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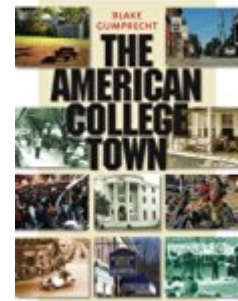
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Blake Gumprecht. *The American College Town*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008. xx + 438 pp. \$28.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55849-813-6; \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55849-671-2.

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The Best of Its Kind: Gumprecht's Study of College Towns in the American Context

The American College Town presents the reader with several case studies that the author, Blake Gumprecht, argues are representative of college-town types in the United States. Through a mix of historical study and present-day analysis, he proposes that college towns are “exceptional places, worth knowing and worth knowing about.” His thesis is that they are “an essential component of American geography” and “part of what makes life different in these United States.” Moreover, “they reflect the singular nature of American higher education and the indelible characteristics of American culture.” Because they are “distinctive, memorable, lively, and ever-changing,” college towns “possess a prominent image in the American mind” (p. xvii). Insofar as people think about college towns, my sense is that Gumprecht’s thesis is indeed plausible.

The author’s contribution to the historiography of this subject, as well as the general history of U.S. higher education and urban history, is substantial. Technically, this is a work of cultural-historical geography but it is apparently the only historical book on the subject. Indeed this reviewer was initially skeptical of Gumprecht’s claim that “little serious research” had been conducted on American college towns and that “not a single major work had ever been published” on the subject (p. xvi). In terms of history, I had thought that at least a chapter of Paula Fass’s excellent 1977 book, *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s*, not cited by Gumprecht, covered youth and cam-

pus towns. I was wrong. While she covers youth culture in higher education—morally, socially, intellectually, and politically—the college town as a necessary landscape is decidedly in the background of her work, covered incidentally. As a related aside, I think the formation of youth culture has been central, if not causal, in the development of college towns—at least over a certain period (say 1900-60, prior to globalization). Towns cater to student needs and dollars. Since, however, this is a disciplinary difference (I am an intellectual and cultural historian), I shall leave that consideration for another day.

Apart from Fass, the same in-the-background theme works its way through other books, more and less well known, in the historiography of higher education: Frederick Rudolph’s *The American College and University: A History* (1962); Laurence Veysey’s *The Emergence of the American University* (1965); John S. Brubacher and Willis Rudy’s *Higher Education in Transition: A History of American Colleges and Universities, 1636-1976* (1977); and even Lawrence Cremin’s comprehensive, three-volume *American Education* (1970, 1980, and 1988). And, as a parenthetical, the reference list for the Wikipedia entry “college town” is composed of three academic articles by Gumprecht, without a citation of his book. The only scholarly works that cover campus towns are apparently the idiosyncratic collection of particular histories of specific universities.[1] Gumprecht’s book, then, is attempting to fill a considerable historiographic hole.

Does it? Inasmuch as any one book can tell readers “the story” about a subject, yes it does. More historical studies are needed, but Gumprecht’s work is, in my estimation, the starting point for future scholarly work. The strengths of his book are considerable, and his weaknesses—including lacunae and theoretical choices—have to be considered and covered by future scholars.

What about the book itself? The introduction and conclusion (chapters 1 and 10) are generalized, but the rest of the book covers themes in relation to specific, existing college towns: campuses as public spaces (chapter 2 on the University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma); housing and residences (chapter 3 on Cornell University in Ithaca, New York); town-campus business districts (chapter 4 on Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas); the progressive character of college towns (chapter 5 on the University of California, Davis, California); college-town misfits, eccentrics, and transients (chapter 6 on the University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia); football (chapter 7 on Auburn University in Auburn, Alabama); high technology and business (chapter 8 on the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan); and town-and-gown conflicts (i.e., problems between a college’s students, faculty, and employees and a town’s regular citizens in chapter 9 on the University of Delaware, Newark, Delaware). Each chapter ends up being a limited history of the institution covered.

Gumprecht’s prose is easy on the reader. It is descriptive and workmanlike. In other words, he avoids the jargon that is indicative of a theory-driven work. His descriptive mode, however, has both positive and negative consequences. Positively, the absence of an overall critical-theoretical framework—of a strong, overt analytical perspective (e.g., Marxist)—gives the work an empirical feel. It feels like social science, which it is. But the lack of an overt critical position also limits one’s ability to deeply analyze each town and theme. Gumprecht avoids the tired (at times) but still useful lenses of race, class, and gender. His fidelity to his findings, and the facts perceived, makes the reader feel that he is treating each town and theme fairly. I suspect this a product of working within the paradigm of cultural-historical geography rather than cultural history.

How would a stronger, more distinct theoretical-critical stance have enriched this book? I believe a more thorough consideration of the virtues and vices of globalization (in terms of economics and politics), for instance, would have enriched the text’s analysis of Ann Arbor. For his part, Gumprecht honestly informs the reader of

this chapter that “a summer spent reading and thinking about high-tech demoralized me.” Though the author recognizes the “importance of economics to understanding places,” he “hate[s] money and what it does to us.” This ambivalence is reflected in the chapter thesis: “the distinctive college town way of life shapes the nature of the high-tech economy in places like Ann Arbor. High-tech entrepreneurs and workers drawn to college towns tend to be motivated by different factors [i.e., money] than individuals who gravitate to established tech centers. College towns also impose limitations on high-tech growth. They may never become leading high-tech centers, but they serve as alternative sites for knowledge-based entrepreneurship and so might be thought of as high-tech valhallas, to borrow usage applied by Joel Kotkin” (p. 261).

Kotkin’s term, from his *New Geography* (2000), is meant to underscore high-tech communities with a high quality of life. And it is that aspect of the college-town’s intersection with recent economic trends that concerns Gumprecht, not how Ann Arbor’s high-tech industry wants cheap labor and efficient cost-of-living tradeoffs. The requirements of high-tech communities are partially covered by Gumprecht’s invocation of ubiquitous (in globalization circles) Richard Florida, who has made the phrase “creative class” famous (p. 288). College towns most certainly attract a creative class, and some members of that class, inside and outside of the high-tech industry, appreciate the opportunities for innovation in college towns. Self-selection creates opportunities for the exploitation of the United States’ youthful creative class. This is the dark side of a college town-cum-high-tech valhalla and is worthy of further analysis.

A stronger sense of political trends might also have helped Gumprecht better process changes taking place in college towns like Ann Arbor or even Davis. For instance, had he forwarded, applied, and defended a theory of neoliberalism, he could have perhaps explained how markets, creativity, innovation, research funding, politics, and job opportunities—in the absence of traditional state funding—now determine the social and built geography, as well as viability, of college towns in a polarized funding climate that generally favors private solutions to problems. Incidentally, a better developed historical-political framework would also have prevented Gumprecht from repeatedly and erroneously referring to the “radical” or “militant SDS” (Students for a Democratic Society), rather than the really radical and militant Weathermen (a violent offshoot of the SDS). I concede this is a personal pet peeve that grew more annoying over

its five in-text references.

My desire for a stronger theoretical basis in relation to globalized “college towns” and their political connections should not detract from this book’s substantial strengths. In addition to being a well-written first- and best-of its kind on this subject matter, this book contains something for almost every kind of reader interested in the history of higher education: music trends, entertainment, beer joints, significant architecture, football weekends, frat houses (and hijinks), memorable student apartment ghettos, farmer’s markets, sex, quirky stores, etc. Veterans of many institutions, as many academics are, are likely to be entertained with Gumprecht’s stories about college-town fixtures that are, in fact, universal phenomena. They are also likely to be alternatively pleased or sore if their own famous fixtures from their own experiences are not mentioned. For instance, as I read about famous college-town pizzerias in a chapter involving Big 12 Universities (i.e., his analysis of “Aggievilles” in Manhattan), I was bummed at the absence of my beloved Shakespeare’s Pizza from Columbia, Missouri! I digress. My point is that this book brings out those old allegiances—which makes for enjoyable reading.

Gumprecht’s anecdotes, both historical and present, are entertaining and demonstrative. The people present in these anecdotes give this book of social science a surprising vitality. Indeed, the book seems to lack a strong human element at the outset. But by the end one has seen a number of human faces, heard their voices, and experienced something of their feelings. Returning to the chapter on Kansas State University, for instance, I loved the themes that converged in the story of the campus bookstore over the 1899 to 1902 period. It involved local and national politics (Republicans and charges of socialism) and the creation of a student cooperative bookstore. Music fans and artists are surely to love Gumprecht’s history and appreciation of Athens from the 1970s to the 1990s (think R.E.M., the B-52s, Joni Mabe, and Vic Chesnutt). Athens’s characters are colorful; the human touch, in all its eccentric and odd-ball forms, is on display in that chapter.

At its best, *The American College Town* is also an urban history of progressive communities in the twentieth

century. It captures the creativity, liberality, eccentricity, and artistry that has existed, in fits and starts, in both higher education and each institution’s surrounding urban areas. The chapter on Davis best exemplifies the problems and possibilities of a progressive spirit that infuses itself in a surrounding area. Gumprecht’s story shows the limits of that kind of fusion and in some ways delineates the boundaries around how free-spirited innovation “works” in practical settings (i.e., the cautionary tale of the Davis Food Co-op). This boundary is also put on display at the end of the chapter on Ann Arbor, where Gumprecht reflects on how the town “cannot decide whether it wants to be a storybook college town or a city of the future” (p. 295). This is a question that many mid-sized and large universities not already located in global, or pseudo-global, cities must face. How is Manhattan going to carve a niche for itself in the global Midwest—the area Richard Longworth says is “caught in the middle”? [2]

Speaking less broadly, in only the special terms of the history of higher education in the United States, I would say that this book is a must-know (if not must-read) for every historian of the subject. In a situation where case studies are utilized, one can—and will—argue about each case’s universal applicability. But that concern should be put aside, for now. Gumprecht has written the best study of its kind on the subject matter of college towns in the United States.

Notes

[1]. Speaking only of books on my shelf or institutions with which I am familiar, examples include the multivolume University of Wisconsin historical series (first authored by Merle Curti and Vernon Carstensen); Frank F. Stephens, *A History of the University of Missouri* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1962); and Winton Solberg, *The University of Illinois, 1894-1904* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000). By citing these examples, I do not mean to imply they are deficient in relation to what each author sets out to do. Rather, few-to-no university histories actively seek to describe the college towns in which they are set.

[2]. See Richard Longworth, *Caught in the Middle: America’s Heartland in the Age of Globalism* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009), chap. 1.

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