

# CANADIAN JOURNAL of URBAN RESEARCH

REVUE CANADIENNE de RECHERCHE URBAINE

## BOOK REVIEW

**Keil, Roger**

*Suburban Planet. Making the World Urban from the Outside In*

Cambridge and Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2018

258 pages

ISBN: 978-0-7456-8312-6

Don't be fooled by its title: *Suburban Planet* is in fact a book about urbanization. But in contrast to the contemporary urbanist literature (which devotes overwhelming attention to questions related to urban centres, especially in the Global North), the author advances the claim that "it is through the lens of suburbanization (broadly defined) that the process of urbanization reveals itself in the twenty-first century" (16). As a global phenomenon, Roger Keil argues, urbanization "will necessarily be largely suburban" (9).

To understand what Keil construes as the suburban on a planetary scale, we are invited to put aside the meanings traditionally ascribed to the words "suburbs", "outskirts", "peripheries" or "semi-peripheries", and even to consider neologisms like *post-suburbanization*—"a term mostly trying to denote that historical suburbs have now entered themselves into a complex renewal and urbanization process" (39). More concretely, Keil argues that we need to conceptualize suburbanization *as a process*, but also to reject the centrism that reduces it to a unidirectional flow of people and capital that starts out necessarily from an urban centre. Inspired by recent postcolonial urban scholarship, the author also calls for a way of studying suburbanization that rejects another kind of centrism, namely the Euro-American centrism of the dominant English-language literature on urbanization. Keil predicts that the future of human settlements will unfold in places that have not traditionally been centres of urbanization or of its theorization. For this reason, he argues, "it is from the emerging geographies of non-European and non-American (sub)urbanity that the architectures of urban theory await rebuilding" (45).

Early in the book, Keil explains that his intention is not to promote suburbanization (or post-suburbanization) as a global model of urban development, nor to inveigh against contemporary forms of urbanization in the world's metropolitan centres. Instead, he sees *Suburban Planet* as part of a theory building project aimed at "conceptualizing the continuous suburbanization of our world" (12). An important aspect of Keil's theory building project is to see suburbanization as a distinct, self-constituting process that is at the same time indivisible from the historical unfolding of urbanization. This un-static, decentering, and relational take is based on his observation that "the geographical periphery, the outskirts, the peri-urban [are claiming] new kinds of centralities" (55). But the larger theoretical point that emerges from this conceptual stance is the necessity to rethink two of urban theory's key concepts, centre and periphery, by placing them in an ongoing dialectical relationship with one another.

In Keil's approach, however, this dialectical rethinking must take care to understand individual processes in their specificity and "not to *assume* convergence and conceptual universality" (45, emphasis mine). As he adds,

*Canadian Journal of Urban Research*, Winter 2018, Volume 27, Issue 2, pages 65-66.

Copyright © 2018 by the Institute of Urban Studies.

All rights of reproduction in any form reserved.

ISSN: 2371-0292

“[there] is plenty of idiosyncrasy and endogenic activity in the myriad suburban forms that are now emerging; there is also much blurring among and between the morphologies, lifestyles and infrastructural technologies in different world regions” (49). If we cast our sight globally, Keil avers, it becomes difficult to ignore this patterned heterogeneity—although he urges us not simply to attend to it in a shallow or additive sense, but rather to treat it as a powerful tool to rewrite suburban theory.

Theory writing of course requires generalization, and for Keil this means a commitment to making boundary-pushing claims that link to many of the world’s most urgent and consequential questions of social change. This involves the adoption of a critical systemic approach that “sees suburbanization as an outgrowth of contradictions caused by capitalist urbanization processes and intrinsically entwined with them” (81). To avoid economic reductionism, however, such a theory building project also demands an effort to “learn from the suburbs and their study something more general, perhaps even universal, about the urban overall” (64). In other words: while suburbanization must be understood as being deeply tied to uneven geographical development, its study must be geared at comprehending *urbanization* in a broad sense.

Keil provides a number of thematic examples with varying degrees of empirical detail to illustrate the potential of his suburban theory building approach, including: suburban infrastructure, which as he points out is key to the very functioning of urban life; density, which he argues can only be regarded as a key strategy to attain urban sustainability “if many higher scale issues of energy use, etc. are ignored” (161); climate change, which he sees as a crucial (sub)urban issue that requires a shift in focus from the consequences of global urbanizing processes to the very means by which we construct and live urbanity; and suburban governance, in which he strives to read an opening toward “a plurality of tantalizing political possibilities” (199).

This thoughtful, highly provocative volume has clearly benefitted from the author’s extensive collaboration with more than 50 scholarly experts from around the world in his capacity as principal investigator in a recently concluded eight-year research project called *Global Suburbanisms* (for which I worked as a postdoctoral fellow a few years ago, although at arm’s length from Keil). There is certainly much more to say about *Suburban Planet* but I will close simply with a strong recommendation to read it, aimed not only at suburban scholars but at urban scholars in general—for as the author argues, “suburbs are not catching up [to the city], they determine the pace and direction of urbanization today” (27).

Pablo Mendez  
Department of Geography and Environmental Studies  
Carleton University