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## Suburban Cosmopolitanism: How Niceness Undermines Patriotism

Joseph Natali  
*Saint Vincent College*

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Title: Suburban Cosmopolitanism: How Niceness Undermines Patriotism

Author: Joseph Natali

University: Saint Vincent College

Biography: Joseph Natali is a graduate of Saint Vincent College in Latrobe Pennsylvania, bearing degrees in Politics and History. He is currently a faculty member at Chandler Preparatory Academy, a classical charter school in Chandler Arizona, teaching 12th grade Humane Letters and 11th grade Economics.

Abstract: Many prominent conservatives of the 20th century have commented on moral superiority of a love of a particular place and community over a general cosmopolitan love of humanity. For a multitude of reasons, suburban living does not help to foster this love of one's immediate surroundings. Suburbs, despite being a "nice" and "comfortable" place to live, create a set of conditions that undermine the development of a genuine love of one's land and neighbor by physically separating one from two of the most important aspects of human existence: work and community. In the absence of a genuine love of place, many suburbanites, especially the young and idealistic, choose to embrace a humanistic worldview that happens to exclude most of humanity.

People have been surprised to learn that until rather recently I played music in a punk band. Despite my mild-mannered appearance, there was a time not so long ago when I would climb on stage and scream into a microphone until my throat was raw and my fingers bled all over the front of my second-hand bass guitar. I'm still not entirely sure why I decided to do these things. I have always been both conservative and a practicing Catholic, and my hometown music scene is not the kind of place where decent, church-going folks typically congregate. However, despite the obvious difference in opinion between myself and my peers the punk rock community was my home. I think that I enjoyed that community so much because of the catharsis it offered me. A typical local show involved a mid-sized group of suburban white kids gathering together to scream into the void about their shared sense of dissatisfaction. Even though it may be a punk cliché to blame the suburbs for this collective angst, it does seem to me that the rise in suburban living is, at least partially, responsible for a decline in an important aspect of patriotism.

The grievances of the white suburbanites that make up the modern “punk scene” are unique and they are believed to be the product of socially constructed evils. Nevertheless, shared hatred of a particular entity is not enough to build a legitimate community. The fundamental animus of the genre is resistance. While Sid Vicious may have rebelled for the sake of rebellion, it seems that modern voices rebel for the sake of achieving a perceived good. The lack of this “good” is always identified at the local level, and the only conceivable solution is sought from higher, remote levels of the state. As such, the genre doesn't necessarily encourage misanthropy *per se*. Instead, punk music evokes a sense of despair at the possibility of finding a desired “good” in one's locality. Since suburban living atrophies one's sense of community, punk rockers long to find goodness elsewhere; they search for inspiration in their shared love of humanity. Thus, the unitive factor of the punk “community” is their shared “cosmopolitanism” that develops in reaction to their disdain of suburban life.

Many prominent conservatives of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have commented on moral superiority of a love of a particular place and community over a general cosmopolitan love of humanity. In “The Patriotic Ideal,” G.K. Chesterton warns against such a cosmopolitanism, calling it a “psychological impossibility” and arguing that “real universality is to be reached [...] by convincing ourselves that we are in the best possible relation with our immediate surroundings” (597). What Chesterton means by this is that one must love the land upon which they stand and their neighbors in order to have a well formed love of the humanity. Thus, if one does not love one's hometown, job, or parish, then it is unlikely that they will be able to love their country, profession, or even their Church. For a multitude of reasons suburban living does not exactly help to foster this love of one's immediate surroundings. Suburbs, despite being a “nice” and “comfortable” place to live, create a set of conditions that undermine the development of a genuine love of one's land and neighbor by physically separating one from two of the most important aspects of human existence: work and community.

Those who live in suburbs rarely work in them. The suburbs foster a detachment from work that make it feel as a necessary evil rather than a source of satisfaction. This is not to say that suburbs somehow make work more stressful. Rather, since we are forced to leave our families, and commute long distance to jobs that are not always fulfilling, we are left feeling isolated and exhausted when we return to our suburban abode. This situation perpetuates the idea that our work is something that must be retreated from to achieve happiness. If we are convinced that our

work is antithetical to our happiness, then why would we try to work harder or do better than is necessary to maintain the status quo?

Similarly, due to the isolation promoted by suburbs, the development of extra-familial communities often becomes difficult. Friends that one may have made in college or high-school are likely scattered around the country or, at the very least, live farther away than is convenient for frequent interaction. Other friend groups may develop within the workplace. But, due to the desire to escape work, interaction with those groups only infrequently takes place outside of the office. The only other option for social interaction are those which adults make the conscious effort to engage in, and this voluntary socialization typically requires transportation to a location outside of the suburban hub. One can only go to the same Applebee's bar so many times a month. Furthermore, because suburbs force social interaction to be conducted on a voluntary basis it is uncommon that neighbors befriend each-other. Aside from proximity, what do we have in common with our suburban neighbors?

In some ways, rural and urban areas have been spared from suburban malaise. In both the country and city, one lives in far closer proximity to where one works. It is uncommon to live in a city and work on a farm, and although it is not unheard of for those in rural areas to work in urban centers, it is more common that they have additional work that is related to their physical home that those in the suburb do not. Additionally, in cities there are natural or spontaneous communities of common interest that can form. One can hardly walk down the streets in New York and not find something that interests them, nor do they have to look hard to find organized groups of individuals with similar interests. Similarly, in rural communities there is often a set of common interests that facilitate the development of close-knit social groups. Therefore, it is much easier to feel a sense of belonging when living in a city or a small town. One can feel a deeper connection to a place that not only houses their family, but is also where they work, buy their groceries, go to church, and meet with their friends.

Therefore, in the suburbs it is difficult to foster the proper relationship between oneself and one's "immediate surroundings" that Chesterton sees as so important. However, even suburbanites feel the need to love something, and so those who do not turn inward, choose to embrace the "psychological impossibility" that Chesterton calls cosmopolitanism. In the absence of a genuine love of place, many suburbanites, especially the young and idealistic, choose to embrace a humanistic worldview that happens to exclude most of humanity. Those idealistic suburbanites of the punk community will readily claim to hate their parents, the people in their town, republicans, politicians, corporations, their country, and religion, while simultaneously appealing to ideas of goodness found in amorphous concepts of "the world" or "humanity."

So, what can be done to solve this problem? Short of the implementation of some hilariously impractical plan to reorganize our infrastructure so as to eliminate the suburb, it seems that this suburban cosmopolitanism and the problems it brings with it are here to stay. This does not mean however, that suburbanites are chained to the "psychological impossibility" that is cosmopolitanism. While the suburbs disincline people to love their immediate surroundings, we are not incapable of cultivating such a love on our own. As I have said before, social interaction in suburbs is voluntary, and as such we are presented with the unique opportunity to cultivate

communities of common interest in suburbs that, due to the effort required to participate in them, are necessarily more dedicated to the betterment of the community than those that arise naturally.

#### References

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