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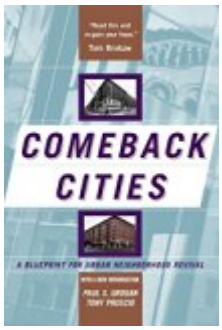
Paul S. Grogan, Tony Proscio. *Comeback Cities: A Blueprint for Urban Neighborhood Revival.* Boulder: Westview Press, 2000. Xiv + 285 pp. $25.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8133-3952-8.



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In *Comeback Cities*, Paul S. Grogan, president of the Boston Foundation, and freelance writer Tony Proscio present a sustained argument about why we should consider American cities as improving, rather than declining, in the last decade. They insist, "The American inner city [is] rebounding--not just here and there, not just cosmetically, but fundamentally. It is the result of a fragile but palpable change in both the economics and the politics of poor urban neighborhoods. Though not yet visible everywhere, the shift is discernible in enough places to unsettle longstanding assumptions about the future of older urban communities" (p. 1). While the level of the authors' positive energy is laudable, the lack of balance in the book's argument makes it easier to take apart. While Grogan and Proscio are correct to point out the unfortunate American penchant to take in despairing stories on urban difficulties rather than upbeat tales of urban achievement, their rose-tinted glasses may be just as dangerous as the sobering tendencies of other urban analysts.

Comeback Cities provides a readable presentation of certain key aspects of the field of urban studies, such as the various waves of troubles that hit many American cities in the twentieth century and the broken windows theory. Such sections would be ideal for assignment to undergraduates if they had been presented within a more balanced framework. The book's inclusion of the achievements of community development corporations (CDCs) is one of its best features. CDCs are certainly important entities in modern American cities, and they demonstrate how thinking outside the lines can have significant results. The authors are correct in pointing out the importance of big business' embrace of the inner city as a growth opportunity. Grocery stores, drug stores, and other retailers are moving into the central cities, improving the look of the landscape (in some ways), and providing services long absent from these areas. *Comeback Cities* also investigates the Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) that requires every bank to extend its services to the entire community it serves, including less-than wealthy neighborhoods. In the era of large-scale bank consolidation, the act pushed banks to act as more responsible neighbors or risk the disapproval of desired mergers. This pro-cities legislation may have

spurred greater investment in non-traditional areas, yet the changes may have also stemmed from business' come-lately realization that poor neighborhoods can also be profitable ones.

Grogan and Proscio site examples of urban areas made more desirable places to live by cosmetic changes which then pull in increased retail business. They document the way in which inner cities now obtain credit for building and opening small businesses in an unprecedented way. According to the authors, we are witnessing a "coast-to-coast regeneration in downtowns of every kind, from Boston to Cleveland to Milwaukee and even to sprawling Los Angeles" (p. 14). Their point is well-taken that "it's possible that poverty is not equivalent to blight" (p. 45). But how much of the puzzle is the physical appearance of the city? Certainly there is achievement to celebrate in nearly every American urban center--but can't this argument be made while considering the city with a balanced view, and adding a hint of caution? We needn't be labeled naysayers if we ask for more assessment on the longevity of the changes cited here.

The authors express amazement that enough changes have come to the South Bronx that "something that was once altogether unthinkable has happened: People like it here" (p. 9). Yet to an urban historian, such admissions are not surprising nor are they necessarily signs of great change. Indeed, the residents of 1970s and 1980s South Boston in Michael McDonald's ***All Souls***, thought highly of their community without physical or economic improvements, and the same thing can be found in Herbert Gans' famous treatise, ***The Urban Villagers***, which examines the West End of Boston in the 1950s.[1] When Grogan and Proscio admit that the statistics are not yet there to sufficiently back their argument ("the best data can lag reality by as much as ten years"), reliance on such expressions of fondness for one's community appears to be a risky tactic (p 2).

The authors' quick dismissal of the lack of job opportunities (outside of part-time, low-paying retail options) in these urban areas proves troubling. Growth of jobs in the service economy does not make up for the loss of formerly high-paying industrial work many of the residents of these neighborhoods once held. The authors laud "a careful restoration of order" in the South Bronx as a triumph, which indeed it was, but acknowledge in almost the same breath that the poverty levels at the end of the 1990s are almost entirely the same as the 1980s in this area (p. 13). How much does the physical look of a place ultimately matter when people can't earn enough to care for their families? We are told that figures for adolescent pregnancy rates have not declined significantly in the momentum of the Bronx' new uplift. In order to sway readers to their cause, Grogan and Proscio need to tell us what has improved in the daily lives of central city residents.

On a side note, Grogan and Proscio should have edited out comments which reveal an apparent dislike of academics who study the city. The readership for the book is significantly reduced if academic readers are so quickly eliminated. In the book's conclusion, for instance, the author's worry about the trustworthiness of the translation of the 2000 Census figures by "an academic establishment already in need of antidepressants" (p. 267).

The rigid argument about the positive changes in many urban areas makes this book unable to deal well with the changes that have taken place in the American landscape since the book's publication. Written in a financial boom, the author's did not anticipate the abrupt change that has now hit the economy. Grogan and Proscio considered cities from a vantage point in which new policing methods were still the perfect way to lower urban crime statistics. The argument loses fuel in today's world in which figures are again beginning to rise despite the new approaches. Perhaps Grogan and Proscio ought to write a new

introduction to their work. Or perhaps the work ought to present a more balanced portrait of cities' current strengths and weaknesses so that the argument can withstand the winds of change.

Note:

[1]. Michael Patrick MacDonald, ***All Souls: A Family Story from Southie*** (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999); and, Herbert Gans, ***The Urban Villagers: Group and Class in the Life of Italian-Americans*** (New York: The Free Press, 1962).

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