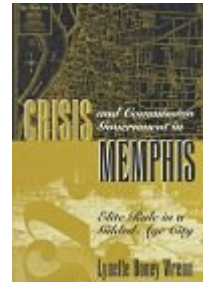


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Lynette Boney Wrenn. *Crisis and Commission Government in Memphis: Elite Rule in a Gilded Age City*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1998. xxiii + 231 pp. \$38.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87049-997-5.

Reviewed by James J. Connolly (Ball State University)
Published on H-SHGAPE (May, 1998)



Who Governed Gilded Age Memphis?

Who governs? At least since Robert Dahl's 1961 study of that name, historians and political scientists have been asking this question about American cities. Unlike Dahl, who concluded that a plurality of interests exercised power in mid-twentieth-century New Haven, Lynette Boney Wrenn concludes that an "oligarchy" ran Memphis during the Gilded Age. [1] In *Crisis and Commission Government in Memphis: Elite Rule in a Gilded Age City*, Wrenn examines an obscure but interesting episode in American urban history, the "municipal suicide" of Memphis in 1879, and the creation of the commission-governed Taxing District of Shelby County. In a detailed account of the dozen years of local politics and policymaking that followed, Wrenn argues that the installation of a commission government allowed Memphis's economic elite to govern the city. While this arrangement helped the city recover from fiscal difficulties and a devastating yellow fever epidemic, it denied the working classes, particularly immigrants and African Americans, a voice in local affairs.

Measuring power in an urban setting is tricky. Wrenn rests her argument primarily on an analysis of decision making under the regime established in 1879. She constructs a series of narratives from newspapers and public documents that describe the origins and consequences of key policy decisions. While these discussions prove generally persuasive, they leave room for a more subtle interpretation, one that recognizes the advantages given to the wealthy and property owners by centralizing municipal governance in the hands of a few,

but also acknowledges the diffusion of power in an urban context.

Wrenn's account opens by describing the origins and development of commission government in Memphis. Wracked by hard times and persistent debt after the Civil War, the city's economy and society virtually collapsed in the wake of a virulent yellow fever epidemic that struck in 1878. Seeking to restore the city's economic and public health (and stymie the power of an emerging coalition of immigrant and African American voters), Memphis business leaders took the drastic step of petitioning the state legislature to dissolve the city charter and establish the Taxing District of Shelby County in 1879. Three Fire and Police Commissioners and five Public Works Supervisors made up the new government, which ceded the power to levy taxes to the state. This system persisted with some modification until 1893, and the basic commission arrangement remained in place until 1967.

The structure inaugurated in 1879 ushered in a decade of municipal government by oligarchy, according to Wrenn. The process of appointing commissioners and supervisors and the reliance on at-large elections in the place of ward representation meant that a handful of well-connected business leaders ran Memphis. After a chapter narrating the politics of the 1880s, Wrenn makes her case through four narrative accounts of policymaking under commission government. Her discussions of sewer construction, debt settlement, the provision of municipal services, and the regulation of public service corpo-

rations constitute the core of the book. In each case, she describes in great detail the process of municipal decision making and its outcomes. These choices almost uniformly catered to substantial property owners and business interests by keeping taxes low and directing services their way. But they usually neglected the concerns of those least well off, who had little voice under the new system. The book closes with an account of the demise of elite rule and a social analysis of commissioners and supervisors that supports the argument of Samuel Hays and others that municipal reform during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era benefitted the elite.[2]

Crisis and Commission Government has a number of strengths. It is lucidly written and presents a balanced account that acknowledges both the successes of commission government and its undemocratic consequences. It also provides a useful reminder that commission government did not originate in Galveston, Texas in 1901 but existed in several southern cities during the nineteenth century. Wrenn offers numerous corrections to previous Memphis histories while putting the city's politics in broader historical context. Discussions of sewer construction, street paving, streetcar service, and public education are particularly successful in illustrating the class bias of commission government. The final chapter precisely and persuasively documents the upperclass character of the Fire and Police Commission and the Board of Supervisors during the 1880s.

While Wrenn's case is generally persuasive, she overstates it at times. Her use of the term *oligarchy* seems particularly excessive. Commission government clearly served the interest of the well off better than it did the interests of workers, but it is less clear that a single elite ran Memphis during the 1880s. Local business leaders were often divided over policies and programs, a point Wrenn acknowledges but does not explore sufficiently (pp. 146-47). This difficulty becomes especially evident in her discussion of the growing opposition to commission government that emerges during the later 1880s. It is not clear why the men who ousted the oligarchy during the early 1890s were not themselves an "elite."

Wrenn's investigation of power dynamics might also benefit from closer attention to politics beyond city hall. Her sources (mostly newspapers, secondary sources, and public documents) rarely convey the views of lower-class residents on the various issues under consideration. The dissatisfaction expressed by a "disgusted South Memphian" over the minimal services his district received stands out because it is one of the rare times when we

hear the voice of an apparently ordinary citizen (p. 89). In other instances, Wrenn accounts for the opinions of workers, immigrants, and blacks with a brief sentence or two, or provides a tantalizing glimpse of dissent, such as the presence of a Workingmen's Party slate on the 1879 ballot, without exploring it any further (p. 35).

Insofar as Wrenn does acknowledge power emanating from outside elite circles, she sees it exercised through party machines. The Democratic Party in particular provided the alternative to oligarchic rule and eventually knocked the business elite from power. She assumes that decentralized party machines more readily represented the interests of a cross-section of the community than did the businessmen who led the city during the 1880s. This may well have been true, but Wrenn is perhaps too quick to assume that machine politicians were any less beholden to fiscal conservatism and business interests than the reformers who opposed them.[3] In the emerging age of Jim Crow, it was certainly unlikely they would have treated African American districts any better than the elite leaders of the 1880s. Here again, more careful attention to ground level politics may well have led the author to a more nuanced interpretation of the distribution of power in late nineteenth-century Memphis.

Nevertheless, Wrenn offers a convincing argument that structural changes tilted Memphis politics and policies in favor of the upper and middle classes. Memphis may not have been ruled by a cohesive oligarchy during the Gilded Age, but the corridors of power certainly narrowed. To this extent, Wrenn makes her case and makes a useful contribution to Memphis history and to scholarly understanding of urban political change and its social consequences during the Gilded Age.

Notes

[1]. Robert Alan Dahl, *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961).

[2]. Samuel Hays, "The Politics of Reform in Municipal Government in the Progressive Era." *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 55 (1964): 157-69.

[3]. Terrence McDonald, *The Parameters of Urban Fiscal Policy: Socioeconomic Change and Political Culture in San Francisco, 1860-1906* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). Wrenn cites McDonald but does not systematically consider the implications of his conclusions for Memphis.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-shgape>

Citation: James J. Connolly. Review of Wrenn, Lynette Boney, *Crisis and Commission Government in Memphis: Elite Rule in a Gilded Age City*. H-SHGAPe, H-Net Reviews. May, 1998.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2047>

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.