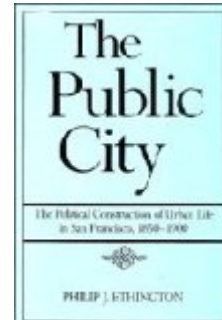


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Philip J. Ethington. *The Public City: The Political Construction of Urban Life in San Francisco, 1850-1900*. New York and Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1994. xvi + 464 pp. \$54.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-41565-1.

Reviewed by Maureen A. Flanagan (Michigan State University)
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This ambitious work deserves close attention from urban historians, political historians, and political scientists. In *The Public City*, Ethington uses San Francisco as the setting to explore five major ideas. First: that the city's politics was politically constructed, beginning with a tradition of liberal republicanism at mid-century, and not the result of group struggles over socioeconomic issues. Second: that this political construction of politics was subsequently transformed into a social construction of politics that he labels "pluralist liberalism." Third: that both the political and social constructions of politics can best be observed and understood by adopting the Habermasian concept of the "Public Sphere"—that "metaphorical space between the state and the world of social labor," wherein political action "was structured by slowly changing 'discourses' or finite patterns of words and ideas that can also be thought of as 'scripts' for the behavior of actors on the political public stage." This Public Sphere, according to Ethington, is "the stage of history itself," that plays an "autonomous historical role" in urban political development, and thereby allows us to view the workings of political culture (p. 15-16). Fourth: that San Francisco can be an exemplar for understanding urban political culture as it moved from a political to a social understanding of politics (p. 37), the latter of which he defines as the basis of "progressivism" (p. 407). And Fifth: that examining the opportunities that urban citizens had to participate in political life within the Public Sphere, exposes the linkages between State and Society both in the "participatory dimension of political life," and in the way leaders in the public sphere mobilized citizens to participate in the institutions of self-government" (p. 38).

How Ethington explores San Francisco's political culture through his five themes is not always easy to follow;

yet, the story is compelling enough to move the reader along through its 400+ pages despite the too frequent reiteration of themes and main points.

The INTRODUCTION gives the book's major ideas and explains how he will pursue them.

CHAPTER ONE depicts San Francisco's formative years, 1850-60, and introduces the city's social organization, some of the city's leading figures of the decade, and the shape of the city's public sphere, including how elections were conducted.

CHAPTERS TWO AND THREE analyze the two periods of "Vigilantism" in this same decade, wherein groups of "respectable" citizens usurped the governing authorities and conducted campaigns of terror against those public figures who violated the prevailing republican sense of "virtue" and the public good as the desired ends of government.

CHAPTERS FOUR, FIVE, AND SIX trace San Francisco through the Civil War years and the 1870s to show how political issues—national Civil War politics, women's challenge to the old republican concepts, an expanded popular press, and politicians' attempts to control the urban electorate through new registration and election laws—shifted the language of politics away from liberal republicanism, unleashed a new political discourse which identified "social-group identities as handles for political mobilization," (p. 206) and in the process reshaped San Francisco's public sphere.

CHAPTER SEVEN depicts how further political events—ballot reform that stripped politicians of their control of the political institutions by severing local

elections from the national, women entering the Public Sphere, and mass, commercial, and sensational journalism, epitomized by the Hearst press-enabled interest groups and their leaders to pursue a new social conception of politics that in turn changed the institutional political structure and reshaped the Public Sphere.

CHAPTER EIGHT completes the transformation of San Francisco's political culture to one based on a pluralist liberalism that stressed a "politics of needs, interest groups, and government by administration rather than by party, and the constitutional structures enabling such a politics." This new understanding of politics was "Progressivism"; "a discourse, not an ideology, a political culture and not a program" (p. 345).

A chapter summary cannot adequately convey how Ethington weaves together his five themes to arrive at his conclusion, nor show the various examples he chooses to support his ideas. This is one reason why the book is often difficult to follow, but also why these themes and supporting materials need to be assessed carefully.

As part of his investigation of SF political culture, Ethington seeks to refute the social-group paradigm, upon which most urban political history of the past 25 years has been built. Ethington offers strong evidence (including statistical) that the Vigilante movements were not socioeconomic at base, nor the product of nativist ethnoculturalism. On the contrary, he contends in chapters 2 and 3 that Vigilantism arose from a republican conception of virtue and the public good. He links the political ideology of the Vigilantes to that of republican Rome (invoking Cicero's peroration against Cataline), seeing a direct link between the 1850s' Vigilante outrage and action—including lynchings, forced confessions, dubious accusations and trials—and that of Cicero and republican Romans against Cataline. Political machinations such as a rigged ballot box, he claims, drove the Vigilantes to a political mobilization that reenacted "a political script written in Rome nineteen centuries earlier by the champion of republican liberties, Cicero." The Vigilantes themselves claimed to be acting for "The People" against "an organized despotism [that] invaded their liberties...prevented the expression of their will...and corrupted the channels of justice" (p. 87). Thus, he concludes, the Vigilante movement was a politically inspired (not socially grounded) response to nonvirtuous public officials and their followers who had corrupted politics, thwarted the public good, and had thereby spurred republican citizens' outrage and goaded them into direct action. Their use of the Roman Republican inscription,

"Let justice be done though the heavens fall," Ethington argues, exposes how they justified their violence by linking it to republican Rome. (Although, in claiming that the message of this inscription is "catastrophic means are justified in the pursuit of justice as an end" (p. 148) I think he over reaches. It is more likely to mean, do what is just and accept the consequences. Also, the first word of this inscription is FIAT not FLAT as it appears on p. 147) In chapters 1 and 2, then, the Public Sphere is that place in which the scripts of the republican ideals of virtue and the common good are read and acted out by those citizens (here, the Vigilantes) most concerned with preserving these ideals.

For the 1870s, he argues, not social agitation but "the efforts of parties and newspapers to win constituencies during the competitive 1870s led to a mobilization of the political community along class lines" (p. 246). To refute the social-group paradigm of political change, he argues that an examination of the rhetoric of Denis Kearney and the Workingmen's Party of California shows its indebtedness to the republican language of "virtue" and a single common interest. For Kearney, the WPC was vehicle of the virtuous "People," embodied in the laboring man (anyone who worked honestly "could" be a laboring man), who struggled to preserve the common good against the few corrupt capitalists and their dupes—specifically the Chinese. (By lumping the Chinese workers with the "corrupt" capitalists, the WPC justified its racism and its demands for Chinese exclusion.) The WPC, according to As part of his investigation of SF political culture, Ethington seeks to refute the social-group paradigm, upon which most urban political history of the past 25 years has been built. Ethington offers strong evidence (including statistical) that the Vigilante movements were not socioeconomic at base, nor the product of nativist ethnoculturalism. On the contrary, he contends in chapters 2 and 3 that Vigilantism arose from a republican conception of virtue and the public good. He links the political ideology of the Vigilantes to that of republican Rome (invoking Cicero's peroration against Cataline), seeing a direct link between the 1850s' Vigilante outrage and action—including lynchings, forced confessions, dubious accusations and trials—and that of Cicero and republican Romans against Cataline. Political machinations such as a rigged ballot box, he claims, drove the Vigilantes to a political mobilization that reenacted "a political script written in Rome nineteen centuries earlier by the champion of republican liberties, Cicero." The Vigilantes themselves claimed to be acting for "The People" against "an organized despotism [that] invaded their lib-

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Then, Ethington argues that in the 1890s, a shrewd politician—Mayor James Phelan—a perhaps even shrewder newspaperman—William Randolph Hearst—and new theories of the relationship between home and state advanced by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and disseminated through the two Woman’s Congresses of 1894 and 1895 transformed SF political culture. Gilman’s ideas, Ethington argues, induced SF’s (male) political participants to substitute “the sense of the polity as a household”(p. 363) for the virtuous individual, and to therein justify demands for concessions from government based on household, neighborhood, or gender needs. Phelan and Hearst were “the pivotal figures” who reconstructed the urban political sphere by revamping the frame of government and the “structures of public discourse” (p. 386-7). By framing the debate over a new municipal charter in terms of these special group interests, Phelan and Hearst, according to Ethington, secured a new charter in 1898 that both satisfied the new “politics of need” in the city’s revised governing structures, and finished altering the Public Sphere into one in which social group identity, “the proper relation between these groups, and...their access to power,” rather than “virtue” and the common good framed the political debate (p. 407-8, 415).

Thus, at no time in SF’s political development does Ethington believe evidence exists that any of this was a struggle determined by the social crises of industrialization, but that rather these various political changes were

determined by a variety of political actors competing to mobilize political followers using language and scripts. His final evidence for this is his contention that SF’s governing problems could have been resolved without restructuring government through a new charter. It was Phelan—a wealthy San Franciscan—who “insisted upon altering the framework of government before attempting to engage in a politics of social needs,” and conceived of restructuring and using government to satisfy social needs, not labor, the working class, or women (p. 405).

Ethington argues convincingly against the social paradigm. He is quite right, I think, that we need to pay more attention to what people say they are doing and why, and to believe them, instead of assuming that there is a hidden social agenda behind the words. Still, more examination of the actual working of politics would have balanced his reliance on language, discourse, and scripts to tell us all. Habermasian theory is just that—theory. Within any discipline there exist competing—sometimes contradictory—theories and historians ought never to assume that a theory is right without testing the empirical evidence. Was Vigilantism an attack on a government that had “delegitimated” itself by using a rigged ballot box and thereby thwarted common good and virtue? Without knowing more about what the municipal government actually was doing, what kind of powers it had, how it was utilizing them, or who actually held power, it is hard to accept that conclusion.

I assume one reason Ethington eschews politics is that there already exist several books (well cited here) on SF politics, especially Terry McDonald’s insightful work on SF urban fiscal policy. He obviously builds on McDonald, stressing that he is able to “focus my energies on the participatory dimension of urban political life in large part” because of McDonald’s work (note 87, p.38). Yet, some attention ought to have been paid to “politics” and not just political culture and public sphere, as if “scripts” and public “behavior” were the sum of politics. But Ethington also seems to be telling us that the script itself is the evidence that explains the actions, thus we do not need to know the politics because by knowing the republican “script” that required government to be virtuous (not use rigged ballot boxes) and represent the common good (by which the Vigilantes meant “low municipal expenditures, low taxation, and the prevention of professional politicians” p. 129), we know what we need to know. Yet, it is hard to accept that the Public Sphere is “the stage of history itself” playing “an autonomous historical role” in urban political development, if we do not know much about that political development

itself. Politics, I think, needs to be weighed along with the “script” and the discourse. At many points in this book one could aptly apply Shakespeare—“All the World’s a Stage,” and “The Play’s the Thing...”—to his interpretation of politics/political culture.

Along with divorcing politics from political culture, he also severs politics from the mass of political participants, despite claiming that “literally thousands of men and women devoted their whole adult lives...to the struggle for justice...” (p. 418). His description of the participatory dimension of politics relies on a handful of elite political leaders: Kearney, Phelan, Gilman, and Hearst; lesser known figures such as David C. Broderick, Laura deForce Gordon, Henry Huntley Haight. Rarely do we glimpse those other thousands. The chapters on the Vigilantes come closest to exposing a broader participation; those on the 1890s, the pivotal period for the establishment of the pluralist-liberal, interest-group understanding of politics in which “the proper relation between these groups, and...their access to power” became the basis of municipal government, provide only brief glimpses of political participation outside of the elites.

No group suffers more from this lack of concern for popular political participation than women, and that is important because a subtext of gender analysis runs through the book. Although Ethington mentions the growing number of women’s organizations, he rarely tells us what they were doing or thinking, aside from suffrage. There are three major problems with this. The first is that, if women’s organizations in other cities at the time are far more politically active (see for example, recent work on women in New York and Chicago), then for gender to be a factor in political culture/political development we must ask more about what SF women’s groups were actually doing and saying. Here is where a reliance on the Habermasian Public Sphere also becomes a problem. Women’s ideas and actions cannot always be discovered in the newspapers or in the public machinations of parties and politicians. Urban women from the 1890s, however, were creating their own “public sphere” through mass public meetings, leafleting throughout the city, etc. Because their meetings, publications, etc. do not fit neatly into the male-defined criteria for the Public Sphere does not automatically mean they did not disseminate their ideas and political desires throughout the city. Carole Pateman has made a particularly pointed critique of the Habermasian theory wherein “public life is implicitly conceptualized as the sphere of men.” (Pateman, *The Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism and Political Theory*, Stanford, 1989. p. 122-3) If, as Ethington claims,

“the ‘public city’ was the site of contestation where leaders sought followers,” (p. 411) then we need to see more of the other fifty percent of the urban population than we see in this book. If power in the public sphere is defined as “the ability to change the terms of public debate and reorient the ethical value of the privileged keywords of debate,” (p. 373) we must examine women’s specific political activities to see how they may have influenced the changes, and not just examine how men resisted or distorted women’s attempts to enter the public debate, as Ethington does here (p. 363-69).

The second problem with the gender subtext of this book is that it is devoted almost totally to arguing that women’s “political culture” (as has been defined especially by Paula Baker) was not responsible for implementing a politics of social needs, the area in which women supposedly were expert (p. 386-7). Although published too late to be considered in this book, Kitty Sklar’s argument in her recent article (“The Historical Foundations of Women’s Power in the Creation of the American Welfare State 1830-1930,” Koven and Michel, *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare State 1830-1930*) needs to be weighed against Ethington’s to present a more subtle assessment of women’s political power.

The final problem with this gender subtext is that it filters all female political ideas/activities through male defined categories of politics. Feminist political theorists (e.g. Carole Pateman and Anne Phillips) strongly contend that as women in western democratic societies gained full political rights, they did not argue a politics of needs, but rather redefined the entire nature of democratic government in terms of what all citizens had a “right” to expect from their government. If James Phelan was attempting to reconstruct government to “‘care for’ the health, comfort, education, property, general welfare, and sanitary conditions of ‘the people’” (p. 386-87) for his political purposes, it does not necessarily follow (and I would contend it does not) that urban women were doing the same. At least for Chicago women in this time period, their demands that government be constructed to meet the “human rights” that citizens had to decent housing, etc. are not the same as arguing the politics of needs. They may be different from a republican concept of virtue and the common good; yet they cannot be understood within the “social needs” interest-group construct that Ethington provides here.

As I said at the beginning, this book deserves the close attention of anyone interested in urban politics

and the concept of political culture. For me, it raises as many questions as it provides answers. Nonetheless—and perhaps even because of this—the questions it asks, the wealth of information it presents on a crucial period for urban political development, and the ways in which it reframes the urban political contest opens the way for a renewed debate on urban politics that has been mired too long in bosses versus reformers and the social-group paradigm of political development. Ethington is to be congratulated for his achievements here.

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