

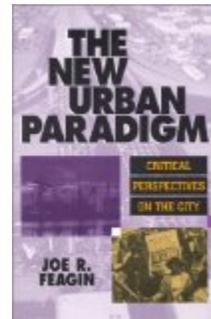
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Joe R. Feagin. *The New Urban Paradigm: Critical Perspectives on the City*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998. xiv + 357 pp. \$32.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8476-8499-1; \$91.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8476-8498-4.

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Subscribers to H-Urban will be undoubtedly be pleased to learn that, in Joe Feagin's opinion, "historians are doing much exciting work on cities these days. One urban history network on the Internet now has twelve hundred subscribers and has seen important discussions about cities around the globe." Whether historians will greet the rest of his latest book as warmly is more moot.

Feagin, Professor of Sociology at the University of Florida, is a fluent writer who has been prominent in popularising and adapting what is usually referred to as the political economy perspective on urban development. According to John Gilderbloom, whose effusive assessment of Feagin's work appears as chapter 15 of *The New Urban Paradigm*, he has written "nearly 40 books and 139 scholarly articles." Whew! These range from a case study of Houston, through a text on urban real estate and development, to studies of racism and sexism. Most are urban in focus, or at least in their angle of vision. As Mark Gottdeiner observes, in a more balanced (and useful) appraisal, here published as Chapter 14, Feagin has been prominent in promoting the "new urban sociology" within his own discipline, and specifically in attempting to incorporate discussion of racism into a paradigm which has emphasized class conflict and the role of the state.

The balance of the book is a collection of Feagin's writings, all published between 1982 and 1992. The thirteen chapters are divided into four sections which encompass the issues that have generally occupied his attention: Cities in Global Perspective; Powerful Economic Actors in City Development; The Political Dimension of City Development; and Race, Racism, and City Development. These are a mixture of journal articles and chapters

from books. They have been republished with little or no alteration from the original, together with an index, assessments by Gottdeiner and Gilderbloom, and an introduction by Feagin himself. Some of the selections show their age, notably a review essay dating from 1986. Others stand as more enduring studies that scholars might still usefully consult: a vignette of the historical development of Houston, viewed in a global context (chapter 2); a discussion of real estate speculation based on a critique of the Chicago school (chapter 5); and a cluster of papers which take issue with William Wilson's arguments about the declining significance of race (see, especially, chapter 11).

As an introduction to Feagin's work this collection is adequate. It gathers together disparate writings and includes a fair cross-section of his work. It is limited in that it offers only hints as to how his interests and perspective have evolved. His statements in the early 1980s focussed on urban real estate. They expressed a perspective which drew upon Marxism, via David Harvey and Manuel Castells. By the late 1980s and early 1990s his attention had shifted towards racism, recognising the limitations of a class perspective. This intellectual trajectory implies some questioning, and perhaps self-criticism, matters that might usefully have been discussed in the introduction. The latter, however, simply sketches his current point of view. As a guide to the intellectual history of an influential urban sociologist, then, the collection is of limited value.

The title (and subtitle) suggest that this collection might (also) be read as a guide to "critical" thinking about cities. In this regard it is useful, if dated. Certainly it addresses issues that most progressive thinkers would

regard as vital to any assessment of modern American cities, notably globalisation, class, and racial inequalities in resources and power, as these are expressed both in urban politics and through the markets for property and labour. The way in which these issues are conceptualised, however, reflects the discourse of the 1970s more than of the 1990s. Apart from passing reference to “racialisation,” for example, or to the work of Sharon Zukin, Feagin makes little attempt to come to terms with recent discussions about the cultural construction of difference, or the seemingly endless debates about postmodernism, post-structuralism, and postcolonialism, terms that are now so familiar that lexicographers have dropped the hyphens. It may be that, like Harvey and other ex-, neo-, or unreconstructed Marxists, Feagin is skeptical of the theoretical and political value of cultural theory. If so, then I am sympathetic. Even so, in a book published in 1998 that defines itself in terms of social theory, such reservations should at least be made explicit. As it is, on this evidence Sociology’s “new urban paradigm” begins to look almost as dated as the “new urban history”.

Of course “dated” does not mean “wrong”. The political economy perspective had—and to the extent that it survives and thrives it still has—a laudable concern for the downtrodden. More than most points of view that

have held sway in the social sciences it is sensitive to historical change, often on a large scale. Feagin is aware of the historical dimensions to urban development, and makes good (if occasional) use of the work of historians of real estate such as Marc Weiss and Ann Keating. He has learned from urban historians. In return he offers a framework and agenda that may sometimes seem schematic, but which do identify large and important issues. If I may speak as an urban historical geographer on behalf of a larger historical fraternity, we would do well to pay attention.

References

Manuel Castells, *The Urban Question*, 1977.

David Harvey, *Social Justice and the City*, 1973.

Ann Durkin Keating, *Building Chicago*, 1988.

Marc Weiss, *The Rise of the Community Builders*, 1987.

William Julius Wilson, *The Declining Significance of Race*, 1978.

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