

COMMENT

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Although the influence of the Philadelphia Social History Project has been assessed in numerous ways, I think I have discovered yet more reliable, empirical evidence of its influence. In the course of helping to organize this panel, I found it almost impossible to find urban historians who had not been on the payroll of the Project, been consultants to the Project, used the Project's data, or appeared in the Project's collection. In fact, the influence has been so pervasive that I have decided to propose to next year's program committee that a session on the "Not Philadelphia Social History" be organized so that we can see what everyone else has been doing. The resulting panel, then, is a panel of outcasts, some of those miserable few not part of or affiliated with the Project who now get the chance to make the Project pay for its oversight.

Seriously, I do not intend today either to praise or to bury the Project as represented in the collection, *Philadelphia: Work, Space, Family and Group Experience in the Nineteenth Century*. It will suffice to say that the Project itself, the collection of essays, and the very numerous other studies that have grown out of or spun off from the Project have greatly enriched the field of urban history both conceptually and methodologically. As important, I think, has been the Project's status as a beacon for multi- and interdisciplinary urban history. For all of us working in this field there has been something reassuring about the knowledge that the Project was there being controversial and experimental, but always challenging and enriching. All of us who might be considered in the "second generation" of social science urban history owe a debt to those of the first generation—among whom Professor Hershberg is certainly one—who blazed the trails and fought the battles that made our taking

up of social science approaches if not commonplace, at least a great deal easier and more “normal.”

I say this by way of introduction because I want to make clear that my comments today are not intended to be an argument with or criticism of Professor Hershberg, the Philadelphia Social History Project, or the Philadelphia volume. Rather, I would like to take off from the title of Professor Hershberg’s introductory essay—“Toward an Interdisciplinary History of the City”—to discuss what I take to be a serious problem in this field, namely, the failure of most interdisciplinary definitions of or approaches to urban history to include the dimension of power and thus the political in their analyses. In order to carry out such a discussion, I think it incumbent upon me, first, to suggest why politics have been left out of urban history; second, to offer a redefinition of urban process that makes room for politics; and finally, to propose a brief research agenda for such political analysis.¹

The “problem” of politics in American urban history has been one of long standing, reaching back to the very origins of the field. As most of us know, social history began as a “residual” category, defined not so much by what it was as by what it was not. Social history was not political, constitutional, or diplomatic history, the fields dominating the profession at the time of its emergence, and thus as urban history began to emerge out of social history it inherited this apolitical legacy. This apolitical inheritance was reinvested by those who, beginning in the early 1960s, attempted to redefine and refocus the field of urban history. The classic essays of Eric Lampard in 1961, Roy Lubove in 1967, Stephan Thernstrom in 1971, and, I should add, that of Professor Hershberg in this volume further defined urban history as a field of social history with an almost exclusive focus on social and economic structure.²

It should be noted that this tradition did not denounce urban political history; most of the products of that field were self-incriminating evidence of its bankruptcy. Motivated by concern with events rather than processes, restricted by an overly narrow definition of the political, and peopled with jousting “debonair scoundrels” and “men of the better sort,” much of the literature in urban political history fit David Potter’s apt description of the “old” political history as “a grab bag of isolated events, strung together chronologically, garnished with personalities and spiced with anecdotes.”³ Given the problems in this area, the focus of the new definitions of the field on its social structural side was—and is—understandable as an attempt to make the best of a bad situation, but rather than improving the situation in urban political history these

definitions aggravated it, setting into motion a sort of law of uneven development according to which urban social history flourished under the stimulation of new work while urban political history essentially languished in the old "framework."

This is no revelation to anyone who is familiar with the literature of urban history. Moreover, it has been pointed out already by many leading urban historians, among them Eric Lampard, who has said that good political history of American cities is "precisely what is lacking."⁴ The challenge is to fill this gap and restore this field. I think there are at least two tasks that must be accomplished before this can happen. The first is the redefinition of urban process so as to make more room for political factors; the second, the redefinition of the political in order to look at more traditional objects of the political historian's attention in a new way. I can only outline the dimensions of these tasks here, of course.

To begin, we might consider precisely what the phrase "urban as process" means. Professor Hershberg offers a fairly standard definition of it in the introduction to this collection as "the dynamic modeling of the inter-relationships among environment, behavior and group experience," and, as he notes, this definition is similar to that of Lampard, Lubove, and others of the "ecological" persuasion. The first question we must ask about this definition is whether there is anything specifically urban about it. For although it has been taken up by the profession as a way of specifying urban experience, as purely *process* the relationships among environment, behavior, and group experience occur everywhere, from small group sociology experiments to baseball parks. Stephan Thernstrom has recognized this problem recently in declaring that the study of these phenomena "ought best be described not as urban history or rural history, but as a history of population and social structure."⁵

The second question we must ask of this definition as a framework for interdisciplinary urban history is whether it leaves room for the political, broadly defined. The answer is both yes and no, but especially no. On the one hand, it does not specifically exclude the political, but, as Professor Hershberg notes, promises that once these ecological relationships are understood we will be better able to understand the interplay of such things as personalities and political decisions. On the other hand, however, politics has always been the unfulfilled promise, the never-quite-reached ultimate of this ecological definition, which usually proposes something like an analysis of "economic structure, social structure, and, ultimately, political structure," but which in practice never quite makes it to the investigation of the last, or at least has not done so with any consistency in the twenty years that have passed since

Lampard's first statement of the ecological definition. More fundamentally, though, the separation of ecological and political processes is inherently apolitical. It assumes that there is one realm of urban development that is somehow uninfluenced by the political but that at some later time can be linked back up with it. Not only is this link rarely made, it is not clear that it can be broken in the first place.

Given these problems with the existing processual definition of urban development, what is needed, I think, is a framework for interdisciplinary history that is more urban specific and that admits to the inherently political nature of urban development in America in the broadest sense of the word "political," meaning having to do with relationships of power, domination, and inequality. Such a framework can be abstracted from the rapidly growing body of neo-Marxian analysis of urban development, and what I would like to do now is to outline that framework briefly and discuss some of its implications for doing interdisciplinary urban history.⁶

In essence, the neo-Marxian framework suggests that the objects of analysis of urban as process must include: first, the logic of the process of capital accumulation; second, the process of community formation; and third, the role of the local state in organizing and reorganizing the inherently conflictual relationship between community and accumulation. Moreover, it specifies the urban as the unique social location of both the processes of community and accumulation and thus the arena for the unfolding of the frequently contradictory paths of development of the two processes. Finally, it posits that although these moments of urban as process can be separated for analytical purposes, in history they occur simultaneously and are deeply intertwined.

The city as built form is a monument to capital accumulation. It is the physical and geographical result of the private locational decisions of households and firms as they respond to the cues provided by the capitalist system, such as price signals and profitability criteria. The values influencing these decisions, obviously, are market values and have to do with the creation, accumulation, and reproduction of wealth. As social form, on the other hand, the city is the terrain of community, a mosaic of institutions and organizations ranging outward from the family through the ethnic group, neighborhood, and class, and the ethnic, neighborhood, and class organizations that enable urban dwellers to trust in, rely upon, and, at times, struggle with one another. The values that undergird the process of community building are, obviously, nonmarket values and involve such things as reciprocity and mutual support.

In theory, then, the logics of these processes appear to be potentially contradictory, and in history they are. The relationship between the two is not just conflictual, however, but also political, since these processes do not meet equally under capitalism. On the contrary, the process of accumulation structures the possibilities for community and, as importantly, the leaders of accumulation attempt to organize and reorganize community in ways compatible with the changing nature of the accumulation process. Even before it moves into the realm of the more properly or narrowly political, then, the process of urban development, as defined in this way, is saturated with the political.

However, it is in the realm of the more narrowly political, which is to say in the realm of the state at the local level and the political parties and bureaucracies within it, that the relationship between community and accumulation is most powerfully mediated, although again upon grounds of inequality. For the state and the political process essentially serve the needs of accumulation in two ways: first, by providing a wide variety of physical and legal outputs designed to facilitate the accumulation of capital and, second, and perhaps more importantly, by legitimizing the inherently unequal distribution of economic and political resources in the city, either by intervening on the side of accumulation or by formulating political issues that evade the central problems of the urbanization process.

However, the state, like the city itself, is, as John Mollenkopf has written, suspended between community and accumulation, and therefore must constantly strive to mediate and renegotiate this three-cornered relationship by attempting on the one hand to mitigate the most outrageous results of private decision-making in a situation of unequal social and economic power, yet on the other hand to maintain the social and political system that institutionalizes this inequality.⁷ It is this suspension of the state that prevents the prediction of specific forms of the state or outcomes of state policy from the "logic" of either capital accumulation or community formation, but requires instead that politics and the state be viewed as both the terrain and the outcome of social conflict and negotiation, although within a situation in which the structural advantages accrue to the forces of accumulation.

By moving politics to center stage, and by proposing a role for the state at the local level that grows out of instead of parallel or external to the urbanization process itself, the neo-Marxian approach focuses our attention on the role of the urban political process as the primary arena for the organization of political consent for the domination of the process and forces of accumulation over those of community in

American urban development. It also highlights the gaps in our knowledge of the urban political process and provides a framework for considering some old objects in urban political history in a new way.

Ira Katznelson has written that this organization of consent was accomplished by means of an interlocking "set of coercive, symbolic, and institutional buffers" that softened the impact of basic social contradictions.⁸ Certainly aspects of the urban political system can be found in each of these categories, and I would like to conclude by considering very briefly the buffering activities and research status of three of them: the suffrage, political parties, and government policy.

Whether or not the ballot box was, as Alan Dawley has written, the "coffin" of class consciousness in America, there can be little doubt of its effectiveness in projecting a realm of political inequality that helped to counterbalance the social effects of radical economic inequality.⁹ Nowhere was this function more important than in the industrializing cities, but to date we know almost nothing about the composition of the active electorate—as opposed to the units from which that electorate emerged. Moreover, nothing is known about the effect of changing registration and election procedures on the different components of the actual urban electorate. Most urban historians rest secure in the assumption that the abolition of property requirements and the assiduous work of political parties guaranteed a near-universal suffrage when, in fact, the most important implication of the mobility studies is that residency rather than property requirements may have been the chief means of disfranchising the northern urban working classes. Until more is known about this, it is legitimate to wonder whether the organization of political consent was carried out without the participation of the most aggrieved members of society.

As the forward units in the battle of American capitalism for the hearts and mind of American urbanites, the political parties were certainly of prime importance in the definition and negotiation of the relationships between community and accumulation, especially given their ability to define political issues and to corrupt or marginalize their third-party opponents. Yet, outside of the rather crude prosopographical studies of the reform coalition, almost nothing is known about the ways by which various classes and groups were mobilized into the complicated sets of alliances characteristic of urban politics. Nor is it at all clear how competing political organizations increased or undermined the political capacities of various classes or other groups. Instead, urban historians have been content to allow this crucial topic to be dominated by an antiquated, restrictive, and increasingly bankrupt

dichotomy between ward or machine politicians allegedly based in "community" and citywide or reform politicians serving "society." In terms of their results, machine and reform politics appear rather as contrasting and at times competing modes of protecting the economic and social privileges of local elites. The first task in this area is to rip away the veil of sentimentality enveloping the political machine. Having done so, it will be possible to determine how *both* machine and reform politicians balanced, or appeared to balance, the frequently conflicting claims of community and accumulation.

In some cases this political balancing act was accomplished by means of judicious use of public decision-making and the allocation of public resources. Both were used to bind components of the electorate to political parties or organizations that failed frequently to protect the voters' broadly conceived interests. Here, again, although we have studies of the critical moments in such decision-making, such as the use of police power against strikers or of patronage against labor parties, we have little sense of the context of routine policymaking within which these critical actions were taken. Thus the need is for continued analysis of the day-to-day operations of local government and the role that allocational and distributional policies played in structuring the influence of the state over the electorate and thus frequently of the power of accumulation over community.

These, of course, are only a few of the possible objects of attention in the political institutional arena of urban as process. There are many more topics within the "properly" political and many more areas outside of the properly political but intermediate between community and accumulation that contributed to the social, economic, political, and cultural domination of some groups over others in the developing American city. Moreover, the neo-Marxian framework is only one possible way of approaching these issues. However, this framework does have the unique virtue of its single-minded refusal to separate the political, economic, and social aspects of urban development.

The research products of the Philadelphia Social History Project have illuminated significant aspects of the relationship between accumulation and community and underscored the enormous influence of the former upon the latter through their analyses of the nature of industrial development and the impact of industry on the city's economic and residential spatial arrangements and on the "structure of opportunity" for various communities in the city. Yet to be investigated is the political economy of the way in which community was reorganized and the life chances of individuals, classes, and groups parceled out

during the industrialization process. How did the political system help to legitimate the differential individual and group outcomes of these processes? Did the “regular” political parties face or evade the issues of power and inequality raised by industrialization, and how did they respond to those organizations (such as labor movements and parties, populists, socialists, and so on) that attempted to challenge the social “logic” of the accumulation process? How did local public policy accommodate the needs of both community and accumulation and, given the enormous power of industry, how “public” could this policy be? Given the social character of those who exercised it and the ability of the political parties to seriously restrict the range of its efficacy, how effective was the suffrage as an instrument of social and political protest?

While it was perfectly proper for the Philadelphia Social History Project to limit its investigations primarily to the area of “social” history, as we look beyond the Project “toward an interdisciplinary history of the city” we look for the complete merger of social and political history and the mutual enrichment of their research agendas. For only by analyzing both society and power in urban America, or, better yet, “power in urban society,” can we move toward a truly interdisciplinary history of the American city.

NOTES

1. My thinking on all these issues has been aided by three recent considerations of the historiography of American urban history and three recent essays on the problem of the “political” in social history. Those dealing with urban history are Michael Frisch, “American Urban History as an Example of Recent Historiography,” *History and Theory* 28 (1979), 350-377; Kathleen Neils Conzen, “Community Studies, Urban History, and American Local History,” in Michael Kammen, ed., *The Past Before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States* (Ithaca, 1980), 270-291; Michael H. Ebner, “Urban History: Retrospect and Prospect,” *Journal of American History* 68 (1981), 69-84. Considerations of social history and the “political” include Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, “The Political Crisis of Social History: A Marxian Perspective,” *Journal of Social History* 10 (1976), 205-220; Geoff Eley and Keith Nield, “Why Does Social History Ignore Politics?” *Social History* 5 (1980), 249-271; Tony Judt, “A Clown in Regal Purple: Social History and the Historians,” *History Workshop* 7 (1979), 66-94. Because of the specificity of its critique and its proposals for improvement, the Eley-Nield essay is certainly the best of these three. The Judt essay, on the other hand, has received far more attention than it deserves; when he concludes his huffing and puffing, what he has, in fact, produced is a travesty of himself.

2. Eric Hobsbawm discusses the history of social history as a "residual" category in his essay "From Social History to the History of Society," *Daedalus* 100 (1971), 20-45. These definitional efforts include: Eric E. Lampard, "American Historians and the Study of Urbanization," *American Historical Review* 67 (1961), 49-61; Roy Lubove, "The Urbanization Process: A Historical Approach," *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 33 (1967), 33-39; Stephan Thernstrom, "Reflections on the New Urban History," *Daedalus* 100 (1971), 359-375.

3. David M. Potter, "Roy F. Nichols and the Rehabilitation of American Political History," in Don E. Fehrenbacher, ed., *History and American Society: Essays of David M. Potter* (New York, 1973), 216.

4. Eric E. Lampard, "A Conversation with Eric E. Lampard" (interview), in Bruce M. Stave, ed., *The Making of Urban History* (Beverly Hills, 1977), 275. Commenting on the situation in labor history, David Montgomery, too, has suggested a shift in emphasis toward the political. See Montgomery, "Gutman's Nineteenth Century America," *Labor History* 19 (1978), 426.

5. Stephan Thernstrom, "The New Urban History," in Charles F. Delzell, ed., *The Future of History* (Nashville, 1977), 45.

6. I have drawn this outline loosely from a variety of recent neo-Marxian works, including David Harvey, *Social Justice and the City* (Baltimore, 1973); James O'Connor, *The Fiscal Crisis of the State* (New York, 1973); William K. Tabb and Larry Sawers, eds., *Marxism and the Metropolis: New Perspectives in Urban Political Economy* (New York, 1978); Michael Dear and Allen J. Scott, eds., *Urbanization and Urban Planning in Capitalist Society* (New York, 1981); Ira Katznelson, "The Crisis of the Capitalist City: Urban Politics and Social Control," in Willis D. Hawley et al., *Theoretical Perspectives on Urban Politics* (Englewood Cliffs, 1976), 214-229. The community-accumulation distinction is made most clearly in John Mollenkopf's essay "Community and Accumulation," in Dear and Scott, *Urbanization and Urban Planning*, 319-337.

7. Mollenkopf, "Community and Accumulation," 321.

8. Katznelson, "Crisis of the Capitalist City," 220.

9. Alan Dawley, *Class and Community: The Industrial Revolution in Lynn* (Cambridge, 1976), 70.