

American Metropolitcs: The New Suburban Reality

Myron Orfield

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Reviewed By Stephen M. Wheeler

Myron Orfield is one of the foremost contributors to the new wave of thinking about metropolitan regional planning. Orfield, a Minnesota state legislator, has developed an increasingly sophisticated analysis of spatial growth, economic disparities, demographic change, and politics within U.S. urban areas. In his new book *American Metropolitcs*, he goes well beyond his previous writings to help lay the groundwork for a new generation of metropolitan initiatives.

The author's 1997 *Metropolitcs* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press) explored metropolitan issues especially in the context of the Minneapolis-St. Paul region. In that work Orfield described his efforts to pass legislation for stronger regional governance in the Twin Cities, and argued that all around the country political coalitions could be built between central cities and older suburbs to support such initiatives. He presented extensive data for the Twin Cities showing how older, usually inner-ring suburban jurisdictions had lost tax base and gained spending needs in recent decades, making them natural allies of urban municipalities in fights against newer, wealthier suburbs. Effectively mapping the growth of poverty and minority concentrations in the central city and older suburbs, Orfield made the case that regional tax sharing is essential to avoid a continued concentration of poverty in metropolitan cores.

In *American Metropolitcs*, Orfield expands his mapping and analysis to the 25 largest U.S. urban regions, and develops both a more detailed suburban typology and a more comprehensive critique of regional challenges and opportunities. Using cluster analysis, a technique for grouping cases according to common characteristics, the author and his research team divide metropolitan areas into seven types of communities. The categories are based primarily on differences in tax capacity, changes in tax capacity over time, poverty (measured in terms

of schoolchildren eligible for free lunch programs), density, population growth, age of housing, and minority percentage.

In Orfield's typology, At-Risk, Segregated Communities find themselves under significant fiscal or social stress and have high minority concentrations. At-Risk, Older Communities also face fiscal pressures and contain older, dense housing, but have not yet experienced the rapid growth of poverty and minority populations. At-Risk, Low-Density Communities have a tax base growing more slowly than the regional average and a relatively high rate of poverty, but are located in more exurban locations and are still gaining population. All three of these groups lack substantial business districts and key amenities such as large parks and cultural centers, and are at risk of rapid decline.

In contrast, Bedroom-Developing Communities are growing rapidly and do not yet face social and fiscal stress. Yet if they do not grow in a coordinated and efficient fashion, infrastructure and service costs may rise in the future without an equal growth in tax base. Affluent Job Centers are far better off. These "edge cities" benefit from high tax base and very low costs compared with central cities. Still relatively new, they have avoided the social costs resulting from poverty, and have a tax capacity 212 percent of the regional average. Very Affluent Job Centers are even better off, with resources 525 percent of the average. This final group has an even higher concentration of office and commercial space, while being home to only 7 percent of the region's population. Their residents tend to be highly educated, wealthy, and vigorously opposed to further growth.

The first third of the book, "Metropatterns," is devoted to describing this typology and its resulting problems. The second section, "Metropolicies," provides a review of federal, state, and regional policies that have tried to stem center city decay, ease fiscal disparities, and control metropolitan growth. In the author's view most of these efforts have failed because they lacked a comprehensive, regional approach to problems. As part of this discussion of policies Orfield lays out an agenda for reform, which includes regionally coordinated infrastructure planning, a regional housing plan, measures to support racial and economic integration, and regional review of local land use planning. He also explores metropolitan governance strategies that could help implement this agenda. Though little of this section is dramatically

new, it forms a well-presented and compelling synthesis of regional strategies.

It is the third section, “Metropolitics,” that is the book’s most intriguing contribution. Orfield dissects community types in terms of party loyalties, and finds not surprisingly that Republicans have a solid base in affluent job centers and Democrats in central cities and older declining suburbs. But two types of more recent suburbs—the At Risk, Low Density Communities and the Bedroom-Developing Communities—hold a large majority of political swing districts and together with central cities represent a potential base for regional reform. The challenge will be for leaders to appeal to residents’ strong concern about issues such as sprawl, traffic congestion, and school funding.

It would be nice if Orfield said a bit more about how exactly these issues could be raised with voters. He could also address more directly the concern that many suburban communities do not care much about inequities with other suburbs or central cities, and indeed are just as likely to resort to NIMBYism and no-growth politics. However, he does make a convincing case that fiscal disparities are at the center of many other regional problems and must be addressed one way or another. And most readers are likely to agree with his overall point that “When regionalism becomes a suburban issue, it becomes possible. As long as regionalism is portrayed as a conflict between city and suburbs, the debate is over before it starts.”

The path toward regionalism that Orfield describes looks like hard work. His list of strategies includes many organizing and coalition-building approaches that have been tried before. But it is probably too much to hope for an easier way. In *American Metropolitics*, Orfield has amassed an exceedingly useful body of research about regional trends and institutions (much of which is available online at www.metroresearch.org), and also charts what seems to be the most likely political strategy for reform. With its wealth of information and down-to-earth political wisdom, *American Metropolitics* goes a long way towards laying the foundations for improved regional planning.