

## **Reckonings; My Beautiful Mansionette**

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### **Body**

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For most of the past year my wife and I lived in a rented house in central New Jersey -- a McMansion, also known as a mansionette. It was in a brand-new development, in what used to be a cornfield, that looks like a textbook illustration of turn-of-the-millennium urban sprawl. These days they aren't little boxes on a hillside, they're big boxes on flat ground. But they're all still made out of ticky-tacky, and they all look just the same.

Our neighbors, however, didn't all look just the same. Most of them were immigrants, and most were nonwhite; the largest contingent came from India.

Seeing this, some of my recent correspondents would doubtless have felt confirmed in their prejudices. You see, a few columns back I wrote a piece about urban sprawl and its attendant traffic congestion, which is becoming a very serious issue -- a lot more important to the lives of most people than the dollar or two per day they might eventually get from George W. Bush's tax cut. And a surprising number of the letters I received in response insisted, vehemently, that the real culprit behind urban sprawl was population growth, and that therefore it was all because of immigration.

A quick search of the Internet reveals that my correspondents are not isolated individuals; they are part of a still small but growing movement. On casual observation I would say that the anti-immigration movement today is where the anti-globalization movement was a couple of years before Seattle: not yet large enough to be a political force to be reckoned with, but quite possibly on its way to achieving critical mass. And complaints about the alleged linkage between immigration and urban sprawl is a popular theme.

Like so much of what the anti-globalization activists say, these complaints are mostly but not entirely off base. The grain of truth in the argument is that other things being the same, a growing population means more houses, more cars and hence more sprawl. But population growth is only a secondary contributing factor to a disastrous pattern of land use driven by skewed incentives that encourage people to spread out in a low-density sprawl that in turn forces them to spend more and more of their time in cars. What's really impressive to me is the way that medium-size metropolitan areas, like Atlanta or Houston, have managed to mismanage their development so completely that they have worse traffic congestion than metropolitan New York, which has five times their population. (I know, I know, I sound like the kind of person Dick Cheney loves to hate. But as it happens I do own an S.U.V.)

So why the vehemence? Psychoanalyzing a political movement guarantees a fresh wave of hate mail, but my best guess is that the passion of my correspondents is ultimately fueled by cultural unease. The changes one sees in central New Jersey are the same as what one sees everywhere in this country: farms and traditional towns submerged by a rising tide of malls, highways and McMansions. And since some of the faces behind the wheel or the fake Palladian window are brown, it's all too natural to blame them for the trend.

## Reckonings; My Beautiful Mansionette

Obviously I don't feel the same way; I am one of those people who feel that immigration is a good thing -- most of all for the immigrants, but good for America too. To some extent this position rests on mundane economic arguments. Foreign-born talent has been crucial in this country's technology boom, and plays a large role in many less glamorous industries too. (For some reason all the gas stations around here seem to be run by Sikhs.) And one can make a good case that demography -- the perils of a low birth rate -- is a key factor in the economic malaise of Japan and some European countries; America's openness to immigration is one of the things protecting us from that fate.

And I have **my** own cultural prejudices. Isn't the immigrant experience part of what this country is all about? Without immigrant families climbing the social ladder, what would become of the American dream?

But never mind the rational arguments. Over the horizon new and possibly quite nasty political storms are brewing. If you think people get angry and irrational when arguing about taxes, wait till you see them argue about immigration.

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