
IS THERE AN AMERICAN URBAN HISTORY?

A Review of:

Stephan Thernstrom
The Other Bostonians--Poverty and
Progress in the American Metropolis
--1880-1970--Cambridge, 1973

Sam Bass Warner, Jr.
The Urban Wilderness--A History of
the American City--New York, 1972

by

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Two recently published books, The Urban Wilderness and The Other Bostonians¹ are representative examples of two lines of approach which appear to be contradictory in the historical literature on cities. On one hand, Sam Bass Warner has investigated large urban areas in order to understand the dynamics of city growth, the social components of city centers and the development of a privatistic way of life in the suburbs of American cities. Stephan Thernstrom, on the other hand, has made some generalizations about population movement and social mobility based on data from Boston but he overlooked geographic differences and distinctions. From the outset it should be said that Thernstrom's discussion of the relationship between geographical and social mobility and Warner's analysis of the importance and pervasiveness of segregation as a salient feature of American urban life must be ranked as on a par with de Tocqueville's picture of American democracy in the making, Veblen's scrutiny of the leisure class and Turner's characterization of the frontier as a combination of civilization and barbarism.² The underlying goal of the two authors is the same: to describe and analyze the social divisions of American society as they have arisen in the urban context. Thernstrom's book results from a careful scrutiny of the documentary records of thousands of silent people, but it does not treat space and methods of organization. Thernstrom has written a book on social mobility in the liberal American tradition with special attention to ethnic and religious factors. He is, to be sure, interested in such Marxian concepts as alienation and rotation and distribution of capital; but he is most at home in manipulating such important variables as geographical and intergenerational occupational mobility as they relate to individuals. Thernstrom's goal is the destruction of some complacently accepted American myths.³ He asks what the

commonplace phrase "adaptation to American life" can mean when two thirds of the population were migrants. He questions the American legend of success by showing that although immobility may be the exception in American society, "equality of opportunity" is certainly not the rule. And by uncovering a pattern of heavy migration from city to city on the East Coast and from the East Coast westward, Thernstrom is able to correct the accepted opinion that the East Coast was a collection of closed communities while was the frontier the road to freedom. He is able to prove that, to the contrary, the Eastern city functioned like a discriminating sieve to retain only the wealthiest of the thousands of individuals and families which poured through it.

Warner has written a book on the American urban environment. He has primarily studied both how the environment was transformed and the dynamics of change within cities. He describes the American "urban wilderness", the fluidity and flexibility of zones in cities, and how they have changed in character since the seventeenth century. His purpose is to explain the various types of clustering in American urban society and how the administrative freedom based on an anti-feudal ideal analyzed by de Tocqueville has ironically produced a segregated society. The book makes fascinating reading when it describes the mechanics of land speculation and the control of land in urban and rural milieus. Warner also presents a convincing account of the imposition of a second grid geometry on to cities by the highways. He accurately explains the differences between neighborhoods as diverse as a "little Italy" and Wasp suburb. He recounts the process of deterioration of the "old neighborhoods";⁴ the neglect of everyday life; the underfunding of medicine in cities; the backwardness of public housing and urban renewal policy. Once he

has described such urban ills, he goes on to argue persuasively for the necessity of policy-making at the federal level.

When one closes Thernstrom's book, one believes in American democracy. American cities are compared favorably to the city of Solon.⁵ Every citizen is provided with just enough of the resources he needs to prevent dissatisfaction. He does not have too much, but he does not have too little. In other words, through hard work the average man can ascend a few rungs of the social ladder. The road "from the bottom up" is not easily opened but is never entirely closed. And if it is closed somewhere, people can always leave one city to seek success in another. There are no dead-ends, only detours. This is a good solution for everybody; it avoids rebellion while providing manpower.

At the end of Warner's essay one has a very different picture of the workings of American society. America is described as an urban world which is really a "wilderness". Its main feature is social segregation which according to Warner has existed since the beginning of the colonial period. Segregation originated in American patterns of land-ownership. The emphasis on private property created a privatistic way of life obviously oriented against the city, where people must share land and goods. The American city inevitably became and remained an essentially segregated area where the poor are imprisoned and whence the well-to-do escape.

The reader who has read the two books is left with these confusing conclusions and wonders what the two books are about. Do they deal with the same subject? Warner argues that the urban network has changed with great flexibility at least four times since its creation. Following the studies of Patrick Geddes and Lewis Mumford,⁶ he relates the pattern of land use to the stages of technological advance and shows how the

equilibrium of urban communities has been constantly disrupted by the forms and forces of innovation and competition. In the first time-period from colonial times to 1820, when American port towns were mainly centers of consumption⁷ "townships and counties were woven into a fabric of low density settlement and multiple villages." (p. 13) The period 1820-1870 is associated with the "Big City", the steam engine, canals and railroads, and some specialization in land use but also with a rather integrated pattern within a grid without center and boundaries. In the third period, 1870-1920, the industrial metropolis sprang up in the age of science and engineering. The city grows, and commuting allows residential segregation along class lines. The fourth period, 1920 to the present, is the age of megalopolis. In the city all the activities are concentrated in the service sector; the wheel pattern of highways imposes its new logic on an "unprecedented array of special arrangements for all degrees of spatial units." (p. 119) This chronology is only an approximation. It implicitly accepts the biased neostatistical definition of community, town, city, etc., and the evolutionism inherent in Tonnies' metaphor of *Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft*.⁸ Warner's purpose is not to rethink this global scheme but to prove that every new form taken by the city was a stopping place on the road to segregation.

Thernstrom does not even try to locate his Bostonians in an environment. He insists on the validity of his conclusions over time. In both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the population has been volatile. "Boston persistence rate for 1830-40--44 percent--was only two points below that for Boston 1958-1968" (p. 224). The only difference is that in the twentieth century, middle class mobility has replaced lower class mobility. Thernstrom insists on the city's role in enabling and

encouraging social mobility. In the nineteenth century, it is in the city that one climbed the social ladder. Reality is consistent with the "Urban escalator model". Thernstrom insists also upon the fact that the black population experiences the highest level of discrimination. The rate of geographical mobility may be very high in ghettos, but blacks do not climb the social ladder in the same way as members of other groups. Although the road to success is closed to blacks, it is open to members of all the other ethnic or religious groups. Nonetheless, the Yankees' share of the pie remains larger than that of any European immigrant group and their sons are more prepared to retain their social inheritance. Thernstrom does not teach us very many new lessons in this book, but it is comforting to know that his data authoritatively put the lie to myths already discredited. Thernstrom insists on the accuracy of his conclusions not only over the 90 year span he studies but also over space, from Boston to Los Angeles.

Unfortunately, Thernstrom's tables are not entirely reliable. He uses a congeries of records for purposes of drawing samples: 1880 federal census, 1910 city marriage records, 1930 local births records, the 1958 city directory, and one sample drawn from a previous study.⁹ The reader would like to know more about the scope of the documents and their accuracy. The author, however, is silent. Is it necessary to resurrect Seignobos and the positivistic school of history to reinstruct us again in the techniques of documentary criticism?¹⁰ Thernstrom does not attempt to estimate the underenumeration in his sources when he tabulates geographical mobility. He has no method to determine the margin of error which must inevitably creep into his figures because he cannot distinguish between true migrants from the city and those who simply moved to the suburbs during the recent

period of rapid suburbanization, hence vanishing from the documents at his disposal. To some extent the discussion of intergenerational mobility is limited to the well-recorded population of central Boston. Instead of giving a reasonable estimate of his margin of error, Thernstrom is content to be totally wrong as long as he preserves the possibility of being totally right. Thus he writes in one appendix (p. 281): "Unless it can be demonstrated that the city directory is a reasonably comprehensive and accurate source, much of the new work in urban history will stand upon shaky foundations." The Other Bostonians is a book essentially based on demographic data, but despite the claim of "demographic scrutiny" (p. 221) these documents are mainly used as a socio-economic index for intergenerational mobility from one head of household to another regardless of family structure. The occupational categories are themselves very broad and defined on the basis of an ambiguous mixture of wealth, status and power. They are "adequate for the purpose at hand" (p. 302), but what is the purpose at hand? Thernstrom's analysis has two recurrent weaknesses: first, the serial analyses are rarely integrated with structural change. The author mentions only in passing that "structural change can in a sense require occupational mobility" (p. 104) and that the notion of persistence changes over time--even if the rate is similar--since it is the middle class and no longer the poor that moves after the 1930s. Second, the data are analyzed after they have been biased by a number of arbitrary decisions. Boston residents born in Massachusetts are not considered migrants to the city! What does it mean to be born in the city? Religious affiliation is partially determined on the basis of name and nationality. Common names are eliminated from the sample because they could not be effectively linked from one document to another.¹¹ Thernstrom would

probably be willing to accept differing viewpoints if in a few years more research is done. Needless to say, The Other Bostonians already contradicts most of Thernstrom findings on Newburyport where he suggested a more segregated picture of the American working class.¹²

On finishing these two books, doubts persist when one comes to ask whether or not the phenomena described are really urban. In a recent essay on urbanism Paul Wheatley concluded: "a high proportion of urban studies have been directed towards the investigation of a totality of events within a city, impliedly assuming that it was the fact or urbanness which unavoidably determined all activity within the urban enclave."¹³ This assertion is certainly applicable to American urban history. Warner's subtitle is A History of the American City, and although Thernstrom does not subtitle his book, "Essay in the New Urban History", his first article on Boston, appeared under such a title¹⁴ and the expression "new work in urban history" (p. 281) is still to be found in the book. But what is specifically urban in these books? In what sense is the word "urban" used? The technological criterion Warner uses to assign a chronology to urban history contains nothing specifically urban. Derived from Lewis Mumford's Technics and Civilization and The Culture of Cities,¹⁵ the notion that technology and culture are mostly to be found in an urban environment is misleading. In the old world, the original cluster of people that constituted a city was made economically viable by the surpluses accumulated through rural technology, as George Duby has recently reminded us.¹⁶ Warner's attempt to correlate "the growth of the nation and the growth of the units of its organization" is not yet ready to be operationalized. Many concepts are loosely used in the two books and therefore do not allow us to truly come to grips with the urban phenomenon. Is poverty a

specifically urban problem? Is the distinction urban/rural, constantly used in the two books, really valid?¹⁷ I do not think we can grant any longer that a community under 2,500 is by definition "rural" or that a "big city" is a valid category for all units larger than a "community" and smaller than "the industrial metropolis". Paul Wheatley, calling such a method "the expedient approach", rightly dismisses it.¹⁸ Thernstrom refuses to take seriously the problem of the suburbs. Warner's case is here much stronger: the distinction between the core and the periphery of the city is one of his key concepts for analyzing urban segregation. But many variables are not subjected to a well thought out network of analysis. We cannot know what Thernstrom's movements of population to the city, from the city, between cities, from the center to the periphery, really are since his analysis is global. We don't know if some groups are more urban than others.

In these two books the urban phenomenon appears to be only a subsumption of life in general rather than a topic in itself. One wonders if it is even necessary or possible to write urban history in view of the vagueness and ambiguity of the concept "urban". The main merit of these two books is clearly to raise the question.¹⁹

Both Warner and Thernstrom deal with an essential aspect of the American mode of production: the influx in the nineteenth century of unskilled workers into an enormous and diluted space. The abundance of unskilled manpower inevitably led to a division of production into tasks easily comprehensible and performable by everyone. The process of settlement illustrates well this organization of production. A simple grid has extended over the whole country, which, in turn, has been divided up into "units of organization". Some people go from one unit to another, while

others stay where they are. In the nineteenth century, the city was relatively less segregated than in the twentieth century, mainly because in the nineteenth century the mobile part of the population was the poor instead of the well-to-do who stayed behind to govern the old units. Since the 1930s the well-to-do have reconstructed in remote areas the kinds of aseptic environments no longer possible in the decaying cores of the cities they once built and dominated. The segregation process operates easily because the "units of organization" are flexible due to division into subunits similar to the squares on a chessboard.

Although this phenomenon is complementarily described by Warner and Thernstrom, it is likely that such fluidity is not specifically urban. There is no compelling reason to oppose zones of fixity to zones of fluidity. There is an urgent need to construct a typology of the spatial organization of a territory in order to compare population variables within comparable units and to control environmental criteria.

The lesson of Marc Bloch, too often repeated, is to find men "behind the features of landscape, behind tools or machinery, behind what appear to be the most formalized written documents, and behind institutions, which seem almost entirely detached from their founders."²⁰ When man is studied in his environment, the main difficulty is to delineate the physical boundaries of a given space. Urban space, a phrase which does not mean much, is defined neither by political boundaries nor by artifacts. Hence it is necessary to define within urban areas flexible spatial units of analysis, large enough to permit observation of significant social phenomena, small enough to divide a city into truly distinctive sectors. Some useful classifications already exist for twentieth-century cities. Cities have been classified according to their functions,²¹ their sizes²² or their ethnic characteristics.²³ But no such taxonomy

has been developed for cities of the nineteenth century, and it would be useful to invest some time in collecting data for establishing proper taxonomic categories in order to avoid the pitfalls of ill-conceived comparisons. It is for instance only the haphazardness of historical scholarship, not any necessary substantive interrelationships, which allows Thernstrom to compare the social structure of Boston and Poughkeepsie²⁴ (New York) throughout his book.

Warner defines urban history as "the history of the conflicts and possibilities wrought by the growth of the nation and the growth of the units of its organization. . ." He therefore sees urban history as involving two "general categories" for analysis: "the national network of cities and the patterns of land use within the cities themselves" (p. 57). This definition has the great merit of providing us with a new awareness and understanding of the urban phenomenon but it does not provide a methodology for practical analysis.

The success of urban history is dependent upon the use of methodologies which can cope with the rich texture of the urban phenomenon. Such methodologies are not only useful in defining the boundaries of the study but also in integrating data extracted from both highly and minimally quantifiable information.²⁵ And to the extent that significant behavioral differences are determined by a group's national origin or religious affiliation, a cross-cultural analysis of population whose members are in daily interaction with each other is required to further our understanding of urban settlements.

FOOTNOTES

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¹Sam B. Warner Jr., The Urban Wilderness--A History of the American City, New York 1972.

Stephan Thernstrom, The Other Bostonians--Poverty and Progress in the American Metropolis 1880-1970, Cambridge, Mass. 1973.

²A. de Tocqueville, La Démocratie en Amérique, Paris 1835-1840

T. Veblen, The Theory of the Leisure Class: an Economic Study in the Evolution of Institutions, New York 1889.

F. J. Turner, The Frontier in American History, New York 1920.

³The author has contributed to its destruction. See: S. Thernstrom, Poverty and Progress--Social Mobility in a Nineteenth Century City, Cambridge, Mass. 1964.

⁴Bernard J. Frieden, The Future of Old Neighborhoods, Cambridge, Mass. 1964.

⁵Aristotle, The Constitution of Athens VI-XI.

⁶Patrick Geddes, Cities in Evolution, London 1915.

Lewis Mumford, The Culture of Cities, New York 1938

⁷See Jacob Price's Sombartian analysis in "Economic Function and the Growth of American Port Towns in the 18th Century," Perspectives in American History, Harvard 1974 (forthcoming.)

⁸Ferdinand Tönnies, Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft, Leipzig 1887.

⁹E. R. Laumann, Prestige and Association in an Urban Community: An Analysis of an Urban Stratification System, Indianapolis 1966.

¹⁰Ch. Seignobos, La méthode historique appliquée aux sciences sociales, Paris 1909.

¹¹Here, the author acknowledges his mistake (see p. 270).

¹²S. Thernstrom, Poverty and Progress--Social Mobility in a 19th Century City, op. cit.

- ¹³ See Paul Wheatley, "The Concept of Urbanism" in P. J. Ucko, R. Tringham and G. W. Dimbleby, Man, Settlement and Urbanism (Cambridge 1972), an excellent synthesis of the following diverse approaches: 1) reliance on ideal-type constructs; 2) formulation of ecological theories; 3) delineation of trait complexes; 4) conceptualization of the city as a center of dominance; 5) the expedient approach based on the size of the urban population.
- ¹⁴ S. Thernstrom, "Immigrants and Wasps: Ethnic Differences in Occupational Mobility in Boston--1890-1940", in S. Thernstrom and R. Sennett (eds.) Nineteenth Century Cities. Essays in the New Urban History, New Haven 1969.
- ¹⁵ L. Mumford, Technics and Civilization, New York 1934, and The Culture of Cities, New York 1938.
- ¹⁶ G. Duby, Guerriers et Paysans, Paris 1973.
- ¹⁷ See the very subtle analysis of Maurice Agulhon, who has studied the diffusion of democratic feeling among nineteenth century French peasants and urban workers in La République au village, Paris 1970, and Une ville ouvrière au temps du socialisme utopique--Toulon de 1815 à 1851, Paris La Haye 1970.
- ¹⁸ Paul Wheatley, op. cit.
- ¹⁹ In the recent historical literature, see M. Frisch, "L'histoire de l'urbanisation américaine, réflexions sur les tendances récentes", Annales E.S.C. 800-896, No. 4, juillet-août 1970, numéro spécial Histoire et Urbanisation. Frisch raises the question of the specificity of urban history, but unfortunately his main point is to demonstrate that an urban chronology does not make sense in itself. History is not only chronology.
- ²⁰ M. Bloch, Apologie pour l'histoire ou métier d'historien, Paris 1949. Translated by J. R. Strayer as The Historian's Craft, New York 1953, p. 26.
- ²¹ See Brian J. L. Berry and Katherine B. Smith, City Classification Handbook, New York 1971; and Brian J. L. Berry and Frank E. Horton, Geographic Perspectives in Urban Systems, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey 1970).
- ²² Office of Statistical Standards, Criteria for Defining Standard Metropolitan Areas, (Washington, D.C. 1958) International Urban Research, The World's Metropolitan Areas, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1959).
- ²³ Stanley Lieberman, Ethnic Patterns in American Cities, (New York, 1963).
- ²⁴ Clyde Griffen, Poughkeepsie Mobility Study; study in progress; see "The Effect of Craft and Ethnic Differences in Poughkeepsie, New York: 1850-1880" in S. Thernstrom, R. Sennett (eds.) op. cit.
- ²⁵ See Fernand Braudel's illuminating integration of the analysis of the mode of production, the production itself, processes of settlement and daily life patterns in Civilisation matérielle et capitalisme (Paris, 1967).

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