White Cities, Linguistic Turns, and Disneylands: The New Paradigms of Urban History
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THE NEW PARADIGMS OF URBAN HISTORY

Timothy J. Gilfoyle

Few events better illustrate the multiple paradigms in recent urban history than the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago. For decades, the considerable literature on the Fair emphasized the "White City" and issues of physical planning, moral order, and neoclassical architecture. But since 1980, the Exposition has exemplified the growing diversity of urban historiography. For Christine Boyer, the Fair was part of a new discourse reflecting the emergence of modern urban planning. By contrast, Stanley Schultz characterizes the Exposition not as a beginning, but the culmination of the city planning ethos of the nineteenth century. William Cronon invokes the event as a metaphor for the "shock city" of industrial America, "a fantasy landscape," and "a fairy city" symbolizing Chicago's historic climax. Alan Trachtenberg and Wim de Wit underscore nationalism, viewing the Fair as a "grand illusion" by American rulers "to win hegemony over the emerging national culture." Peter Hales, by comparison, emphasizes urban culture, with an elite seeking "control over the production of the urban vision." Most critical is Robert Rydell, who sees the White City as "a cultural Frankenstein," "a coin minted in the tradition of American racism."2

Numerous narratives now emphasize the Midway over the White City. John Kasson cast the first stone in this direction, arguing that the Midway represented a new model of democratic urban recreation shaped not by the civic beliefs of cultural elites but by the commercial values of entrepreneurs seeking to attract a mass audience. A host of historians conclude that the Midway's architecture and leisure environment was constructed as imagined and commodified "representations of exotic culture."3

In essence, the Columbian Exposition is an interpretive smorgasbord. For urban historians, the Fair represents a metaphor for elite and plebeian values, a symbol of leisure and commercial cultures, the industrial city at its apogee, the physical embodiment of racial, ethnic, class and gender conflict, the beginning and the end of nineteenth-century planning, and the very essence of nineteenth-century American nationalism.

The multiple and perplexing views of this one event are emblematic of the

interpretive confusion marking urban history since 1980. The inclusion of topics ranging from cultural representations of cities found in fiction to empirical studies of the built environment fractured an already splintered and internally divided field. Some, like Stephan Thernström who helped invent the nomenclature “new urban history,” even abandoned the label “urban” altogether.4

Rejecting the category of “urban,” however, does not justify ignoring cities. Intellectual identity crises and scholarly pessimism are hardly unique to urban history. Most subfields of history are susceptible to such charges. Western, diplomatic and intellectual history, for example, recently generated debates over their meaning or utility. Practitioners of cultural studies openly concede the impossibility of defining their field.5 Scholars will probably always contest the meaning of “urban” and “city.” By now, the debate is pointless.6

For most urbanists, the definition is quite simple. People identify cities as places; what happens in those places is considered “urban.” Undoubtedly, such a broad, imprecise definition raises howls of protest in some academic quarters. Yet, recent urban history with its multiple paradigms and conflicting interpretations is a reaction to the narrow methodologies of the “new urban history” of the 1960s and 1970s. Sophisticated studies like Theodore Hershberg’s Philadelphia Social History Project precisely analyzed space and certain social behaviors, but effectively excluded architecture, politics, gender, and culture.7 These themes constitute the bulk of recent urban scholarship. Most significant has been the application of “culture” as an interpretive paradigm, influencing not only studies of social groups but also examinations of the built environment, regionalism, and suburbanization. Even institutional approaches to urban political history, which have turned old paradigms upside down, represent a reaction to cultural methodologies and questions.

Urban Cultures

Since 1980, historians of urban social groups have largely abandoned “modernization” and Marxism for the subcultural theories of sociologist Claude S. Fischer and anthropologist Clifford Geertz.8 From Italians in the tenements of Elizabeth Street to Jews and Mexicans in the bungalows of Los Angeles, historians emphasize the persistence and adaptability of premigration cultures over time. Migrant groups shaped and controlled their lives, even within the harsh economic, spatial and social limits of the dominant culture. Vastly different kinds of migrants were active agents in choosing among different courses of action, not simply subjects of social control. Rather than
posing a picture of complete assimilation or ongoing ethnic/racial persistence, historians now see the process as an ongoing blend of both over time.¹

Much of the literature on migrant groups details the "construction" of certain social identities. Whereas labor historians frequently locate the source of class consciousness in the workplace, urbanists emphasize domestic and leisure activities. In the nineteenth century, for example, male working-class identities were defined by neighborhood networks, street gangs, and saloons.¹² Antebellum elites and Protestant institutions physically separated themselves by constructing "patches of elegance" in their neighborhoods—renaming specific blocks, planting trees, and erecting picket fences to physically extend the domestic space outward. Geography became equated with gentility.¹¹ Likewise, examinations of fashion, "style," and dress explain the plasticity of urban classes. Migrants, while dressing better than in their former societies, used clothing for symbolic and self-identifying purposes. In her detailed examination of five working-class communities in twentieth-century Chicago, Lizabeth Cohen found older ethnic identities subverted by patterns of mass consumption and class consciousness.¹³

Applications of anthropological theory further highlight a "discourse of the street."¹¹ Rituals and customs which intersect with or exploit part of the built environment illustrate how different groups manipulated public streets in cities for their own use: antebellum women in New York, paraders in nineteenth-century Philadelphia, street children at the turn of the century, African-Americans in the segregated South.¹⁴ Studies on urban Catholicism, in particular, increasingly emphasize its territorial character. The high rates of white ethnic home ownership, a sacralized attachment to residential property and the neighborhood, devotional Catholicism and the centrality of the ethnic parish in daily life generated a community identity emotionally linked to physical locale.¹⁵

The strength of many case studies lies in revealing the internal complexity of urban communities. Studies of urban blacks, for example, expose highly differentiated neighborhoods divided by class, gender, culture, and especially religion. Historians have more closely scrutinized the migration to northern cities in the twentieth century and its polarizing impact. The focus on local communities and internal subcultures even complicates interpretations of the civil rights movement, suggesting that many different movements, not a single national crusade, characterized this phenomenon.¹⁶

The "thick descriptions" of various working-class groups and their social identities has inadvertently overturned the "textile" and "Coketown" paradigms of the industrial city.¹⁹ Varied models stretching from Lowell to Los Angeles have replaced older, linear theories of industrialization. Although Sean Wilentz's theory of "metropolitan industrialization" attracted the most
attention, other historians have found a complex, multifaceted, even pluralistic evolution of industrial capitalism. The industrialization of certain sectors, such as shipping, generated distinctive urban forms for different cities. Paradoxically, the bulk of this scholarship originated largely from examinations of labor, not capital.18

Gender studies further complicate this fragmented picture. Examinations of women, for example, emphasize their associational, sexual, and work behaviors. While many of those activities afforded autonomy and venues of public life unknown to rural counterparts, women often remained divided by class, racial, religious, and other identities—conclusions mirroring investigations of ethnic and racial groups.19 Anxiety over the status and behavior of young men and women was especially acute in the urban industrial environment of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Urban reformers and public authorities, rather than addressing the economic roots of the vulnerability of single women, usually problematized women's sexual behavior and transformed it into a "moral" crisis demanding aggressive intervention.20

Other historians have examined the subjects of such aggressive intervention. For single women, gay men, lesbian couples, and others, certain city neighborhoods provided unprecedented opportunities to escape the traditional controls of family and community, allowing them to become partially autonomous actors in the market. Wage labor, although arduous and poorly paid, gave many young women and men an independent income, effectively buying a measure of freedom from family dependence. The centers of commercialized leisure—dance halls, movie theaters, amusement parks—provided a relatively unregulated, cash-based, social arena for young men and women in the hours between work shifts. By developing new habits of dress, speech, and entertainment, urban youths created a variety of distinctive urban subcultures. Studies of sexual behavior have uncovered a complexity of communities ranging from prostitutes to homosexuals.21 Groups and activities long deemed geographically segregated, socially marginalized, or imperceptible were visible, public actors, especially within the context of their spatial impact.

This body of literature raises a new interpretation of popular culture. The era from 1890 to 1950 was one of civic sociability and democratized urban leisure. The vaudeville houses, cabarets, movie palaces, baseball fields, amusement parks, department stores, and world's fair midways offered a "something for everybody" philosophy that appealed to fantasy and consumption. The crowded venues, spectacular displays, and sophisticated styles epitomized not only a new urban culture, but modernity itself. The cumulative effect of these "cultural bazaars" was a "democratic" subversion of Victorian gender, ethnic and class boundaries. A variety of urbanites—gay males, single women, entertainers, "sporting men"—carved out spheres of
participation. In many cases, local politicians were key participants in the protection and development of these new forms of leisure. The rise of the shopping mall, automobile, theme park and suburban sports stadium after World War II ultimately destroyed this world.22

The emphasis in popular cultures, especially the subversive and surreal worlds of “nightlife,” broadened urban history to include an almost infinite variety of subcultures. For the first time, historians revealed how certain marginalized groups not only created their own communities but appropriated and contested the use of urban space. Indeed, the worlds of the hobo and homosexual, the prostitute and panderer, become core fixtures of American social life, and Times Square its epicenter.25

Unfortunately, the focus of this literature is “Gothamcentric.” New York City not only dominates these narratives; some proclaim Gotham the embodiment of modernity. But “modernity” is a slippery term. Many of the same fantastic images and social themes appear elsewhere. Some locate the birthplace of modernism in Los Angeles with the architecture of R.M. Schindler and Richard Neutra. Elsewhere, Chicago is represented as a place of industrial might, skyscrapers, and progress. The city possessed a vigorous bohemian and “modernist” subculture. Chicago’s Century of Progress Exposition of 1933 preceded New York’s World’s Fair of 1933. Using Chicago’s Great Fire, Haymarket incident and Pullman strike as representative events, Carl Smith argues that disorder—especially class disorder—epitomized the new metropolis, representing the “vocabulary of the formative period of modernism.”24

While popular culture transgressed or muted class, ethnic, and gender boundaries, historians examining neighborhoods find greater racial divides. Even studies that distinguish between southern and northern black neighborhoods—the former being “separate cities” of self-contained communities, the latter dependent ghettos—conclude that each prototype became a larger and poorer enclave. Some, like Roger Lane, insist that decades of residential segregation, social discrimination, industrial exclusion, and economic insecurity generated a criminal culture within African-American northern neighborhoods that detrimentally affected all residents of that community.25 Others point to structural factors and racism. Some examinations even document the emergence of a black “urban underclass” in the twentieth century, a term largely rejected by urban historians and sociologists because of its fluid, ambiguous meaning.30

The precise evolution and relationships among these urban cultures remain unresolved. Most recent scholarship adheres to Lawrence Levine’s depiction of American urban culture as fluid and divided, replete with ethnic, class, and regional differences. The shared variety of city cultures, especially in the first half of the nineteenth century, was less hierarchically organized and more fragmented than a century later. Yet others push the clock back on
cultural homogenization. Richard Bushman insists that late-eighteenth- and
nineteenth-century urban elites commercialized aristocratic, European notions of "refinement" and gentility. By 1850, they were sources of middle-class identity. Culture may percolate up from below, producing a contentious, dialectical relationship between high and low, elite and plebeian, native and immigrant cultures. But for Bushman, power exercises influence, and those "at the top have an immense advantage in influencing cultural power." 27

The emphasis on culture, particularly the dynamism of subcultures, has contributed to a convergence of architectural, social, and cultural history. 28 Here the locus of urban culture is defined not by leisure, work, or ethnic cultures, but by the manipulation of landscapes and built environments. The nineteenth-century park and cemetery movements reflected not only new physical forms, for example, but conflicting urban cultures with their own political and social ideologies. Nineteenth-century changes in law, technology, health care, and even urban novels (or "utopian" fiction) epitomized a new urban culture, a "moral environmentalism" beholden to technology as society's savior and to planning to insure urban order. 29 Even studies of company towns divulge a complexity of moral visions and physical forms—ranging from Christian socialism to welfare capitalism to corporate paternalism—stretching from the mill towns of New England to Torrance, California. 30

Studies of skyscrapers reflect a new interest in their cultural meaning and social impact. Few now debate who or what city "invented" the skyscraper, recognizing that the tall building was an evolutionary product rather than a specific discovery. Instead, tall building controversies at the turn of the century reveal a variety of cultural conflicts. New York builders sought unregulated commercial expansion and an architecture advertising wealth and prestige. Boston and Chicago, by contrast, frustrated skyscraper construction by adopting strict height regulations in order to emphasize and imitate European aesthetics. The earliest skyscrapers, once disdained by modernists for hiding internal structures, now win appreciation for providing "cultivated" work environments and historical links to the past. 31 Still others, notably Carol Willis, argue that the skyscraper is a product of money, speculation, prestige, and technology, not aesthetic theories of form. Questions of construction technology, internal mechanics, and finance rendered the engineer's contribution to tall buildings essential, the architect's superficial. 32

Housing remains the most examined building form, in part because residential designs illuminate ideologies of gender, class, and race. Cooperative housekeeping designs by nineteenth-century "material feminists," for example, represent little-remembered alternatives to privatized domesticity. The apartment house and its association with modernity was a key ingredient of urban middle-class identity, even if only a minority ever resided in them. In New York, the emergence of new forms of residential architecture, namely the
tenement, reflected the transformation of the nation's largest metropolis into a city of working-class renters. Nationwide, home ownership rates proved surprisingly high in immigrant and working-class communities, provoking a debate over the utility of working-class home ownership. Paradoxically, Americans displayed high levels of residential mobility which continued well into the twentieth century. Only the housing programs after 1933 changed this, cementing Franklin Roosevelt's vision of a modern social compact dependent upon a residentially-stable citizenry.

Housing represents a key linkage between African-American and urban history. By the mid-twentieth century, white ethnic communities in numerous cities violently resisted demands for adequate housing by expanding African-American populations. In Chicago alone, Arnold Hirsch discovered nearly 500 "communal riots"—violent, racial incidents from 1945 to 1950 largely unreported by the media. Herein lay the origins of the "new American ghetto" or "hyperghettos." Between 1940 and 1970, a government-sanctioned "second ghetto" with a distinctive form of de jure segregation emerged, supported by white ethnics defending their "homeowner rights" and downtown elites striving to preserve commercial real estate.

Racial conflicts over housing raise several interpretive issues. First, the forces contributing to the "urban crisis," deindustrialization, and the emergence of "Reagan Democrats" originated in local resistance to racial integration before the antipoverty programs of the Great Society in the 1960s. Second, neighborhood-based violence over housing illuminates the emergence of "whiteness" and racially-constructed identities among various ethnic groups. Finally, that same violence beckons for more nuanced interpretations of urban riots and rebellions, a literature which frequently construes crowd behavior as a rational, extralegal—even legitimate—vehicle of protest by powerless groups.

Other students of the built environment treat urban technologies as the material embodiment of people's values and culture. Joel Tarr, Josef Konvitz and others focus on "technological networks"—roads, bridges, water and sewer systems, disposal facilities, power grids, transit and communication structures—and their environmental impact. Some even redefine long-held assumptions in urban history. For example, nineteenth-century nuisance regulations and rat control programs in the twentieth century alter the standard chronology of municipal politics. Women reformers, acting as "municipal housekeepers" after 1890, used environmental issues like smoke abatement to affect public policy and generate reform movements. Pollution concerns and water fluoridation in industrial cities like Gary, Indiana transformed conservative, middle-class women into liberal political activists after 1950, turning the environmental movement into a woman's movement. Studies of utility executives such as Samuel Insull in Chicago and Henry
Doherty in Denver go beyond their consolidation efforts to explain their advocacy of new forms of urban consumption, modernity, and labor saving technology. Treating cities as ecological systems even redefines where urban history begins; the origins of St. Louis lie not with the European settlement of 1701, but with the Indian city of Cahokia in the tenth century.40

Paradoxically, this literature both corroborates and refutes Sam Bass Warner, Jr.'s theory of privatism.41 In nineteenth-century Chicago, physical improvements were the responsibility of individual property owners or private development companies. Private real estate forces thus dominated municipal government, excluding propertyless citizens and delaying the construction of streets, sidewalks, and sewers. Ironically, working-class Pullman and Harvey enjoyed better streets, sewers, and gas than the more affluent Wicker Park. Even residents in older New England communities demanded more and better services as cities grew larger, but refused to pay for them. When municipalities assumed such responsibilities at the turn of the twentieth century, "reformers" created less-representative political bodies—commissions, special districts, city manager governments, strong-mayor systems, at-large councils—to insure efficient delivery of services.42

At the same time, political action preceded infrastructure improvements. Even middle-class residents organized, petitioned, and fought for physical improvements. Hence, historians increasingly question Warner's contention that transportation technology triggered urban growth. Urban transit networks actually followed the settlement of newly developed neighborhoods.43

The largest and most expensive infrastructure—the interstate highway—has generated several studies on the impact of the automobile. Within the first quarter of the twentieth century, a new social order was imposed on urban streetlife. Streets were increasingly reserved for vehicular traffic, terminating their use as playgrounds for children, markets for peddlers and consumers, and open-air churches for pilgrims or sexual emporiums for prostitutes. Automobiles also furthered the deterioration of mass transit systems. Here, Americans held contradictory attitudes, blaming automobile manufacturers for the decline of urban transit systems (a myth perpetuated in the popular movie Roger Rabbit) while simultaneously regarding the car as the epitome of freedom. Most historians now reject arguments that automobile interests insidiously conspired to destroy urban mass transit systems. In Los Angeles, for example, residents abandoned streetcars for autos and transit companies replaced streetcars with motor buses in the 1920s, long before General Motors stepped on stage.44

Regions and Suburbs
Like many ordinary Americans, urban historians have engaged in a regional shift. The American West has replaced the Midwest and East Coast as the
centerpoint of many urban narratives. Southern California epitomized this demographic and historiographical transformation. A postwar “megalopolis,” the region contained communities like Irvine identified as “spread cities,” “technoburbs,” “edge cities,” “disurbs,” or “post-suburbs” which were not traditional cities or suburbs. Rather, they possessed attributes of both. The prominence of this regional form inspired new theoretical approaches to the study of cities while inducing others to redefine the field as “metropolitan history.”

This new regionalist paradigm is illustrated in the diverse works of Roger Lotchin and Kevin Starr. The former argues that a “metropolitan-military complex” dating to the 1920s generated intense intercity rivalries that proved more influential than industrialization in creating one of the world’s dominant urban regions. By contrast, Starr offers a detailed narrative of the urbanization process, although his voluminous writings focus on the entire state of California. Both authors resist the case-study microhistory typical of recent urban history, thereby providing long-term, comparative studies of twentieth-century urban systems and networks.

Reinterpretations of Western history increasingly highlight the region’s urban character. As early as 1880, the West was more urban the rest of the U.S. (30 versus 28 percent). Several themes stand out. First, the study of western cities has shifted from “frontier” questions to issues concerning ecology, urbanity, and the metropolitan periphery. The “history of the frontier West,” admits William Cronon, is “a story of peripheral areas becoming ever more integrated into an urban-industrial economy.” Second, the diversity of individual cities is comprehensible only by regional comparisons of urban systems, thereby emphasizing interactions among towns and cities. Anthony Orum’s comparison of Milwaukee, Cleveland, Austin, and Minneapolis-St. Paul found similar patterns of growth in their early histories before factors independent to each city caused them to diverge in the twentieth century. Finally, Western metropolitan expansion rarely imitated Eastern competitors. The history of twentieth-century “sunbelt cities” in both the West and South witnessed business-dominated politics, hostility to organized labor, suburban spatial form, and federally-subsidized growth.

Distinctive, regional patterns of urbanization similarly apply to the South. David Goldfield maintains that southern city building was “urbanization without cities.” Even after four centuries, southern cities remained closer in spirit to antebellum plantations than their northern counterparts. Similarly, Carl Abbott finds that while transportation and communication systems integrated Washington, D.C. into regional networks of the Northeast, the city’s southern character grew more pronounced. “Modernizing without northermizing,” Washington’s history challenges interpretations of regional culture as a form of resistance to the homogenizing and hegemonic forces of
globalization. Others like Don Doyle disagree, pointing out that the post-
Civil War South increasingly replicated the North with growing boosterism,
physical infrastructures, planned suburbs, new and dominating business
eites, and the emergence of an urban network of southern cities.

The most studied of regional forms is suburbanization. By some measures,
twentieth-century American urbanization is suburbanization. Kenneth T.
Jackson and Robert Fishman, in particular, argue that the “automobile
suburb” differed from anything else in the urban world in its lower density
and larger average lot size. The physical impact was considerable: the rise
of the residential subdivision with one-story and ranch-style houses, the disa-
appearance of the porch, the growth of an entirely new vernacular architec-
ture—the shopping mall, the motel, the gas station, the drive-in theater, the
mobile home. Since 1950, cities like Baltimore, Philadelphia, Chicago, Boston,
Detroit, Cleveland, and St. Louis lost between 22 and 50 percent of their
populations. Cities that grew—Dallas, Houston, Phoenix, San Diego—did so
largely through annexation. By 1970, most Americans lived in suburbs, not
cities or rural areas.

Some theorists still argue that suburbs or “multinucleated metropolitan
regions” represent new forms of urban space. Historians, however, locate
suburbs in the distant past, tracing their origins and ideological roots to
European Romanticism and British town planning. Suburbs, alongside the
pioneering landscape designs found in cemeteries and parks, embodied a key
element of American Romanticism. Indeed, efforts to incorporate nature into
city life distinguished American suburban design well into the twentieth
century.

Historians increasingly argue that cultural values favoring rural living
propelled the growth of suburbs. Developers and planners simply followed
popular currents and used their trade to satisfy demand. Similarly, historians
of gender find postwar suburbanization a key component in the evolution of
domesticity and the social construction of masculine and feminine identities.

This suburban paradigm has come under recent attack. Some insist that
movement to the periphery was a feature of American cities before highways
and autos. Suburbs were less homogeneous than described, often developing
as satellite cities with diverse and mixed populations. Recent studies of “self-
building” in Detroit and Toronto even found working-class residents, immi-
grants, and minorities settling on the undeveloped fringe. Herbert Gans, in
particular, argues that social distinctions between cities and suburbs are often
more artificial than real, that inner-city neighborhoods, or “urban villages,”
can be as socially detached and isolated as suburbs.

Portions of these disputes are definitional. Suburbs represent a physical
form neither urban or rural, but something in-between, a problem in a field
with no agreed upon definition of “urban.” Indeed, some suburbs began as
outing villages and evolved into inner-city neighborhoods: Harlem and Brooklyn Heights in New York, Old Irving Park in Chicago, and Country Club Plaza in Kansas City. Postwar suburbs have assumed a confusing variety of labels such as “multinucleated metropolitan regions,” “technoburbs,” and “edge cities.” Just as sociologists like Louis Wirth argued that urbanism was a way of life, some suggest the same of postwar suburbs.59

In fact, historians like Jackson, Fishman, and others do not deny the diversity and difficulty of defining suburbs, illustrated by such differing communities as East St. Louis and Winnetka, Illinois. In the nineteenth century, railroad suburbs had both rich and poor, sometimes duplicating the spatial and employment patterns of inner cities. These old patterns simply accelerated after World War II. Just as the railroad reorganized urban space in the nineteenth century, the automobile fundamentally redefined the American urban form a century later. For Jackson, in particular, American urban growth was historically unique in its low residential density, strong penchant for home ownership with big lawns, as well as the tendency of middle and wealthy classes to live on the periphery and suffer a long journey to work.60

Furthermore, American suburbs are distinctive in their political independence. In comparison to Europe, incorporated suburbs thwarted movements toward metropolitan governance. Suburbs from Brookline, Massachusetts, to Evanston, Illinois, to Beverly Hills, California, fought annexation and evolved as municipalities in opposition to central cities. The racial landscape of America remains the most telling illustration of this fragmented metropolis. From 1950 to 1965, the nonwhite population of cities rose ten times faster than the white population, while in the suburbs the white population grew 36 times more than the nonwhite.61

Politics and Planning

While social analysis and cultural imagery dominated the agendas of many urbanists, scholarship on politics moved in the opposite direction. Increasingly, urban political historians not only reject the “machine” paradigm for its biographical, episodic, and manichean treatments of urban politics, but remain critical of reducing politics to issues of symbolism and culture.62 For Jon Teaford, David Hammack, and Harold Platt, in particular, modern city services and infrastructures created new municipal agencies and special-interest factions that transcended neighborhood and ethnic loyalties, dramatically altering forms of municipal authority. Even elites were never monolithic. Rather, they were internally divided, constantly competing, and shifting alliances depending upon the issues involved. The provision of services and infrastructures in late nineteenth-century cities was, in Teaford’s words, an “unheralded triumph.” Engineers thus replace elective officials in the political narrative of the city.63
Such examinations of urban political institutions conclude that the "local state" was relatively autonomous from social and cultural patterns. Nineteenth-century municipalities spent far more money than state and federal counterparts. Cities adopted policies of "promotional governance," acted as "economic adventurers," and relied on residential property owners for support, not immigrant or working-class masses looking for patronage or social services. By investing in new physical infrastructures, municipalities underwrote the expansion of a capitalist urban economy.  

More significantly, immigrant and working-class groups, traditionally identified as proponents of patronage, actually resisted municipal expansion. In a case study of San Francisco, Terrence McDonald discovered that municipal taxes and expenditures reached historic lows under administrations dominated by Irish politicians (in part, because home ownership increased among immigrants and workers). Progressive reformers and ward bosses alike espoused "pay as you go" philosophies. The pattern of low per capita municipal expenditures from 1890 to 1910, years when allegedly patronage-driven machines were powerful, is repeated in other studies. The watchwords of the age were not "spend, spend, spend," but "economy."  

This interpretive framework relegates the machine model of urban politics to myth. While 80 percent of the 30 largest cities had "machines" from 1880 to 1914, few enjoyed a long hegemony, most were "factions," and endured only through two or three elections. Even the prototypical boss, George Washington Plunkitt, suffered a loyal opposition throughout his political career before three defeats finally drove him out of office. Most significantly, battles between bosses and reformers in cities like San Francisco little affected city expenditures. Ideology and institutional structure did. The squandering boss is simply a caricature, the political machine a social construct.  

This institutional paradigm has influenced studies of urban crime. In Philadelphia, Allen Steinberg shows how ordinary residents shaped the criminal justice system through citizen prosecutions in the early nineteenth century. By the century's end, the fluid, flexible, and sometimes corrupt system which enabled city dwellers to act as defendants and prosecutors was replaced by a state-administered system which was more efficient but less democratic and participatory. In New York, Eric Monkkonen finds a political economy demanding good services at low cost. Arresting felons was cheap, while prosecuting and punishing them was expensive. Hence, nineteenth-century cities devoted comparatively few resources to the prosecution of criminals.  

One weakness of the institutional approach is the overly narrow conception of urban politics. Some argue for a broader paradigm in the form of a "public culture." Thomas Bender was among the earliest to apply Jürgen
Habermas's theory of public and private spheres, not only to explain the changing use of urban space and politics, but as a vehicle synthesizing the voluminous corpus of social history. Rather than defining politics according to elections, parties, budgets, and bureaucracies, Bender urged historians to examine the different manifestations of power, ranging from the state "to the power to establish categories of social analysis and understanding." In effect, Bender called for a "linguistic turn," an examination of the language and discourses that described and shaped political behavior.⁸

The paradigm of a "public culture" locates political life outside the state. Similarly, historians employing gender as an analytic category have argued for a more broadly conceived urban polity. Maureen Flanagan compares male and female "city clubs" with similar class and racial memberships, finding the latter frequently promoted different and conflicting visions of "progressive" politics. Examinations of Roman Catholic nuns and educational unions challenge orthodox interpretations of urban charity and social welfare work that emphasize the influence of Protestant and settlement house ideas. Other studies searching for the origins of the national welfare state increasingly focus on female volunteerism, "cooperative" or "municipal housekeeping," juvenile courts and child health programs, most of which originated or were headquartered in cities.⁹

Historians of the parks movement use the "public culture" paradigm to investigate themes of urban republicanism. Green spaces were not simply works of art. They were envisioned as a pastoral locus of cultivation and cosmopolitanism, a literal and symbolic alternative to unbridled capitalism combatting "the forces of barbarism." Elizabeth Blackmar, Roy Rosenzweig, and Alexander von Hoffman insist that nineteenth-century reformers like Frederick Law Olmsted sought to limit the power of local, elective democracy which they considered "a fundamentally corrupt exchange," not "an expression of popular will." Conflicts over the meaning of "public" thus had cultural, spatial, political, and property-based dimensions. Similarly, private associations like the Chicago Relief and Aid Society not only assumed broad political and "public" responsibilities, but virtually became a "private state" in their control of public resources.²⁰

Others scrutinize the language of public life. Mary Ryan and Philip Eltington delineate a nineteenth-century "public discourse" centered around the newspaper and the marketplace, not social tensions or conflicts. Carl Smith treats the Great Fire, the Haymarket incident, and the Pullman strike in Chicago as "texts" expressing certain "imaginative" views of the city. Urban traumas and catastrophes not only haunted urban residents but defined their conception of the city.⁷¹

These "linguistic turns" present new ways of conceptualizing public life
and politics in cities. Historians in search of a public culture emphasize the oratory of electoral campaigns and their associated institutions (parties, newspapers, lobbyists). This method not only illustrates the importance of symbols and politics in the formation of group identities but permits the inclusion of long-ignored groups into political narratives. The attention to language illuminates how certain groups conceptualized the city and civic identity.

Historians focusing on public culture rely on groups and events that created "scripts"—elections, parades, disasters, trials. Such a paradigm, however, ignores the daily operations of the state and veers close to reducing politics to a study of communication, obscuring important political, economic, or social change. Compare Chicago and San Francisco. Using unpublished city council records and debates, Robin Einhorn finds a narrowly defined polity in early Chicago, one dominated by and organized around real estate interests. By contrast Philip Ethington, relying upon election rhetoric and newspaper coverage, concludes early San Francisco enjoyed a broader, more participatory public life. Only later did that public degenerate into a "politics of needs, interest groups, and government by administration." One is left wondering when the "decline" of public life began. Was the American city really once more "public" than now? If so, for whom? Was it ever open to widespread participation of the majority? Or was it largely plutocratic throughout history?27

These disagreements reflect larger methodological divisions among historians. Institutional interpretations demand that historians analyze measurable results (budgets, bureaucratic behavior, infrastructures), not simply the rhetoric of elections or the symbolic banners of parades. Indeed, political historians have devoted surprisingly little research regarding local budgets and bureaucracies. Yet the public culture paradigm has "deconstructed" political "languages" while the organizational structures of urban politics remain largely unknown or misunderstood. Institutional historians point out that reliance on the rhetoric and bombast of ward bosses and journalists only generated the myth of the machine, not accurate history. The institutional interpretation, however, may not explain critical twentieth-century developments. For example, historians studying the emergence of a "second ghetto" after World War II might argue that the municipality embodied certain community values about "whiteness" and race. The government-sanctioned, Northern form of de jure segregation effectively incorporated the cultural beliefs of white residents in various municipal institutions.27

Historians of urban planning have, in some respects, unwittingly integrated the institutional and linguistic approaches. Studies of the park and City Beautiful movements base their arguments on the debates, discourses,
and languages grounded in the Olmstedian ideals and rhetoric of the nineteenth century. The origins of comprehensive physical planning are located in the changing concepts and definitions of land use, a very specific dialogue and discourse which emerged at the end of the nineteenth century and marked the beginnings of modernism.24

Most histories of twentieth-century planning, however, remain structuralist in methodology and critical of the planning profession, postwar liberals, and their government allies. Overly concerned with “blight,” planners addressed the problems of poverty and inequality as physical, not social, problems. While Robert Caro’s The Power Broker (1974) remains influential, recent interpretations reject his “great man” view of history. These scholars blame the failures of postwar planning on the social engineering ethos of liberalism, the influence of private developers, the ideologies associated with modernism, or some combination thereof. Regardless of liberal, radical or conservative ideologies, planning ultimately reflected the conservative, corporate, pro-growth, and institutional values of the era.25

The association of twentieth-century planning with modernism has generated a variety of postmodernist critiques.26 Modernism’s affection for linear progress, rational planning, standardization of knowledge, new communication systems, and engineering wonders were embraced in projects ranging from Haussman’s Paris to Daniel Burnham’s Plan of Chicago (1909) to the urban renewal programs of 1950s and 1960s. But after 1970, postmodernists contend, the urban West witnessed a new way of experiencing time and space. The postmodern city is a new urban form, reflected in more flexible modes of capital accumulation, “time-space compression” in the organization of capital, and consumer, image-driven economies. David Harvey even postulates the precise moment of urban modernity’s death: 3:32 p.m. on July 15, 1972 when the Pruitt-Igoe housing development in St. Louis, a prize-winning version of LeCorbusier’s “machine for modern living,” was dynamited.27

Many, if not most, urban historians have been slow to openly invoke postmodern and poststructural theory. Calls to entertain and apply such theories literally draw groans.28 This is hardly surprising. Although elements of postmodern theory prioritize space as a primary locus of power, many urban histories effectively criticized modernism in the early 1970s—witness Caro’s The Power Broker. Well before Michel Foucault’s spatial theory of heterotopia, historians and critics of urban planning displayed a distrust of universal or “totalizing” theories or “meta-narratives.”29

Indeed, postmodern interpretations of the city seem to ignore or stand outside of history. If any generalization possibly describes urban history, it is that contestation, heterogeneity and confusion define the history of cities.
Fragmentation and indeterminacy are the grist of urban life. Cities have always been complicated and resistant to human-imposed order. Indeed, the characteristics applied to the “postmodern city” mimic many of the qualities recent historians associate with the nineteenth-century industrial metropolis. Then as now, cities were labyrinths, emporiums, theaters—places where people assumed multiple roles and became what they pleased. Personal identities were rendered “soft,” open, and endlessly fluid. The multiple forms of industrialization represented and produced disorder. Nearly a century ago, Henry James returned to New York after a long absence and complained about the “chaos” and “invented” qualities of urban life, that Gotham was a “struggle in the void.” For James, earlier signals, styles and systems of communication that were the lifeblood of the metropolis were rendered meaningless or incomprehensible.69

Indeed, Jane Jacobs was an early “postmodernist.” The Death and Life of Great American Cities (1961) remains the most influential critique of postwar planning and modern architecture. Published in the same year as the last “meta-narrative”—Lewis Mumford’s The City in History—Jacobs severely attacked Ebenezer Howard, LeCorbusier, modern city planning, federal policy makers, financiers, even critics of modernism like Mumford. For Jacobs, modern urban planning was “not the rebuilding of cities, [but] the sacking of cities.”60 Her celebration of the chaotic and spatial diversity made Jacobs “anti-modernist” in her time, perhaps postmodernist in ours.

Paradoxically, Disneyland functions as one synthesizing paradigm for this literature on culture, politics, planning, the built environment, and suburbanization. By the early 1960s, Disneyland’s imaginary landscape based on collective nostalgia manipulated around consumption was viewed as a “symbolic American utopia.” The child-centered, amusement universe of Disneyland (1955) and the adult-centered, postmodern aesthetics of Disney World (1971) emerged during an era when sunbelt cities from Los Angeles to Miami lacked a singular visual identity like the steel mill in the company town or the skyscraper in the modern metropolis. In the current fin-de-siècle, Disneyland is the nexus of urban culture and entrepreneurial capital, the representation of a new form of economic growth emphasizing service, order and corporate control, a “symbolic economy” turned real.60

A variety of urbanists see Disneyland as both metaphor and reality, the epitome of the postmodern city. The traditional downtown is replaced by freeways, clusters of suburban homes, isolated office towers, and low-rise industrial parks. The new urban prototype celebrates leisure, affluence, and “quality of life.” An urban form rooted in rest and recreation, amusement parks and expositions, spaces of commerce and fantasy—not the production of the industrial metropolis—better explains how American cities developed
in space, time, and character. If the Columbian Exposition provides multiple interpretive paradigms for the fin-de-siècle metropolis, Mickey Mouse on Main Street (once an antiurban ideal) does the same a century later. “All the world’s a fair” is supplanted by “All the world is Disneyland.”

Yet, much of this literature ignores important historical continuities. The association of fantasy, illusion, and nostalgia with cities is hardly new. Lewis Mumford aptly recognized this half a century ago: “The metropolis itself may be described as a World’s Fair in continuous operation.” Indeed, ideologies of urban and nostalgic fantasy appear in the industrial metropolises of the East and Midwest. Examinations of Times Square, for example, contend that location marked the first time a major city’s “agora” was developed for leisure and illusion, not governmental, religious, or market purposes. The most recent work on the evolution of the postwar shopping mall finds the implementation of entertainment and play for marketing and planning strategies. Finally, William Leach convincingly argues that the world’s first and most powerful culture of consumption was fathered in the industrial city by the likes of John Wanamaker and Marshall Field, figuratively and literally within their department store windows. The department store and a broad network of institutions—art museums, investment banks, universities, chain stores, advertisers—generated an “urban landscape of consumer desire” by 1930.

Conclusion

For over three decades, urban historians have abandoned the “Mumfordian” meta-narrative. While cultural paradigms serve as the connecting link in this essay, many of the approaches discussed above remain divorced and segregated from each other. Practitioners of certain methodologies and subfields barely know, much less debate, other perspectives. Fragmentation defines the way historians now envision the urban past. Case study, subcultural, interdisciplinary, and postmodern methodologies prove that cities defy easy generalization and definition. While there is much to admire in Mumford’s organic urban history linking culture, politics, and technology, his remains a highly romanticized view. Urbanists have even foregone Sam Bass Warner, Jr.’s call for a comparative, synthesizing “scaffolding” approach because few believe “all the world was Philadelphia.” Philadelphia in 1775, New York in 1860, Chicago in 1900, and Los Angeles in 1950 represent distinctive cities having less, not more, in common with urban counterparts. Consequently, urban history remains a field with no totalizing theory, hegemonic interpretation, or universal paradigm. A plurality of microtheories characterizes the history of American cities.

Even subcultural paradigms fail to offer a synthetic overview. Subcultures
are what make cities cities, and cities enable subcultures to flourish. Yet, urbanists and other historians risk overusing "culture" as an explanatory tool. The history of American cities now incorporates alternative cultures, commercial culture, community culture, consumer culture, criminal cultures, ethnic culture, leisure culture, planning cultures, plebeian cultures, political culture, popular culture, public culture, racial culture, regional culture, sexual cultures, spiritual cultures, women's culture, workers' culture, and youth culture. Who and what does not have a culture? Cultural paradigms have opened many new windows in urban history, but the ensuing draft has blown the field into modest chaos.

Some justifiably lament the abandonment of a broad narrative. Most recently, Charles Tilly and Howard Gillette urged urban historians to move toward centrality and away from particularity. Cities offer opportunities to study the interaction between large social processes and the routines of local life, a chance to explore the "total history" of ecology, politics, and society. Others complain that insularity and novelty, not dialogue, characterize the study of cities. Instead of engaging in interdisciplinary research, urbanists have sealed themselves off and narrowed their discussions.

Calls for synthesis, however, risk imposing a new urban orthodoxy. Compare recent subcultural histories on Chicago's African-American migration, an ethnic Catholic parish, and New York's gay community. A synthesis of their shared attributes might emphasize their marginalized and subordinated conditions. Broadly (or synthetically) speaking, each of these radically different communities built empowered, self-reliant, and alternative subcultures for themselves. Yet, such a portrait flattens a contested social landscape. By definition, synthesis combines different parts to form a whole, emphasizing the shared, the common, and the typical. What is remarkable about these and other urban communities is the singular, the uncommon, the atypical. Glossing over the particular on behalf of the commonplace invites turning the themes of autonomy, independence and power into a reductionist mantra.

For nearly twenty years, urban history has flourished in interdisciplinary chaos, generating its most innovative scholarship. Only a generation ago Richard Wade and others complained about the paucity of research on American cities. Today, we know more about American cities than ever before. Recent urban historiography mirrors the city itself, devoid of continuity, collective agreement, or a single, unifying theme. Like egocentric city residents passing from difference to difference and place to place, urban historians move from subject to subject disconnected and detached (dare I say alienated) from one another.

This state of affairs is hardly surprising. Nor is it necessarily bad. Cities are always in motion, pluralistic, rarely calm, resistant to efforts to logically
comprehend their total meaning. Should we expect anything different from urban scholarship? Henry Adams provided an apt précis: “Chaos was the law of nature; Order was the dream of man.”

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1. For purposes of manageability, this essay concentrates on works published since Stanley I. Kutler and Stanley N. Katz, eds., Reviews in American History 10 (1982), reprinted as The Promise of American History: Progress and Prospects (Baltimore, 1982). Space limitations forced me to exclude many important works from these notes. For a more extensively documented version of this essay, see the article under the same title at the following worldwide web site: http://homepages.luc.edu/~tgilfoy/index.htm


8. Clifford Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures (New York, 1973); Claude S. Fischer,


15. On the distinctive territorial nature of American urban Catholicism, see John T.
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22. Various aspects of this paragraph can be found in note 21 and Kasson, Amusing the

For explicit examples, see various essays in Taylor, Inventing Times Square. For elements of this in the antebellum era, see David Reynolds, Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville (New York, 1988).


27. Lawrence Levine, Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), 9; Bushman, Refinement, 400–408. On “craft entrepreneurs” following this pattern, see Wilentz, Ocean’s Democratic, 23–106, 145–71.


72 Finch, *Property Rules*, Ethington, *Public City*, 345 ("needs"); 407-8; Ryan, *Civic Wars*, 99-100. These questions raise many of the same issues regarding community decision discussed in Bender, *Community and Social Change*. For other critiques, see Bruce Robbins, ed., *The Public as Phantom Public Sphere* (Minneapolis, 1993), vii-xlvi; Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (New York, 1992).

73 See note 35, especially Hirsch, Moch, and Sugrue.


Lost Dream: Businessmen and City Planning on the Pacific Coast, 1890–1920 (Columbus, Ohio, 1993).


77. Harvey, Condition of Postmodernity, vii, 5–6, 39 (Fruitt), and note 75.

78. See the reaction to Mary Corbin Sies' plenary address to the Society for American City and Regional Planning History in 1995, Planning History Present 9 (1995): 1–2.


80. This description of cities is found in Jonathan Raban, Soft City (London, 1972), and employed in Harvey, Postmodernity. See James, The American Scene (New York, 1967), 1–8, 77, 162. On the conflict over social identities in the nineteenth century, see note 12. On the nineteenth-century street as theater, see note 14. On the "invented" quality of the modern city, see Taylor, Inventing.


83. Ibid.


86. Mumford continues to fascinate historians, virtually generating an entire field of "Mumford studies." The most complete biography is Donald L. Miller, Lewis Mumford: A Life (Pittsburgh, 1992).


89. For purposes of comparison, see Grossman, Land of Hope; McMahon, Which Parish are You From?, and Chauncey, Gay New York.
