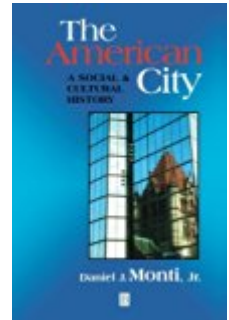


Daniel J. Monti, Jr.. *The American City: A Social and Cultural History*. Oxford, England and Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1999. 391 pp. \$28.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-55786-918-0.



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The Civic Life of American Cities

In *The American City*, Daniel J. Monti, Jr., examines the way in which people live within cities, how they choose to interact with each other, what organizations or societies they form, and what forms of communities emerge out of this interaction to create a civic culture that then defines both the city and the people who make the city their home. A series of loosely related essays on various aspects of human interaction, this book is less thesis-driven than it is a wide reaching rumination by Monti on the various aspects of city life. Monti brings together many different aspects of studies on citizenship and public action and asks very large questions about what it means to have a community, how these communities emerge, and what, if anything, is the future of civic life within the American city.

Instead of lamenting the end of great cities and the passing away of civic culture, Monti argues that the urban environment holds many of the keys to both the perceived decline in American citizenship and the possibilities for resurrection of the good society. A vibrant civic culture, he

argues, still exists within the city. Thus, the key to urban renewal is an understanding of how this civic culture and urban communities form and function. Far from a polarized dichotomy of liberal or conservative approaches to community, Monti sees a blending of both liberal and conservative ideals in the way that people deal with and understand each other within the city. Through an examination of how people deal with the contradictions of belonging to a community and accepting newcomers, endorsing piety and embracing tolerance, and carving out both public worlds and private lives, Monti argues that everyday city life is actually a combination of ideologies. Thus, when planners and pundits push for either a liberal or conservative image of the city, their plans tend to make more problems than they solve.

Because of their ability to negotiate and combine different ideologies to create a livable world, city dwellers, Monti argues, are essentially a bourgeois people who base their existence around the twin ideals of prosperity and order. These ideals form an integral part of the urban experience. Out of this agreement forms a "covenant of comi-

ty," or a general agreement upon accepted behavior, rules, regulations, and penalties for transgressing these standards. This covenant represents for Monti not only the core of community and civic culture within the city but much of what passes for city life. Within the ideals of prosperity and order, city dwellers are capable of pursuing both communal and individual goals. It allows for various types of communalism because each type contributes, albeit in different ways, to the larger ideals. Within the city, Monti sees four distinct types of "vital communities: commercial, ethnic, consumer, and governmental." Throughout the book, he traces how each of these types of communalism functions and how it contributes to the city's civic capacity. Yet, these different communities can co-exist within the city because they contribute to the bourgeois ideals of prosperity and order. We are, as Monti argues, "a bourgeois people who have created an urban world." This is why Monti embarks upon such a broad interpretation of the urban environment and the people who make this world their home.

Despite the subtitle, however, this book is not exactly a social and cultural history of the American city. Rather, Monti provides no real context for his analysis or his examples. His research, which comes almost exclusively from city newspapers, jumps from cities to towns and moves across regions and decades without taking into account either historical context or location specificity. Monti, thus, offers examples of urban life from, for example, Boston, Massachusetts, Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and Fairbanks, Alaska, without discussing the potentially important differences between the cities. In addition, Monti moves rapidly across a good century and a half without much discussion of historical context. His examples range from colonial cities to turn-of-the-century towns to post-war metropolises without reference to historical changes that may have affected these places. Instead, Monti advocates the idea of the American urban experience.

Regardless, it seems, of time or locale, this experience is the same for all city dwellers. In fact, it might not even be specific to cities, since Monti suggests that small towns and villages are also largely defined by their "citified" ways. However, such a conceptualization of a universal experience tends to undermine some of the effect of Monti's analysis. Throughout the book, Monti never really defines "the city," and he does not seem to see much of a difference between cities, towns, or villages. Many of his examples are taken from locales that, on their best days, would probably not be considered a city by many. However, Monti argues that the experiences of these towns are part of a larger bourgeois urban world. A reader is left uncertain, then, whether Monti is discussing the inner workings of the city or whether he is engaging larger issues such as citizenship, community, responsibility, and social interaction that transcend the city.

Whether the analysis is actually about the city or not detracts nothing from the quality of the writing and quality of the book, however. Monti has chosen to tackle large issues, and he admits that he offers few solid answers. Still the issues are extremely well discussed, and Monti's critiques, observations, and analysis are substantial and thought provoking. This book is a thoughtful rumination on extremely broad themes by a substantial scholar. Yet, it remains a concise, readable, and engaging study.

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