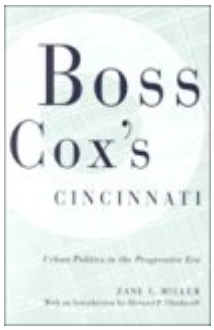
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Zane L Miller. *Boss Cox's Cincinnati: Urban Politics in the Progressive Era.* Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2000. 301 pp. $19.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8142-5064-8.



Reviewed by John D. Fairfield

Published on H-Urban (July, 2001)

Private City, Public City: Revisiting Boss Cox's Cincinnati and Rethinking the American City

Ed. Note: H-Urban's invited Professor John D. Fairfield of Xavier University to write a retrospective review of Zane L. Miller's *Boss Cox's Cincinnati: Urban Politics in the Progressive Era*. Professor Fairfield wrote the thoughtful, far-ranging essay that follows.

(Original edition: Zane L. Miller, *Boss Cox's Cincinnati: Urban Politics in the Progressive Era*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1968.)

When Zane L. Miller's *Boss Cox's Cincinnati: Urban Politics in the Progressive Era* first appeared in 1968, inner-city unrest and new, ambitious public programs had thrust what might otherwise have been an obscure academic discipline into the limelight. In a nation anxious for answers to the tangle of policy questions the Nixon administration would soon be calling "the cities," the new urban historians found their audience. *Boss Cox's Cincinnati* would be reviewed in the August pages of the New York Times Book Review, where William V. Shannon praised the study, concluding that our "understanding of contemporary urban problems would be considerably enriched if a comparable history existed of every major city." But reviews within the profession were more guarded. Joel Tarr, writing in the *American Historical Review*, found "much to recommend" in the study. Yet he spent most of his review expressing skepticism about Miller's central contention--that residence rather than race, religion, or ethnicity shaped the city's politics. "Most urban sociologists today," Tarr pointed out, "have discarded the ecological approach and see residence as a reflection of ethnic, religious, racial, and class factors." Finding election analysis the "weakest part" of the book, Tarr backed up his skepticism by pointing to "discrepancies" in Miller's use of census figures on ethnicity. In the *Journal of American History*, Frederic C. Jaher described the book as "a superior study." But he went on to complain that "little is said about business" and that the argument lacked "conceptual sophistication." He also lamented the author's failure "to communicate the vitality of urban life and the distinctiveness of Cincinnati." Ambiguous reviews in the flagship journals of the profession do little to ex-

plain why *Boss Cox's Cincinnati* has remained in print for over thirty years and attained status as one of the founding classics of the new urban history.[1]

A rereading of *Boss Cox's Cincinnati* is a better guide to its longevity and influence.[2] In an efficient 241 pages that has made it a favorite of classroom teachers, Miller developed four overlapping arguments. In his first three chapters, "The New City, 1880-1914," Miller crafted a spatial analysis of Cincinnati's transition from the old walking city to the expanded metropolis of the era of corporate capitalism. Miller's sensitivity to how social and economic tensions worked themselves out in space provided a guidebook to the new metropolitan form of the early 20th century, as well as a model for others thinking about the city in spatial terms and a still-useful introduction, pace Jaher, to the peculiarities of Cincinnati today. In the second three chapters, "Decade of Disorder, 1880-1894," Miller examined the political paralysis that beset the expanding metropolis in the Gilded Age and highlighted the role of Cox's machine in establishing communication and accommodation between antagonistic classes and interests in the newly divided city. In these chapters, Miller encouraged an ongoing rethinking of machine politics and bossism, showing that Boss Cox played a positive role in bringing new public services and good government to the city. In his final seven chapters, "Periphery and Center: The Politics of Reform," Miller analyzed the perennial contests between machine and reform politics in the Progressive era, arguing that they hinged less on ethnic or class or moralistic divisions than on a competition between central and peripheral neighborhoods. While scholars continue to argue whether residential location is simply a proxy for ethnic, class or other characteristics, spatial arrangements in general and the center-periphery competition in particular have proven to be indispensable factors in understanding 20th-century urban politics. These final chapters are perhaps the most difficult to follow in the book. But that in itself contributes to a larger message, namely the role of center-periphery divisions in the political paralysis that played such a large role in deterioration of the cities in the second half of the 20th century.

The longevity of *Boss Cox's Cincinnati* ultimately depends, I believe, on the middle three chapters, "Philopolism and the New Urban Discipline." Cox's suppression of the decade of disorder, Miller argued in Chapters 7, 8 and 9, was not the culmination of Cincinnati's reform era, but the beginning. Cox's efforts spurred a bevy of new reformers who rejected Cox's methods, but not his strategy. Rather than puritanical or manipulative members of the middle-class concerned only with social control, Miller's anti-machine reformers were civic-minded urban patriots. These "philopolists," a term Miller borrowed from a 19th century historian of the city, were eager to turn municipal politics "away from its preoccupation with order and toward a concern with social justice and the preservation of an open society" (p. 111). Although his reformers did sometimes come off as narrow-mindedly concerned with order (he is too good an historian to disguise any aspect of his subject), Miller also conveys the diversity of their motivations and the decency of their civic aspirations. Above all, Miller depicted the "exuberance" of Progressive-era democracy, the "desperate yet confident quest for a new urban discipline" that sought to civilize the American city (xxi). "Desperate yet confident" captured the character of an era that so many historians have described as "optimistic," yet was riven with anxieties about the future of the republic and of American civilization. *Boss Cox's Cincinnati* remains one of the most convincing portraits of the Progressive era.

"Philopolism and the New Urban Discipline" also provides the key to understanding the enduring influence of *Boss Cox's Cincinnati* within the new urban history. Miller's analysis of the politics of an urban crisis and the anatomy of civic aspira-

tion has served as an essential counterpart to Sam Bass Warner, Jr.'s powerful indictment of the American tradition of "privatism." In ***The Private City; Philadelphia in Three Periods of Its Growth***, published in the same year as ***Boss Cox's Cincinnati***, Warner located the "endlessly repeated failures" of the American city in a neglect of public and civic enterprise. Interviewed in the ***Journal of Urban History*** in 1974, Warner explained that he used privatism in some senses a synonym for capitalism. But he hoped the term would suggest the "internalizing" of capitalist values, an "individualistic, looking out for their family orientation, as opposed to some more communitarian focus." Privatism was not "simply a political or general large-scale ideology," he explained, "but it's carried within each individual, and it affects individual psychology." Warner did not ignore civic ambitions in American life; indeed he embraced and promoted them. The American Revolution, he argued, left Philadelphia with a "tradition of democratic forms and democratic goals grafted upon a society of private economic aspirations." The city's subsequent history often hinged on a struggle between private economic interests and public egalitarian aspirations. But it was always the private economic interests that triumphed. Starting from the other end of the equation, Miller emphasized the political dimensions of the turn-of-the-century urban crisis--the decay of the public infrastructure, the inadequacy of public services, the incompetence of local government. Miller also showed how political action could, in at least one historical context, successfully tackle the problems generated by the private economic system. Both Cox and his reform antagonists responded to the urban crisis with more efficient methods of governance and an expanding array of public services. [3]

A Scaffolding For Our Urban Past and Future

Warner's and Miller's aspirations for the city and for urban history do not markedly differ. Indeed, each has been honored under the rubric of the "urban historian as citizen." They have both been consistently committed to civilizing American cities and have seen public debate and civic enterprise as keys to the task. But they have developed different approaches and emphases that provide essential complements to one another. Jaher's complaint that Miller said little about business in ***Boss Cox's Cincinnati***, for example, certainly could not be said about ***The Private City***. At the same time, Samuel P. Hays's lament that ***The Private City*** never connected individual choices to the larger structure of politics could not be said about ***Boss Cox's Cincinnati***. Taken together, the two books suggest a larger truth about our urban past, namely that Americans' faith in the free market has often frustrated their civic aspirations. As Roy Lubove pointed out in his review of ***The Private City***, Warner was concerned to show how "market disciplines would serve as the arbiters of community life, determining what would be done and how well." In Warner's view, privatism doomed American civic enterprise to failure; public and civic forces remained disastrously undeveloped. In our own era, when government is labeled as the problem, the rage is for the privatization of even the most basic services, and the rich opt out of the civic project, Warner's critique has never been more relevant. But Miller's work reminds us that Americans have never lacked for civic aspirations, that these aspirations have survived incomplete victories and devastating defeats, and that the political system remains the essential arena for their realization. These two seminal works provide a "scaffolding" for thinking about the past and the future of the American city. [4]

The central issue raised in comparing the two books is the relationship of individual choice and political power in city building. In his review of ***The Private City***, Hays captured the essence of Warner's argument: "an accumulation of innumerable decisions made by innumerable numbers of people in their private lives" shaped the city's development. Hays found this view a welcome re-

lief from conspiratorial views of urban politics, with corporations and machines holding all the power and pulling all the strings. But he criticized Warner for failing to connect those innumerable private decisions to "networks of human relationships" and "the patterns of human interaction which generate structures." Hays wanted urban historians to examine the way those structures--and the inequalities of power embedded in them--encouraged or inhibited change. Warner's private decisions too often seemed to be made in a vacuum, never shaping and, in turn, never being shaped by a larger public world of political power and decision. Charles Tilly also regretted that Wagner provided little "information about the political processes that have generated past decisions affecting cities" and failed to "tell us how the structure of American politics would have to change if his representation of popular interests were to come about" or "what might produce such changes." In the *JUH* interview, Warner agreed that he had "never done any systematic studies of politics" partly because of a belief "that the political system is only partially connected to the social and economic system." There seemed no way to get from the private city to the public city.[5]

It is not that Warner lacked a conception of the public city. Critics have found attitudes and assumptions about the public at the center of his work. The early Warner, Robert Wiebe argued, offered a "combination of clear-eyed leadership and central planning to correct abuses of all kinds" as "the public alternative to The Private City." Warner's early studies, ***Streetcar Suburbs*** (1962) and ***The Private City***, took a "jaundiced view of popular behavior," as millions of individual choices added up to dismal outcomes. Wiebe explained that the "very possibility of a public rather than a private city, in this scheme of things, depends on the capacity of some people to vault beyond the narrow push-and-shove of self-interest and turn their trained intelligence to the public interest." By the 1980s, Warner's faith in a rational, intellectual elite of enlightened planners had collapsed; the "distant central powers" had become "the primary enemy." Warner's later studies, especially ***To Dwell is to Garden*** (1987), reflected the conviction that planners "monitored only by their own rationality threaten us with obliteration; individuals of conscience stand as our best hope." The "range of effective action in Warner's vision has narrowed," Wiebe explained, but the "numbers qualified to act have grown marvelously." In the early work, "individual decisions created the holy mess that planners had to resolve," whereas in the later work "individual decisions...represent the sole possibility of resolving the holy mess that planners have wrought." In short, Warner went through a political transition many Americans have--including, by his own account, Wiebe--becoming increasingly distrustful of an apparently alien and uncontrolled government even as they placed greater and greater faith in ordinary individuals. (George W. Bush campaigned for the presidency on essentially this platform. "I trust people, not government.")[6]

Richard Sennett also found Warner's assumptions about the public to be a central dimension of his work. Sennett argued that Warner treated the "small efforts by individuals as more morally consequent than the large works of planners or the moves of bureaucracy." The problem, Sennett explained, was that the causes of the neglect and decay of American cities that Warner decried were precisely the results of those impersonal agencies. "Moral value and political reality," Sennett wrote, "stands at odds--not only for Warner, for all of us." For Americans, "public decay accompanies the celebration of individual development." Not only does this juxtaposition support the "notion of punishing those who fail to sustain themselves," Sennett wrote as the 1996 welfare reform act was moving through Congress, but it becomes "a way to divide the public and the private, the social and the individual--individual development versus the putrification of that which is collective." The decaying city becomes "a kind of negative confirmation that life lies in opposition, in resistance, to

the mass." Warner not only embodied these tensions in his early work, Sennett continued, but struggled against them in ***The Urban Wilderness*** (1972) just as the "collective stain" of urban decay became impossible to ignore. Yet the public response, Sennett lamented, had been "a deeply rooted, archaic political response: Reduce the scale of government, increase individual responsibility, decollectivize, and then regeneration can occur." Sennett did not mean to "lay the blame for Newt Gingrich at Sam Warner's feet" (anymore than I mean to blame Warner for the "election" of Bush). But he does insist on a radically different approach to city politics. We should be searching for "new forms of collectivity" rather than "new forms of community," Sennett concluded, focusing not on "the charisma or the honesty of politicians," but on the larger political structures of power and the formation of a reinvigorated public that can control and redirect those structures. [7]

The Vision Thing

Again the issue is not the reality of privatism. Warner has correctly identified and appropriately railed against a central reality in our urban life. The issue is how do we get from the excessively private city of our past to the more public city of our civic aspirations. In focusing on the public process of thinking about the city and defining its problems--rather than on the private process of making economic and cultural choices--Miller has addressed precisely those questions neglected in Warner's work. In a series of essays in ***Reviews in American History***, Miller made explicit an approach to urban history that was implicit in ***Boss Cox's Cincinnati***. Miller championed what he called "the cultural approach to urban history,' a focus on the city as a city (rather than a focus on particular social or economic groups within the city) and on "all facets of urban society as a means of understanding the development of American civilization." Miller cited Jon Teaford's ***The Municipal Revolution in America*** (1975) and Kenneth Fox's soon to be published ***Better City Government*** (1977) as books that focused on "the problem of the definition of the term 'city,' and how the definition shapes the form, structure, and organization of urban life," and specifically how it shapes politics and reform. In what was principally a review of Blaine Brownell's ***The Urban Ethos*** in the South (1975), Miller argued that Brownell was looking for "a guiding complex of beliefs concerning the nature and role of the urban community--an urban ethos." While he lauded Brownell's sensitivity to the "importance of space and place," Miller criticized him for providing only a "static snapshot" of the ethos that "provides us no sense of the mechanism and circumstances which triggered its formulation," making it difficult or impossible to evaluate the consequences. In other words, Miller was interested in how new and different conceptions of the city gave rise to newly defined problems and possibilities.[8]

In his review of Richard B. Stott's Workers in the ***Metropolis*** (1990), Miller traced the rise of our own contemporary vision of the city and explored its implications. He was concerned with what he called "an anti-deterministic impulse," the conviction that "individuals are or should be free to determine their own lifestyles and group affiliations as a means of achieving self-fulfillment." He saw this vision of the city as a product of the post-World War II rejection of the race- and place-based determinisms of totalitarian regimes. The new assumptions first appeared in studies of the national character, tracing experiences and beliefs (not races or places) as the source of a democratic consensus. But in the 1960s the focus shifted to subgroups that historians argued had opted out of the consensus for one reason or another. At the intersection of the new labor and the new urban history, this new emphasis denied the existence of a single working-class culture or experience. Enter Stott and his study of antebellum, male workers who created something different from "the highly ideological Anglo-American artisanal republicanism" of the early 19th century. In

Stott's argument, an "abundance consciousness" made workers less suspicious of competition and more interested in enjoying a rough and vigorous plebeian culture. Their economic orientation was not toward a rejection of the wage system, but only "about the denial of fair wages for their hard and fast work." Thus Stott's workers were a more or less contented group, more or less sharing in American abundance. It was, Miller wrote, a "decidedly cheery account." Although some critics might want to question the reliability of Stott's sources, or turn his description on its head (thus condemning a hedonistic, sexist and violent set of workers), Miller's concern was more about the direction of the new labor and urban history, its lack of interest in putting "politics back near the center of social history." Stott's preoccupation with "amusement, recreation, and 'style' as a source of self-fulfillment and social satisfaction," Miller argued, was "characteristic of the latter twentieth-century revolt against determinism." This orientation led "away from social and economic questions and conflict, away from a concern for civic identity and civic virtue, and away from the question of the public interest, matters which play a small role in this book." Without disputing his findings, Miller wondered whether Stott had read our own emphasis on private over public matters back into history and whether that was a good thing for either the history or the future of the American city.[9]

In a 1996 essay, Miller offered an alternative approach to thinking about the past and the future of the city. In the middle of the 20th century a new understanding of the city had emerged, Miller explained, one that "emphasized the importance of individual choices in the past and made the advocacy of lifestyle choices a hallmark of American civilization." (Miller had apparently discovered privatism.) The new understanding generated tremendous interest in urban history, putting an urban spin on the study of ethnic and racial minorities, popular culture and sports, women and the family. But Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., had long ago looked at such topics. It was not the topics but the perspective, the approach, that had changed. Schlesinger and his fellow urbanists of the 1920s and 1930s assumed that groups, not individuals, were the "basic units of American life in the past and the present" and the source of personal and cultural identity. Some groups lagged behind others in adapting to city life, they believed, and so the city would always have problems. But urbanization--which encouraged improved standards of living, a "more inclusive democracy," and "the sharing of cultural traits among groups,"--meant progress, just "so long as the great variety of groups interacted in a competitive and cooperative manner that kept the social and civic peace." Schlesinger and his colleagues believed that "sophisticated managers of intergroup relations" could design the city to insure that peace and progress. Temporary residential segregation of "lagging" groups--while "urban design and management" spread competence--would keep the peace and promote intergroup toleration and understanding.[10]

When expert design and management failed to keep the peace or promote toleration, Miller continued, the anti-determinist impulse took over. The focus shifted to individuals and the "obligation to define their own culture rather than to accept and learn the culture of the group into which they had been born." Wade's ***The Urban Frontier*** (1959) was an example of the new approach, undermining the deterministic notion that successive frontiers created the American character. Instead Wade found cities shaping the frontier and described those cities as collections of diverse, choosing individuals intent on the "creation and improvement of a civilization comparable to that of older places." The good part of this was that history was used to remind "people that individuals in the past also sought to invent cultures and make cultural choices--reminders that help legitimize the doing of it in the present." But the consequences "provided the basis for profound changes in the way Americans lived in and treat-

ed cities." Emphasis on choice brought not peace and harmony, but a new set of conflicts based upon "the assertion that one person's or group's choice should not inhibit other persons and groups from making their own and different choices." Experts and compromisers were rejected, the first blamed for telling others what to do, the second for being unable to make and stick to choices. A "policy paralysis" set in, based upon "the general assertion that everybody possesses the right to choose a lifestyle but to exercise it only in a neighborhood of like-minded people." All of this was the result of a "de-emphasis...on the idea of civic identity and the eclipse of the idea of the public interest." The private city had eclipsed the public city.[11]

Miller's interest was not in eradicating the freedoms of the private city, but in balancing them with the demands and the possibilities of the public city. The earlier urbanists, Miller wrote, had "tied economic and cultural progress inextricably to the civic and political realms." They took as axiomatic the "obligation of individuals to be good citizens, to cultivate intergroup tolerance and understanding, and to make the personal sacrifices and compromises necessary to keep the civic and political systems going." By obscuring "the idea of civic commitment and the pursuit of the public interest as a source of personal satisfaction," the emphasis on individual choice and lifestyle had created a "crisis of civic and political virtue." Indeed, civic and political engagement had become redefined as a "means for the realization of personal aspirations instead of the promotion of the public interest." The example of Wade, who shared the new understanding of the city but combined it with a concern for civic and political life, might "help put arguments about visions of the public welfare back at the center of our civic and political life." These public visions were essential to negotiating the conflicts that now only "feed the country's antiparty, antipolitician, and antigovernment mood," fostering not just policy paralysis but corrosive cynicism. It might even help "revive the idea of civic identity," Miller concluded, "as a solution to the problem of historical narrative and synthesis about which we've heard so much." Both historical understanding and contemporary politics would benefit from a reconsideration of the claims of the public city.[12]

Uniting the Private and Public Cities

Just as Miller shared Warner's concern about privatism, Warner shared Miller's hope for public action. Dolores Hayden responded to Wagner's "argument that urban residents need to be involved in pressing for public space and amenities." As an illustration of that process in the past and a spur to its continuation in the future, Hayden was inspired to recover "urban landscapes as public history," to show how those landscapes "represent the social and economic struggles of the majority of ordinary citizens." Tilly also lauded Warner for examining cities as "settings for human life, reflecting incessantly on how that human life could improve through wise, historically informed public action." Tilly also suggested the need for a balance between the public and the private city. "Concentrations of political power and of productive capacity make urban life possible," Tilly wrote in comparing Warner's vision to Lewis Mumford's, "but that life only remains healthy below a certain modest scale and in the presence of a well-regulated balance between the two city-building forces." Too much of one gives us Rome, too much the other gives us Coketown.[13] Similarly, our understanding of the urban past requires the insights and approaches of Warner as well as those of Miller.

Terrence J. McDonald's review of Eric H. Monkkonen's *America Becomes Urban: The Development of U.S. Cities and Towns, 1780-1980* provides some clues as to how a synthesis of Warner and Miller might work. Monkkonen's analysis of "the service city" recalled *Boss Cox's Cincinnati* in transcending the boss-reformer dialectic and focusing instead on the creation of social order through an expanding array of public services.

But Monkkonen turned *The Private City* on its head. Rejecting the critiques of Lewis Mumford, Jane Jacobs, Warner, and others, Monkkonen argued that the booster mentality had always included an emphasis on the provision of housing, transportation, and public utilities. Pro-business promoters and reformers created a service-oriented municipal government, an active city that successfully tackled a host of urban problems. Monkkonen thus sought to overcome the "invisibility" of the active city and the service revolution and encourage Americans to appreciate their urban accomplishments. Private interests, it appeared, had been most responsible for the development of the public city.[14]

In order to underscore the new synthesis of American urban history that Monkkonen offered, McDonald contrasted his study with a synthesis similar in scope and sharing the ambition to reshape American attitudes about the city. That synthesis was Warner's *The Urban Wilderness* (1972). Warner's contemporary purpose had been to emphasize that Americans had choices about what sort of city they might build. Warner's "urban wilderness" was the product of a system, a set of structures, arising out of what he had earlier called privatism. But Warner hoped to show that an alternative existed, at the neighborhood level, in the form of a "cultural consensus" about the importance of equal access to public utilities, amenities, and opportunities. Yet Warner's neighborhood alternative remained at best speculative. More often, Warner treated the neighborhoods as victims of the structure of privatism. "By both emphasizing structure and failing to consider political--or other--examples of change, Warner defeated his own purpose," McDonald argued. "He set out to write a book about 'choice,' but the story he told allowed 'structure' to overwhelm it." Although Monkkonen only briefly confronted *The Urban Wilderness*, the implication of America Becomes Urban was that the same urban developments Warner derided--the single-minded pursuit of wealth through boosterism, the preference for property values over community values, subsidies for private transportation rather than provision of public transportation--were simply popular, democratic choices. These choices were the products of "human action, human institutions, human organizations" and nothing more, Monkkonen wrote, certainly not "inevitable physical manifestation of vague economic and social and geographical forces." As McDonald puts it, Monkkonen implies that such choices are a "problem only for those who disagree with those choices."[15] Private choice and private interest, Monkkonen suggested, had given us just the level of public enterprise we desired and a very high level at that. But McDonald refused to leave matters there.

McDonald returned to public questions and insisted on asking who did the choosing, under what circumstances, and in the context of what distribution of power. Corporate status, Monkkonen wrote, gave American cities the capacity to "borrow and lend, build and destroy, expand and contract," and ultimately "appear and disappear." His study was essentially a history of how cities "came to their corporate status, what they have done with this status, and how they have shaped themselves." But McDonald reminded us that the corporate identity of American cities was itself a contested process. "Involved in this," McDonald writes, "were conflicts over authority between city and state, over jurisdiction between the legislative and judicial branches of government, and over boundaries between private and public that had important implications for economic activities." The struggle was ultimately "about use of public power for private purposes, precisely the connection between corporate status and boosterism" that Monkkonen celebrated. In McDonald's view, Monkkonen's story of a progressive march towards solutions to urban problems becomes a story of "changing terrains of conflict over solutions to problems" where the "reigning 'vision' of the city" might be nothing more than the "ideology that the 'winners' in these contests use to mobilize their coalition and its supporters." Today, Mc-

Donald concluded, the reigning vision of the "active city" is losing out to a new "coalition of ideological 'free marketeers' and victims of the city's failures," bringing the era of the active city to an end in favor of privatization. As the contemporary example suggests, urban visions arise not automatically or irresistibly but in the context of a conflict of opinion and interest. That is not to say that ideas are mere rationalizations or have no power to persuade, but that urban visions themselves have a contested history that marks the intersection of the private and public cities.[16]

Public Power, Private Interest

A major part of that history, as McDonald suggested, is the struggle over the use of public power for private interests. To explore the role of power in that struggle as well as the civic possibilities inherent in it, we might examine how Wagner's private interests help to shape Miller's public process on imagining the city. In reviewing Arnold Hirsch's *Making the Second Ghetto* (1983), Miller gave a glimpse of what that examination might look like. Highlighting the recent discovery that ghettos "emerge not from the operation of impersonal forces but because of decisions made and carried out by people," Hirsch had indicted private decision-makers, realtors, bankers, and violent mobs, as well as the public decision-makers they influenced (governmental officials, political parties, and reformers of various stripes). Miller's review explored a tension in Hirsch's study, between the author's "assertion of the uninevitability of the creation of the second ghettos (because of the availability of alternatives) and his stress on the pervasiveness of the white determination to preserve the residential color line." That observation anticipated Miller's conclusion--not only that the ghetto is our central problem, mocking our pretensions to equality and frustrating our approach to all other metropolitan problems--but that "like any legacy, we can reject it, if we choose." Refusing to see anything inevitable about the ghetto or any other particular expression of private interest and public vision, Miller suggested we might reject the urban vision that gave the ghetto life. Referring to Hirsch's alternative visions of integration, on the one hand, and nondiscrimination on the other, Miller wondered whether the triumphant vision of nondiscrimination was powerful enough to overcome the determination of whites to uphold the ghetto. A more forthrightly integrationist vision, Miller concluded, might have been more effective in overcoming self-interested positions. In his recent book on *Cincinnati's Over-the-Rhine, Changing Plans for America's Inner Cities* (1998), Miller has connected the persistence of the ghetto more directly to the "anti-determinist" impulse discussed above. Although he does not identify it as such, it is a pragmatic approach to ideas that Miller adopts. He invites us to judge ideas more on the basis of their usefulness than their supposed accuracy. Miller treats ideas as tools and argues that they create new possibilities in suggesting new approaches and overcoming entrenched interests. In emphasizing choice and possibility in past and present, Miller's pragmatic approach to ideas suggests that public vision is potentially more powerful than private interest.[17]

Again, Miller is not so different from Warner in this. Tilly argued that however much the Warner of *The Urban Wilderness* borrowed from Mumford in his overall critique, he broke with Mumford on one point. "Whereas Mumford intimates that it will take acts of creative genius and benevolent despotism to bring about the better world of which he dreams," Tilly wrote, "Warner claims we have the essential knowledge for improvement and need democratic discussion to recognize our common needs." Dolores Hayden similarly found in Warner's work the challenge to create "a public, political culture that can carry the American city into the next century." Tilly called the Warner of *The Urban Wilderness* an "optimistic populist," writing from a University of Michigan that had given birth to the Students for a Democratic Society. "Warner insists that the past was open," Tilly

concluded, "subject to the collective choices that Americans made without always foreseeing the consequences."[18] In his review of ***The Private City***, Hays argued that Warner's study of Philadelphia was less a description of what had actually happened than an explanation of why the city had not developed in the "progressive" manner that Warner held as normative. ***The Private City***, Hays wrote, offered "an explanation for the failure of cities to develop in a particular way, according to Warner's norms, rather than a systematic description of the evolution of cities themselves." Warner explained his approach rather differently. In "every period of time, when you look back," Warner said in the ***JUH*** interview, "it's perfectly clear that there were choices that the society turned down that would have made a difference."[19] While Hays's criticism is fair to the extent that an historian is importing options and possibilities not actually present in the historical situation, his "systematic description" in the hands of a present-minded historian would make what has evolved seem inevitable and flatten our historical understanding and narrow our understanding of choice and contingency. The fullest explanation of an historical situation requires an analysis of all the possibilities contained within the situation. Historical understanding of that variety heightens our sensitivity to choice and possibility in the present.

But, finally, Warner has something essential to add to this conception of ideas as tools. For, as McDonald suggested, ideas can also be instruments of power. As free as we might be to pick and choose among competing ideas based upon their utility, ideas do often advance interests and require constituencies to remain potent. Warner suggested as much in ***The Urban Wilderness*** when he wrote that "the late development of the labor movement, legitimized only in the mid-thirties, and the consequent failure of the labor and urban reform movements to coalesce have contributed to the heavy middle-class bias of our urban programs and weakened all attempts to serve the lowest third of the population." It is also a point that is implicit in ***Boss Cox's Cincinnati***. In examining the rise of Cox's machine and the civic-minded reformers who eventually toppled the boss, Miller understood that the erstwhile antagonists actually shared the same strategy and "were interlocking parts in the new system of urban politics" (p. 241). What Steven Ross's Workers on the Edge helps us see is that boss and reformers were advancing a new vision of the city that triumphed over an older one that the city's artisans had attempted to revive in the decade of disorder. As Monkkonen and a host of other scholars--including Miller--have shown, the vision of the city as a business corporation providing a limited set of public services had to fight for its life against an older conception of the city as a regulatory corporation promoting the commonwealth. Its victory remained incomplete late in the 19th century. The United Labor party campaigns of the mid-1880s had evoked the vision of city as commonwealth in an effort to use municipal politics to radically redirect industrial development. Whatever else it might have accomplished, the service city vision helped remove explosive questions of economic justice from urban politics. Walter A. Draper, member of the Chamber of Commerce and one of Miller's civic reformers, argued that "the problems that confront us will not be settled by the radical nor by the stand-patter, but by the progressive conservative." The city's business leadership, Draper argued, had seen that a "new order of things must prevail...[and] have determined that the knife that will perform the operation must not cut deeply enough to kill" (pp. 120-121). The proponents of the "new urban discipline," Miller concluded, hoped to address the problems of the industrial city "without arousing the divisive, emotional, and hysterical responses which helped immobilize municipal statesmen in the 1880s" (p. 239). But in doing so, they narrowed the range of issues open to debate. Miller's study of the new system of urban politics still has something to teach us, this time about the role of both

power and vision in policing the boundaries between public and private and the use of public power for private interests.[20]

Notes

[1]. William V. Shannon, review of ***Boss Cox's Cincinnati***, ***New York Times Book Review*** (February 9, 1969), 6; Joel A. Tarr, review of ***Boss Cox's Cincinnati***, ***American Historical Review*** 74 (April 1969), 1380-1381; Frederic C. Jaher, review of ***Boss Cox's Cincinnati***, ***Journal of American History*** 55 (March 1969), 883-884.

[2]. Caveat lector: "Rereading" is a bit misleading. As a resident of the Cincinnati metropolitan area who has often taught Cincinnati history, I have never really stopped reading ***Boss Cox's Cincinnati***. Indeed, the assignment to review the new edition of the book has occasioned the not entirely comfortable feeling that I have made something of a career of thinking and writing about the book. My first published article was a review essay of ***Boss Cox's Cincinnati*** and Steven Ross's ***Workers on the Edge*** (New York, 1985): "Cincinnati's Search for Order," ***Queen City Heritage*** 48 (Summer 1990), 15-26. I have recently returned to ***Boss Cox's Cincinnati*** in "Democracy in Cincinnati: Civic Virtue and Three Generations of Urban Historians," ***Urban History*** 24 (1997), 200-220.

[3]. Sam Bass Warner, Jr., ***The Private City*** (Philadelphia, 1968); Bruce Stave, "A Conversation with Sam Bass Warner, Jr," ***Journal of Urban History*** 1 (November 1974), 85-111.

[4]. Warner, ***The Private City***; Bruce Stave, "A Conversation with Sam Bass Warner, Jr;" Roy Lubove, review of ***The Private City*** in ***The Journal of Economic History*** 29 (June 1969), 409-411; Blake McKelvey, review of ***The Private City*** in the ***American Historical Review*** (February 1969), 1082. "Scaffolding" comes, of course, from Warner's influential essay, "If All the World Were Philadelphia; A Scaffolding for Urban History, 1774-1930," ***American Historical*** Review 73 (October 1968), 26-43. On the rich opting out of the civic project (and for an historical account of that civic project), see Christopher Lasch, ***The Revolt of the Elite and the Betrayal of Democracy*** (New York, 1995).

[5]. Robert Wiebe, "The Urban Historian as Citizen: In Honor of Sam Bass Warner, Jr.," ***Journal of Urban History*** 22 (July 1996), 626-648. On Miller as citizen, see Fairfield, "Democracy in Cincinnati: Civic Virtue and Three Generations of Urban Historians;" Samuel P. Hays, review of ***The Private City*** in ***Political Science Quarterly*** 85 (December 1970), 644-645; Charles Tilly's comments in Wiebe, "The Urban Historian as Citizen;" Stave, "A Conversation with Sam Bass Warner, Jr."

[6]. Wiebe, "The Urban Historian as Citizen."

[7]. Richard Sennett's comments in Wiebe, "The Urban Historian as Citizen."

[8]. Zane L. Miller, "Defining the City--and Urban History," review of Blaine A. Brownell, ***The Urban Ethos in the South, 1920-1930***, ***Reviews in American History*** 4 (September 1976), 436-441.

[9]. Zane L. Miller, "Cheers! (But Is That All There Is, My Friend?)," review of Richard B. Stott, ***Workers in the Metropolis: Class, Ethnicity, and Youth in Antebellum New York City*** in ***Reviews in American History*** 18 (December 1990), 485-492.

[10]. 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 (September 1996), 361-368.

[11]. Ibid. For a case study of this problem in Cincinnati's Over-the-Rhine neighborhood, see Zane L. Miller and Bruce Tucker, ***Changing Plans for America's Inner Cities: Cincinnati's Over-the-Rhine and Twentieth Century Urbanism*** (Columbus, OH, 1998). Michael J. Sandel, ***Democracy's Discontent; American in Search of a Public Philosophy*** (Cambridge, MA., 1996) examines the philosophical and practical limitations of public policies based on the right of all to choose their "lifestyles."

[12]. Zane L. Miller, "The Crisis of Civic and Political Virtue: Urban History, Urban Life and The New Understanding of the City."

[13]. Dolores Hayden's and Charles Tilly's comments in Wiebe, "The Urban Historian as Citizen."

[14]. Terrence J. McDonald, "Rediscovering the Active City," review essay on Eric H. Monkkonen, American Becomes Urban (1988), in *Journal of Urban History* 16 (May 1990), 304-311.

[15]. Ibid.

[16]. Ibid.

[17]. Zane L. Miller, "Villains All?" review of Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* in *Reviews in American History* 12 (September 1984), 429-434. Miller and Tucker, *Changing Plans for America's Inner Cities*. For a brief and clear statement of the pragmatic conception of ideas, see Alan Ryan's review of Louis Menand's *The Metaphysical Club* (New York, 2001) in the *New York Review of Books* 48 (May 31, 2001), 16-20.

[18]. Tilly's and Hayden's comments in Wiebe, "The Urban Historian as Citizen."

[19]. Hays, review of *The Private City*; Stave, "A Conversation with Sam Bass Warner, Jr."

[20]. Warner, *The Urban Wilderness* (New York, 1972), 230-231; Steven J. Ross, *Workers on the Edge: Work, Leisure and Politics in Industrializing Cincinnati, 1788-1890* (New York, 1985); Teaford, *The Municipal Revolution*; Zane L. Miller, "Scarcity, Abundance, and American Urban History," *Journal of Urban History* 4 (February 1978), 131-156. For a fuller discussion of the intersection of *Workers on the Edge* and *Boss Cox's Cincinnati*, see Fairfield, "Cincinnati's Search for Order." For a fuller discussion of the transition from regulatory to business corporation, see John D. Fairfield, *Mysteries of the Great City: The Politics of Urban Design* (Columbus, OH., 1993), ch. 3. The weakness of Miller's otherwise convincing study of *Over-the-Rhine* is his reluctance to acknowledge that the idea of the "public interest" has too often been used myopically, if not cynically, in ways that ignored the needs and interests of the poor and the black. See my review of Miller, *Changing Plans for America's Inner Cities* in *The Northwest Ohio Quarterly* (Summer/Autumn 1998), 185-188.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban

Citation: John D. Fairfield. Review of Miller, Zane L. *Boss Cox's Cincinnati: Urban Politics in the Progressive Era.* H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. July, 2001.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5298