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CURRENT BOOKS

REVIEWS OF NEW AND NOTEWORTHY NONFICTION

Living on the Edge

Reviewed by Tom Vanderbilt

JOEL KOTKIN, ALONG WITH HIS SOMETIME nemesis Richard Florida, is perhaps the leading purveyor of a kind of psycho-economic demography, a predictive chronicler armed with Census tract data, Pew surveys, and some old-fashioned shoe-leather reporting, all recounted in an urgent, assuaging, insider-y tone—a kind of *Kiplinger Report* for the national soul. I can imagine Kotkin and Florida randomly encountering each other—in, say, the Admiral's Club at DFW, as each is en route to his assignation with civic leaders eager to sup the sooth—and engaging in a dueling-PowerPoint exercise, with Florida touting his “creative class” metropolises and their cappuccino-fueled dynamism, and Kotkin his “ephemeral cities”—places such as Portland that are elaborate stage sets for hip urban play, ultimately overregulated and hostile to the wants of average Americans, who would find fuller expression of their economic (and reproductive) potential in a place such as Boise. Only one man would be left standing amid the acrid tang of overheated hard drives, but I'm not sure which.

In his latest oracular production, Kotkin—whose other books include *The New Geography* (2000) and *The City* (2005)—takes as his starting point a single, arresting statistic: “According to the most conservative estimates, the United States by 2050 will be home to at least 400 million people, roughly 100 million more than live here today.” This next 100 million will be a bit different from the last 100 million; for one, the “vast majority,” Kotkin notes, will be Asian or Hispanic. For another, many of them, he predicts, will reside not in the great megaregions, but in the “Heartland”—which seems here to be somewhere around Nebraska—reversing a trend of disinvestment and depopulation. The country will become more suburban, more dispersed. The good news, Kotkin writes, is that “even with 100 million more people, the country will still be only one-sixth as crowded as Germany.”

At its best, *The Next 100 Million* combines deftly energetic and sweeping

THE NEXT HUNDRED MILLION:
America in 2050.
By Joel Kotkin. Penguin.
320 pp. \$25.95

analysis, spanning everything from the sociology of immigrant communities to labor economics, with healthy smatterings of revelatory facts (“between 1990 and 2005 immigrants, mostly from the Chinese diaspora or from India, started one of every four U.S. venture-backed public companies”). Kotkin is particularly good at countering casual assumptions with larger data patterns. For example, while the portrait of the dying Middle American town, struggling with foreclosure and meth addiction, has become familiar, Kotkin writes that “demographer

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Richard Rathge states that since the 1950s the overall population of the Great Plains has more than doubled.” And Kotkin’s interpretation of American exceptionalism offers a suasive

rejoinder to the idea that it will be China, not the United States, that is dominant in 2050.

But the book is not always so refreshingly elucidating. For one, it often seems to be revisiting material from *The New Geography*. (Fawning profile of lifestyle-center developer Rick Caruso? Check. Beguiling Japanese sociological phrase borrowed to describe U.S. trends? Check.) For another, Kotkin spends too much time rebutting old canards (e.g., the history of antisuburban bias). His evidence often seems selectively framed—while there is certainly something to be celebrated in the fact that “scores of . . . Heartland towns and cities, such as Sioux Falls, Des Moines, and Bismarck all grew well faster than the national average through 2008,” it would be nice to know if, say, that increase came off a bottom reached after decades of stagnation and decline. There are moments of repetition (an economist’s unremarkable observation that “suburbanites like the suburbs” appears twice), and on several occasions banal obser-

vations are tossed off as keening insights, such as this (footnoted!) kernel: “Today, in the age of computers and cell phones, children who leave home are no longer ‘gone.’ They send text messages, maintain blogs, and write e-mails to keep parents informed of their activities.” Once upon a dark time, they also used landlines and sent letters.

While Kotkin’s optimism about the American future can seem a tonic against unquestioning prophecies of American decline or Dobbsonian nativist screeds, the book has an unremittingly Pollyannaish tone, like a gauzy-hued sales document for a master-planned community in one of the author’s beloved suburbs. Worried about the impact of all those new people settling into dispersed exurbs? No problem—we’ll be living in “Greenurbia” (one of several lamentable portmanteaus). “Development is often castigated as poor for the environment, but research suggests that modest, low-density development can use less energy than denser urban forms.” (He doesn’t define modest, nor suggest, since he seems to be antizoning, how such development would be regulated.) What about all those new people driving all those new miles? Here he cautions that “some aspects of suburban life,” such as long commutes, will “have to be changed,” not by government, but rather by market forces. To wonder about the carbon footprint of all those new people or to ponder having fewer children is presented as radical environmentalism, a worldview nothing short of that depicted in Cormac McCarthy’s post-apocalyptic novel *The Road* (despite his proclaimed nonpartisanship, Kotkin hews to a rigidly anti-Smart Growth position).

Far from being homogenous, Kotkin argues, suburbia will become the new melting pot, the direct portal of new immigration; suburbs, as he quotes one researcher, “can give rise to a much more integrated, rather than ‘balkanized,’ relationship among groups.” But there’s



plenty of evidence to the contrary; for instance, a recent Pew Hispanic Center report noted that even as Hispanic school enrollment grew sharply in the past decade, segregation in many districts increased. And research at the State University of New York, Albany, has identified segregation patterns—ethnic enclaves—within suburbs. Sociologist Robert Putnam has put forward the unsettling proposition that “social capital” actually *decreases* with diversity; he notes, for example, that “interracial friendships (apart from that structural constraint on opportunities for contact) appear to be actually more common in less diverse settings.” People may like some of the trappings of diversity—what I’ll call menu multiculturalism—but to suggest that suburbs will become polyglot meccas with no social discord seems overly optimistic. (Already there are myriad stories of increasing suburban crime.)

Similarly, Kotkin’s boosterism of post-automotive cities is relentlessly breathless, and often meaningless. “Conceived as a bucolic collection of suburbs,” he writes of Los Angeles, “it has matured into a dense network of communities, organized more like the random-access memory of a computer than the linear, hierarchical pattern that was common to cities for millennia.” Los Angeles is

A crowded melting pot: By 2050, roughly 100 million more people will call the United States home.

non-hierarchical? Something to remember the next time you go shopping for real estate in Brentwood or Compton. In his zeal to defend suburbia from its elitist critics, Kotkin tends toward monochromatic depictions of “luxury cities” such as New York, which he calls a “demographic dead end,” a place filled with dour antinatalists harboring Scandinavian tendencies. He sets up a false dichotomy between “cultural cachet” and “family friendliness.” In material terms, yes, cities are expensive—Kotkin warns that “an individual from Houston who earns \$50,000 would have to make \$115,769 in Manhattan and \$81,965 in Queens to live at the same level of comfort.” True in terms of raw numbers, but one doesn’t move to New York expecting Houston-sized real estate, just as one doesn’t move to Houston expecting all that New York has to offer.

Kotkin takes a particular, and often justifiable, glee in recounting the various doom-saying (and largely unmet) prophecies of previous futurists, from Malthusian alarmists to premature peak-oilers. But this also reminds us of the frailty of societal prognostication,

not to mention the power of hindsight. It now seems easy to chart the reasons why Argentina, which once possessed one of the world's most powerful economies, declined in the 20th century, but for a time, those 19th-century forecasts of a Pax Argentina looked pretty spot-on. On Kotkin's own Web site, we are told that *The New Geography* "focuses on the digital revolution's surprising impact on

cities: Their traditional role as the centers of creativity and the crossroads for trade and culture is becoming ever more essential in a globalized information-age economy." Now, less than a decade later, he's telling us that the suburbs are where all the action will be.

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America's Namesake

Reviewed by Felipe Fernández-Armesto

RENAISSANCE SOPHISTICATES sneered. How could a sleepy little backwoods town like Saint-Dié in distant Lorraine, deep in upland pine forests, home to flax weavers and log sawyers, presume to rival the great centers of humanist learning at the beginning of the 16th century? Saint-Dié seemed too poor and remote for glory and fame. Yet under the ambitious patronage of the young Duke René, a group of learned men gathered, around the town's printing press and cathedral library, to undertake an audacious project—overly rash, by the standards of the town's resources. They proposed to bring out an updated edition of the most acclaimed geographic text of classical antiquity—Ptolemy's *Geography*, compiled in the second century AD—and to supplement it with the new knowledge of the planet revealed by recent and current explorations. Eventually, the project collapsed. The scholars died or dispersed, and the focus of Ptolemaic research moved away from Saint-Dié. Meanwhile, however, the effort had changed the world by generating two maps of enormous influence

THE FOURTH PART OF THE WORLD: The Race to the Ends of the Earth, and the Epic Story of the Map That Gave America Its Name.

By Toby Lester.
Free Press. 462 pp. \$30

and significance—the work of jobbing humanists who probably had been fellow students.

The world maps Martin Waldseemüller made in Saint-Dié, with the help of his colleague, Mathias Ringmann, were technically innovative. One was the world's first printed globe. The other was a vast map, engraved in black on multiple squares of gray-ing paper, designed to be trimmed, joined, and pasted onto a study wall. The content was innovative, too: The wall map was, as far as we know, and according to the cartographer's own commentaries, the first to attach the name "America" to the Western Hemisphere. Its fragility condemned it to hazard—worn and scraped off a thousand walls. But one copy survived, neglected for centuries, unmounted, in an old folder in a musty munitions room in a German castle. In 1901, an erudite Jesuit schoolteacher searching for medieval Norse documents happened on it and recognized it at once for what it was. It is now the costliest treasure in the Library of Congress. In Waldseemüller's day, however, copies abounded, helping to fix the name of "America" in scholars' minds and on other maps.

Ironies enshroud the story. Waldseemüller