

American Suburbia

Teacher Seminar, 07 May 2010

Speaker: Prof. Dr. Udo Hebel, Universität Regensburg

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At the beginning of the twenty-first century, suburban areas are home to more than half of all Americans. The ever-increasing suburbanization since World War II has evoked descriptions of the United States as a “suburban nation” and as the “United States of Suburbia.” Cultural geographers have viewed American suburbia as a distinctively American contribution to urban and metropolitan forms. Cultural historians have discussed the ideological implications of the desire to live in a suburban middle-class family home, surrounded by a garden and lawn and securely distanced from the city. Critics of suburbia have emphasized, among other things, the maintenance of traditional gender roles, the conformity and group pressure reigning supreme in the suburbs, the increase of dysfunctional families in suburban areas, and the ecological consequences of the suburban sprawl. Long regarded as a white middle-class residential space, American suburbs have become culturally and economically more diverse in recent years. In view of these developments, it is hardly surprising that political and demographic analysts point to the far-reaching consequences of the ongoing move of large portions of the U.S. American population to the suburbs. Some social observers claim that suburbanization was the most significant demographic development of the twentieth-century; others argue that since the early 1990s, by the latest, presidential elections have been won in the suburbs. The recent financial crisis, however, has taken many suburban Americans to the end of their dreams of unlimited opportunities and upward mobility. Despite the evident changes which American suburbs have undergone in the past decades, the ideal construction of suburbia still holds a powerful grip on the collective American imagination and figures prominently, though vehemently contested, in contemporary representations of different kinds and media.

9 – 10:30 Presentation and discussion of ‘American Suburbia’ as a historical, social, and cultural phenomenon

10:30 – 11:00 Coffee Break

11:00 – 13:00 Discussion of materials for teaching from the fields of contemporary American photography/fine arts, fiction/drama, film/TV series, popular music.