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Author	Stephen Schryer
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After the Good Life – Introduction

Dr Stephen Schryer

University of New Brunswick

When people refer to the good life, they usually have in mind a specific middle-class lifestyle that flourished between the 1940s and early 1970s. This lifestyle has steadily eroded since that period as the socioeconomic circumstances that sustained it disappeared; most of the welfare systems that protected the middle class have worn thin, and middle-class work has become tenuous and uncertain as a result of downsizing and permatemping. We live in a world marked, in Loïc Wacquant's terms, by "Social Insecurity" (*Punishing the Poor* 3), a generalised sense of anxiety brought about by the acceleration of creative destruction within late capitalism. Nevertheless, the good life persists as an ideal with ambiguous effects. At times, it helps citizens challenge the neoliberal assaults on what remains of the welfare state. At other times, this ideal props up neoliberal ideology itself, keeping workers chasing after the ever-receding mirage of middle-class security.

In large part, both the good life and the forces that have destroyed it are American inventions, products of the affluent society that emerged in the United States after World War II. The welfare state itself is a European invention, and the U.S. developed the most anaemic welfare system of any developed nation. However, the U.S. established the idea that the welfare state's purpose was, above all else, to protect and nourish the middle class. Through Keynesian spending and legislation such as the Social Security Act of 1935 and the Housing Act of 1949, the U.S. facilitated an unprecedented expansion of its middle class. The Housing Act, in particular, provided millions of Americans with what became the ultimate symbol of the good life: the privately owned house, usually located in America's burgeoning suburbs.

This expansion of the middle class was accompanied by the exceptionalist myth that anyone could be successful in America. In the affluent society, everyone would be middle class; factory workers would find suburban homes close to those owned by their white-collar managers. In fact, postwar American good life was rigidly exclusionary. The Social Security Act blocked most benefits for racial minorities and women; the Housing Act provided cheap mortgages for white families moving into racially segregated suburbs, while erecting housing projects for African-Americans and other minorities left behind in the nation's decaying inner cities. The postwar expansion of the white middle class also disguised this class's fundamental fragility. As the U.S. sociologist C. Wright Mills pointed out in *White Collar* (1951), the postwar period marked the culmination of a century-long transformation of the white middle class, as it shifted from a class of small property owners to one of salaried, white-collar employees. The suburban home provided the white middle class with the illusion that its identity had not changed; it remained a class of property owners, with small plots of land located far from the downtown offices where many of them worked. In the meantime, the class had become dispossessed. The postwar period, in other words, at once marked an unprecedented expansion of the middle class and the beginning of that class's proletarianisation.

The event that highlighted the culmination of this proletarianisation was, appropriately, an American crisis with international repercussions: the subprime mortgage crisis, which provoked a global collapse of banking systems. This event threatened the suburban home as a central symbol of the good life, underscoring the fact that in most cases, home ownership rests on a legal fiction, since banks usually own more of a home than the resident. More generally, after the crisis, middle-class dispossession could no longer be disguised. By the time the crisis hit, many of America's suburbs had degenerated in quasi-slums, with many of the same problems (poverty rates, crumbling infrastructure, falling tax revenues) as the inner city neighbourhoods from which their residents had fled. The crisis hit hardest the most recent entrants into the American middle class: the minorities that had been excluded from home ownership in the immediate post-World War II period due to employment discrimination and restrictive covenants. Suddenly, millions of Americans found themselves jettisoned from the good life. The good life itself, however, had been disintegrating for decades.

Along with the illusion of middle-class affluence, the subprime mortgage crisis challenge a whole series of other American mythologies. Most notably, the crisis undercut the ideology of American individualism. This mythology was built into the U.S. welfare state in the 1930s. The Social Security Act, with its emphasis on old age, disability, and unemployment benefits accrued as rewards for a lifetime of labour, effected a compromise between collectivist ideals of social welfare and individualist ideals of personal responsibility. The version of the good life that the U.S. welfare state supported championed individualism as a middle-class trait. American individualism was central to the marketing strategies used by suburban developers, especially with the emergence of the ranch home, whose name and architecture alluded to the vanished American frontier. For post-World War II suburban theorists, this mythology was already in crisis in the 1950s; sociologists like Daniel Riesman and William H. Whyte, observing the rise of the mass suburb, theorised that the American individualist of the nineteenth century had been displaced by the "other-directed man" (Riesman) or "organization man" (Whyte) of the 1950s. These laments for the death of individualism provoked what Timothy Melley refers to as a sense of "agency panic" (vii) in post-World War II culture – a sense that agentive categories like the subject and the author were under assault by systems that evaded human consciousness and control. Postwar American novelists and filmmakers depicted the suburbs as a site of imperilled individualism. From Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955) to John Updike's Rabbit novels, these texts depicted suburban male individualists at war with their conformist environment. By the 2000s, however, the notion of the suburban individualist had become strained to the breaking point. In the era's fiction, as Kathy Knapp argues in a recent study of post-9-11 suburban novels (*American Unexceptionalism*), this figure virtually disappears as a viable character.

The essays collected in this special edition of *Forum*, entitled *After the Good Life*, explore the ramifications of this decades-long collapse of a specific vision of the good life linked to expansion of the middle class after World War II. With the exception of Bethany Roberts's essay, all of them focus on American cultural objects. Andrew Hicks's "Being Alive is a Crock of Shit" focuses on Kurt Vonnegut, one of many U.S. writers who dissented against the optimism expressed by post-World War II liberal social theorists, for whom the 1950s and 1960s affluent society represented the apogee of the American Dream. Hicks's essay focuses on Vonnegut's increasing pessimism over the course of his career, although this pessimism is already implicit in early works such as *The Sirens of Titan* (1959). Vonnegut's

pessimism stands out in the context of the evolution of science fiction between the 1950s and 1960s. Whereas Golden Age writers like Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke expressed an almost unbounded optimism about human progress and the potential of human relationality, their postmodern successors in the late 1950s and 1960s (especially Kurt Vonnegut, Philip K. Dick, Samuel Delany and Joanna Russ) undercut the Enlightenment certainties that had long underpinned their genre.

Joanna Wilson's "The End of the Good Life" and Wyatt Moss-Wellington's "Sentimentality in the Suburban Ensemble Dramedy" directly confront the disappearing promise of suburbia between the 1950s and the present. Wilson's essay offers a wide-ranging history of suburban writing, from Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) to more recent books such as Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides* (1993) and Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones* (2002). Wilson identifies a tension between utopian and dystopian representations of suburbia that runs throughout the genre's history and helps explain its lasting popularity. As she points out, suburban writers have been especially fascinated with the rigid encoding of gender roles built into the first suburbs. In line with the postwar revival of the Cult of True Womanhood, suburbia geographically separated and thereby reinforced the distinction between the feminine private and masculine public sphere. Moss-Wellington's essay turns to recent films about suburbia, from Sam Mendes's *American Beauty* (1999) to Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris's *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006) and Lisa Chodolenko's *The Kids Are All Right* (2010). Moss-Wellington uses these films to rescue sentimentality from critics such as Lauren Berlant. Suburban ensemble dramedies, he argues, use sentimentality as a critical tool to construct a sense of community. In this way, these films undercut tropes of imperilled individualism that characterise classic suburban films such as *The Stepford Wives* (1975),

Lastly, Bethany Roberts's "Constructing the Good Life: Posthuman Musical Identities" turns away from specifically American visions of the good life to interrogate, more broadly, some of the conceptual categories implicit in the individualist ideologies that sustained these visions. Roberts takes aim at humanist conceptions of artistry and authenticity within music theory; these conceptions, she argues, are giving way to posthuman practices of music making and consumption that have filtered into popular art. Roberts focuses on two groups that embody this alternative practice: the Australian-based Avalanches, and the London-based Ibiblio Sound Machine. The Avalanches' plunderphonics album, *Frontier Psychiatrist*, exemplifies a posthuman resistance to originality; Ibiblio Sound Machine exemplifies an aesthetic of hybridity that disrupts notions of cultural authenticity usually associated with World Music.

All four essays invite us to question what remains of the utopian visions of the good life that animated white middle-class existence in developed nations for the middle decades of the twentieth century. Why have these visions, which derive from such a narrow set of circumstances, proved so enduring? What can they still offer us now that neoliberalism and globalisation have torn those circumstances apart?

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Author Biography

Dr Stephen Schryer is Associate Professor of English at the University of New Brunswick. He is the author of *Fantasies of the New Class: Ideologies of Professionalism in Post-World War II American Fiction* (Columbia University Press, 2011), co-winner of the Canadian Association for American Studies' Robert K. Martin Book Prize. He has published articles in *PMLA*, *Modern Fiction Studies* and *Arizona Quarterly*. His new project, tentatively titled "Cultures of Poverty: American Literature and the Politics of Welfare" focuses on literary representations of poverty in the post-New Deal welfare state.