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THE URBAN HISTORIAN'S DILEMMA:

FACELESS CITIES OR  
CITIES WITHOUT HINTERLANDS?

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## Historical Images of the City

History is so porous a subject, and writing history so various an endeavor, that almost any image anyone -- historian or not -- has ever held of cities appears somewhere in an historical account. From Herodotus' splendid Athens to Mumford's rotten Rome, evaluations cover the possible range. A conscientious survey of urban images in history would amount to an inventory of all existing conceptions of the city. That inventory would be charming but useless, like the reproductions of antique mail-order catalogs which appear on gift-book counters toward the end of each year. It would also be many times as bulky. True, one can economize by classifying: the city as a point in space as opposed to the city as the setting of battles and pageants, the city as a storehouse of civilization versus the city as a cesspool, the city as a market or the city as an organization, and so on. Even such a classification ends up, if faithfully pursued, an enumeration of all the logical and aesthetic principles one might employ in sorting cities. An idle task, at best.

Instead of frittering away effort on taxonomy, let us consider the dilemma faced by historians who write about cities: how to portray the textures of individual cities, and yet to connect those cities firmly to general historical processes. The dilemma confronts an urban historian who wants to place his subject in the overall stream of social change just as surely as it challenges the political or social historian who wants to follow broad processes of change through the lives of particular cities. How shall we fashion a sound analysis of the growth of large-scale manufacturing which permits us to capture the differences in the experiences of people in, say, England's Birmingham and Manchester during nineteenth-century industrialization? How shall we carry out that dual analysis without reducing to bare points on a graph those cities of tenements, alleys, canals, workers, capitalists, widows, brawls, shouts, and stench?

The problem does not result simply from clashing levels of abstraction, from

inconsistency between the general and the particular. Here is the difficulty: Cities are, above all, places whose analysis requires a sense of spatial and physical structure; analyses of broad historical processes rarely deal effectively with spatial and physical structure. Working out the implications of broad historical processes for spatial and physical structure is never easy. As a consequence, treatments of urban geography seldom articulate usefully with discussions of the development of national electoral politics, or of the growth of new ideologies. Likewise, historical accounts of revolution or of changes in family organization usually have only the weakest implications for changes in the characters of cities as places. It is as if the text consisted of clusters of microdots, each cluster conveying its own internal message, but also appearing to form part of a larger message -- while the magnifying glass used to read the text has only two settings, one for the microdots, the other for the whole array, and nothing in between.

Why try to articulate the two? Why not treat the historical development of particular cities, and the changes of whole countries, as distinct problems, each requiring its own intellectual frame? Why not wait for the occasional daring synthesizer to join the two problems? Why not? Because urban history itself will be the loser. Without provisional synthesis, urban historians run the risk either of drifting into antiquarianism or of following strong but poorly formulated questions into confusion.

If analysts of large-scale change neglect urban form and reduce the cities they examine to locations in abstract space, they will not only ignore a crucial feature of those cities, but also misconstrue the causal links among the features they do observe. Without an understanding of how people use different parts of a city, for example, students of cities easily fall into thinking of migration as a solvent of social ties and a producer of rootless individuals. That misconception, in its turn, leads easily to the idea that massive in-migration produces crime and conflict. Once they

see the segregation of many cities into "urban villages" formed by migrants from the same origins who are attached to each other by the routines of chain migration, however, students of cities begin to grasp the fact that large-scale migration actually creates solidarities and social controls. Only by articulating the connections between long flows of migrants and the fine spatial organization of the city do we acquire a proper sense of migration's impact on the city's social life. Similar relationships hold for many other features of urban experience.

The usual division of labor in urban history makes more difficult that articulation of cities as places with cities as points within large social processes. When, for instance, Leo Schnore assembled papers representing the best current work in the "new urban history", the papers divided as follows (Schnore 1975):

Cities as Places

Martyn J. Bowden, "Growth of the Central Districts in Large Cities"

Kenneth T. Jackson, "Urban Deconcentration in the Nineteenth Century"

Kathleen Neils Conzen, "Patterns of Residence in Early Milwaukee"

Zane L. Miller, "Urban Blacks in the South, 1865-1920: The Richmond, Savannah, New Orleans, Louisville and Birmingham Experience"

Cities as Points in Large Social Processes

Allan R. Pred, "Large-City Interdependence and the Pre-electronic Diffusion of Innovations in the United States"

Gregory H. Singleton, "Fundamentalism and Urbanization: A Quantitative Critique of Impressionistic Interpretations"

Claudia Dale Goldin, "Urbanization and Slavery: The Issue of Compatibility"

Robert Higgs, "Urbanization and Inventiveness in the United States"

Joseph A. Swanson and Jeffrey G. Williamson, "Firm Location and Optimal City Size in American History"

Cities as Places Within Large Social Processes

NONE

To be sure, the four articles in the first category bear on social processes which crossed the boundaries of any single city, and which depended on changes in the United States as a whole. But the analyses themselves make those links neither explicit nor problematic.

The problem is not simply a matter of the scale at which particular analysts feel comfortable working. When Jane Jacobs wrote her stimulating Death and Life of Great American Cities, she showed herself to be a sensitive observer of neighborhood-to-neighborhood variation in the texture of social life. The whole book concerned the effects of spatial patterns and built environment on the quality of social interaction in different parts of cities. Yet when the same author turned to her Economy of Cities, the cities in question collapsed to points on the graph. Implicitly, Jacobs' distinctions among craft production, mass production, and diversified production as successive stages in a city's manufacturing describe places which have -- or can have -- substantially different internal structures. More so than mass production, diversified production ought to make possible the sort of variety and complexity Jacobs values. Implicitly, then, the distinctions among craft, mass, and diversified production link the two books. Explicitly, nevertheless, Jane Jacobs does not work out the consequences of successive forms of industry for the city as a place.

One more example. Gary Nash's remarkable book, The Urban Crucible, compares the eighteenth-century histories of Boston, New York, and Philadelphia up through the American Revolution. A number of earlier students of the period from the Seven Years War to the Revolution have examined the geography of politics in those cities -- delineating, for example, the roles of activists from the South End and the North End of Boston during the Stamp Act crisis. Furthermore, a comparison of Allan Kulikoff's analysis of segregation by wealth in pre-revolutionary Boston with Sam Bass Warner's observation of occupational mixing in eighteenth-century

Philadelphia suggests the possibility of significant differences in the structures of the two cities: perhaps Boston's exceptional activism depended in part on the mobilization of people in class-homogeneous neighborhoods. Nash does not follow the geographic lead. Instead, he treats each of the cities as the repository of a somewhat different mixture of social classes resulting from its particular economic position, then gives an account of the various class alignments which emerged in the politics of the three cities. The account is fresh and illuminating. But it says nothing about the three cities as places.

One might reasonably complain that urban form has little to do with the problem Nash set himself. That is exactly the point: the current division of labor in urban history draws the line among problems at city limits: on one side, problems to which the study of spatial organization is obviously relevant, or even crucial; on the other, problems in which it makes eminent sense to treat individual cities as elementary points in space; and practically no problems, recognized as such by the practitioners, which straddle the line. As a result, urban history, for all its occasional brilliance, rarely contributes much to our understanding of the interaction between large social processes and the changing form of cities.

#### Drawing a Blank

Even within the city limits, studies of social processes often ignore the city's spatial structure. Only one case this time: Stephan Thernstrom's masterful Other Bostonians traces the life histories of almost 8,000 of Boston's residents from 1880 to 1970. Questions about social mobility and immobility dominate the book. Geographic mobility into and out of the city, furthermore, figures both as a technical problem and as an important phenomenon. But the book pays no attention to mobility from one part of the city to another, or to differences in social mobility among residents of different parts of the city. Not one of the eighty-one statistical tables treats the city's spatial structure. The book contains nary a map of Boston. Discussions of the

relationships -- mostly non-existent -- between the extent of a group's residential segregation and its occupational achievement come closest to taking local geography into account. Since the description of residential segregation involved is a single index summed over all areas of the city, even that one concession to spatial organization falls far short of conveying the city's changing internal structure.

In Thernstrom's Boston, people fall into ethnic and occupational categories, but otherwise have no local existence. In that Boston, questions about the locality transmute themselves into questions about the nation as a whole: in the United States of the industrial age, how much, and how, did opportunities for mobility vary from time to time and group to group? Pursuit of those questions does not obviously require any attention to urban spatial organization. So long as the object is to fill in the cells of a social-mobility table, one can treat the city's map as a blank.

To some degree, the connections that Thernstrom and other urban historians make with major historical questions justify the drawing of the city as a blank. Before Thernstrom initiated a series of social-mobility studies in one American city after another, few historians saw that treatments of individual cities could aim beams of light on opportunity and inequality in American life as a whole -- therefore, by reflection, on the apparent lack of class-conscious militancy among American workers, and on the common supposition that in the twentieth century an open society began to close down. Thernstrom deserves credit for an outstanding accomplishment. Nevertheless, his accomplishment contributes little to our sense of Boston and other cities as places with complex internal geographies.

Many other questions historians have brought to cities likewise encourage them to blank out the spatial pattern. That is especially true of questions imported from the social sciences: questions about demographic changes in industrialization, questions about class structure, questions about organizational life, et cetera. As social scientists usually pursue those questions, locations matter little except as evidence



about the social categories to which people belong: living in a neighborhood high on the hill marks a family as elite, living in a predominantly Greek neighborhood strengthens the presumption that a family of Greek extraction is "ethnic", other locations provide information for the placement of other sorts of people. Location within the city dissolves into position within an abstract social space. As a consequence, urban historians look at place after place without contributing to our understanding of the organization of cities as spaces.

Not all urban historians who examine large-scale social processes as they work themselves out in particular cities therefore neglect spatial organization. In a fairly direct reaction to the abstractness of social-mobility analyses, for example, Theodore Hershberg and his fellow researchers of the Philadelphia Social History Project have spent much of their energy pinpointing the locations in the nineteenth-century city occupied by different sorts of people and activities. Attention to space has made it possible for them to investigate how transport changes, shifts in the location of jobs, and urban growth affected the journey to work; that is only one example of the many problems they have addressed. John Cumbler has organized his history of working-class life and collective action in nineteenth-century Lynn, Massachusetts, around the reshaping of urban neighborhoods and home-work relationships with the decline of small-scale craft production and the concentration of capital in large firms. In exquisitely fine detail, Olivier Zunz has analyzed alterations in the texture of Detroit's neighborhoods -- including changes in the structure of racial, ethnic, and class segregation -- with the growth of big industry after 1880.

Zunz's study deserves special attention, for he has deliberately undertaken to make the study of spatial structure and built environment relevant to large questions of social history. For that purpose, he has taken his observations of land use, building type, and population down to the individual plot and structure. Zunz argues (although with many qualifications and considerable subtlety) that processes relating

people to their work dominate the shape of the city — for example, that in periods when the urban labor force is growing largely through the influx of long-distance migrants via chain-migration the local clusters created by the migration dominate the map of the city. He argues, furthermore, that the scale of production strongly affects the scale of segregation — where workplaces are generally very small, for instance, segregation by class and common origin takes the form of small clusters of similar households. It follows that an observer who looks at changes at the level of relatively large geographic units such as wards or census tracts is likely to mistake an increase in the scale of segregation for the emergence of segregation in a previously mixed city. In the case of Detroit, these two principles combined to produce a fundamental rearrangement of Detroit's ground plan around World War I. Then, Zunz tells us, the rapid expansion of automobile plants and other large employers coupled with the migration of blacks and whites from the South to the city, and rapidly created the class- and race-segregated industrial city we know today. Zunz's analysis takes spatial structure seriously, without forgetting why we might be interested in it as a clue to general social processes. Such analyses are rare.

Urban historians face a real dilemma. Constrained by today's questions, materials, and procedures, they do not easily, or often, examine the relationship between large historical processes and the textures of individual cities. For the most part, they treat the two separately. They bring together historical processes and city textures mainly by broad allusions at the beginnings and ends of studies which remain doggedly on one side of the line or the other. This despite Oscar Handlin's twenty-year-old challenge to his colleagues:

The distinctive feature of the great modern city is its unique pattern of relations to the world within which it is situated. Large enough to have a character of its own, the modern city is yet inextricably linked to, dependent

upon, the society outside it; and growth in size has increased rather than diminished the force of that dependence. Out of that relationship spring the central problems of urban history — those of the organization of space within the city, of the creation of order among its people, and of the adjustment to its new conditions by the human personality.

It is, of course, perfectly possible to approach the history of these communities in a purely descriptive fashion — to prepare useful accounts of municipalities, markets and cultural centers on an empirical basis. But such efforts will certainly be more rewarding if they are related to large questions of a common and comparative nature (Handlin 1963: 3).

What is more, two hundred pages farther into the same book, Eric Lampard echoes Oscar Handlin:

Although there are limits to which (sic) any one discipline could or should treat urban developments in their entirety, it is time surely to frame a broader approach to urban history, one that elucidates concrete local situations in the same terms that are used to treat more general transformations in society. Individual cities, for example, can be treated as particular accomodations to a many-sided societal process: urbanization . . . The scope of historical studies should thus be broadened and more systematic effort made to relate the configurations of individual communities to on-going changes that have been reshaping society (Lampard 1963: 233).

In the very same volume, ironically, the speculative and theoretical essays spring gracefully from broad social changes to urban form and back, while the two sustained discussions of a particular city -- studies of Philadelphia by Sam Bass Warner and Anthony Garvan -- barely mention the interaction between national or international processes and the reshaping of the city. Conclusion: bridging the gap is easier to

advocate than to accomplish.

### Bridges Across the Gap

Nevertheless, determined students of cities have found a few standard ways to cross the divide between large social changes and alterations within particular cities. We might call the three most prominent global reach, space-economy, and city-as-theater.

Global reach consists of evoking a principle which pervades an entire society or civilization, then treating the internal organization of cities as a direct expression of that principle. Max Weber, Oswald Spengler, Henri Pirenne, and Arnold Toynbee all invented global-reach accounts of cities. None of them, however, provided as full a statement as Lewis Mumford has. In The City in History and many other writings, Mumford has worked out an analysis of cities as expressions of two principles, in varying combinations. The first principle: accumulation, symbolized by the Neolithic agricultural village. The second: conquest, symbolized by the Paleolithic hunter. Neither one in itself, thinks Mumford, leaves much room for leisured, humane daily life. The initial synthesis of the two principles, however, produced the first cities -- small in scale and heavily dependent on agriculture, but nonetheless combining warrior-kingship with unprecedented accumulation of goods.

From then on, according to Mumford, the extent and balance of accumulation and conquest determined the internal structure of cities. It also limited their viability. In Europe, he says, a relatively modest and balanced advance of the two principles created the harmonies of Medieval cities: wall, market, fortress, and cathedral marked out a city in which even people of moderate circumstances could live comfortably. Hypertrophy of conquest and control produced the ostentatious Baroque city, with its palaces, monuments, and parade grounds. Exaggeration of accumulation and consumption produced the gritty Industrial city, with its tenement, gridwork streets, and smokestacks. Pushed beyond all bounds by the masters of the

later industrial city, incessant conquest and (especially) accumulation destroy any possibility of humane existence, indeed any semblance of an urban community. The city destroys itself. We live in the image of Rome:

From the standpoint of both politics and urbanism, Rome remains a significant lesson of what to avoid: its history presents a series of classic dangers signals to warn one when life is moving in the wrong direction. Wherever crowds gather in suffocating numbers, wherever rents rise steeply and housing conditions deteriorate, wherever a one-sided exploitation of distant territories removes the pressure to achieve balance and harmony nearer at hand, there the precedents of Roman building almost automatically revive, as they have come back today: the arena, the tall tenement, the mass contests and exhibitions, the football matches, the international beauty contests, the strip-tease made ubiquitous by advertisement, the constant titillation of the senses by sex, liquor, and violence -- all in true Roman style. So, too, the multiplication of bathrooms and the over-expenditure on broadly paved motor roads, and above all, the massive collective concentration on glib ephemeralities of all kinds, performed with supreme technical audacity. These are symptoms of the end: magnifications of demoralized power, minifications of life. When these signs multiply, Necropolis is near, though not a stone has yet crumbled. For the barbarian has already captured the city from within. Come, hangman! Come, vulture! (Mumford 1961: 242).

Although Mumford's analysis is contestable in many ways and incomplete in many others, it has the virtue of creating a direct link between large social changes and the spatial organization of cities: The changing priorities of dominant classes produce decisions which dominate the locations and distributions of activities, populations, and structures within the city. That argument matters to Mumford because it suggests the possibility of changing the texture of cities by altering priorities. It matters to

us because it indicates one escape from the historian's dilemma. Global reach makes the same principles that inform social life in general reshape the internal structure of cities.

Space-economy builds a very different bridge. As Eric Lampard's ever-skeptical but always-hopeful essays have established over the years, economic historians keep alive the idea that the logic of costs (and, to a lesser extent, of benefits) dictates a distinctive spatial pattern for each system of production and distribution. That spatial pattern stretches seamlessly from the scale of a neighborhood to the scale of a continent. Richard Meier, for example, has sketched a "communications theory" of urban growth, in which transaction costs under varying technologies affect the relative feasibility of conveying goods, services, and various sorts of information over long distances or short, and thus shape neighborhoods and continents at the same time. Allan Pred treats "biased information fields" as determining the relative advantages of different locations for the pursuit of major activities, and as thereby constraining the whole pattern of urban growth. While making less of the formal structure of space-economy, Yves Lequin has analyzed nineteenth-century Lyon and its hinterland as a single interdependent site of industrial production. And G. William Skinner has extended a classic treatment of space-economy -- the economic geographers' model of nested urban hierarchies built up from the markets for different commodities -- into a portrayal of the entire Chinese urban system.

In addition to his imaginative leap from an abstract market region to a concrete Chinese subcontinent and the indefatigable assembly of evidence on Chinese regions, Skinner has added to the interest of the classic model by conceiving of a China characterized by not one but two urban systems: a bottom-up hierarchy created by the unsteady filling in of markets with the growth of production of trade; a top-down hierarchy created self-consciously by imperial agents intent on conquest and control. The parallels to Mumford's principles of accumulation and control are

engaging. But even more engaging is Skinner's proposal that the relative position of any community within the two hierarchies determines its internal structure -- with a location that stands "higher" with respect to the market hierarchy than with respect to imperial control tending to give priority of power and space to merchants and marketing rather than to administrators and administration. (The proposal avoids tautology because Skinner's model specifies the expected sizes and geographic positions of places at different levels of the two hierarchies.) Clearly, these models of space-economy provide the means, at least in principle, of bridging the gap between urban spatial structure and large-scale social processes.

The third way across is very different. It is to conceive of the city as a theater for the human drama. The main problems and developments of the drama are very general; but they work themselves out in a particular setting, and in response to its particularities. Richard Trexler, for example, has shown us the great families of Florence living out the rivalry among patron-client networks that informed the lives of Italy's Renaissance cities. Trexler portrays the public display of wealth and following in the great civic processions as a context in which the failure to command deference and envy not only cost a family self-esteem, but also decreased its influence in the city's subsequent affairs. In the process, he treats the importance of family palaces and public squares as settings for the ritualized combat among clienteles. Thus the organization and use of urban space become part of the struggle for power.

Similarly, John Brewer has used the popular movements and electoral struggles of the eighteenth-century London area to examine the emergence of articulated demands for popular sovereignty in Britain and its American colonies. More than a "case study", the analysis of London's struggles reveals the development of an ideology, a vocabulary, and a repertoire of action that would eventually become dominant in the English-speaking world. Brewer's analysis is an imperfect example of

the city-as-theater, for it slights the day-to-day use of the city's space: the ways that file after file of protesters marched through the Strand on the way to petition the king at St. James or Parliament at Westminster, the incorporation of Southwark's King's Bench Prison (site of John Wilkes' imprisonment in 1768) into the Sacred Way of Wilkite processions, the use of local coffeehouses as rallying-places for different trades and their interests, the significance of Mansion House and Guildhall as points of reference for civic and corporate power. Yet Brewer's portrayal of the turbulent gatherings on the hustings during the contested elections of the later eighteenth century opens the way to an integration of large political processes, extending far beyond London, with the uses of the city's territory as a stage for the working out of those processes.

#### What Rime Has This Space?

Global reach, space-economy, and city-as-theater mitigate the urban historian's dilemma, but they do not resolve it completely. Global-reach accounts beg the question of the mechanisms translating very large social processes into the forms of cities. Space-economy accounts say little about the relations of dominance, subordination, solidarity, and conflict that inform any city's social structure. Presenting the city as theater almost inevitably takes the stage setting for granted, instead of explaining how it changes. Of course, any theory which purports to explain everything probably explains nothing. Nevertheless, we might hope for a more comprehensive analysis of the connections between urban spatial structure and large social processes than any of the three approaches now permits.

At the moment, the problem does not result mainly from our ignorance about cities as such. It lies in the relative weakness of available accounts of the large social processes impinging on cities. An unduly technological account of industrialization has hidden the role of the accumulation and concentration of capital in the shaping of western cities. An excessively optimistic account of statemaking



has disguised the importance of coercion, extraction, and surveillance in creating the patrolled metropolis we know today. The conjunction of capitalism and statemaking created the contemporary western city, with its extraordinary concatenation of large workplaces, residential segregation by class, high-priced central locations, massive governmental intervention to assure the profitable use of those central locations, huge but shaky systems of transportation, and political struggle over the collection and allocation of municipal revenues. Conceptions of global reach, space-economy, and city-as-theater can each contribute to our understanding of the ways in which capitalism and statemaking performed these dubious wonders. But it will take renewed conceptions of capitalism and statemaking themselves to surmount the urban historian's dilemma. With those renewed conceptions, urban historians will begin to understand the western city as the arena in which capitalist power and state power not only set the main themes of the drama, but also rearrange the very stage on which its players act.

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I have confined most of the paper's discussion to American examples, in order to keep it focused. The references here include the items mentioned in the paper, a number of other recent writings on American cities, and a few examples of relevant work concerning Europe. I am grateful to Dawn Hendricks for help with bibliography, and to Olivier Zunz for several valuable suggestions, including a reminder of the significance of Allen Kulikoff's work on Boston to the problem of the paper.

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