

high-paying jobs that would more than fulfill their parents' dreams for them.

"Never before" was virtually the slogan of the age. Never before had there been a car like this one or a floor wax like that one. The Populuxe generation heard of precedent being shattered several times each day.

Still, *Life* was onto something very important, and statistics bear it out. Americans who were born during the Depression came of age at a time when a number of economic and demographic factors converged in an extremely favorable way. There was more wealth to go around and a decline in the number of people to share it. Nothing like it had ever happened before, and nothing like it has happened since. . . .

The postwar period brought a much more equitable distribution of income than ever before. The increase in real income went almost entirely to the middle class. The absolute number of high-income people, which *Fortune* defined as those making more than \$7,500 annually in 1953 dollars, more than doubled from 1929, but their share of the nation's total income declined sharply. The biggest increase came in the number of families in the \$4,000-\$7,000 salary range, which was understood to be solidly middle class. There were 5.5 million families in this category in 1929, 17.9 million in 1953. They accounted for 35 percent of the nation's population; they earned 42 percent of its income. These were the candidates for suburbia, the cream of the American market. . . .

The new world without sidewalks was, at once, an exciting and perplexing place. It was a world of the young, a place apart from mothers and uncles and familiar neighbors. You were new, and so were all your neighbors. And in many suburbs the chances were that neither you nor they would be in the neighborhood very long. Nationwide, one American in five moved every year. . . .

The mobility of these trend-setting suburbanites probably contributed to the increasing uniformity of suburbs from coast to coast as new styles, products and trends hit the housing market. Such standardization had its value for the highly mobile segment of the suburban population. If your company moved you from Cherry Hill, New Jersey, to Anaheim, California, the vegetation would be different, but you could probably move into much the same house. Your furniture would fit, and it would be blessedly familiar besides. . . .

This itinerant young suburban market was far from a majority of the American people, but it was considered the cream of the market

## The Luckiest Generation

Thomas Hine

*America's economic growth was striking during the postwar era. And such growth meant that families' real incomes grew—in 1953, up approximately 50 percent over the pre-Depression boom year of 1929 (in constant dollars). Most strikingly, the modest affluence this brought to the American people was more equitably distributed than any time before or since. Industrial wages increasingly propelled workers into an economic middle class. More and more young Americans were able to complete high school or even attend college. The affluence of the postwar era fundamentally changed America's class structure.*

*This growing middle class moved, by the millions, to the suburbs. In many images, from then and now, these postwar suburbs appear as sites of stifling conformity. But Thomas Hine portrays the new postwar suburbs as more akin to the frontier. In the suburbs, Americans from widely diverse social backgrounds came together and had to figure out how to live in this new space. The cultures they created often emphasized conformity—but a conformity quite different from the rigid traditions and hierarchies of urban ethnic neighborhoods, small towns, or rural communities in which many of these new suburban residents had been raised. In the suburbs, people looked to the advice of national experts on everything from child raising to recipes. According to Hine, the suburbs fostered the creation of a new, national, middle-class culture that was open to a broader range of Americans than ever before.*

*Keep Hine's argument in mind as you look at two sections that follow this piece—the chart portraying sales of consumer goods and the letters responding to news that a black family had moved into a formerly all-white Pennsylvania suburb. How do these documents support or challenge his analysis?*

"Never before," *Life* exclaimed in a 1954 article, "so much for so few. The article was accompanied by photographs of such novel phenomena as crowded student parking lots at a high school. It told of young men just out of college or the service who had their pick of excellent,

Source: William H. Chafe, Harvard Sitkoff, and Beth Bailey, *A History of Our Time: Readings on Postwar America 7e* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 68-74.

and it set the tone for the rest. The look and accessories of casual suburban living moved quickly into older urban row-house neighborhoods, and suburbanites set the goals to strive for. In some part of his being, every American wanted a Cadillac. And even though television and magazines united the country as never before, the amount of contact Americans had with other people was steadily diminishing as they drove to where they were going and stayed away from the crowds and jostling of the cities. . . .

The new suburbanites were attractive consumers, and almost everything they encountered in the popular media treated them as consumers. Moreover, because they were usually far from their families and others who would traditionally set standards for them, they were considered to be a very malleable market. They were very receptive to newness, they believed that things were improving. They watched a lot of television and read a lot of magazines, from which they were believed to be taking ideas about how they should live. In short, they were ideal targets for advertising.

One indication that this was true could be seen in the way people ate. In the early 1950s, a very unusual thing happened. Americans increased the percentage of their income they were willing to spend on food. No industry marketed more aggressively or came up with a larger array of new, more profitable products. Food was more than mere nourishment; it was convenience, modernity and a fulfillment of parental obligations. A bit of the increased expenditure came from moving up in status—eating high on the hog—but most came in manufactured food, such as canned goods, frozen foods, boxed mixes, prepared snacks. . . .

Recipes found on the backs of cans and boxes became increasingly influential during this period. Typically there were directions for the preparation of the product and suggestions about how to use the product to make a fancier "company" dish. Just as basic automobiles were made more exciting by the addition of tailfins and chrome, so were ordinary sweet potatoes dressed up by the addition of Campfire marshmallows and Dole crushed pineapple. Just as buyers of automobiles and other products knew that styling was a bit fraudulent, eaters seemed to enjoy the revelation that the apple pie was really made out of Ritz crackers and the snack at the party was just plain old Wheat Chex putting on airs. . . .

Even as Americans became more and more widely dispersed geographically, they became more and more a single nation, all making

the same recipes found on the backs of boxes. Betty Crocker represented a new kind of authority, acting *in loco parentis*.

Authorities and experts seemed everywhere in the popular media, in editorial copy, advertising and often both. They served as national parents, telling young people separated from their families and thrown into unfamiliar contexts how to deal with their problems, raise their children, take care of their house and yard, dress, entertain and enjoy themselves.

Folk wisdom, the sort of thing your family might tell you, was called into serious question by the rapidly changing circumstances of modern life. Parents wondering about what to do about their children were more likely to consult—and believe—Dr. Spock's child-rearing manual than their own parents, who had been through it all before. . . .

Anyone who paid attention to all the experts and all the advertising, and tried to behave accordingly, would probably have gone mad from trying to reconcile the many contradictions routinely set forth in the popular magazines.

Men were to be consummate breadwinners, protectors of their family, who journeyed to work each day to do their part for the most productive and robust economy the world had ever seen. They were told that they must be close to their families and to their houses. *Life* discovered in suburbia "the new domesticated male" and noted that he typically had three children at the age his father was when he married. Men were believed to be taking an ever larger share in the tasks of keeping a household together, and these chores seemed to become more important as home and family were increasingly depicted as the only respectable obsessions. Lawns had to be attended to. Men were emissaries of modern styles from their workplaces to their homes, and they should assist their wives in deciding how to decorate those homes. And the man was expected to be a do-it-yourselfer, getting special rewards from solving the crises of the homeowner while steadily improving his investment. He was the support on which the household rested, and the stability of his family's life was a very important goal. Yet he was also married to his employer and expected to uproot his family and take it off to distant places to serve the company. He was, at once, more domesticated and more career-oriented than his father, and he did not have the support of old friends and nearby family to help him through difficult times.

He was likely to be the first member of his family to be doing well economically, and he was part of a generation of pioneers in the new

kind of suburbia that was emerging. Still, he was constantly being reassured that his kind of life was normal. He was not defeated by these contradictions. He consistently told pollsters that he was happy, that his chief regret was that he did not have more education, that he expected to do better next year and that his children would do even better than he did.

While women were rarely assumed to have a productive place in the economy, they were taken very seriously as consumers and indeed were often depicted as the chief decision makers in regard to what their families would purchase. They were marrying younger than their mothers had, and their husbands were younger too. That made more children, indeed a lot of children all at once, nearly inevitable.

The physical nature of most suburbs, with their lack of public facilities and public transportation, increased the demands on mothers, even those of older, theoretically more self-sufficient children. They organized their children's social life and their educational and athletic achievement. One of the most prevalent commercial images of Mom was behind the wheel of a station wagon, sitting at a curbside while pigtailed Susie and freckled-faced Tommy come running to be picked up from ballet lessons or Little League. . . .

Around the house, Mom was said to be an engineer, someone who keeps a technologically and organizationally complex institution running smoothly. In advertising at least, she did not have to exert herself very much. If anyone was depicted on her hands and knees scrubbing a floor it was someone from her parents' generation, before the availability of modern cleansers and labor-saving appliances. Women in magazines were always stylishly and impractically dressed. In advertising, they sometimes wore a glove to press the button of the latest household machine. More often than you would expect, they were shown striking poses in the kitchen while wearing a tiara. Somebody must have liked this, because the image persisted for many years. . . .

The polls generally found women slightly less happy than their husbands, although far more satisfied than not. They expressed extreme displeasure with housework perhaps because the media were leading them to believe that they would not have to do any. They said they wanted more excitement in their lives. And by 1959 teenage girls were saying that they planned to have a career outside of the home.

It was difficult to live up to the image of the new suburban man and woman found in mass magazines, television and advertising.

On top of this was tremendous criticism that emanated from intellectuals and was often disseminated through these very same outlets. Chief among these critiques were that suburbanites were abject conformists without any minds of their own. They were dupes whose culture had been sugar-coated by hucksters, and they chose to live in what Lewis Mumford called "the proliferating nonentity" of suburbia. Their environment was not paradise, as everyone knew, nor was it countryside or the relatively more privileged suburbs known to previous generations, something that commentators spent quite a lot of time deploring.

There was a distinct class bias in most of what was written about suburbia and suburbanites during this time. For most intellectuals, it represented not a triumph of democracy but a proof of Robert Maynard Hutchins' formulation that the industrial revolution made it possible for a moron to be successful. There arose a successful minor genre of trouble-in-the-suburbs literature, with such titles as *The Crack in the Picture Window*, the story of John and Mary Drone and the way in which development living drives them crazy, without their knowing it. One of the most extreme was *The Split Level Trap*, based on the experiences of a psychiatrist in a northern New Jersey suburb. Things were so bad out there, he wrote, that the phenomenon should be renamed. He proposed Disturbia.

One of the problems that commentators seemed to have had was that they had far higher expectations for suburbia than the residents themselves had. Suburbia was where new houses were, where there were yards and barbecues. Buyers of development houses knew they were not getting a carefully landscaped, picturesque environment. The neighbors of sociologist Herbert Gans, who in 1958 was one of the first people to move into the third Levittown, now Willingboro, New Jersey, told him they hardly thought about a new community or a new environment when they were making their decisions. They were there because Levittown offered the most house for the money. In a few cases where chunks of whole urban neighborhoods moved en masse to a particular suburb or when an industrial plant relocated, people were able to simply transplant the society with which they were comfortable. Many people changed the way they lived upon moving to suburbia, but that was a by-product, not a goal.

Some of the anti-suburban commentary of the period seems fired by anger at many new suburbanites betraying their working-class backgrounds by voting for Eisenhower. Later it became clear that

they had not all metamorphosed into Republicans, but rather that they voted for someone who represented the same kind of security and stability they looked for in their neighborhoods and within their families.

Even the reputation for conformity has probably been overstated. One of the hallmarks of suburbia was, in fact, a lack of the standards and expectations one would find in an ethnic neighborhood of a large city or in a small town. The suburbs were inhabited by people who didn't know one another, let alone their neighbors' parents, who had never lived in such a place before and weren't quite sure of how to do it. And like most people in such a novel situation, they suspected that other people really knew how to behave. They might criticize how their neighbors were bringing up their children, but they looked to their neighbors for signals on how to behave.

In the 1950s and early 1960s, most suburban placés had not been around long enough to have become communities, a situation that was exacerbated by the extreme mobility of their residents. They felt anxiety about how to fit into a society whose shape and rules were more or less indeterminate. Far from being conformist, many suburbs were highly tolerant, more tolerant than the communities from which most of their residents had moved. In both city and small town, worry over what the neighbors would think kept people in line. In the suburbs, one had little idea of what the neighbors were doing inside their houses and was reluctant to disapprove.

Yet there were new situations to confront, new etiquette to be formulated in order to keep things humming in at least apparent harmony. Sometimes the atmosphere of mutual unfamiliarity led to the kind of social horror story Gans came across in Levittown, New Jersey. A couple newly arrived from New York invited some neighbors for a cocktail party. The hostess wore Capri pants for the occasion. Early arrivals, who saw the hostess through the window, noticed her unfamiliar outfit and concluded that she was in her pajamas. Had they shown up on the wrong night? What sort of a woman wears her pajamas in front of company? They went back home and telephoned other neighbors who were going to the party and spread doubt throughout the neighborhood. Despite grave doubts and much social discomfort, the party finally took place. Eventually, the hostess heard about what happened and the Capri pants were put in the closet and left there. Such incidents were common and disconcerting. New people and new situations bring new hazards.