

BOOKS:

The Birth of Expansive Man

by David Hapgood

The Radical Suburb: Soundings in Changing American Character
by John B. Orr and F. Patrick Nicholson
The Westminster Press, Philadelphia. \$2.45

“The paradox of the suburb is almost too stark to be perceived: the Neanderthal suburbanite turns out to be a cultural radical. While we have been wailing about the inactivity of the middle class in championing the cause of the powerless and the not-fully-liberated, the suburbanite has been busy with his own agenda, which in his own way is profoundly revolutionary.” The revolution is led by the parents, not the kids. When the yuppie sets out to zen the culture, he is “actualizing life patterns learned at his mother’s net-stockinged knee”—in the

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suburbs, the locus, in current mythology and sociology, of tacky-tacky, Dick-and-Jane conformity and conservatism. That is the thesis presented here by Orr and Nicholson, who are professor and student, respectively, of social ethics, in the most provocative book I have seen on the suburban culture.

The suburb, as the authors use the term, is not defined by single-family zoning. Rather it is a state of mind that extends into urban outposts like Manhattan and Georgetown and of course the great protean slurb of Los Angeles. (The authors grew up in L.A., “our great hint of things to come,” and it is there

that they identified the “pioneers of suburban radicality.”) In the suburbs, the authors persuasively argue, you find that the lushest flower of western capitalism, the affluent American, is now engaged in sabotaging the culture that gave him birth.

“Expansive man” is their name for the suburban radical. Affluent, he is liberated from the politics of scarcity. Detribalized, he is free of the tribe’s fierce loyalties and solemn hatreds. He has shed the tight puritanism, greed, and rationality of that WASP culture which, for WASP and ethnic alike, has been the substance of the American Dream. And, sometime in the early sixties, God died in the suburbs. Without tribe, the suburban radical has no past, and without God, no future. That leaves only the present, and expansive man has to make the most of it. His life is an incessant search for experience; when one experience has been drained of its novelty, he moves on in search of another. He is likely to switch jobs frequently, not waiting for the gold watch. Appreciating variety and unbound by tribal law, expansive man cannot take his neighbors’ fiercely-held faiths too seriously. He likes to play both with beliefs and life styles. In abandoning severe rationality, in his enjoyment of conflicting values, expansive man is making a “major move towards the Easternization of the American middle class”; the Oriental fads are no coincidence.

In politics, into which expansive man frequently lurches, he is likely to be unsteady, unreliable, and imaginative. Expansive man is profoundly irritating to his more rigid and tribal fellow-citizens. To the hardhat, blacks are recognizable as tribal enemies; but the suburban radical dismisses tribalism itself and seems about to adopt the hardhat as an object of curious interest. Similarly, the more rigid liberals are horrified when expansive man lionizes the Black Panthers (as was so beautifully recorded by Tom Wolfe in his essay “Radical Chic”), even though the Panthers’ paramilitary machismo runs counter to the suburban

style; but of course the Panthers are just this year’s pets. The permissive suburban radical occupies one extreme on the cultural axis along which America’s future is being fought out; at the other end are the puritans of the new left and the much more significant radical right. Expansive life is expensive, bought at the cost of shoving economic issues under the rug; the authors see the danger that the suburban radical will ultimately turn to the right to protect his zoning code. They also feel that he helps bring on conflict. “Perhaps the greatest danger to American society in the coming of expansive man is this possibility: that he will encourage a rigid, fierce polarization of the suburb, with other groups uniting in a backlash to resist his disruptive behavior.”

Anyone who dabbled in suburban politics in the sixties, as I did, might well take a fresh look backwards in the light of the authors’ vision of the suburban radical (remembering always that, as they point out, expansive man is a tendency, not a portrait, and that he is a minority even in the suburbs). Let me now explore how their thesis illuminates my own experience.

It was a college town in the Northeast Corridor, population 25,000, with income far above the average and an extraordinary number of expansive people. Most of the natives belonged to a kind of bourgeois intelligentsia, endowed with both financial and diploma status; because they did not work with their hands, it was generally presumed that they worked with their heads. The town was also home to a black minority, about 10 per cent, and roughly the same number of Middle Americans. Both groups, but especially the blacks, were gradually being shoved out by class zoning. Local government was run from the top down, no worse than most places, by a cozy establishment that was neither imaginative nor consciously oppressive. The opposition, such as it was, consisted largely of programmatic liberals left over from the fifties; they

seldom won, but that didn't matter because they would rather write a good platform than be county committeemen.

In the early and mid-sixties, new people moved into local politics, some of whom fit the definition of *The Radical Suburb*. They were white and over-30 tribal dropouts, almost always from the WASP and Jewish tribes—comfortable enough in financial career status so that neither of these pursuits took all their energy, and, I suspect, bored. They had worked their way through Danish furniture and trips-to-Europe, and then they took up the game of politics. In 1963, they went in heavily for civil rights, attacking the informal segregation that prevailed in the town's mores. Some went on to class issues, mostly concerned with housing. About 1965 most of them switched to peace, and later to ecology. They tended to switch in flocks, like birds responding to a finely tuned call, and a good number flew through several political causes and clear out the other end into encounter (essentially a search for the lost tribe).

It was a strange time. Those already in local politics were puzzled and exasperated by the newcomers: they didn't play by the rules, their self-interest was unclear (what did they really *want?*), they would swamp an issue and then abandon it. Blacks, especially, were first discomfited when the whites crawled all over them vicariously experiencing black suffering, and then distressed, though perhaps secretly relieved, when the whites abandoned the cause. Tribals, both white and black, were baffled by the newcomers' lack of paranoia about opposing tribes. Rational liberals disapproved of the newcomers' erratic performance and their emphasis on style over platform. As for the newcomers, they seemed to be having a ball.

The newcomers' behavior in many ways fits Orr and Nichelson's concept of expansive man. Their political successes, it seems to me in retrospect, were due to the appeal of expansiveness. Two local issues on which some measurable progress was made were race and class. Many

overt racial bars were dropped, if only to reveal the deeper barriers below; at least a beginning was made toward reversing the public policy of class exclusion in housing. In fighting on these fronts, the overt appeal was to social justice. But justice for others has not been one of history's better selling issues. A more potent, though less explicit appeal was that of variety: the reason not to drive out the black and poor, the young and the single, was that their presence made the town more interesting—different kinds of people to play with. This appeal

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was aimed at the expansive type, and at him alone. It made no sense at all to the tribals, who wanted a one-tribe community, nor to the academic liberals, whose ideal was to make everyone like themselves, nor yet to the presumed beneficiaries, whom it defined as a kind of field trip. But the idea of variety drew a wide response in town and proved to be the only plausible reason to dilute the sacred principle of suburban exclusiveness.

Changes in public policy in that town, and they were considerable, seem less important in the long run than the change in the political process. The number of people actively engaged in politics was greatly increased, and they brought new values into the system. These people discovered that, in an affluent community, considerable change is possible within the existing order; the same establishment still runs the town, but its style has changed. Freedom of behavior has expanded. More people in politics strengthens the community against reaction. When the backlash surfaced in the past year with the usual outcry against peace, pot, and permissiveness, the town's political fabric seemed strong enough to contain the attack.

All this took time, for the newcomers had to learn how to play the game, a more or less painful process for those who have been to college, since it means casting off rational modes of thought. The newcomers learned that politics is irrational, that it deals in emotions and personalities, that perception is the only reality, and that the game is played mainly on bluff. These are not new insights; the trick is to be able to act on them. The expansive suburbanite, freed of both tribal paranoia and excessive rationality, often turned out to be a skillful and imaginative player. Certainly in our town the newcomers accomplished goals toward which rigid liberals had been striving for years without success. For a couple of decades, the local liberals had been issuing ponderous reports advocating a municipal swimming

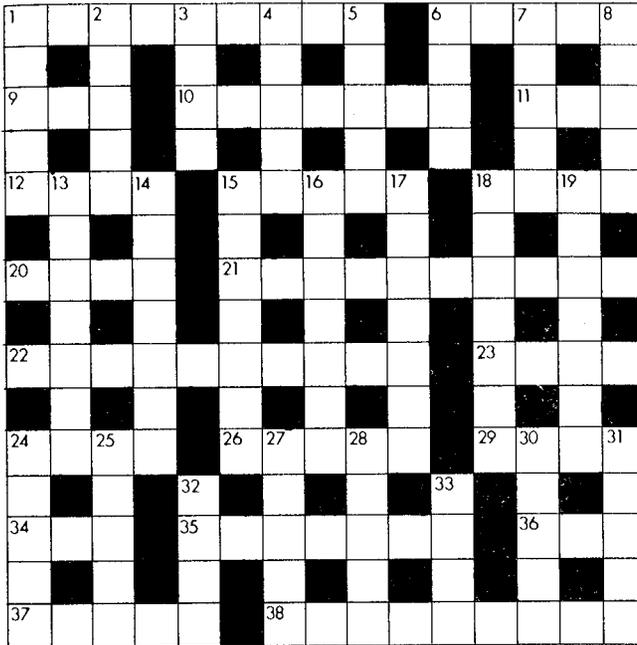
pool; nothing had happened. The newcomers got the pool in a few months by mobilizing tribals who cared little about swimming but loved to harass the establishment, and by other tactics, like absurd "deadlines" for action, that seemed to embarrass the old liberals. That kind of effectiveness is the bright side of suburban radicalism.

The browner side is of course the fickleness of expansive man. This is not so much because, as Sam Brown has argued, liberals consider a problem solved once it is catalogued; rather it is because expansive man gets bored with an issue once he has savored it. There is no self-interest to cement his loyalty when the going gets dull. So his participation, skillful as it is, comes in great intermittent gusts of cultural fashion. Some of us in suburban politics used to wish secretly that the troops wanted a garbage contract or a job in the county courthouse so we could hold on to them for the next battle. Affluence has its drawbacks.

The suburban radical, talented and flawed, is an erratic freedom fighter in our present cultural struggle. A citizen of post-industrial society, free (or bereft) of tribe and God, homeless and lonely, fond of living and scared of dying, he is groping for the future. The question is, are we going to have a future? The suburban garden of Eden is zoned off-limits to most Americans and to all the rest of the world. If suburban man is going to be free to proceed with his cultural revolution, he will have to cope with the angry tribes outside. He may, as Orr and Nicholson fear, hire Ronald Reagan to guard the gates, which means giving up much of his playfulness—Reagan doesn't come cheap—to protect his property. The other way is to extend to the outsiders an opportunity to become affluent and find it boring. That might save suburban man's skin and the revolution as well; more important, perhaps, in enlisting him, it would be an experience beyond any he has found yet—better, even, than *Beaujolais Nouveau* or last week's encounter group. ■

The Political Puzzle

by John Barclay



38. Will \$10 aid cad to achieve goal? (9)

Down

1. He really laid down the line. (5)
2. Featured in Mannix on TV. (5)
3. Vain men of P.S. 93. (4)
4. Kind of ordinary yet quite different. (5)
5. Let Verdi conduct. (5)
6. Racing star with letters. (4)
7. Enoch Arden very much alive and in Washington. (5)
8. She can be both merry and black. (5)
3. Good place to be fighting the rein. (2,5)
14. Children get hung at White House. (3,4)
15. Alfred G. leads the Revolution. (3,4)
16. Humor leaves CIO calm. (7)
17. C.O. sends back defective items. (7)
18. Where to be cross in London. (7)
19. Authors often so tried by them. (7)
24. Society pin or badge. (5)
25. Winfield or Hugh. (5)
27. It takes some nerve to cop it. (5)
28. Went after the wolf up North. (5)
30. How the Greeks get started. (5)
31. Attack the written word with a spear. (5)
32. He filed report of retreat, not I. (4)
33. Nita comes out on the other side. (4)

Across

1. A leaders who damns life. (9)
6. A leader we nag. (5)
9. Full complement of crises for a leader. (3)
10. Let Thelma act up to get real American. (7)
11. It's odd how power concentrates in Capital. (3)
12. Full complement of lives for leader's pet. (4)
15. Place to lose acres of money. (5)
18. The rooster engaged in teamwork? (4)
20. This party tags along despite two party system. (4)
21. Form of government in which some do crime act. (10)
22. Form of government not too near public. (10)
23. Maiden or mountain. (4)
24. Something to do when très fatigué. (4)
26. How 6 Across makes contact with sports figures. (5)
29. Try this in Las Vegas pollution. (4)
34. You can't con him. (3)
35. Building up for low dent. (3-4)
36. What Rap Brown looks for on the course. (3)
37. Watched VIP do ten. (5)

The numbers indicate the number of letters and words, e.g., (2,3) means a two-letter word followed by a three-letter word. Groups of letters, e.g., USA, are treated as one word. Answers to this month's puzzle will appear in the next issue. Answers to last month's puzzle are on page 59