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SEMINAR ABSTRACT

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Mapping Membership: A social and spatial analysis of associational activity, 1950-2005

Once regarded as a nation central to the development of civil society, associational activity in contemporary Britain is perceived by some authors as fragile. Whereas the urban leadership provided by the middle classes was crucial to the trajectory and character of towns and cities all over Britain in the nineteenth century, it has been claimed that their relocation to suburbia has become synonymous with detachment, disinterest and the decline of the associational sphere. Depicted in literary and historical accounts, as well as in the popular media, as pursuing a suburban lifestyle that was both monotonous and disengaged, the middle classes of the twentieth century were assumed to have relinquished the management of a multitude of municipal and voluntary functions that defined an urban place. Yet such accounts stereotyped middle-class lifestyles, oversimplifying their relationship with the city, and prompting a 'new wave' of suburban research in America that has offered a revisionism that stresses diversity and challenges prevailing assumptions regarding middle-class behaviour. Assumptions of suburban detachment and disinterest in associational activity are contested in the research that underpins my work.

This paper will provide a detailed analysis of the social and cultural impact of suburbanisation on civic engagement in the city of Leicester and the town of Loughborough, looking at a multitude of organisations such as the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society, the Leicester Racial Equality Council and the Loughborough Emmanuel Women's Guild. Geographically the middle classes may have distanced their home lives from the urban centre but through an examination of their participation in the associational sphere during the period 1950 to 2005, it is evident that suburban living was not synonymous with disinterest and detachment. Furthermore, analysis of cultural changes post 1950, including the issue of conservation in 1960s Loughborough, the shifting nature of gender relations in clubs like the Leicestershire Motor Car Club, and the process of racial assimilation in Leicester, reveal how voluntary organisations, and their middle-class membership, continued to shape the physical, spatial and cultural landscape of modern Britain. Through the intricate networks of power developed in local clubs and societies, the middle-classes found a continuing utility in the transference of knowledge and expertise, often working as mediator between the citizen and the state. Far from being disconnected, the new 'suburbans' were 'semi-detached', demonstrating a vigorous and ongoing commitment to the public sphere that contributed to the stock of social and civic capital in both town and city. In this regard, my paper will attempt to provide a revisionism concerning the middle classes, suburbanisation, and the construction of civil society in the modern era.