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Beyond the crabgrass frontier: industry and the spread of North American cities, 1850–1950

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Abstract

The conventional story of suburbanization in Canada and the United States portrays an outward movement of residences from the cities that only since World War II has been fuelled by the dispersal of employment to the urban fringe. This prevailing wisdom needs considerable revision. In this essay we present a theoretical interpretation of industrial suburbanization. We argue that the outward spread of factories and manufacturing districts has been a distinctive and important feature of North American urbanization since the middle of the nineteenth century. The paper begins with a discussion of how industrial decentralization has been repeatedly misinterpreted as new and unprecedented, rather than an extension of past trends. In contrast to the prevailing interpretation, we claim that industrial suburbanization is the product of a combination of the economic

logic of geographical industrialization, investment in real estate, and political guidance by business and government leaders. The result has been extensive, multinodal metropolitan regions.



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