

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Fred Siegel. *The Future Once Happened Here: New York, D.C., L.A., and the Fate of America's Big Cities*. New York: The Free Press, 1997. xii + 260 pp. \$24.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-684-82747-6.

Reviewed by Anthony M. Orum (University of Illinois at Chicago)
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Let me make a confession about this book from the outset. My sense of the book, if not my final assessment, was shaped at the beginning by the lead blurb from the back cover. It went as follows: "Fred Siegel may well be an oxymoron: a clear-eyed academic. This book is a cogent and incisive eulogy for a well-intentioned but aggravating urban experiment—the virtue-free public activism of the last half of the twentieth century." This little piece of wisdom came from Joe Klein, the essayist and writer for, among other places, *The New Yorker*. Joe Klein, as you may know, is another kind of moron, the one who penned *Primary Colors*, but failed to confess to his deed until forced to do so by, presumably, a not-so-clear-eyed academic.

Obviously this work was not written to be read by academics, especially the misty-eyed ones, a group which, after reading the book, I am positively thrilled to belong to. This book will tell no serious student of cities, much less American history, anything either about cities or about American history. What is curious is who Fred Siegel had in mind as his audience. Perhaps it was avid readers of the *New York Post*, or those who simply like to read the op-ed pages of the conservative dailies. Perhaps he thought he was writing simply for a group of conservative journalists like himself, or maybe all those people who stopped reading and thinking about cities between the publication of Edward Banfield's *The City as a Behavioral Sink*, and the publication of this book. What is especially perplexing, to me as a student and constant observer of cities, is that the other blurbs on the back-cover say that "Fred Siegel knows and loves America's great cities," and that this is the "best book about cities in decades." Hardly either of those claims could be true!

Fred Siegel, according to information provided by the

publisher, is a Professor of History at The Cooper Union for the Arts and Sciences, and a senior fellow at the Progressive Policy Institute. He also has been a fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies as well as a teacher at the Sorbonne. What this apparently learned fellow has written is simply a kind of urban rehashing of Charles Murray's thesis about the welfare state in America, published fourteen years ago.[1] Mr. Siegel believes that the three great cities he discusses here—New York, Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles—have fallen prey in the latter half of the twentieth century to the welfare machinery of the local administrations. He feels particularly strongly in this regard about New York City, and indicts everyone for the problem from Fiorello LaGuardia to Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward. It is the good intentions, but evil consequences of these liberals that have erected a substantial bureaucracy whose main end is itself, and whose main evil is that it is bloated with jobs, and has created a city budget that is out of control.

If one wants to get to the heart of the book, one simply can skip to the last section, "Back to the Future," and, to save even more space, move quickly to the last paragraph on page 212: "Poverty programs that were created to bring minorities into the economic mainstream have over the years metastasized into an alternative economy. The supposed means to aid the poor, namely, social services, have become an end in themselves. New York no longer produces many private sector entrepreneurs, but its many public sector entrepreneurs have discovered that pathology, both social and medical, can be packaged, marketed, and sold like a commodity once the city, state, and federal governments have set themselves up as buyers." The reader's judgment about the book will rest on the evidence for these claims, and the nature of the arguments that Siegel makes about them.

Fred Siegel does not believe that the problems of these major cities are due, then, to the loss of jobs, nor to the departure of industry. Instead, they are due to the historic decisions taken by a few figures that created the generous services provided in places like New York City—rent control, the availability of public sector jobs, and the like. His very political reading of the city continues right up to the present moment, bringing him face-to-face with the changes that Rudolph Giuliani has helped to make in New York City—in particular, the lowering of the crime rate. Not only does Siegel see the city as a welfare sink, but it also is a place of fear. He notes some figures that suggest the very large majority of people do not want to live in cities because of crime. Yet he does not turn around and wonder deeply what this means when, in fact, the large majority of Americans actually live in and around cities.

His view of the cities he “loves so much” then rests on seeing the city as a place of danger and as a place whose public bureaucracy continues to generate jobs for people who, he believes, should be employed in the private sector. He does mention the changing face of cities, such as the flood of immigrants and the creation of a strong private sector, as in Los Angeles, but somehow these kind of facts pale by comparison to his condemnation of figures like Tom Bradley, another failure of liberal politics.

Perhaps what is most remarkable to me—and some may regard me as supremely naive—is that a book like this, which simply is a political tract gussied up with some passing references to history and historians, is published as a tradebook by the Free Press at a time when genuinely good works on history often find it hard to make their way through the printing presses. (How good is Siegel’s scholarship? One might note that he makes several references to the urban historian “John” Teaford early in his book. Teaford’s first name, as most urban his-

torians know, is spelled “Jon.”) Is that what the study of cities has come to? That sloppy writers who have little new to say can find big-time publishing houses to print their works when genuine scholarship often goes unpublished?

Perhaps there are some readers out there to whom this book will appeal. They probably are the same people who make up Rush Limbaugh’s audience, though I wonder how many of Limbaugh’s audience actually read books. But for the serious student of the city, there is nothing here to ponder—no new facts, no new arguments, no provocative theses. Had Siegel really been a lover of cities, he might have turned his work into something more interesting. He might have asked: Why is it that many people seem fearful of American cities, but the same street life and activity does not inspire fear in a city like London? Why does crime take a different form in London than it does in New York? Why can people walk across great stretches of the London urban landscape, observing diversity of culture and squalor of class, when that cannot easily happen in New York, or Detroit, or Chicago? Is there something, in brief, that we can learn from the London experience so that we can turn around and actually make important reforms in the nature of American urban life?

It seems to me that those are the kind of demanding and serious questions that a real “lover of cities” would have wanted to address.

Notes

[1]. Charles Murray, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

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