

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Anthony M. Orum. *City-Building in America*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1995. xiv + 261 pp. \$37.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8133-0843-2; \$77.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8133-0842-5.

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Published on H-Urban (March, 1997)

*City Building in America* by Anthony Orum is a major case study of Milwaukee, Wisconsin (a fairly typical Midwestern industrial city), along with a comparative analysis between it and Cleveland, Ohio (another Midwestern industrial city), Austin, Texas (a western, post-industrial city) and Minneapolis, Minnesota (another Midwestern city, but one which has thus far escaped some of the social and economic problems associated with de-industrialization).

Anthony Orum's goals for this book were certainly ambitious. "We want to learn how cities are built and how they can change over time ... want to learn how cities are built and how they can change over time ... with an eye to making discoveries that might be helpful in understanding how cities in other nations can be built, as well as how cities can be transformed" (p. 13). Thus, he was seeking not only to write yet another city history but also to advise policymakers. As we will see, he was far more successful in achieving the first aim than the second.

Orum describes Milwaukee's history in terms of five periods. Land speculation by a handful of economic entrepreneurs was the key feature of Pre-industrial Milwaukee (1818-1870). In the Early Industrial Period (1870-1900) economic entrepreneurs continued to dominate the city by controlling large firms (breweries, heavy machinery manufacture). During the Mature Industrial Period (1900-1930), municipal government became an active agent for growth by annexing adjoining land, but this annexation spurred suburban resistance which continues to the present. Reshaping Industrial Milwaukee (1930-1950) was a period of incipient decline; the Depression created widespread social needs which the city was unable to meet and as a result the city took a back seat to both the county and federal governments in meeting welfare needs. The Decline of Milwaukee (1960 to present) has been characterized by the rapid outflow of industry and the middle class from the city and the inflow of poor blacks from the South.

The comparative analysis supports the notion that American cities go through these same stages whether they are the older industrial ones in the Northeast and Midwest, or the newer post-industrial ones in the South and West. Not surprisingly, Cleveland's development closely parallels Milwaukee's. For example, municipal government became a key actor at about the same time, the 1930s. What is surprising is that although Austin's development started later (the 1940s), the city has progressed through the same first three stages, with local government playing an active role in stage three. However, whereas industrialization was the main spur for development in Milwaukee, the federal government was the main instigator for Austin (e.g. funding for Colorado River dams and for a major Air Force base). The Minneapolis case study highlights this midwestern city's ability to maintain a relatively high quality-of-life because it never experienced industrialization to the degree that Milwaukee and Cleveland did.

Orum's main theoretical contribution lies with his critique of Logan and Molotch's 1987 "growth-machine" argument. The latter argue that throughout U.S. history, real estate interests have had a pervasive impact on the expansion of cities, that these interests form coalitions with government leaders, and that these coalitions invariably squelch citizen groups. The five case studies clearly show that in earlier periods, private firms and municipal government performed such a pro-growth function. Orum could, however, have expanded his critique of the growth-machine by making better use of the Austin case study and by addressing the following questions. How often do neighborhood and environmental groups beat the growth machine in Austin? How does this compare with the batting average of neighborhood groups in other Southwestern cities? If the batting average is higher, what are the reasons?

*City Building in America* has three serious flaws. The first is an over reliance on Neo-Marxist terminology and perspectives. For example, the terms "capitalism" and

“capitalists” are repeated so often as to be irritating. Not only that, the terms are never defined. At various points in the book, the term “capitalist” is defined as “industrial owner,” “a very wealthy person,” and “a somewhat wealthy person.” Had Orum expanded the term further to include property owners, then the term would have lost any distinguishing purpose whatsoever.

Orum’s discussion of the rise and fall of the Social Democratic Party, the socialists, provides the best (or worst) example of a tendency to mix political commentary with historical scholarship. Milwaukee is among the handful of American cities to elect a socialist mayor. Is Orum, who seems to have strong liberal/progressive credentials, happy? By no means. Orum lambasts the Social Democrats even though they were successful in making municipal government more efficient:

...[B]y making government more efficient, they also enhanced the overall operations of capitalism in Milwaukee. Perhaps, if they had directed more of their attention to mobilizing workers, rather than voters, they might have truly effected an improvement in the conditions of most Milwaukeeans (p. 99).

I had three reactions to this political rhetoric. First, achieving greater governmental efficiency is no small achievement. A locality accomplishing this goal today might appear on the cover of *Time* magazine [a major American newsweekly]. Second, what was the goal that the Social Democrats were supposed to be mobilizing around? Was the aim the creation of a socialist society? If that is what Orum had in mind, that goal would seem, in hindsight to have been unrealistic and unproductive, given the fate of socialist governments throughout the world. Finally, the quote seems to ignore the economic realities of local government, that is, local governments do not have the means to solve the problems of poverty and unemployment. Only the federal government has that ability. In short, Orum’s criticism seems unfair.

While Orum’s life cycle model of cities is useful as a descriptive and classificatory device it is not a theoretical contribution because it can neither explain nor predict growth and decline. A key assumption behind any life cycle model, whether it applies to neighborhoods or cities, is that decline is inevitable and that eventually the entity must “die.” Orum does take this terminology seriously. On page 196, in discussing stage four Milwaukee, he says that this stage represents “the beginnings of the end for Milwaukee.” Similarly, on page 207 he asserts that for cities like Austin “their decline awaits them just around the corner.” Neither of these assertions is supported by any empirical analysis. Although Orum does

discuss the departure of heavy industry from Milwaukee, he does not discuss the city’s continuing importance as a regional financial center. Recent scholarship by political scientists (see for example Judd and Parkinson, 1990), emphasizes the importance of leadership in successfully adapting to the forces of deindustrialization. For example, a partnership between politicians and business leaders has revitalized Pittsburgh’s economy, the same thing has happened in connection with Cleveland’s downtown. The assertion concerning inevitable decline and death is not only inaccurate, it is also counterproductive. City leaders reading this book might incorrectly assume that there is nothing that can be done to deal with the problems of an aging city and give up trying. That would be a big mistake.

Orum’s attempts to explain decline (as compared to describing it) are uneven, the discussion of Minneapolis is by far the weakest. He inexplicably fails to apply the life cycle model to this case study. Furthermore, in trying to explain the city’s success in maintaining a high quality-of-life and in creating the Metropolitan Council (one of America’s most successful metropolitan planning ventures), Orum understates the importance of: (1) progressive politics (the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party), (2) the Scandinavian heritage of its citizens (in contrast the German heritage of Milwaukeeans is emphasized), and (3) the leadership exercised by individual politicians, civil servants and civic leaders. Because of these gaps, the Minneapolis case study adds to the incorrect impression that little can be done to halt decline in American cities.

Finally, given Anthony Orum’s concern about inequities in American cities, it is disappointing that the book offers such weak policy prescriptions. Orum fails to discuss anti-poverty strategies in any systematic way. Rather, his focus is on changes in metropolitan governance, which if implemented, could have only a marginal impact on urban poverty and poverty related problems like crime and welfare dependency. Two of the recommendations—metropolitan government and annexation—are “non-starters” because their chances for being implemented in cities like Milwaukee are close to nil. The third idea, a greater role for state governments, makes sense, but Orum fails to show what states like Wisconsin could do to improve metropolitan planning.

Thus, the good news is that *City Building in America* is a useful addition to the growing body of city histories. The bad news is that this volume offers little in the way of advice for policymakers as they attempt to confront the seemingly intractable problems of urban America. Readers who are interested in books that are more

policy relevant ought to take a look at *Old Problems in New Times* (Byrum, 1992), *New Visions for Metropolitan America* (Downs, 1994) *CitiStates* (Peirce, 1993), and *Baltimore Unbound* (Rusk, 1995).

Notes:

[1]. Byrum, Oliver E. 1992. *Old problems in new times: Urban strategies for the 1990s*. Chicago: Planners Press.

[2]. Downs, Anthony. 1994. *New visions for metropolitan America*. Washington DC: Brookings.

[3]. Goshko, John M. 1995. Downtown endures in twin cities' retail war. *Washington Post*, 4 June, 3. Johnson, Dirk. 1996. Nice city's nasty distinction: Murders soar in Minneapolis. *New York Times*, 30 June, 1.

[4]. Judd, Dennis, and Michael Parkinson, editors. 1990. *Leadership and urban regeneration: cities in North*

America and Europe. In Volume 37, *Urban Affairs Annual Review*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

[5]. Logan, John R., and Harvey L. Molotch. 1987. *Urban fortunes: The political economy of place*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press.

[6]. Peirce, Neal R. 1993. *Citistates: How urban America can prosper in a competitive world*. Washington DC: Seven Locks Press.

[7]. Rusk, David. 1995. *Baltimore Unbound: A Strategy for Regional Renewal*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

[8]. Tyson, James L. 1996. Racial tensions test 'clean' Minneapolis. *Christian Science Monitor*, 11 July, 4

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**Citation:** David Varady. Review of Orum, Anthony M., *City-Building in America*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. March, 1997.

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