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Arthur Meier Schlesinger. *The Rise of the City, 1878-1898.* New York: Macmillan Press, 1933. xiv + 494 pp. $19.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8142-5038-9.

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Arthur Meier Schlesinger (1888-1965) discovered urban history while writing this book; his students, including Richard C. Wade, developed the field from themes he suggested. Sometimes referred to in graduate seminars as "Papa Schlesinger," this term not only distinguishes him from his son Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., but also indicates his founding role in American social history. As Wade pointed out in a 1977 interview on contemporary urban history: "I don't see any subject that wasn't in Arthur Schlesinger's seminars in the 1940s." Schlesinger's pathbreaking book, reprinted repeatedly through 1975, is no longer available in print.[1]

In 1922 Schlesinger introduced a course called "The Social and Cultural History of the United States" at the University of Iowa. Building on the new social history impulse, the following year he and Dixon Ryan Fox signed a contract with Macmillan to produce a multivolume series titled *History of American Life*. Describing his goals for the series, Schlesinger declared to Macmillan that he and Fox "aimed to free American history from its traditional servitude to party struggles, war and diplomacy and to show that it properly included all the varied interests of the people." The series covered the years from 1492 to 1941. Burdened by the task of editing it, Schlesinger took ten years to get his own volume into print. In his autobiography he recounts the tale of writing *The Rise of the City*: "it was only as my examination of the sources proceeded that I realized this span of years marked the emergence of urban centers as the dominant force in American civilization ... With that as the key the diverse social and cultural developments fell into an intelligible pattern."[2]

The Rise of the City marks the invention of American urban history. Schlesinger would later address the role of the city more explicitly in a pair of essays which still appear as the earliest selections in readers in American Urban History.[3] These works established Schlesinger firmly as a founder of the field. As he notes in his essay on sources used in *The Rise of the City*: "The American city has not yet been studied generically, nor do there exist any adequate social histories of particular cities" (p. 448). But Schlesinger did more than call attention to an ignored topic, he also suggested that cities shaped the nation's story. In so doing, he offered a challenge to Frederick Jackson Turner's 1920 declaration that the frontier provided the key to understanding American history. Although *The Rise of the City* does not openly target Turner, the evidence presented there does so, and the two later essays explicitly suggest that Turner overlooked the role of the city.

Schlesinger offers his readers no introduction, no preface, no explanation for the organization of *The Rise of the City*, although Fox does provide a foreword. The story begins with the most rural part of the country and concludes with the triumph of urban civilization. Along the way it demonstrates the shift from America as a predominately rural agricultural society to the birth of an urban industrial national culture. Comprised of thirteen chapters and a "Critical Essay on Authorities," the book's first two chapters look at the rural regions of the country the South and the West. Next come the most explicitly urban sections of the book, "The Lure of the City," and "The Urban World." Chapter Five addresses another area of historical study which Schlesinger pioneered "The American Woman." Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight concern developments in education and culture, primarily in urban settings. Chapter Nine, "The Pursuit of Happiness," examines leisure activities, necessitated by urban life. Chapters Ten and Eleven look at the changing role of religion, and the treatment of "Society's Wards." Traditional (fundamentalist) religion is rooted in rural life, urban churches have begun to move to modern "socialized Christianity." The penultimate chapter looks at politics (city, state and national) and the final one examines American life at the end of the 19th century, concluding that the era marked the "momentous shift of the center of national equilibrium from the countryside to the city."

For a book titled *The Rise of the City* this is a curiously meandering work, with the city coming in and out of focus over the 400 plus pages. One explanation for this multifaceted, indeed encyclopedic, approach might be that for Schlesinger "the city" equaled "American civilization." Chapters One, Two, and Three suggest the process by which the American city triumphed over rural agricultural life. Chapter Four, "The Urban World" clearly presents in rough outline Schlesinger's ideas about the importance of the city in history all of history. Quoting Theodore Parker, who described cities as "the fireplaces of civilization whence light and heat radiated out into the dark cold world" (p. 79), Schlesinger sweeps through the ancient civilizations of Memphis, Babylon, Greek and Roman citystates, the 11th century urban revival which "hastened the breakdown of feudalism and paved the way for the Renaissance and modern times," to arrive in the 1880s when urbanization "for the first time became a controlling factor in national life" (p. 79). This city, a product of the new industrialism, is an economic center but also "the generating center for social and intellectual progress." Cities were not without problems, but Schlesinger proclaimed that such urban dilemmas as traffic, lighting, waste disposal, pure water, communications, fire protection, policing and housing, provoked urban dwellers to seek solutions. In place of vanished rural neighborliness, the anonymity of city life gave birth to "a spirit of impersonal social responsibility which devoted itself, with varying earnestness and success" to solving urban problems (p. 120).

In addition to the rise of the city, Schlesinger provides several key themes for making sense of American history in these decades. First, the idea of progress, not perfection, but progress; every chapter, with the notable exception of the one on politics, ends with an assessment of the positive progress made in the 1880s and 90s. Second, Schlesinger has a propensity to provide psychological explanations for human activities; rural life is repeatedly described as isolating and psychologically difficult, even causing insanity, hence the psychological appeal of the city. Third, pluralism, rather than conflict, provides a way to tell the story of America's heritage. He describes an America composed of groups–Hillbillies, southern black sharecroppers, Mexicans, "Orientals," Norwegians, Swedes, scientists, writers, farmers, factory workers, criminals, humanitarians, Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Mormons, Christian Scientists, atheists, socialists, bosses, and millionaires–all of whom are common contributors, or at least potentially common contributors, to the country's story. Fourth, Schlesinger is interested in the question of democracy–not presidential elections and party struggles–but the prospects of the success of democratic self-government. The rural individualistic pattern of American politics, Schlesinger thinks, no longer fit the collectivized nature of urban life. Cities, without a new model of government, have become the worst governed units of American life: "Americans had learned how to rule populations scattered over large areas, but they had little or no training in the management of densely packed urban centers" (p. 389). The frontier experience failed to provide a model for democratic modern life. It is in the area of urban politics that Schlesinger permits himself the most pessimism, he expresses despair at his inability to reconcile the educational and cultural successes of the city of the 1880s and 1890s with its dismal political problems. One of the most useful parts of the book is the biographical essay, "Critical Essay on Authorities," which suggests the grand sweep of Schlesinger's research, from urban architecture, to museums, to historical accounts, biographies, newspapers, magazines, census studies, government reports, and more.

First published sixty-five years ago, last re-published twenty-seven years ago, out of print–is this book of continuing interest? I was the first person in six years to check out the university library's copy of the *The Rise of the City*. There is a certain amount of archaeological / historiographical utility: a contemporary reader can find the roots of Oscar Handlin's work in Schlesinger's comment that "[g]enerally people of push and initiative migrated while the less enterprising stayed at home" (p. 71) and of Richard C. Wade's work in Schlesinger's mention of urban imperialism. Practitioners of women's history will recognize the roots of the Schlesinger collection at Radcliffe. On the other hand, scholars in the "new" field of whiteness studies, might be interested and surprised to discover Schlesinger's careful attention to poor whites, while students of religion may be surprised to discover evidence of a forgotten interest in the varieties of American religion. More than for what it said about the 1880s and 1890s, however, *The Rise of the City* merits attention for what it says about American civilization in the 1930s–it is a liberal, democratic, pluralistic, and curiously optimistic vision about the past and future of American cities and civilization spoken in a lost language about the benefits of collective life, the possibility of progress, and cities as "a new Promised Land." We no longer think about cities and American civilization in this way, perhaps that is why the book is out of print. But, for that very reason, it is worth a read.[4]

Notes:

[1]. Bruce M. Stave and Richard C. Wade, "The Making of an Urban Historian: An Interview," in Howard P. Chudacoff, *Major Problems in American Urban History* (Lexington, MA: D.C.Heath and Company, 1994), 12-15. Macmillan reprinted *The Rise of the City* in 1940, 1944, 1953, and 1969. Quadrangle (Chicago), reprinted it in 1971 and New Viewpoints (NY) did the final reprint in 1975. Additional recent assessments of Schlesinger include Zane L. Miller, "The Crisis of Civic and Political Virtue: Urban History, Urban Life and the New Understanding of the City," *Reviews in American History* 24:3 (September 1996) 361-368 and Terrence J. McDonald, "Theory and Practice in the 'New History': Rereading Arthur Meir Schlesinger's The Rise of the City, 18781898*",* Reviews in American History_ 20:3 (September 1992) 432-445.

[2]. Arthur M. Schlesinger, *In Retrospect: The History of a Historian.* New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc. 1963, 112.

[3]. The essays are "The City in American History," (first published in the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 27, June 1940) and "The City in American Civilization" (first published in Schlesinger's *Paths to the Present*, New York: Macmillan, 1949). For an example of Schlesinger's continued presence in urban history see, for example, "The City in American History" in Chudacoff's 1994 book.

[4]. The 1971 paperback edition I read is falling apart; perhaps the *Rise of the City* is a good candidate for electronic publication, which would also allow readers to see the many illustrations published in the original book, but dropped in the reprint editions.

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