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Timothy J. Gilfoyle
Loyola University Chicago, tgilfoy@luc.edu

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URBAN HISTORY:
A GLASS HALF FULL OR HALF EMPTY?
Comments on Clay McShane's
"The State of the Art in North American Urban History"

TIMOTHY J. GILFOYLE
Loyola University Chicago

Clay McShane offers much food for thought. He raises provocative questions, provides useful and deep quantitative data in parts, and challenges many assumptions regarding the study of urban history. The five databases he relies upon represent an approach that assumes the sum of the analysis will be greater than the individual parts.

McShane, like many urbanists today, is searching for a broad historical narrative to comprehend the complexity of the American city. Just as Charles Tilly and Howard Gillette in the past fifteen years have urged urban historians to move toward centrality and away from particularity, McShane laments the absence of wide-ranging historical urban thesis.¹ For those of us who study cities, such a synthesis remains attractive. More specifically, synthetic works make the teaching of urban history an easier task. The publications of Lewis Mumford, Sam Bass Warner, Thomas Bender, and Kenneth Jackson remain popular among urbanists, in part because of their expansive sweep of time and the comprehensive coverage of their subjects.²

The search for a synthesis, however, is hardly unique to urban history. Indeed the topic has been part of an ongoing debate among American historians for over a decade, in part because of the declining interest in the publications of professional historians by the so-called "educated lay reader."³

Historians in general and urbanists specifically can do little to change this state of affairs. I question whether they should. Since 1970, urban historians have abandoned the "Mumfordian" metanarrative, replacing that synthetic approach with a wide array of methodologies that remain divorced and segregated from each other. Historians in certain subfields and proponents of various methodologies and subfields barely know, much less debate, other interpretations. Fragmentation defines the way historians now envision the urban past. Urban history, perhaps more than other subfields, is largely a case-study

driven field. This explains urban history's "temporal parochialism" cited by Stuart Blumin.

But cities are complex phenomena, requiring urbanists to break them down into constituent parts in their attempts to make sense of them. Cities defy easy generalization and definition. Urban history thus remains a topic absent any totalizing theory, hegemonic interpretation, or universal paradigm. In place of such models is a plurality of microtheories and city biographies that characterize the state of American urban history.⁴ McShane's data and conclusions confirm such conclusions.

Some might even question the need for a new urban orthodoxy. For nearly twenty years, urban history has flourished in "interdisciplinary chaos," even if many of those works are written by individuals who do not define themselves as "urbanists" or "urban historians." This state of affairs is hardly surprising. Nor is it necessarily bad. In the end, I think urban history benefits from the absence of a canon, or a "Turner thesis" for each generation to refute. While that means the field lacks a certain glue to hold it together, the multiple methodologies and subjects encompassed by "urban history" make for a more invigorating field, albeit a more difficult one to teach or promote.

From this perspective, certain parts of McShane's evidence are problematic. Syllabus assignments are a poor measure of any field. Professors assign books for many reasons, some of which have little to do with the importance or quality of a book. I know of colleagues who assign books they have not read in order to force themselves to finally read the text. Others assign works with which they disagree so they can refute an important argument or hypothesis. In my own United States survey course, for instance, I regularly assign Frederick Jackson Turner's "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in large part because I think Turner's thesis is wrong. Some assign books because they generate thoughtful and provocative discussions in class, even if they are poorly researched or argued. I was successful in this regard when I assigned Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* in a history of education class. Some good—even canonical—books are not assigned because they are too long or too difficult for undergraduates to read. Mumford's *The Culture of Cities*, or Olivier Zunz's *The Changing Face of Inequality* are noteworthy examples.⁵ Other important books are never read in the classroom because of negative student evaluations. Combined, all of this renders course syllabi a questionable source of data to measure influence in the field.

Relying upon prizewinning books presents similar problems, some of which McShane acknowledges. All too often, influential books are initially ignored by prize-selection committees. Lawrence Levine's *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (1977) and *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (1988), and Arnold Hirsch's *Making the Second Ghetto* (1983) are such examples.⁶ Conversely, the selection of prizewinning books are based on inconsistent and subjective criteria. The potential impact on a field or path-breaking interpretation are rare measures in determining if a

text is prize-worthy. How many of us remember, much less read, Paul Horgan's *Lamy of Santa Fe*, Leonard D. White's *The Republican Era: 1869–1901*, or Oliver Larkin's *Art and Life in America*? All of them were recipients of Pulitzer Prizes in history.⁷

I am also skeptical that “old books” reflect poorly on the field. In writing on *Crabgrass Frontier*, McShane writes: “It is hard to imagine another discipline where commonly adopted books are that old.” Well, that’s history! Many fields in history assign books even older than Jackson’s. Again, Turner is the most notable example that comes to mind. But I can think of other areas where the “canonical works” are even older: Edmund Morgan’s *The Birth of the Republic* (1956) and *American Slavery, American Freedom* (in two entirely different fields, no less), Eric Foner’s *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men* (1970) or Linda Gordon’s *Women’s Body, Women’s Right* (1976).⁸ I could go on, but why belabor the point? The continued popularity of certain books might be interpreted as a product of meticulous research and powerful argument, not the moribundity of a subject area.

McShane ends on a pessimistic note. No core or canonical texts dominate the field of urban history. The publications that come closest—Jackson’s *Crabgrass Frontier* and Warner’s *Streetcar Suburbs*—appear in less than half the surveys or course adoptions he examines. I am less pessimistic, in part because McShane’s conclusion is partly a function of his sources. Many of the texts discussed in McShane’s analysis appear more frequently in courses and surveys outside of urban history. George Chauncey’s *Gay New York* (1994) is now a classic in classes ranging from the history of sexuality to queer theory. William Cronon’s *Nature’s Metropolis* (1991) is must reading not only for historians of the American West, but also for environmentalists. Adam Rome’s *The Bulldozer in the Countryside* (2002) is probably more frequently assigned in environmental history classes. And Christine Stansell’s *City of Women* remains one of the most popular, influential, and assigned works in women’s history.⁹ This hardly represents decline; rather, these examples reflect how urban history has become increasingly integrated into other fields and sub-disciplines in the academy.

Finally, McShane’s argument implies the existence of a golden age of urban historical writing, that where there was once organic unity is now replaced with fragmented isolation. Urban historical writing was always fragmented, and “professional” urbanists were “marginalized” in a certain way. How else can we explain the influence and popularity of the two most influential writers before 1970—Jane Jacobs and Lewis Mumford—neither of whom were trained historians? In this respect, rather than being “out of step” as McShane queries in his final step, the influence of nonhistorians and nonurbanists (evidenced by the popularity of books by Nicholas Lemann, Mike Davis, and Joel Garreau) in the field of urban history represents an ongoing and historic tradition.

NOTES

1. Charles Tilly, "What Good is Urban History?" *Journal of Urban History* 22(1996): 702–19; Howard Gillette, Jr. and Zane L. Miller, eds., *American Urbanism: A Historiographical Review* (New York, 1987); Gillette, "Rethinking American Urban History: New Directions for the Posturban Era," *Social Science History* 14 (1990): 203–28.

2. Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (New York, 1961); Sam Bass Warner, *The Urban Wilderness: A History of the American City* (New York, 1972); Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York, 1985); Thomas Bender, *New York Intellect: A History of Intellectual Life in New York City, From 1750 to the Beginning of our Own Time* (New York, 1987).

3. Bender, "Whole or Parts: The Need for Synthesis in American History," *Journal of American History* 73(1986): 126–36; Olivier Zunz, "The Synthesis of Social Change: Reflections on American Social History," in Zunz, ed., *Reliving the Past: The Worlds of Social History* (Chapel Hill, 1985).

4. I have argued this point in greater detail in Timothy J. Gilfoyle, "White Cities, Linguistic Turns, and Disneylands: Recent Paradigms in Urban History," *Reviews in American History* 26(March 1998): 175–204; and Louis P. Masur, ed., *The Challenge of American History* (Baltimore, 1999), 175–204; reprinted as "The New Paradigms of Urban History," in Howard Chudacoff and Peter C. Baldwin, eds., *Major Problems in American Urban History*, second edition (Boston, 2005).

5. Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (New York, 1938); Olivier Zunz, *The Changing Face of Inequality: Urbanization, Industrial Development, and Immigrants in Detroit, 1880–1920* (Chicago, 1982).

6. Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York, 1977); Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA, 1988); Arnold Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940–1960* (New York, 1983).

7. Paul Horgan, *Lamy of Santa Fe, His Life and Times* (New York, 1975); Leonard D. White, with assistance from Jean Schneider, *The Republican Era: 1869–1901* (New York, 1958); Oliver W. Larkin, *Art and Life in America* (New York, 1949).

8. Edmund S. Morgan, *The Birth of the Republic, 1763–89* (Chicago, 1956); Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York, 1975); Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York, 1970); Linda Gordon, *Women's Body, Woman's Right: A Social History of Birth Control in America* (New York, 1976).

9. George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World* (New York, 1994); William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York, 1991); Adam Rome, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (New York, 2002); Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1790–1860* (New York, 1986).

Timothy J. Gilfoyle is a professor of history at Loyola University Chicago. He is most recently the author of *A Pickpocket's Tale: The Underworld of Nineteenth-Century New York* (W. W. Norton, 2006) and *Millennium Park: Creating a Chicago Landmark* (University of Chicago Press and Chicago Historical Society, 2006).