CONCEPTUALIZING ORANGE COUNTY

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Understanding Metropolitan Regions – Competing Interpretive Stances

Let’s begin with baseball. About a year ago now [Winter, 2006], an important law suit was adjudicated in Orange County. In that trial, jurors agreed with Arte Moreno, the owner of the Angels, who was being sued by the City of Anaheim. The basis of Anaheim’s law suit was that Moreno had violated his lease agreement with the city when he renamed his team “the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim.” The jurors rejected that reasoning, siding with the defendant, Moreno.

For purposes of my remarks today, that was a very significant outcome. It was significant because, among other things, it suggested once again that many people still believe that Orange County is a suburb of Los Angeles. Certainly Arte Moreno began the trial believing that. Such a serious misapprehension is, in my opinion, most unfortunate and inaccurate. And I’d like briefly to explore with you why I hold that opinion.

Some of you may recall reading an article from the L.A. Times that appeared late last January [1/24/06] entitled “New York Team to Design Orange County’s Great Park.” At the very end of that long article are some important paragraphs that many readers might have missed, or perhaps not fully appreciated. These paragraphs contain insightful quotations from an urban theorist by the name of Joel Kotkin. Kotkin is an astute observer of southern California developments and author of a book entitled The
New Suburbanization: A Realist’s Guide to the American Future. His “take” on “the new suburbs” is more positive than is the case with many other urban theorists.

In that article Kotkin is quoted as follows: “Orange County is all about redefining itself from 30 years ago when it was white-bread suburbia with a few arty types in Laguna to being a very sophisticated, high-tech place that is ethnically diverse. It is becoming a very sophisticated place, and [the Great Park] is part of the great experience in the evolution of suburbia. In many ways, Orange County is more cutting-edge for how people are going to live in the next 30 to 40 years than [is] New York City.” [Repeat]

There, in a nutshell, is the essence of my remarks today – Orange County as an anticipatory region. As you will see, my own “take” on the new suburbs is somewhat less enthusiastic than is Kotkin’s. But on the “anticipatory” claim, I agree.

I don’t intend to dwell on the Great Park, though that is a very interesting topic in and of itself, and I’ve been involved with the Great Park for a number of years as a historical consultant. Instead, I will focus on less visible, but perhaps even more significant, developments in Orange County during the past four or five decades.

We really cannot begin to understand Orange County without spending some time discussing the terms “suburban” and “suburbia.” As you all know, suburbia is a thoroughly mythologized landscape with its own set of clichés and conventions. The very term brings to mind a number of images and associations, many of them quite negative – white-picket fences, desperate housewives, gleaming SUVs crammed with kids, teenage angst, mindless materialism, conspicuous consumption, and on and on.
Think, for example, of the novels of Sinclair Lewis (Babbit, 1922), John Cheever, and John Updike. Or, alternatively, think of the movies of the late 1990s such as Pleasantville, The Truman Show, and American Beauty, or Tim Burton’s Edward Scissorhands and Big Fish. Or, more recently, of the very darkly comical 2005 movie, The Chumscrubber, whose anxious upper-class executives and spouses live in identical side-by-side bunkers in a suburban dystopia somewhere in southern California, and where parents simply cannot comprehend their drug-induced children. Of course, we can’t forget the contribution of TV, with such notable products as “The O.C.” “Laguna Beach,” and, most recently, “The Real Housewives of Orange County.”

As historian Margaret Marsh has written, “The idea of suburbia transcends space and civic boundaries and becomes a means to conceptualize a way of life.”

I wish to argue that it is time to RE-conceptualize suburbia. It is time – and it has long been time – to say something new and different about suburbs in contemporary America. It seems to me that this is an important project because of the fact that the U.S. new suburbs of 2007 are a world away from the imagined suburbs of Sinclair Lewis and John Cheever and Tim Burton. And as developments on the urban fringe have become increasingly independent from their urban centers, the very existence of “suburbia” in the traditional sense needs to be interrogated.

Most important, I believe, the suburbs have become the dominant way of living in contemporary America. Today, more than half of America lives in suburbia. Or, to put it another way, more Americans live in the suburbs than in urban and rural areas combined. To our north, the number of Canadians living in suburbs has doubled since the 1960s.
And the bulk of metropolitan population growth and job growth in this country is occurring in places that look much more like Orange County than New York City.

Not surprisingly, these developments have become a booming theme for academic researchers, myself included. In this regard, suggest that you may wish to consult some of the books listed on the bottom of the lecture hand-out under *Selected Readings*, beginning with the landmark studies by Kenneth Jackson (1985) and Robert Fishman (1987). A more recent entry to the list is not mentioned there – Jon Teaford, *The Metropolitan Revolution: The Rise of Post-Urban America* (2006).

My co-authored contribution to the list is entitled *Postsuburban California*. In the course of researching, writing and editing that book, my coauthors and I identified several central concepts that hopefully promote a better understanding of the historical significance of Orange County, as well as regions similar to it across the United States. Will briefly describe four such key concepts: (1) spatial organization; (2) information capitalism; (3) consumerism; and (4) cosmopolitanism.

Before discussing those concepts, however, let me say, first, that our book is written within a newer tradition of scholarship about emerging metropolitan regions in the United States. In my opinion, in analyzing the meaning of developments here in Orange County, it is very important to relate those to other metropolitan regions. In other words, it is important to understand O.C. in its larger national, even international, context, and to approach the topic in a comparative manner.

Earlier academic studies in the 1960s and 1970s in a very real sense parroted the aforementioned viewpoints of Sinclair Lewis and John Cheever and other novelists and film makers. They were highly critical of suburban life in such regions. Suburbs were
viewed as disturbingly parochial and exclusionary in mind set and behavior. They were exceedingly dull places essentially unfit for civilized existence. It was not the suburb that mattered, but, rather, the central city. Those earlier studies portrayed traditional cities—cities such as New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles—as the leading centers of civilization and vitality. This approach led to what has been called “bashing the `burbs,” in which suburbs have served as the objects of scorn and derision.

Our book is more in line with recent studies of the 1980s and 1990s that have discovered something quite different in suburbs—have discovered economic, social, and cultural dynamism in what was formerly viewed as the sleepy suburban hinterland. I certainly do not see myself as a “booster of the `burbs.”” An appellation I might apply to Joel Kotkin, for example. Nor am I interested in “bashing the `burbs.”” What my colleagues and I sought to accomplish instead is to explain and to understand a relatively new and interesting metropolitan region, Orange County, not merely for its own sake but as a case study of larger developments of great significance.

What are some of these larger developments??
Spatial Organization

Would first offer a few comments about Orange County’s *spatial organization*. For many centuries, students of what is called the “built environment” have used three, and only three, defining or descriptive terms: rural, urban, and suburban. *Rural* means an open, low-density, and homogeneously populated space with essentially an agricultural economy. *Urban* means a high-density and heterogeneously populated space with a wide variety of commercial, industrial, and residential land uses concentrated in a relatively small area. And, as I’ve just suggested, *suburban* has always referred to an economically and culturally inert residential area from which people commute to jobs and cultural activities in a distant and more lively urban center.

And here is where a problem arises. The problem is that none of these three terms accurately describes Orange County—nor, I might add, does the term apply to other regions similar to Orange County. The very physical layout, or the spatial organization, of the county requires us to move beyond these three customary terms toward something new and original. I would stress that it is precisely the emergence of such sprawling, developing regions outside of historical central cities such as Los Angeles that creates the need for new concepts of urban growth in contemporary America.

For that reason, Rob Kling, Mark Poster, and I invented a new term—“postsuburban.” By this term we mean that Orange County’s spatial organization does not fit any of the traditional options. Rather, it has *evolved from* an earlier spatial organization characteristic of low-density, suburban regions. In terms of its spatial characteristics, therefore, Orange County really constitutes a new arrival—indeed, a new invention—and therefore requires a new descriptive term. We believe that our
descriptive term is more accurate than competing ones with which you may be familiar, such as “technoburbs,” or “urban villages,” or “edge cities,” or “the exopolis.”

In spatial terms, if it is not rural, not urban, not suburban, then what is it? Well, in the first place it is both decentralized and multicentered. As such, it differs dramatically from a traditional, large city surrounded by industrial and residential zones. (The fancy jargon used by some urban scholars is “polynucleated metropolitan region.”) A vast majority of its residents go to their jobs and fulfill their personal and commercial and cultural needs in their immediate surroundings and not in some distant major city. At the same time, postsuburban residents—whether in Orange County or elsewhere—are likely to travel by automobile across boundaries of smaller cities for work, shopping, and socializing as much as within such boundaries. Postsuburbia, in other words, is by no means pedestrian-friendly. It is, rather, automobile-essential.

Here I call your attention to an article in the Orange County edition of the LA Times from last August 29 [2006]:

“When planners designed Southern California’s freeway system, one goa was to get commuters from their homes in suburban Orange County to their jobs in Los Angeles County.

“But Orange County’s days as primarily a bedroom community have been over for a long time, and transportation officials say it’s beginning to show a shift in commuting patterns.

“Officials expect that within the next 20 years, more commuters will take Freeways from LA County to Orange County for work than travel in the opposite direction.”
The operating logic of postsuburbia, therefore, is the exact opposite of the conventional “sleepy” suburb. That’s why I cringe when Orange County is referred to as a suburb of Los Angeles, which it long ago ceased to be. That’s way I supported the seemingly odd challenge by the City of Anaheim to Arte Moreno’s naming of his baseball team. And, quite certainly, Orange County is not economically and culturally inert, as I will mention in a moment.

The point is that such postsuburban regions have become the rule, not the exception, in metropolitan development in this country. As I mentioned earlier, by the 1970s, they contained the bulk of the population of the United States, thereby reversing a 5,000 year-old trend of urbanization. One chapter in our book identifies twenty-one other postsuburban regions that have recently emerged in the United States: for example, Norfolk, Mass; Fairfield, Conn.; Suffolk County, NY; Fairfax County, VA; Du Page County, Ill; Gwinnet County, GA; Broward County, FA; Santa Clara County, CA (the Silicon Valley); and so forth. All of these regions represent a qualitatively new form of settlement space.

Thus, far from being a regional backwater, Orange County, and the larger southern California region of which it is a part, is in fact a trendsetting region—what I called earlier an *anticipatory region*, or a window on the future.

Questions or observations or disagreements??
Information Capitalism

Let’s now move from the topic of spatial organization and turn briefly to the topic of economic development and to the concept of “information capitalism.” My guess is that most of us here this evening can be called “information workers.” We do not harvest or make “things.” We process information. In that regard, we differ from farmers and factory workers who dominated the work force of earlier generations. For more on this, I draw your attention to Rob Kling’s contribution to Postsuburban California on “The Information Labor Force.”

For shorthand purposes, I suggest we consider the economic development of Orange County in three overlapping phases: (1) an agricultural phase that lasted from the founding of the county in 1889 throughout the 1940s and even into the 1950s; (2) a manufacturing phase that blossomed in the 1950s and matured in the 1960s; and (3) a more diversified high-tech and information-oriented phase that began in the 1970s and continues to this day.

In the second phase of manufacturing, the Orange County economy was to a large extent dependent on massive federal military expenditures. And it’s worth pausing here a moment to take note of something interesting about Orange County’s history. The fact that the country’s manufacturing phase was dependent on federal military expenditures is strikingly at odds with its free enterprise political culture. In other words, by means of aerospace-defense expenditures -- primarily for electronics, synthetic materials and sophisticated communications systems -- the federal government was a crucial
contributor to Orange County’s economic take-off and to its growing autonomy from Los Angeles.

Thus, the pioneers of high technology in this region were the aerospace-defense companies which began locating in Orange County as early as the 1950s (for example, Northrop Corporation and Hughes Aircraft, and Douglas Aircraft’s Space Systems, which later became McDonnell Douglas Astronautics Company, and so forth). By 1964, Orange County accounted for nearly 90 percent of all electronics employment in the area of advanced communications and detection equipment for all U. S. defense systems. In short, massive military expenditures spurred a major spatial shift in manufacturing production in this country to the so-called “defense perimeter,” of which Orange County was a crucial component.

Like other regions once heavily dependent on federal expenditures, however, Orange County has made a successful transition to more diversified economic activity, especially as it has moved into the so-called third phase. During this phase, during the past 35-40 years, the gross regional product of Orange County has increased to more than $80 billion. This is larger than the national economies of Argentina, Austria, Denmark, and Egypt, as well as the entire state of Arizona.

But perhaps even more important than its growth is the kind of economy that has emerged in Orange County -- an economy we label “information capitalism,” a new phase of economic development. This phase is certainly not unique to Orange County, but it is nonetheless more highly developed here than in most other postsuburban regions in the U.S.
As I’ve suggested, it is characterized much less by the production of goods than by the delivery of services and the processing of information. If I had to pick a year that marked the transition point from phase 2 to phase 3, it would be 1973. In that year, for the first time, the major employment growth sectors in Orange County were finance, insurance, real estate, trade, service, and state and local governments. After the mid-1970s, the region’s labor force worked primarily in the information sector.

This sector is composed of those occupations in which the processing and distribution of information is a central and time-consuming activity. It is important to distinguish the “information” workforce from the “high-tech” workforce. The high-tech workforce refers to people who work in a variety of technical jobs within the manufacturing sector, in contrast to information-oriented jobs that are found across all economic sectors—agricultural, manufacturing, and services (such as finance, insurance, real estate, travel, and education). By the end of the 1980s, about 58 percent of Orange County’s workforce was in this information sector, and that was about six times larger than its high-tech workforce counterpart.

The other notable feature of Orange County’s economy in the past 20-25 years or so is the extent to which it has become more tightly integrated into the global market system. By 1980, nearly 25 percent of county-based firms were involved in overseas commerce and a large percentage of these firms were controlled from outside the region. Orange County, in short, had quietly become a major export center for the international economy—in electronics, microchip products, computer parts, software, and biotech and
medical supplies (the kinds of products one would expect from an information-oriented regional economy).

What has been especially interesting to observe and to study have been the increasing tensions between the global, export-oriented nature of contemporary economic and social life in Orange County, on the one hand, and the more restricted territorial concerns of local politicians and social activists concerned about the “quality of life,” on the other. The fact is that a new cosmopolitan and global business elite has largely displaced a former regional or provincial business elite in the county.

I devote an entire chapter in the book to explaining this process, and won’t go into it in any detail here. But the process can perhaps be best summarized in the phrase, “placeless power and powerless places.” By this I mean we are faced with the increasing mobility of capital and simultaneously with the diminished capacity of government to control the forces of development. To the extent that the rapid growth of the Orange County region has been tied primarily to the needs of large corporations, the major political question in the county for the 1980s, the 1990s, and into the 21st century has been whether powerful growth networks could be constrained by the political process.

NOTE: See “Globalization and the Politics of Locality,” in WHQ (May 1991)
Consumerism and the Growth of a New Consumer Culture

Will be even more brief with the last two concepts—consumerism and cosmopolitanism—because I think they are a bit more obvious than are spatial organization and economic development.

In terms of consumerism, would refer you to a recent essay in the LA Times Magazine section entitled “Livin’ Extra-Large,” by Scott Duke Harris, which deals with what the author calls O.C.’s “conspicuous consumption.”

As those of you who live here know very well, Orange County has a special consumer-oriented character. This character derives from the amount and distribution of discretionary income and from the general level of education of O.C. residents.

Between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s, six huge regional shopping centers opened in O.C., and each of these centers was anchored by several major department stores and each of them boomed in the 1970s and thereafter. By the fall of 1987, O.C. residents spent more per capita at retail stores than the residents of any other county in California ($2,680 per resident, or 25% higher than the statewide average).

O.C.’s housing is another aspect of consumerism. By the late 1980s the county had one of the most expensive housing markets in the U.S., and we all know that situation continues to this day.

And, as the author of “Livin’ Extra Large” points out, “… More sumptuous resort hotels with suites prices up to $6,000 per night have sprouted along the coast. People are paying up to $2 million for glorified tract homes on view lots and filling their garages with cars from a fleet of luxury-vehicle dealers. High-end retail centers are tallying
record sales. Regional magazines with names such as Riviera and Grand Tour are dripping with ads for jewelry, spa treatments, and cosmetic enhancements….”

Since the 1960s, Orange County’s consumer culture has also become increasingly cosmopolitan. South Coast Plaza, for example, houses clothing stores with an international flavor—such as Courreges and Gucci and Armani—and cafes such as Bangkok 4 and ZTejas. Drive five miles to Fashion Island and you will find similar international options.

While these kinds of stores tend to cater to O.C.’s largely white middle- and upper-income residents, we should certainly also mention that for residents of Central and North Orange County regions, cosmopolitan consumption could include dinner in a Mexican or a Thai or a Korean or a Vietnamese or a Persian café with predominantly Mexican, Thai, Korean, Vietnamese, or Persian clienteles.

And I would note that Scott Duke Harris also incorporates examples and the glaring imbalances and inequalities that exist alongside the affluence. In response to some critical letters-to-the-editor, he followed his first article with another one focusing just on Santa Ana.
Cosmopolitanism

Finally, a few final words about cosmopolitanism. By that term, I simply mean being marked by an interest in, knowledge of, and appreciation for many parts of the world. A region obviously becomes more cosmopolitan when it is comprised, as O.C. increasingly is, of persons from many parts of the world. The term is the opposite, therefore, of provincialism and localism. Cosmopolitanism has increasingly replaced parochialism as a defining feature of Orange County.

Obviously, O.C. is extraordinarily more ethnically diverse today than in the 1960s. [See Social Ecology Concept Paper on the website of your School, and see handout.] You are probably more familiar with those statistics as I am. What you may not have considered is a fact to which I alluded a few minutes ago: namely, that O.C. has become the headquarters for a surprising number of international corporations and is the home for increasingly export-oriented commercial activities. Just a few examples to help make my point. By the late 1980s, five Asian auto makers had located their U.S. headquarters in O.C.:—Mazda, Mitsubishi, Hyundai, Suzuki, and Daihatsu. In addition, twenty Asian corporations had located in the Irvine Spectrum. By the early 1990s, O.C. had surged ahead of San Francisco and Los Angeles in total value of exports.

These corporations have recruited key professionals and managers from around the world, and most of these new residents are highly educated. In turn, they have cosmopolitan tastes and have created a ready clientele for the things I mentioned earlier—ethnic restaurants, foreign cars, imported goods, cultural events, foreign films, and so forth.
It is also worth noting that in the paperback edition of our book, we included a new section called “The Cultural Vitality of Postsuburbia.” There we stress the cultural significance of Orange County by including a table [p. xii] that lists major American cities and regions according to the relative strength of their arts cultures. That ranking system was published in 1993 and was based on certain kinds of mainstream fine arts venues, including concert time, symphonic performances, theaters, museums, and touring performances. While in that particular ranking system Orange County, not surprisingly, was ranked below NYC, LA, Philadelphia, and Boston, it was somewhat surprising to us to find that Orange County was ranked 8th out of 28 cities and regions, ahead of such places as St. Louis, Seattle, Denver, Pittsburgh, Milwaukee, Rochester, Ann Arbor, Urbana/Champaign, and Santa Fe.

Yet another indication of important postsuburban trends.
Concluding remarks

As we contemplate the future, it is worth pondering the views of certain critics of postsuburbia, some of whom have argued that the current car-dependent model of low-density residential areas connected by multi-lane highways is simply not sustainable. One such critic – James Howard Kunstler, author of *Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Fall of America’s Man-Made Landscape* – has called suburban sprawl “the most destructive development pattern the world has ever seen….”

Other critics have drawn our attention to the damage caused by politically divisive municipal borders, in which metropolitan areas are divided into 1000s of separate municipalities. Under such conditions of political fragmentation, it is difficult, if not impossible, to address such regional issues as traffic, transportation, pollution, and excessive growth.

Thus while contemporary postsuburbia may not reflect the imagined plastic suburbs found in novels and film, and while all indications are that the residents of postsuburban regions, in the main, very much enjoy living in such communities, problems nonetheless remain and will need to be addressed wisely and effectively in the years to come.
Selected Readings:


Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier* (Oxford University Pres, 1985)
