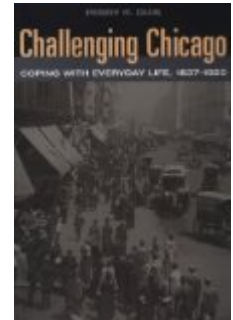


Perry R. Duis. *Challenging Chicago: Coping with Everyday Life, 1837-1920.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998. xiii + 430 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-252-02394-1.



Reviewed by Douglas Knox

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"Through feeling resistance, the body is roused to take note of the world in which it lives. ... The body comes to life when coping with difficulty."-- Richard Sennett [1]

This creative, entertaining, and extensively researched book is undoubtedly a treasure for those interested in Chicago's history, but it merits a wider readership among those interested in the history of urban life and American culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The book began modestly as a series of monthly columns published between 1978 and 1985 in *Chicago* magazine that presented primary research on original topics to a popular audience. In accepting the invitation of the University of Illinois Press to publish this work, Duis has selected, revised, integrated, and re-researched many of these pieces (along with several published in *Chicago History*). The result is more unified and more creative than a mere anthology would have been, although the structure is looser, more fragmentary and open-ended than a conventional monograph.

To provide unity, Duis has chosen as his primary topic the variety of everyday challenges faced by Chicagoans during the city's first century of growth: problems of transportation, housing, food, leisure, and work, and crises of finances and health. Duis's introduction forswears any claim to a comprehensive approach, instead offering to work by sample and example, by anecdotal narratives. This derives in part from Duis's desire to appeal to both scholars and general readers. It also represents a particular style of historical thinking--in this case a style well suited to the subject. The aesthetic texture of the book is a dense one in which a great variety of mini-narratives spin off from the main theme, generating their own sometimes surprising subthemes and counterthemes. By means of the accretion of stories, Duis is able to share quite a number of insights and historical finds, many of which could in themselves become the germ of a more explicitly theorized full-length book. But the rich, associative, open-ended form of this book appeals in part, I think, because in itself it evokes the untidy complexity of cities and of everyday urban life.

The book is divided into six thematic parts, each consisting of two chapters, while each chapter has its own subsections, conclusion, and postscript to bring the chapter's story up to the present. Several pages of well-chosen photographs and other illustrations appear within each chapter as well.

The intellectual heart of the book is Part One, "On the Move," which deals with problems of local and metropolitan transportation. This is a subject that has hardly been neglected by historians of Chicago and other cities. Duis's contribution here is less in his uncovering of new details than in his ability to integrate arguments about urban spatial processes into a concise, engaging sixty-page narrative of transportation in Chicago from the 1830 canal commissioners' plat to the standardization of state automobile license plates by 1915.

Duis's arguments about transportation make explicit a kind of dialectical perspective implicit throughout the book: "solutions to problems could also become problems" (p. 59). Duis terms the various technological advances in transportation "self-dissolving solutions" (p. 17). Paved streets, rails, and mechanized propulsion addressed problems of slow, inconvenient transportation by foot or horse through muddy streets, but the faster speeds created safety hazards, while the increasing number of vehicles drawn by convenience led to traffic and parking problems.

Another recurrent Duis theme is the articulation of private and public space, particularly in what he terms "semipublic places," by which he means privately owned commercial enterprises that permit general public access. This is a theme familiar to readers of his earlier book, *The Saloon: Public Drinking in Chicago and Boston, 1880-1920*.^[2] He is interested in the ways in which semipublic places market themselves as refuges from the challenges of urban life, and those challenges might best be envisioned as a

traffic jam caused by rude private interests that are appropriating to themselves public amenities.

Some readers with their own investments in the terms "public" and "private" may be disappointed that Duis does not offer much historiographic or theoretical exposition on this subject. He does not invoke the "public sphere," nor does he pay much attention to political speech and identity in the way that Mary Ryan or Philip Ethington might, for example. Yet the pattern of attention and selection in Duis's stories suggests that something quite interesting might result from such a juxtaposition.

Though the book deals with how Chicagoans dealt individually and collectively with the problems of daily life, *Challenging Chicago* pays relatively little attention to municipal government, to social-identity groups, to rational-critical discourse or to republican citizen gatherings. Nor, despite the high valuation of commercial semipublic space, is there any suggestion that problems are magically resolved by the generous action of the free market. Instead, consistently, we meet a perspective in which collective action, aggregate behavior, collective plight, and individual difficulties all intersect and interact without necessarily collapsing into each other. In short, if we look for agency in Duis's book, we find ourselves in traffic—not as a predicament, but as template for historical narratives of everyday life.

The particular histories Duis brings together in this book range widely, and for each chapter there will be a subset of urbanists who will be especially interested in what Duis has found.

I. ON THE MOVE Chapter One: Coping with a New Sense of Place In addition to the transportation issues already mentioned, in the first chapter Duis includes an interesting section on the layering of traffic in Chicago's Loop, in the course of which he also considers pressurized underground messenger tubes and the physical transit of information.

Chapter Two: Counting Minutes and Miles Beginning with the dramatic murder of Chicago's last private toll road owner, the second chapter deals primarily with the rail lines that fostered suburban development and the spatial conflicts and class tensions that accompanied the early years of the automobile.

II. A ROOF OVERHEAD Chapter Three: Housing Strategies Extending the subject of suburbs, the third chapter discusses how developers marketed their subdivisions as places of refuge from the challenges of the city. Within the city, the annual disruptive ritual of Moving Day (May 1) was both an inconvenience in itself and an opportunity to escape the site of the previous year's daily inconveniences.

Chapter Four: Living in the Inherited City Duis briefly recounts the remarkable mobility of Chicago's houses themselves in the nineteenth century, and then moves on to a discussion of how the increasingly specialized use of space in early Chicago led to the development of one of Chicago's earliest slums on Goose Island.

III. FOOD Chapter Five: The Risky Business of Food Following a meditation on the multiple rhythms circulating through urban life, Duis applies his insights into the paradoxes of traffic to the problems of the distribution of perishable foods, ice, and milk, with the added complication that poisons and diseases were often free riders. Local gardens provided less risky sources of food.

Chapter Six: Eating Out A subsection entitled "The Lobster Died in Cleveland" details the long, slow struggle to achieve a cosmopolitan range of opportunities for fine dining. This is complemented by a subsection on Chicago's contributions to the history of lunch, from free saloon lunches to the cafeteria to the drugstore lunch counter.

IV. SPARE MOMENTS Chapter Seven: Reducing Risk and Taking Control Despite the generality of its title, this chapter's three subsections all recount public enthusiasms over issues of personal health. Various forms of exercise and sport gener-

ated a demand for facilities in the latter half of the nineteenth century, while the bicycle craze represented a novel conjunction of health, transportation, and fashion. Chicago's own Lucy Page Gaston ignited an early national crusade against the health hazard of the cigarette.

Chapter Eight: Amusements, Crowds, and Morals The chapter on leisure covers a host of attractions, from panorama paintings which evolved into 360-degree "cycloramas" to dime museums, baseball parks, beer gardens, the Ferris Wheel, amusement parks, dance halls, and the early nickelodeon moving picture theaters. Such amusements offered relief from urban challenges and were sometimes themselves seen as moral dangers. Yet at the same time, Duis suggests, urban life had its own inherent appeal: "the amusements of the city were a reaffirmation of the culture of the crowd" (p. 237).

V. HARD WORK Chapter Nine: Chicago is Work Duis looks at the problem of finding work in the city through the history of employment agencies, which profited by offering to coordinate job information, although fraudulent ones merely exploited the information deficits of their victims. A subsection on black restaurant waiters details the shifting fortunes of their efforts to unionize and to maintain their dignity in conditions of racial discrimination and workplace hierarchies.

Chapter Ten: Getting Ahead on Your Own This chapter discusses street peddling as a demanding but indispensable form of self-employment for many Chicagoans, as well as the history of efforts to achieve social mobility through night schooling.

VI. AVOIDING DISASTER Chapter Eleven: Time, Risk, and Family Finances Duis outlines the various strategies and institutions that sprang up in the gap between income and spending for the working poor, with particular attention to the history of the pawnshop.

Chapter Twelve: The Institutional Trap The final numbered chapter treats public institutions

that deal with people whose individual coping strategies have failed: Cook County Hospital, the county insane asylum at Dunning, and the Bridewell, or Cook County Jail.

CONCLUSION: Coping with Urban Life The possibility of the ultimate collapse of individual survival strategies is encapsulated in a concluding image of Lincoln Park's scenic High Bridge, or Suicide Bridge (1894-1919)--another case of the private reappropriation of an intended public amenity. Finally, Duis offers a useful summary and generalization of his perspective on urban processes in several concluding subsections. He considers differential class strategies of coping, as well as the challenges of distance and the synchronization of daily rhythms in a rapidly expanding city. He discusses general issues of risk, particularly with regard to changes in technology and the social structuring of information. Finally, he offers reflections on the "multifunctional place" and the reordering of urban space through processes of centralization and decentralization.

General readers, urban scholars, and anyone who is curious about the historical depth of many present-day challenges of daily life will find something of interest in this rich, entertaining, and thoughtful book.

Notes

[1]. Richard Sennett, *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1994), p. 310.

[2]. Perry R. Duis, *The Saloon: Public Drinking in Chicago and Boston, 1880-1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983).

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