

Cities and the Making of Modern Europe, 1750–1914

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This text book aims to cover 150 years of European history from a perspective which desperately needs coverage: the perspective of the city. It attempts a bold fusion of thematic and chronological approaches: the first half of the book is characterised as ‘An Era of Disruption’, from 1750–1850, and comprises a chapter on ‘Urban Worlds around 1750’, a survey of ‘Industrial Urbanisation’, a chapter called ‘Varieties of Urban Protest’ covering the period between 1780ish and 1850ish, concluding with a survey of early projects of urban improvement. The second half of the book goes under the banner of ‘An Era of Reconstruction’, covering 1850–1914. It surveys ‘The Challenge of the Big Cities’, has a chapter on the growth of welfare, assesses ‘Urban Cultures’, and then concludes with a survey of ‘Imperial and Colonial Cities’. As such, the book represents the distillation of a vast amount of data and reading, and stands as an admirable accomplishment in that regard. It manages to seem far more detailed and far less sweeping and superficial than other attempts, like Peter Hall’s *Cities in Civilisation*.⁽¹⁾ Its geographical reach is greater, though intellectual precision is less, than Daunton’s relatively recent collaborative survey, *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain: Volume III, 1840-1950*.⁽²⁾

The work comes from two urban historians of excellent pedigree: A. Lees’ *Cities Perceived* is still a standard work 25 years after it was written, and his recent work on German morality campaigners has been well received.⁽³⁾ L. Hollen Lees’ work on migration and poverty in Britain is outstanding.⁽⁴⁾ Yet this book is not a monograph. The book does not present an argument, or a new type of analysis, or different sorts of primary evidence. It is unashamedly a textbook (and there is nothing wrong, and much right, in that), written for classes and teachers, and so it is as a textbook that I will review it.

A textbook should be the *first* word on a topic, not the last (and thus Peter Hall's tome is often useless to historians, with its search for finality). Thus, a textbook in history should seek to cover a topic both in terms of alerting students to the competing intellectual concerns that their instructors will expect them to wrestle with, and in terms of the empirical data that tutors will expect students to interpret. As a starting point, a textbook must open doors for students, and make the lives of teachers easier. For bright students, the textbook needs to serve as a springboard, enabling them to launch off in a direction of their own choosing by making sense for them of the bigger field; for more pedestrian students, a textbook needs to explain complexity in a way which alerts them to a problem to be solved, and walks them through solving it. Great examples that I think stand out for a deft balance of data, evidence, debate and survey are McPhee's slim 2002 volume, *The French Revolution*, or Christopher Bayly's more substantial *The Birth of the Modern World*.⁽⁵⁾

At times, this book does use its fact-driven account to disrupt some clichés upon which students regularly rely – for example, in describing the fractured, mobile and labile nature of the late 19th-century family (p. 65). Equally, pages 70–97 give a real sense of the disorder and instability of political affiliations and systems in the first half of the 19th century – but while the name of Engels is mentioned (Marx's is not), no attempt is made to suggest *why* cities produced political conflict. It is merely observed *that* they did. The second half of the book reads much more richly than the first half: the data was better, there were more clues as to where students might go with it. However, by this stage of the book, the idea of an urban history of Europe has faded, and become much more a history of Europe (which took place in cities). The nation state dominates in the second half; the city seems incidental.

But this book falls short for me on most of the criteria of a good textbook suggested above. I am loath to write a negative review, because this book represents real people's lives and works and hopes, and because we work in a job where we pointlessly niggle at each other so much. But hopefully future textbooks might be better for it (of course, this also allows me to be both critical and negative, yet heroic and contributory – readers will more likely detect only two of these four qualities). While the book's coverage across Europe is impressive, it is undifferentiated. The city itself is not problematised – it stands merely as an agglomeration of individuals, not an economic or cultural or social 'type' of organisation. Thus, Ghent and Naples and Copenhagen appear unembarrassed beside Manchester, Paris and Vienna. Of course, it is great to see two historians moving beyond the 'usual suspects' that have dominated, in particular, the cultural turn of the last 15 years. But if the authors are making a point by doing this, they are doing so only implicitly. An undergraduate reader would not know that Paris and Manchester have served for 200 years as yardsticks of modernity, class, family, economic change and experience in a way that Bordeaux and Antwerp have not.

This silence is profoundly significant for the functionality of the book. Large themes – such as the emergence of a public sphere, class, experience, *flânerie* ⁽⁶⁾, economic organisation, liberalism/Liberalism, Socialism, governmentality, modernity, *Alltagsgeschichte*, the national paradigm in historiography – are sort-of addressed in this work. But they are tackled in the most delicately tangential way, never named, such that if you did not know about them already, you would not be able to discuss them in a seminar, for it is unlikely you would know that the topic had been mentioned in the book at all. For example, chapter 4 discusses the 'Pursuits of Urban Improvement' without discussing cholera, typhus, typhoid or consumption, or mentioning governmentality or Foucault, or commenting on how Engels might have addressed (in fact, did address) the observation that Kay Shuttleworth deplored the conditions that capitalism produced, but supported and justified capitalism. It is as if E. P. Thompson, Poovey, Joyce, Corbin, Kudlick *et al* had never put pen to paper. While the chapter on 'The Challenge of the Big Cities' in the second half of the 19th century does focus heavily (and rightly) on disease, it still does not draw any of the 'big picture' conclusions that one might expect – in particular, it does not address the vast controversy as to how and why, quite suddenly in the 1870s and 80s, urban life-expectancy began to exceed rural. This chapter focuses too on 'middle class fears' of crime and poor people, and the ways they were represented often as racially inferior – great topics, which would allow for seminar discussions of 'scientific' racism, social Darwinism, Foucauldian 'discourse' or Marxian 'ideology' (depending on one's bent...). Yet the theme is analysed (p. 149 *ff*) according to whether these perceptions are borne out by the evidence – an important question, no doubt, but one which

ties students into detecting our old friend 'bias', rather than asking what roles bias might play in shaping the world at the time – the history undergraduate's much larger task.

Other examples of this 'dodging' of the dominant ideas which structure urban history courses abound. For example, while surveying the urban scene in the mid 18th century, the authors note that 'Josef Klefeker, a Hamburg jurist, needed twelve volumes around 1770 to codify the laws' (p. 37). But they do not go on to mention Habermas, the public sphere, the bourgeoisie, literacy, the Enlightenment, or state formation. Thus, a bright student could not go anywhere with the data, and a pedestrian student would not know that this type of urban activity had a profound shaping influence on the whole history of the modern world – it was not just a geek in Hamburg writing stuff down. A lecturer would merely have this 'factoid' floating out there that a man in Hamburg collated some laws, and is then presented with the task of managing that factoid. The authors are merely content to observe that, 'German towns intruded more aggressively into the lives of their citizens than did English or Dutch cities, but the ideal of regulation or effective "police" by local authorities in the interests of good order was common throughout Western and Central Europe in the Eighteenth Century.' The idea of 'Police' in an 18th-century, continental context surely needs explaining to undergraduates?

When they do introduce 'theory', as with 'Central Place' theory on p. 58, they do not mention any names – they merely mention 'central place theorists'. This is an awful model for undergraduates, who rely on 'some historians' to explain so much, although so much data in this book is cited without referencing, that it seems almost to *intend* that students do not pursue lines of enquiry. Each chapter comes with a select bibliography – but the works there are almost all books. On the one hand, this is good – students need reminding that these things called books contain so much. Yet I would have liked to have seen a similar number of articles, so that in our inflated classes, and at universities of different ages and wealth, students could have accessed more of the work by logging into online (and therefore infinitely reproducible) journals. Conversely, they commit the exact opposite 'modelling crime' at other points, for example stating baldly that 'Fernand Braudel pointed to ...', offering students no insight as to why all historians might regard Braudel as so significant an author. In an age when students are apt to grab any article from JSTOR, and present it as an authority, it would have been valuable to explain why some historians from the 1930s or 1940s are regarded as indispensable intellectual assistants to current historical projects, while others are viewed as, say, slightly clumsy racists.

Equally, when using primary evidence the authors use it not to present a complex piece of material which needs interpretation, and then model for students how that material might be interpreted. Instead, the primary evidence appears to add 'colour' to a scene. For example, when discussing the persistence of folk religious traditions in Rome, there is a detailed description of the clothes people wore from a primary source, and a brief mention that they were ridiculed for wearing them. But what is missing is, perhaps, an interrogation of why some people were so keen to eliminate such habits, or whether the urban/rural divide is really sustainable in the light of such evidence, or whether modernisation assumptions needs to be questioned in urban history (p. 57). A page later, wishing to emphasise how cosmopolitan 19th-century cities were, they mention that 2.4 per cent of London's population was foreign born in the 1860s. For undergraduates in London, Manchester, Melbourne, New York or Miami today, that number will seem bewilderingly small and parochial (p. 52). At the school of 896 pupils at the end of my street in Manchester, 45 languages are spoken. (7) The French Statistical Bureau, INSEE, calculates that the non-French born population of the whole of France is currently 10 per cent, rising to 25 percent in urban areas such as Seine-Saint-Denis, which is effectively north Paris. (8) I never had any idea that late 19th-century London was so ethnically homogenous – but it is the opposite conclusion to the one the authors draw.

When discussing the growth in inspection, and the concomitant rise in knowledge, about housing, the authors produce evidence from many cities. For example, 'In the early 1880s a Berlin city missionary, Herr Böckelmann, visited one such building [a tenement] that housed 250 families. Paper, wood or cloth, rather than glass, filled window frames, and many families shared a single room with lodgers' (p. 150). Evidence like this raises many questions that could be touched on lightly to alert students to important foundational themes in modern European history which urban history is uniquely positioned to open up: why did middle-

class people start to inspect poor areas? Does such evidence suggest a class identity? Produce a class-based politics? These questions go unasked. The poor are widely ‘done to’ in this vision of history. The second half of chapter 6, ‘Towards the Social City’, is rich in detail about urban ‘improvements’ – from rail, to sewage to the demolition of ‘unsanitary’ housing, and the construction of much less ‘model’ housing – thereby driving up rents for precisely the people intended to benefit. But this happens in a series of ‘events’ – poor people’s responses to this are strangely detached, as if they just accepted it (many clearly did – and still do – but others did not, and they had a profound historical impact – the foundation and rapid success of the Labour Party and the SPD are not without consequence, and totally bound up in the history of housing and cities). The sense that this was a process, rather than an event, is missing. And the driving force here is still the nation state: French cities did x, German cities did y, British cities did z. The story would be the same without the urban aspect at all. What really impresses me as a historian is that all these people in cities started doing roughly the same thing at roughly the same time according to roughly the same logic with roughly the same personnel – but this does not receive explicit analysis. Why? How? With what effect?

Thus, all in all, an undergraduate reader of this book would end up viewing history as an agglomeration of facts, not necessarily connected, just as these authors view the city as an agglomeration of people, not necessarily connected. It would be hard for them to see it as a set of problems to be solved. Ultimately, it is very hard to see which urban history course I know of that this would be the coursebook for: urban history is an important sub-field, because it allows lecturers to introduce students to complex themes and ideas (like class, the cultural turn, modernity, capitalism, globalisation, ethnicity) in a manageable data set that challenges clichés. I do not know of any urban history courses that treat urban history as a linear set of observations, or who do not differentiate (rightly or wrongly) between Zurich and Lisbon on the one hand, and London and St Petersburg on the other. Ultimately, readers would be led to view history as a series of ‘things’ which ‘happened’, whereas their tutors will mark them on whether they can understand how and why different types of evidence can be interpreted by different people in different ways, all pointing towards the fundamentals: why? How? So what? Why is this important? I can see this book being used as an adjunct to courses aimed at *non*-historians in, for example, modern languages degree programmes, where history courses serve as a broad introduction to the foundations of a contemporary (national) culture, rather than as the core ‘problem to be solved’. But it is hard to see this book contributing to turning around the history major that just doesn’t get it, or inspiring the student who does, and wants more of it. This is a tragedy, because the scholarship in this book would need only a few sentences like, ‘This trend goes to the heart of our understandings of...’, or ‘This evidence opens up key issues around...’ to have been really useful. And a textbook stands or falls not by its scholarship, but by its usefulness.

Notes

1. Peter Hall, *Cities in Civilisation* (London, 1998).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, ed. D. M. Palliser, Peter Clark and Martin Daunton (3 vols., Cambridge, 2000-1).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Andrew Lees, *Cities Perceived. Urban Society in European and American Thought, 1820–1940* (Manchester, 1985); *Cities, Sin, and Social Reform in Imperial Germany* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2002).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Lynn Hollen Lees, *Exiles of Erin : Irish migrants in Victorian London* (Manchester, 1979).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Peter McPhee, *The French Revolution 1789–1799* (Oxford, 2002); Christopher Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World 1780–1914 : Global Connections and Comparisons* (Malden, 2004).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. *Flânerie* is discussed briefly as a phenomenon on p. 224, but its impact on studies of gender, experience, class, and space are not mentioned.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. HM Inspector of Schools, ‘Inspection Report: St Peter’s RC High School’, 10 October 2006 [Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Institut Nationale de la Statistique et des Etudes Economiques, ‘Population selon nationalité’ <http://www.insee.fr/fr/themes/tableau.asp?reg_id=0&ref_id=NATTEF02131> [2] [accessed on 16 June 2009].[Back to \(8\)](#)

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