

THE AMERICAN LANDSCAPE IN THE ERA OF POSTMODERNITY¹

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Flying from the East to the West coast of the United States at 36,000 feet on a clear spring day you might be tempted, even now, to describe the terrain below by assigning its parts to the old familiar categories: city, countryside, and wild nature. The further west you fly, the fewer cities you see, a fact that seems to reconfirm the standard moral geography of North America: to move west is to move from civilization toward nature, from a more artificial to a more natural terrain. Extensive greening begins with the dark stretches of forest along the Appalachian range, and it spills over into the agricultural mid-west, a vast patchwork of farms in shades of lighter green and tan segmented by the rectilinear grid pattern of the geological surveys, with occasional built areas (small towns or mere clusters of buildings), the whole terrain criss-crossed by whitish bands of highway. The huge central plain, referred to in media accounts of the Oklahoma City bombing as «the nation's heartland,» is what some Americans still call «the country,» short for «countryside.» According to recent census figures, the nation's population is gravitating toward its coastal cities, and as the relative size of the heartland population declines, a growing majority crowds into that roughly 1% of the national land mass occupied by cities. Later, flying over the Nevada desert and the Rocky Mountains, you might suppose that you are looking down on pieces of unspoiled wildemess –geographic embodiments of non-human «Nature» in its pure state.

At ground level, however, this airborne impression of a tripartite topography proves to be unreliable. Not one of the postulated sectors –city, countryside, nature–

1. A lecture initially prepared for delivery at the second Congress of the Spanish Society for the Study of the United States in Seville, May 25, 1995; a slightly revised version also was given to the Annual Conference of the Council of Educators in Landscape Architecture in Ames, Iowa, September 9, 1995.

actually displays the distinct, unambiguous defining properties that it seemed to display from six miles up in the sky. Visiting a typical American city, the sky traveller soon realizes how little it resembles the ideal type: a densely populated built environment clearly divided into discrete, identifiable sectors: a downtown core, an uptown, a circle of separable suburbs, and a more or less discernible edge where the countryside begins. If such a classic, and (in Kevin Lynch's usage) clearly «visible» American City ever existed, it began to disappear at roughly the same time, several decades ago, as the concept of «megalopolis» gained currency.² «Megalopolis,» a cluster of cities embedded in an interspersed suburban, exurban, quasi-rural sprawl, was a precursor of the incoherent mix of forms that marks the postmodern urban landscape.

At ground level the countryside also differs markedly from the sky traveler's impression, with its illusory vestiges of the stereotypical American farmland: a clearly demarcated terrain made up of quasi-independent small towns, villages, and farms — the farms inhabited (and ostensibly owned) by the families that work them. This difference, to be sure, is less visible than that observed in the cities. Yet we know, from other evidence — demographic, literary, journalistic — that the distinctive way of life associated with America's farmland has virtually disappeared. For decades people have been abandoning the farmhouses and small towns. Several contiguous farms often have been merged into single working units, with one family living in one house, overseeing the production of the whole cluster; sometimes the family is merely the hired agent of an absentee corporate owner. It is not clear how to describe (or what to call) this new rural scene, or the characteristic way of life of those who now inhabit the site of what was supposed to be a single family subsistence farm — fantasy home of Jefferson's independent American yeoman.

When we come to the wilderness — «nature» in its unspoiled, ostensibly pristine state — we meet a less tangible kind of change: — a change in language, in meaning. Nowadays, in fact, the meaning of «nature» is far more problematic — and more intensely contested — than the meaning of either «city» or «countryside.» In English the word «nature» never has had an explicit or stable topographical referent; it has been indiscriminately applied to rural or wild terrains, and, for that matter, to all non-urban, underdeveloped places, even small oases of green in cities and suburbs; nor has the idea of nature had any other single, clear meaning. Today, however, in the skeptical climate of postmodernism — and of the ideological conflicts within the environmental movement — the word «nature,» along with such other overblown abstract nouns as «civilization,» «culture,» «humanism,» and «progress,» ranks high on the list of endangered linguistic species. These are all key words in the grand narrative of the progress of Western civilization, one of the prime targets of postmodernism. As Fredric Jameson bluntly

2. Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960).

asserts, «Postmodernism is what you have when the modernization process is complete, and nature is gone for good.»³

In what follows I want to relate the recent transformation of the American landscape to the concept of postmodernity. To what extent can we attribute recent changes in the character and meaning of the tri-sectored national terrain — unspoiled nature, countryside, and city — to the forces said to define a distinctive postmodern era? If, as I will suggest, the old spatial categories have lost much of their usefulness — at least for purposes of cultural analysis and understanding — with what should they be replaced? How shall we now think about these distinctions of place? First, however, let me explain what I mean by «postmodernity.»

1. POSTMODERNITY AND POSTMODERNISM

«Postmodernity,» as I use the term, refers to an era, whereas «postmodernism» refers to a theory or doctrine — one that may well derive from, or embody, the distinctive mentality of the putative postmodern era. But I have not found any wholly satisfactory version of postmodernism, that is, a single theory that persuasively identifies the decisive, comprehensive attributes — and accounts for the origin — of postmodernity. This leaves open the question of whether a distinct postmodern era exists or, put differently, whether the emergence of that era's ostensible attributes constitutes a sharp «break» with — or merely a new phase of — the era of modernity?⁴ In either case, «postmodernity» is a valuable provisional name for the phase of contemporary history that began some three decades ago — 1970 is a widely invoked date — and that is identifiable with certain specific socio-economic, technological, and cultural developments.

3. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), p.ix. Other conceptions of postmodernity that have influenced my thinking include those of David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (London: Blackwell, 1989), Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), and Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies, The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989).

4. The leading theorists of postmodernism differ on this much-discussed issue. Jameson is more inclined to credit the occurrence of an historical «break,» whereas Harvey and Soja regard postmodernity chiefly as a further development of modernity. My own preference is for the concept, developed by Ernest Mandel, Eric Hobsbawm, and David Gordon, and endorsed by Soja (op.cit.,p.3), of modernization as having occurred in a series of «long waves» beginning in the era of the Enlightenment and culminating in a fourth, current, postmodern wave. In any case, the issue from the historian's viewpoint is essentially one of periodization — and it is not likely to be resolved soon, if ever. (Scholars still disagree about the temporal boundaries, indeed the very existence, of the Renaissance.) It seems wise, for the moment, to accept the banal assumption that postmodernity is at once an extension of, and a reaction against, the modernization process, and that at least some of its attributes are distinctive, and without precedent.

The advent of postmodernity initially was linked to the critical reaction, beginning in the 1960s, against modernism as a style of expression; the shift away from high modernism was most conspicuous in architecture, where the reigning mode of minimalist functionalism was repudiated, and supplanted by a new eclecticism, a new tolerance for the decorative, for self-conscious innovative display, and for a pastiche of earlier styles. To call these stylistic innovations «post-modern» made perfectly good sense. Analogous departures from high modernism already had become manifest in literature, in other arts, in a new critical theory, and in many scholarly disciplines.

But it also was apparent that the transition from a modern to postmodern *cultural style* was bound up, somehow, with the more or less simultaneous economic transition, independently observed by social theorists, from an industrial to a *post-industrial or service society*.⁵ Taken together, indeed, these convergent changes seemed extensive enough to justify the idea that a distinctively new, postmodern era had begun. Of the defining attributes of the new era, let me cite the four most relevant to the present argument.

(1) *The Global Triumph of Corporate Capitalism*. The steadily increasing domination of the world market by large transnational corporations, many of them originating in, or based in, the United States, many of them in the service sector that includes finance, information, and entertainment industries. The final stage of this process, beginning after World War II, culminated in the collapse of the USSR, the dominant system's leading rival.

(2) *The Electronic Revolution*. The global diffusion of new technologies of communication and computation (television, the personal computer, video, compact disc, fax), has made possible the instantaneous worldwide transmission of words and moving images (including news, monetary transactions, and all kinds of information); the creation of centrally managed interactive worldwide data banks, information and entertainment networks, and the global dissemination of the products of cultural production, much of it originating in the United States.

(3) *The Global Dominion of Commercial Popular Culture*. The eclipse of the formerly privileged, elitist, aesthetically severe, intellectually rigorous and demanding, print-oriented, Eurocentric high culture by a far more widely disseminated, accessible, latitudinarian, oral- and image- and media-oriented, commercial popular culture. The *content* of the culture industry's product is in large measure determined by the formats of electronic production for, and transmission by, television, cable, film, video, compact disc, CD-Rom; by the collaborative effort of the advertising, marketing, and entertainment industries to generate large audiences, the highest possible levels of

5. The most influential of many books on this theme probably were Alain Touraine, *La Société Post-Industrielle: Naissance d'une Société* (Paris: Editions Denoel, 1969); Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

consumer demand, all designed to satisfy the ruling imperatives of commercial entertainment — to celebrate the new global order and to deliver maximum returns on invested capital. The prevailing discourse of the electronic media is marked — with notable but relatively few exceptions by brevity; discontinuity; low affect; primer level ideas; and a paucity of conceptual coherence. The positive aspect of the new pop culture, from the vantage of democratic values, is that it is non-hierarchical: its products are accessible to all. The corresponding negative aspect is that the realm of culture is transformed into a lucrative commodity marketplace. Unlike the older high culture, whose products had relatively little value as commodities, and therefore enjoyed the freedom that came with quasi-autonomy, the globally distributed commodities produced by the popular electronic culture earn huge profits, and therefore are subject to varying degrees of market- and state-imposed constraint tantamount to a kind of virtual censorship.

(4) Philosophical Skepticism and Relativism. The rise to prominence of a new mode of critical theory, an amalgam of philosophic, linguistic, anthropological, and literary-critical ideas and strategies that constitutes the analytic (ostensibly liberatory) method of postmodernism; its characteristic doctrines are feminist, egalitarian, anti-Western, and multi-culturalist. Its most significant component is a powerful epistemological skepticism directed at any and all claims to universal knowledge. This anti-foundationalist outlook, which denies the possibility of access to any timeless, context-free ground for «objective» knowledge or «the truth,» leads to the embrace of uncompromising cultural and cognitive relativism. Whatever their differences on other matters, adherents of postmodernism tend to agree about the equivocal, inevitably unstable, culturally embedded character of all thought; they assume that cardinal ideas like nature, countryside, and the city, are historically and socially constructed, and that their meaning always is determined — and limited — by the outlook and interests of the particular social groups that embrace them.

But it is perfectly reasonable to credit the existence of a postmodern era without endorsing this, or any other version of postmodernism. My subject, in any event, is not postmodernism; it is postmodernity, the historical context, as manifested by recent changes in American geography, culture, and society, in which postmodernism presumably arose. Returning now to those changes, I want to consider the extent to which they illuminate and are illuminated by — the concept of a distinctly postmodern era.

2. WILDERNESS, UNSPOILED NATURE, AND JUST PLAIN NATURE

Students of American culture have special reason to heed Raymond Williams's assertion that «nature» is the most complex word in the English language. From the beginning of exploration and settlement, Europeans projected diametrically opposed

meanings upon the landscape of the New World. At first, indeed, they often described North America as an ahistoric desert, a virtually untouched wilderness. Nature, in this Eurocentric sense, referred to the entire continent and, indeed the entire non-human world. Later, with the increasing secularization of western culture, nature was invested with many attributes of divinity. It came to be seen by Emerson, a progenitor of the American environmental consciousness, as «the present expositor of the divine mind.»⁶ Since it came under the skeptical gaze of postmodernists, the close identification of America with a sacralized natural terrain has lost much of its credibility; and now, suddenly, nature is said to be «gone forever.»

What can that possibly mean? Obviously nature, in the literal everyday biophysical sense, has not disappeared. Yet the statement has at least two important, related, and not implausible meanings. The first has to do with *substantial*, material changes in the natural world, the second with related conceptual changes in the meaning of the word «nature.»

The beginning of the postmodern era coincided with the heightening of public awareness of humanity's new capacity to inflict severe, possibly irremediable, damage on the global environment. The despoilation resulting from the Hiroshima bomb, global warming, and ozone depletion represented the potentially disastrous consequences of such unprecedented technological power. If the atmospheric envelope of the earth has been penetrated and altered, then so, in a sense, has every place, every thing, on the planet's surface. The upper atmosphere was the last remaining sector of the ancient frontier that always had separated humanity from a tangible, accessible portion of untouched «wild» nature. The closing of this frontier marks the potentially limitless reach of humanity's earthly power: its capacity to alter — to establish dominion over — every particle of the global environment. This is one meaning of the assertion that nature now is gone forever.

The second meaning, as formulated by Bill McKibben in his influential book, *The End of Nature*, is a logical corollary of the first.⁷ If we no longer can regard any portion of earthly nature as wholly Other, then, McKibben argues, the concept of nature loses much of its efficacy as a material embodiment of ultimate meaning and value. We thus have deprived ourselves of access to that class of natural facts that had been the object of — that had made possible — a vital experience of transcendence; those facts invited, or were hospitable to, a reverence for the natural (not incompatible with evolutionary biology) as the ultimate ground of Being. (If «nature» is a name for the cosmos that existed before — and that presumably will continue to exist after — the lifespan of the human species, then it is a plausible object of naturalistic, or secular,

6. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature, Addresses and Lectures* (Philadelphia: John D. Morris & Co, 1906), p.63.

7. Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Random House, 1989).

reverence.) This version of natural theology, or «natural supernaturalism,» as expounded by Emerson, Thoreau, and Muir, is the metaphysical basis of what is probably the most influential American form of environmental consciousness. On a less exalted plane, it also nurtured the popular 19th-century nationalistic faith in the United States as «Nature's Nation.»⁸ In the transition to the postmodern era, however, this belief in America's privileged access to nature has lost much, if not all, of its credibility. This is the second meaning of the proposition that nature is now gone forever.

But the consequences of these changes in the status and meaning of «nature» should not be overstated. The continuing physical presence of seeming «wilderness» or its simulacra — exemplified by the remaining uninhabited expanses of forest, desert, and mountain country — continues to exert a strong influence on the nation's collective mentality. Its importance for the environmental movement cannot be underestimated; it is still possible to regard a significant portion of the land as existing in a relatively undefined state. In a 1995 essay, for example, the same Bill McKibben who so recently had written a lament for the «end» of nature, reports on the astonishing recovery, in the last few decades, of the forests along the eastern seaboard of the United States. More of the region is forested today, he contends, than at any time since the American revolution; much of the original wild life also has returned.⁹ This development illustrates the exceptionally fluid, evanescent, unpredictable, ambiguous character of the postmodern era, and more specifically, of current changes in the meaning of such ostensibly reliable rubrics of reality as wilderness, countryside, and city.

3. THE COUNTRYSIDE, THE SMALL TOWN, RURAL AMERICA

Almost everyone has a rough idea of the history: at one time some 90% of Americans lived on farms, today the fraction is roughly 2.8%.¹⁰ As material entities, of course, the farms, the countryside, the small towns, still exist, and as anyone can plainly see, they still occupy a lot of geographic space. What cannot be as plainly seen, however, is the extent to which American agriculture has been «industrialized.» Today it more nearly approximates the ideal type of rationalized, highly mechanized, large-scale commercial production — of corporate agribusiness — than that of the single family farm. The gradual transformation of agriculture was accompanied by the draining of

8. Or, in its vulgar form, «God's country.» M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York: Norton, 1971); Perry Miller, *Nature's Nation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967).

9. Bill McKibben, «An Explosion of Green,» *Atlantic Monthly* (April, 1995), pp. 61-83.)

10. The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimate of the U.S. farm population in 1986 was 2.8% of the national population. See National Research Council, *Alternative Agriculture* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1989), pp. 33-34.

wealth and power — often of life itself — from the country town. As early as 1926, Thorstein Veblen described how retail business in American small towns was losing its independence, and how it was becoming a mere tributary of national corporate enterprise. So far as it had been a quasi-autonomous unit of economic, political, and cultural life, Veblen implied, the small town was dying.¹¹

Today many small towns and villages in the countryside are more dead than alive. Along the main streets of the towns near my family's place in southwestern Maine, many shops, restaurants, and movie theatres are closed, empty, boarded up. That is partly because the population is shrinking (the young still are moving to cities in search of jobs), and partly because the merchants cannot compete with the outlets of national corporations housed in nearby shopping malls. Just about every rural family, no matter how poor, owns at least one car — the automobile surely has played a major role in divesting small towns of their commercial viability. One large shopping mall, or even, for that matter, one of the latest gargantuan-style discount department stores (a K-Mart or Wal-Mart) located at a strategic highway intersection can singlehandedly kill off much of the retail business in several towns. Such losses sap the vitality of town culture. When local businessmen fail, a major source of governance, civic voluntarism, and philanthropy dries up, and the result is an immeasurable decline in communal energy, good will, and self-esteem.

Since Veblen's time the process of integrating all aspects of village and small town life into large national systems — technological, economic, cultural, informational — has accelerated. Even at ground level, however, much of this loss of local autonomy is hidden from view. To appreciate its extent, one must take account of all the largely invisible telephonic and computerized information, financial, mail-order, and marketing networks; of the economic and cultural influence of — including the massive inculcation of consumerist values by — radio, television and video; and of the national circulation of popular music, film, and periodicals — all of these connect the business enterprises, homes, work, leisure activities, and mental lives of people in the villages, small towns, and the countryside with systems originating in urban centers of wealth, power, communications, and cultural production. The significance of the shopping mall is by no means merely economic. It introduces a branch of postmodern culture to small town America. At the mall customers can enjoy many pleasures of the global marketplace: McDonald's and other fast foods and international consumer items, movies and other kinds of entertainment, including some provided by theme parks. Many shopping malls are designed as small scale theme parks in the Disney style.¹² This transformation of the

11. Thorstein Veblen, «The Country Town,» in Max Lerner, ed., *The Portable Veblen* (New York: Viking, 1948), pp. 407-30.

12. For a witty account of the shopping mall-theme park connection to the postmodern global order, see Benjamin R. Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld* (New York: Times Books, 1995).

countryside must be seen as in large measure part of its incorporation into a national — and often, by now international — matrix of electronically linked, high-tech systems of commerce and entertainment.

Another recent development in the countryside is a novel kind of dispersed settlement, sometimes called «rurbia,» that dispenses with many features of traditional communities.¹³ It is created by the piecemeal dispersal, beyond the suburbs — beyond the old exurbia — of industry, small business, and residential housing. There always have been people who preferred to live «out» in the countryside, but that usually meant «out of town,» that is, belonging to — yet living on the outskirts of — an established community. Rurbia is different. It has emerged in two kinds of hitherto underdeveloped terrain: the least productive agricultural areas beyond the outer rim of suburbs, and the truly remote areas of sparsely settled states like Arkansas, New Hampshire, North Carolina, and North Dakota.

The decisive feature of rurbia is «piecemeal dispersal.» In many counties in these less urbanized states the population may have increased by as much as 300-400% in a ten year period, but without any corresponding growth in the population of towns or cities. Some new growth counties in North Carolina or Arizona have populations of 200,000, yet they contain no communities of more than 3,000 people.¹⁴ Housing in rurbia is typified by isolated single-family homes on relatively large plots of land close to outdoor recreation. Such locations — where no other houses are within sight or even, in many cases, within walking distance — satisfy the unappeasable desire of Americans for independence. This form of life appeals to the comfortably retired; to skilled workers in dispersed high-tech, flexible production industries; and to the self-employed — writers, consultants, private investors, and technical experts — who constitute the white collar work force of the growing electronic cottage industries. For the corporations that locate in rurbia, the chief attractions are plentiful, inexpensive land; the availability of a skilled, homogeneous (predominantly white), non-union labor force; low taxes, and the hope of dispensing with some local and state governmental regulations.

The dominant ethos of rurbia is anti-urban and, perhaps more significant, *anti-suburban*. Rurbanites value proximity to open spaces for outdoor recreation (especially

13. Here I draw on observations made in an earlier essay, «The American Ideology of Space,» in Stuart Wrede and William Howard Adams, eds., *Denatured Versions; Landscape and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1988), pp.75-6. See also John Herbers, *The New American Heartland: America's Flight Beyond the Suburbs and How it is Changing Our Future* (New York, 1986).

14. John Herbers, *The New Heartland: America's Flight Beyond the Suburbs and How it is Changing Our Future* (New York, 1986). See also William K. Stevens, «A Rural Landscape, But an Urban Boom,» *New York Times*, August 8, 1988. This is an account of more than 500 counties in the U.S. whose population had grown by almost 14% in the 1980s without an equivalent growth of towns or cities.

hunting and fishing), and the long distance that separates them from those urban conditions — costly and inferior housing; high taxes; crime; drugs; noise; political, racial and ethnic tensions — which have been seeping, in recent decades, from cities into suburbs. This decentralized pattern of settlement creates an odd sort of community — or anti-community — whose built core may consist of little more than a strip, a line-up of stores or a shopping mall and a few services along a highway. The regional school and a church or two are located, more or less randomly, on nearby secondary roads. Although created to satisfy the urge for independence, life in suburbia — at least for those who work outside their homes — entails even greater reliance on the automobile and the long-distance commute than life in suburbia. In the postmodern era, escape from organized communities also is likely to result in greater dependence on electronic networks of communication. Despite, or because of, their embrace of family-oriented privatism, suburbanites end up relying on the electronic media for many of their contacts with the outside world. Some are virtual survivalists, proud of their principled unconcern for the cities and their undeserving (mostly non-white) inhabitants. In its militant form this proto-racist mindset — exemplified by the National Rifle Association and the private militias of the rural West — is anti-liberal, anti-intellectual, anti-government. It expresses the soured hopes and resentments of those who still feel the lure of a long-gone rural America, and of the utopian fantasies of a simple, individualistic life that it continues to evoke.

4. THE POSTMODERN CITY: DECENTRALIZED, DISPERSED, STRATIFIED, AND GLOBALLY CONNECTED

The archeology of the older American cities maps a sequence of group arrivals and replacements. On their arrival, the first settlers, attracted by some natural or technological advantage — a harbor, waterfall, or road juncture — had built what would become the new city's center. Then, having done their work and improved their own lot, they moved out to a greener, more spacious, less crowded terrain, and a new cohort, usually made up of relatively poor, propertyless working people — who often belonged to another ethnic or racial group — replaced them. When this process had been repeated a few times, the city took the form of an older core surrounded by concentric circles of increasingly distant suburbs. The impulse to escape from urban density and complexity is a variant of the pastoral motive inscribed in much of classic American art and expression. The ideal of Jeffersonian pastoral was a society of the «middle landscape,» a polity capable of reconciling the imperatives of technological progress with an accommodation to nature; for many Americans this goal was represented by the cherished

icon of a detached, single family home on an expanse of green, privately owned land.¹⁵

This centrifugal pattern of American development often reversed certain key features of the typical European pattern. In Europe the bourgeoisie usually reserved for itself the choice sites in the central city; in the premodern era many of those sites — grand palaces set in handsome parks and gardens — had belonged to the monarchs, aristocrats, and clerics of established churches — ranks outlawed in the American republic. In America, accordingly, the poorest minority groups often are confined to central city ghettos, whereas in Europe their counterparts are more likely to be relegated to crowded outlying suburbs.¹⁶

Many changes in the character of the American city during the last century and a half stem from a complex two-way flow of population: a simultaneous movement into and out of the central cities. While one large stream of the nation's population was flowing from the countryside to the cities, another was flowing from the cities to the suburbs. Many central cities thus have lost most of their white residents who can afford to own a car and a home in a suburb with — or so they hope — better schools, lower crime rates, cleaner air, less noise, and more neighbors who resemble themselves. This migration has been encouraged by energetic real-estate developers and, more recently, by the managers of high-tech industries and other entrepreneurs who have set up shop on the city's periphery. A major driving force in the reshaping of the cities, as Mike Davis argues in his bitter, satirical book about Los Angeles, *City of Quartz*, is the high profitability of real estate development and speculation, and its capacity to attract large amounts of foreign capital — much of it originating, in the case of L.A., in Japan.¹⁷

One result of the outflow of city residents has been the emergence of Edge City, a satellite urban center that has developed along the suburban perimeters of such metropolitan areas as Washington, D.C.; New York, Los Angeles, Houston, or Atlanta. An Edge City, strictly defined, is a secondary urban core in or near suburbia; to qualify it should have at least five million feet of office space and more jobs than housing, i.e., more people commuting into the Edge City than out of it each day. A single metropolis like Washington, D.C., may have as many as fifteen edge cities.¹⁸

15. Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University, 1964); «Pastoralism in America,» in Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen, eds., *Ideology and Classic American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp.36-69; and «Does Pastoralism Have a Future?», in John Dixon Hunt, ed., *The Pastoral Landscape* (Washington, D.C: National Gallery of Art, 1992), pp. 109-225.

16. Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).

17. Mike Davis, *City of Quartz, Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Vintage, 1992).

18. Joel Garreau, *The Emerging Cities of Washington*, Washington Post Reprint Series, 1987-8; *Edge City, Life on the New Frontier* (New York: Doubleday, 1991).

But perhaps the most striking recent development is the current transformation of the central cities themselves. This is another ambiguous, or dual process, of related decline and growth, as manifested, first, by the exodus — and the inner dispersal — of the residential population, and second, by the construction of a new, lavish, downtown core of financial and transnational corporate enterprise.

Quite apart from the exodus to suburbia, Edge City, and ruburbia, the residential population is now dispersing *inside* the central cities themselves. With the decline of large-scale industrial production, one of the chief motives leading to high population density — the perceived advantage of living near one's workplace — is disappearing. As a result, we are seeing a thinning out of the central city population. In the Chicago metropolitan region, for example, the population grew by only 4% between 1970 and 1990, but land use for residential purposes increased by 46%, and suburban commercial and industrial land consumption increased by 74%. The whole city is spreading out or, as it were, de-congesting. In 1970 the core city of Chicago accounted for 48% of the metropolitan region's population and nearly 60% of its jobs. By 1990, however, the core had only 38% of the people and 37% of the jobs in the region.¹⁹ The accelerating dispersal of the population in space is a striking and, in the long run perhaps, a promising development; it opens up intriguing opportunities for innovative urban planners and landscape architects to refashion the inner cityscape.

But that rehabilitation may be a long time off. For many of its residents, meanwhile, the central cities remain oppressively divided. The people may be dispersing in space, but their neighborhoods are as segregated as ever. If anything, economic, racial, and ethnic boundaries are becoming more pronounced. This is not, of course, objectionable to all of the groups concerned. Nor is it the result, as some contend, of the spontaneous operation of market forces. Since 1970, in fact, federal tax laws and social policies have helped to effect a substantial redistribution of wealth and power from poor, relatively propertyless, people to those who control most of the nation's capital. Recent studies show that the United States is now the most economically stratified of the wealthy industrial nations, with the greatest discrepancy between the rich and the poor. The wealthiest 1% of American households — those whose average net worth is at least \$2.3 million — owns almost 40% of the nation's wealth. In the 1980s 20% of families with the highest incomes made 75% of the gains in family income, and that same minority also controlled virtually 100% of the decade's increase in wealth. On the other hand, 20% of American families with the lowest incomes earned only 5.7% of all the after-tax income in the United States. According to another new study, poor children in the United States are poorer than the children in all but two of eighteen Western

19. Elmer W. Johnson, Project Report, «The Dispersed and Stratified Metropolis.» *Bulletin, The American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, April, 1995, pp. 5-18; see also, Robert Fishman, «Megalopolis Unbound.» *Wilson Quarterly*, Winter, 1990.

industrialized nations.²⁰ Anyone who cares to see the material embodiment of this increasing socio-economic stratification has only to walk through all of the neighborhoods —from the most affluent suburb to the most squalid ghetto — of just about any American city today.

And yet, along with the dispersal and stratification of the central city population —and this is the second, ostensibly more positive, side of current developments — the downtown cores of many American cities have in recent years received an impressive infusion of a new sort of corporate wealth and energy. The visible result has been the construction of partly new, partly rebuilt downtown financial districts. They consist of banks, insurance companies, and other financial institutions; large, imposing hotels; convention centers; upscale shopping malls, and possibly a few luxury apartment houses, all clustered around the new skyscraper headquarters of large transnational corporations. This postmodern downtown is a kind of mini-Wall Street, and in many cities its high-rise office buildings (postmodernist in style of course) are adjacent to the most debilitated and degrading inner city slums.²¹

All of this suggests a disconcerting trend toward the domination of this refurbished inner city by an international monied oligarchy. It is striking that theorists of postmodernism, such as Fredric Jameson, choose the new downtown Los Angeles, with its ostentatious hotels, banks, and high-rise office towers, to illustrate the essential character of the postmodernist mentality.²² As it happens, moreover, the area housing these new structures is close to the site of the nation's most violent urban riots in recent decades. It is hard to avoid the idea that this juxtaposition of postmodern architectural grandeur with the grim ghettos that generate such explosive desperation is emblematic of our emerging postmodern social order.

5. POSTMODERNITY AS THE ERA OF HIGH-TECH GLOBAL OLIGARCHY

In the era of postmodernity, more Americans than ever live in cities, and yet, for purposes of socio-economic, political, and cultural understanding, the concept of the city —as a place distinct from the countryside and the wilderness — has lost much of its usefulness. It no longer is useful to think of problems like racism, poverty, violence,

20. Keith Bradsher, «Gap in Wealth in U.S. Called Widest in West,» *New York Times*, 17 April 1995, pp. A1, D4; see also the editorial comment, «The Rich Get Richer Faster,» *New York Times*, 18 April 1995, p. A24; also Keith Bradsher, «Low Ranking for Poor American Children; U.S. Youth Among Worst Off in Study of 18 Industrialized Nations,» *New York Times*, 14 August 1995, p.A9; the study compares the extent of the gap between rich and poor children in 18 nations, and shows that the U.S. ranks 16th — that the gap is larger only in Israel and Ireland.

21. For a revealing account of this process of decentralization and recentralization, see Chapter VII, «It All Comes Together in Los Angeles,» in Soja, *Postmodern Geographies*.

22. See Jameson, *Postmodernism*.

and crime as «city problems.» The reason for downplaying the urban character of these problems is not, of course, that cities have become less important; on the contrary, they, or rather the networks of wealth, power, communication, and transportation that originate in cities, and whose chief nodes are located in cities, have become all-important.

But the distinction must be emphasized: it is the networks of communication, wealth, and power, not the cities as such, as places of habitation — as communities, that have become all-important in the era of postmodernity. Back in the 1970s, in the aftermath of the civil rights movement, American black communities discovered how relatively unimportant the cities had become as potential sites of local political power. To cope with conditions created by white flight to the suburbs, urban blacks took up electoral politics. In several large American cities they organized successful coalitions, elected black mayors, and won control of the city government, only to find that as a locus of political power the city had become impotent. American cities no longer were capable, if they ever were, of mobilizing enough wealth and power to effect significant change. The fact is that neither the old topographical categories — city, countryside, wilderness — nor the newer ones — metropolis, suburbia, Edge City, ruburbia — are very helpful in elucidating the pattern of change in the era of postmodernity.

In retrospect, it seems evident that we Americans, represented by the views of Frederick Jackson Turner, leader of our «frontier» school of historians, have tended to exaggerate the relative importance of geography — or of space-based institutions and beliefs — in the development of our society. As the ecological historian, William Cronon, demonstrates in his revealing study, *Nature's Metropolis*, the growth of Chicago was intricately and inextricably bound up, from the outset, with the development of a vast hinterland — much of it regarded as «wilderness» — stretching all the way to the Sierra Nevada.²³ In compelling detail, Cronon shows how Chicago and its environs were knit to each other by systems of transportation (especially the railroads), finance (especially the banks, stock and commodities markets, and the channels they provided for the flow of capital), communications, and marketing. This network of economic relations is vividly manifested by the total interdependence of cattle-raising on the range lands of the West and Chicago's crucially important meat-packing industry. The result was to make of the city and the entire mid-continental countryside a complex, more or less unified built environment that Cronon calls «second nature.» This second nature in effect was constructed on top of, and in large measure masked the presence of, the original «first [or nonhuman] nature.» What was decisive in the history of this development, finally, was neither Chicago nor its hinterland; it was the network of wealth and power that bound them together. Cronon's analysis is invaluable in tracing the prehistory of postmodernity, which might be thought of as a name for the latest

23. William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis, Chicago and the Great West* (New York: Norton, 1991).

stage in the serial project of industrialization, electronic rationalization, and the globalizing of corporate capitalism.

In conclusion, and as a cautionary tale about the postmodern shaping of the American landscape, consider the story of Benjamin Thompson's redesign, in 1975, of the Faneuil Hall area in downtown Boston. At the time his refashioning of this venerable colonial site into a general commodity marketplace was widely praised as an exemplar of innovative, practical, civically responsible, aesthetically sensitive, historic restoration. For this splendid project, as well as his other work, Thompson won the highest award of the American Institute of Architecture. The Faneuil Hall Marketplace quickly became a tourist attraction, and people from all over the world flocked to see it. It always was crowded. The tenants, most of them local retail merchants, thrived. All in all, it was a stunning success, but that success, as it turned out, undermined Thompson's initial purpose. He had designed the market, in accordance with its historic function, to house a variety of small shops selling fresh foodstuffs and other domestic commodities, and thus to enhance the quality of daily life in Boston; but the merchants, eager to cash in on the out-of-town tourist trade, replaced those commodities with far more lucrative fast foods and souvenir *kitsch*. In the event, many of the original merchants sold out; much of the local clientele stopped coming, and the whole project lost much of its distinctive Boston identity, past and present. Recently Thompson, now 76, returned for another look. He was deeply disappointed. «That's not my Faneuil Hall,» he told the *Boston Globe*:

We wanted real proprietors who would run the kind of establishment where you could meet the guy who makes the clam chowder and the one who bakes the bread. We didn't want national franchises. We wanted Boston voters and taxpayers, people who were part of the community, Red Sox and Celtic fans. Developers have problems with that attitude. They like banks or a telephone company or a Hyatt hotel to take huge chunks of space.²⁴

There is nothing new, to be sure, about the shaping of the American landscape by the power and influence of capital investment. Nevertheless, there is something about the case of the Faneuil Hall Marketplace, when considered in the context of the developing global marketplace, that makes it qualitatively different: it epitomizes the dominant meaning of postmodernity as the name for the current transformation of life around the world. A hint of that meaning can be heard in Thompson's distinction between what he wanted, namely, to create a place for «real proprietors,...people who were part of the community,» and what he got: the fulfillment of the aims, as he says, of developers

24. *The Boston Globe*, June 15, 1995, pp. 69, 74.

of large banks, hotels, telephone companies, and high-rise office towers. Here local interests have been superseded — erased — by the abstract imperatives of the market. By «local interests» I mean virtually everything having to do with the lives of ordinary people, the discrete persons who live and work in Boston, and with the quality of their domestic, aesthetic, and sensory experience.

What is distinctive, then, about the postmodern era is the widening schism between the two strata of life we see wherever we look closely at the American landscape today. The upper level is held together by a global web of electronic communications; it makes possible the instantaneous transmission of general information, news, money, and commercial entertainment around the world. The people who live on this stratum of society are welleducated, economically privileged, technically sophisticated, members of a cosmopolitan meritocracy. They constitute what is becoming a new kind of monied, global elite. Their natural habitats are the world's great financial and communications centers. These cities are the spatial nodes in the international electronic web that forms the upper stratum of postmodernity.

Life on the lower stratum, where local and parochial interests struggle for survival, is not easily described because in large parts of the world — the former Soviet Union, the former Yugoslavia, the Middle East, much of Africa — it is so chaotic. It resembles nothing so much as the Hobbesian war of each against all. It is the location of retrograde, often racist, nationalisms or fundamentalist religious movements. Just as the small towns of America have lost much of their autonomy, wealth, and power, so have many nation states. Indeed, there is reason to suppose that postmodernity may be making the nation state itself obsolete.

In conclusion, then, I want to emphasize the widening gap between the two strata as the decisive feature of postmodernity. If the upper stratum promises to realize the old fantasy of One World, the lower stratum is a study in social entropy — that is, the tendency of human systems to break down. These trends are accentuated by the apotheosis of the market, and the widespread hostility toward governments. Whatever the impressive efficacy of markets in allocating resources and distributing commodities, they are notoriously ineffectual in furthering such common goods as social justice, democracy, health, education, and the general welfare.

I hate to close on such a grim note. Like most optimistic Americans, I prefer upbeat endings. If there is any consolation to be had from this sorry prospect, however, it requires the prior mention of an even gloomier event that has been hanging over the world since Hiroshima: an oncoming ecological apocalypse. On days when the worst case scenario of the biocentric environmentalists strikes me as credible, I am able to add a positive postscript to this conception of postmodernity. To deal with a truly catastrophic threat to the planetary ecosystem, after all, humanity obviously will require the capacity for unified global action. It is consoling, therefore, to think that the historic mission of postmodernity is to build the global infrastructure that we ultimately will need to insure human survival.