

cessors, nor, subsequently, have we learned how to conceptualize this new kind of urban world. I come to these fundamental changes and intellectual problems from my own research, interest in urban history, which derives from both professional specialization, in particular the study of crime and police, and from a deeper need for self-understanding. I need to know why life in late twentieth-century urban America is the way it is in order to understand my own personal circumstances. This, for me, is what history is for: to gain in self-understanding through social understanding. And the understanding of society must come through history, both to describe what now is and to analyze simultaneously the salient features of how it got that way.

Much of this book is a sketch. It cannot pretend to be comprehensive. Thousands and thousands of pages have been written on the urban working class, on ethnic groups, on women, on racial groups, on politics, on disorder, and on a host of other fascinating details that have gone into the diverse past of everyday urban life. As in a pencil sketch, a line suffices for a whole, white space a background. The sketches and their frames are there only to guide the reader's imagination. The notes are there both to establish my own claims and to guide the curious to further reading.

From: Eric Monkkonen, America  
Becomes Urban. Berkeley: University  
of California,  
1988.

## 1 ☆ Writing About Cities

A fresh rethinking of the history of American cities requires a brief excursion into the well-tilled intellectual landscape of urban thinkers and urban historians. Why have the most fundamental aspects of American urbanization—population growth, suburban expansion, growth of midsize and small cities, and the transformation of the city to an aggressive, service providing entity—been analyzed so little? To answer this question, we have to discuss critically three very different bodies of research and writing that have influenced our conceptions of U.S. urban history. The first is the best known to the general reader and is characterized by the work of Lewis Mumford and Jane Jacobs. I have labeled it the humanist critique of the modern city. The second body of literature is from specialized social scientists who have been analyzing the American city in great detail since the end of the nineteenth century. The most influential in this little-known group is Adna Ferrin Weber. I call this school of thought the statistical approach. And the third body of literature became a sensation among historians in the late 1960s, when it was known as the "new urban history." The names most prominently associated with the new urban history are Stephan Thernstrom and Sam Bass Warner, Jr.

Each of these three bodies of literature has made positive contributions to the way we think about cities, but each has serious weaknesses. Mumford and Jacobs, for instance, present overviews of the city that are both comprehensible and convincing. But with their persuasively crafted polemics, they present idealized views that distort any clear understanding of the much more complex historical reality. The statistical specialists, for their part, added a valuable concern for accuracy and logical consistency to the study

of urban history, but because their approach precluded sweeping statements or grand visions, they have principally addressed one another. And the "new urban history" has almost faded now from the professional scene, its legacy of intense analyses of thousands of individuals having established a literature concerned with what seem like rather small issues. The result: urban history, like the American city itself, has been left centerless. This chapter discusses each of these three major currents of thought in order to clarify the problems and strengths inherent in any modern analysis of the U.S. city. For we cannot study our past without understanding the traditions within which we conduct that study.

### The Humanist Critique: Lewis Mumford

Lewis Mumford wrote *The Culture of Cities* in 1938 to advocate a particular kind of urban planning. Strongly influenced by the teachings of the Scottish city planner Patrick Geddes, Mumford divided urban history into three major, technologically determined eras: the medieval city (the "eotechnic age"), the industrial city (the "paleotechnic age"), and the future (the "biotechnic age"), or what some commentators now call the "post-industrial" city. In Mumford's view, the medieval city was good because while it reflected some planning, this was an organic planning that had unfolded naturally. Like the medieval city, New England towns and villages and most of New York State around 1850 also met this ideal: an "integrated regional life . . . [with] a multitude of settlements, no one of which, outside New York, achieved a disproportionate size." The evils of the paleotechnic age, embodied in the industrial city, resulted either from a lack of planning or inhumane planning—straight lines, blank facades, lack of sunlight. The promise of a bright urban future in the biotechnic age would be in natural planning, on a human scale. Frank Lloyd Wright's writings best elaborated on the idea of organic planning, "using the machine but not dominated by it." Mumford loosely related urban form to social, political, and economic history, equating fascist brutality with the ugliness of straight lines, monumental scale, and insensitivity to nature.<sup>1</sup>

Mumford's work continues to appeal to readers, perhaps because of his authoritative style, best exemplified in the bibliography to *The Culture of Cities*, an impressive collection of some 700

titles in English, German, Italian, and French, annotated with comments and judgments which suggest authority and scholarship: "unimportant," "essential," "invaluable," "fundamental," and the like. A careful reading of his bibliographic annotations, however, brings into question many of his judgments. His citing of Thoreau's *Walden* and *Cape Cod* as "fundamental classics in regionalism" hints that the bibliography was aimed at listing books that were in fashion rather than those that might help readers learn about cities. If Mumford had read it and liked it, it was important. Moreover, the bibliography reveals an essentially aesthetic view of the past: Dickens's *Hard Times* presented the "classic picture of the paleotechnic town," dark, filthy, and ugly. Mumford dismisses the only scholarly history of the American city then published, Arthur M. Schlesinger's five-year-old *The Rise of the City: 1878-1898*. Of this first serious example of modern urban historical scholarship, now considered a classic, Mumford wrote, "as usual with historians of the passing generation, without a grasp of the city as organic whole." At the time he wrote this, Mumford was forty-two years old, Schlesinger forty-nine.<sup>2</sup>

Mumford's history, and his analysis of the present, consisted of a series of aesthetic judgments. The "massing" of industries made them ugly, but a factory where the blankets were bleached and shrunk in "the open air of a charming countryside" earned Mumford's approval. Should the changing urban world be judged by its conformance to our contemporary aesthetic standards, much less to the standards of one individual? Mumford, for instance, dismissed not only Le Corbusier but also Charles Eastlake, "whose dreadful incised decoration left its scar on both wood and stone": in a very direct way Mumford attached his values to the Arts and Crafts movement. He castigated the British Victorian city as "a junkheap of discarded styles . . . the solidification of chaos." By refusing to admit any standard other than his own, Mumford became ahistorical. Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown have shown how much the nature of the urban aesthetic continues to change: Victorian clutter, Eastlake-style decoration, and now even Las Vegas kitsch can fade in and out of style. By claiming the aesthetic territory he did, Mumford precluded any sense of historical change or analysis, save that of what charmed him and what did not. This gave his work a dual appeal, first his confidence and authoritative dicta comforted their readers. Second, although (unlike Mumford)

we now favor Victoriana, much of what Mumford liked has continued to appeal to twentieth-century observers—medieval cities or their elegant remains, the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright, wilderness conservation and urban greenbelts. Yet an examination of the pictures in Mumford's book also should give one pause: the large apartment blocks of which he so approved, and showed in aerial photographs, seem now to be little different from the monumental fascist architecture he so despised. Mumford's aesthetic insisted on a sculptural sense of mass housing, on buildings designed to look planned, but at the same time, not too regular or too square.<sup>3</sup>

Mumford idealized the small town and walled city, spreading metropolitan areas of the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth century, in his words, "stretch over the countryside in an amorphous blob." Thus he emphasized the importance of the visual, and anathematized cities without sharply demarcated visual boundaries. This he made clear in his discussion of worker housing in industrial cities: even if Manchester, New Hampshire, and mid-western industrial towns were better than most, "the improvement was but one of degree: the *type* had definitely changed for the worse."<sup>4</sup> He didn't care whether there was running water or indoor plumbing or adequate living space; his main concern was how they looked. This aggressive intrusion of his aesthetic bias into an essentially nonaesthetic judgment also subtly reinforced a historical error in Mumford's argument: for industrial workers, the proper housing comparison should have been with rural cottage housing, in which almost all medieval workers lived, not with the rare few who dwelt in the medieval city.

These aesthetic standards caused Mumford to reject visionary plans like those of Frank Lloyd Wright. Mumford adored Wright's organic architecture for the detached home, but felt that he went too far in his idealized plan of an automobile suburb, Broadacre City, which was too square and too spread out for Mumford's visual sense. Mumford's definition of chaos, of what did not cohere visually, was a highly personal one. The architectural critic Reyner Banham's *Los Angeles: The Architecture of the Four Ecologies* provides a belated but much needed visual and aesthetic counterargument to Mumford. Through the eyes of its residents, Banham shows how an architectural critic can visualize and make order out of the chaotic sprawl of Los Angeles. Like Venturi and Brown, Ban-

ham makes it clear that the formal aesthetic of urban sprawl has lagged behind its popular understanding. "Disorder," "sprawl," and visual "chaos" are not objective descriptions; they represent instead the reactions of one rather narrow sensibility to the North American city.

By presenting his reactions as historically objective, Mumford managed to create simultaneously an ahistorical past and an equally unrealistic planning goal. His version of the past takes the physical object to be the social and psychological actuality. Mumford claimed that by holding the remaining "hollow shells" of medieval cities "quietly to one's ear, as with a seashell, that one can catch in the ensuing pause the dim roar of the old life that was once lived, with dramatic conviction and solemn purpose, within its walls." On closer examination, his metaphor seems as inappropriate as it is erroneous: if the seashell is the physical shell of the medieval city, then the slimy and silent mollusk inside would be the appropriate analogy to city life. The metaphor's ahistoricity is demonstrated in its description of nineteenth-century cities as chaotic: their inhabitants in all probability found an order in them just as freeway commuters find an order in late twentieth-century southern California.<sup>5</sup>

Mumford disliked the modern city, mass production, and machines in general. While this is an understandable aesthetic position, it virtually disqualifies his analysis of the past and of planning options. Nothing exemplifies this better than one of Mumford's modern "good" examples, the planned garden city of Radburn, New Jersey. The brainchild and "most visible product of one of the most innovative planning groups in American history"—that is, Mumford, Henry Wright, Sr., Benton MacKaye, Clarence Stein, and Stuart Chase—Radburn was built in the 1930s and it remains a charming, attractive, and desirable place to live. But Radburn's population in 1980 was only 3,000 people, and it did not have the status of an incorporated town. Had there been 501 fewer people, it would not even have met the formal census definition of urban! The model it did provide was for the small suburban housing developments and shopping malls (it had one of the first) which are so much a part of the decentralized, automobile- and freeway-dependent metropolis that Mumford hated. From the beginning, in 1929, Radburn's residents moved there, as one recently told a historian, because "being out of the city was what appealed to us at

the time. . . . My wife was pregnant and we wanted to start a family in that kind of environment rather than in the city streets."<sup>6</sup>

Since Mumford sympathizes neither with urban sprawl nor the automobile, it is not surprising that he has often used Los Angeles as an example of the "anti-city." Predictably, he blamed the automobile for destroying the central city, and asserted that the abandonment of the railroad and promotion of the automobile was a great planning error of the twenties and thirties. Yet as chapter seven makes apparent, popularization of the automobile was not induced by planners at all, but the result of an innovation pushed to the fore by ordinary people who used it to expand the variety and distance of personal travel, not merely as a substitute for other forms of mass transit. Mumford, by distorting the reasons for the spread of the automobile, urged a forced return to fixed rail transit. Just as he hated the ugly furniture produced for mass consumption in the Victorian era, so he hated the form of city opted for by masses of ordinary families.<sup>7</sup>

Why did Mumford concentrate on buildings rather than the city itself as sources for his historical sense, on seashells rather than sea? Ask anyone who has been a tourist. Much of what we know as tourists, as visitors with limited time, ability, and knowledge, focuses on the physical city. Because of this necessary limitation, it is all too easy to make what might be called the architectural fallacy: to read economy, politics, and society through buildings. An ordinary stance for a tourist, this is a very poor way to understand history and an even poorer way to plan the future. Because we can grasp buildings, and imagine how to shape them, we seize that aspect of urban life in intellectual desperation. Just as it seemed to nineteenth-century reformers that the proper prison architecture would reform criminals, so it seems that we could make cities better places by simply making them more attractive. And we make superficial efforts to understand cities through the same apparatus. But buildings and their inhabitants are often wildly out of sync. Some ghettos of Los Angeles look like pleasant suburbs, while the desirable Park LaBrea apartments in the same city look like 1930s public housing. In their basic shape and to the unwary, luxury apartment towers in New York look just like awful high-rise housing projects. Renovated nineteenth-century warehouses make elegant inner city housing throughout the older cities of the United States. In Britain many castle keeps have been trans-



Public Housing: Pruitt-Igoe, St. Louis, 1974.

Hailed as exemplary high taste brought to the poor for efficient public housing, designed by an impressive team that included the famous architect, Minoru Yamasaki, the high-rise Pruitt-Igoe towers soon became the symbol for modern urban ills. Less than twenty-five years after construction, most of this housing project for the urban poor was abandoned, destroyed, and labeled an architectural and planning disaster, with the design of the buildings, in particular their high rise modernism, being most implicated. Critics blamed modern design aesthetics for the social and physical problems such buildings sometimes contained. Yet the original caption to the portion of this photo that appeared in the newspaper observed succinctly, "Because there was no maintenance fund, Pruitt-Igoe's broken windows let in wintry air, freezing and bursting the pipes, leading to the project's downfall."

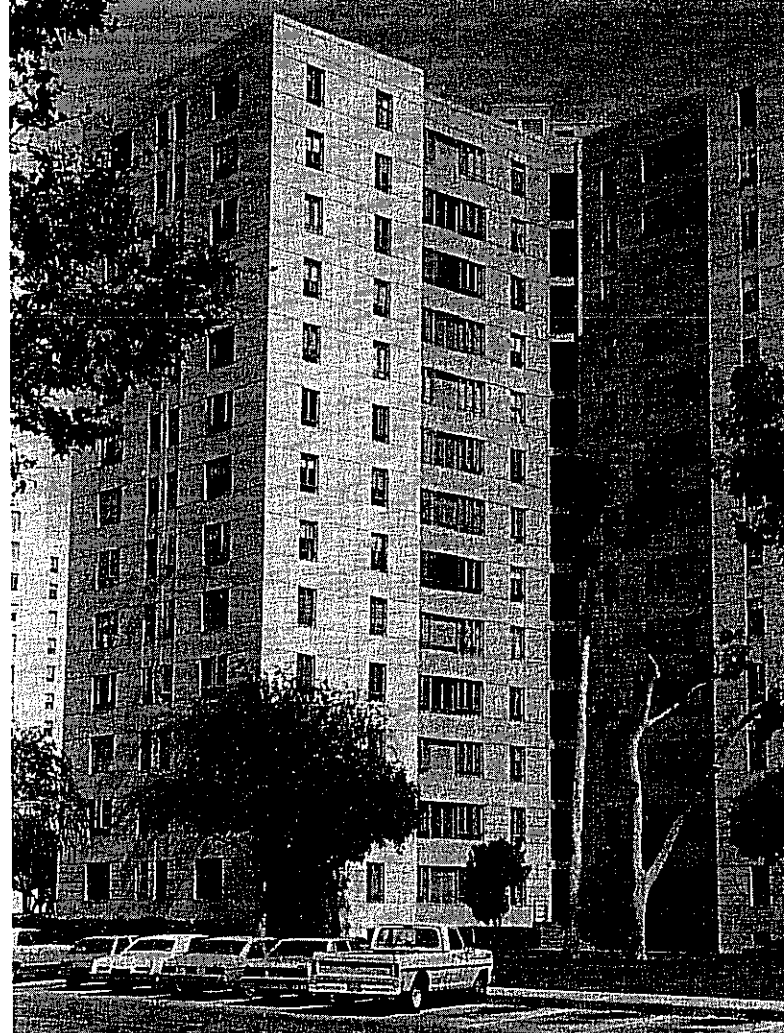
Source: *St. Louis Post Dispatch* (August 25, 1974), 27.

formed from homes for kings to prisons to art museums, all the while looking much the same. Mumford ignored this point when he showed Fifth Avenue apartment buildings in New York and compared them implicitly to the dark, small, and nasty back-to-back houses of Leeds and Bradford.<sup>8</sup>

### The Humanist Critique: Jane Jacobs

In his 1962 essay, "Megalopolis as Anti-City," Mumford reiterated and made explicit the reason he had originally connected the city with the essence of human culture: "the city once spontaneously generated . . . dynamic ideas"; it was the generator of human intellectual progress. The anti-city, therefore, was the cultural equivalent of "a nuclear catastrophe." The city, as Mumford defined it, was more than the sum of its parts, it was the growth center of human culture. Presumably at this point he parted with Thoreau. But he joined with his premier successor as city spokesperson, Jane Jacobs, whose book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, has provoked as much recent urban discourse as Mumford's many books did somewhat earlier.<sup>9</sup>

Jacobs at first glance seems to be everything Mumford was not: she rips apart the garden city notion, castigates Mumford and others like him as antiurban, and reasserts the value of the great city. But her work is no less ahistorical; it depends on a special definition of urban and relies on a physical analog to social and economic relations. And most important in the context of this book, her work profits not at all from academic urban research. To present a firm course of policy, must one project a distorted vision of history? Must one see the past as concluded and assume that knowledge about it is equally conclusive? In Jacobs's view, the past is not so much an arena in which to conduct research and investigate human action, as a museum of completed and completely understood action. Thus it furnishes static, closed-case studies, like Mumford's seashells, rather than an opportunity to conduct living case studies. And the historian, in this view, is akin to the custodian of a small, regional museum, polishing the cabinets and keeping the exhibitions in easily viewed order. Jacobs, however, does not draw her authority from the past as Mumford does. Instead she employs a different rhetorical device: present reality. Do not, she tells the reader, look for illustrations in her book; instead, "the



Private Housing: Park LaBrea, Los Angeles, 1987.

Designed in the same era and modernist spirit as Pruitt-Igoc, these similar looking buildings house very different kinds of people in very different kinds of neighborhoods. But the building types do not create the neighborhoods. The visual comparison with the Park LaBrea apartments is instructive, for Park LaBrea's simple concrete facades could be accused of creating a barren, dehumanizing environment. But high rents, elegant grounds maintenance, and uncrowded apartments continue to make these buildings attractive to renters.

Source: photo by author, for discussion of the continuing attractiveness of Park LaBrea, see *Los Angeles Times* (April 2, 1987), 11:1.

scenes that illustrate this book are all about us . . . look closely at real cities.<sup>10</sup>

Like a religious revivalist, Jacobs tells us that the kingdom of heaven—Greenwich Village, 1950s style—is nigh, and to enter it we only need follow her four-step process to salvation. First, get the right residential density. Second, get the right mix of land use. Third, get the right angles and lengths to city blocks. And fourth, get a good mix of building types and ages. Like most utopian pictures, hers is attractive, and because entry seems less difficult than to Mumford's, which virtually required starting anew, it is easy to understand her popular appeal. Her ideal also shares another characteristic with Mumford's seemingly opposite kind of place: just as his occurred in medieval Europe, hers occurs near the center of the oldest, largest, and best-off American cities. Her diverse, vital, lively, artistic urban community requires the protective existence of a major city surrounding and supporting it. Jacobs makes clear that her vision includes only "great cities," and that by great she means large as well as important. These cities include New York, Chicago, Boston, Washington, Philadelphia, San Francisco and, apparently, no others. As the next chapter demonstrates, such a formulation leaves out most urban Americans, who have never resided in the "great cities."<sup>11</sup>

Jacobs contrasts her vision of exciting public life, urban diversity, small shops, children playing, and vibrant nightlife with the dull sameness of boringly bourgeois suburbs or urban residential areas. Sameness, suburbs, middle-class residential areas, and large public housing tracts comprise her main targets.

One of the major pitfalls in the "great city" viewpoint is that it defines urban in a way that excludes the mundane reality of most U.S. cities and towns. It is concerned with the tip of the iceberg, not the iceberg. For example, Jacobs joins Mumford in rejecting or ignoring inconvenient counterexamples, those thousands of cities which do not look like cities "should." Los Angeles, whether one likes it or not, must be considered a major U.S. city, yet it enters Jacobs's book only as a source of superficial and stereotypical bad examples, while San Francisco supplies her with good ones. The South and the West do not otherwise enter her New York-centered arguments at all. Yet no doubt urban planners have paid far more attention to Jacobs than the millions who continued their suburban exodus as she wrote. Although she vehemently argues against ur-

ban planning for its mistakes, she continues to share with Mumford the basic assumption that cities are essentially dense physical agglomerations of multiuse buildings and inherently plannable. "Cities," she states flatly, "are thoroughly physical places."<sup>12</sup> This seriously misleading assumption, which underlies the Mumford and Jacobs approach, is implicitly antihumanist, for humans are thoroughly physical creatures but much of what they think and do is not accessible to a purely physical analysis. To understand society and its history by studying the human body would be a foolish enterprise, yet that is precisely what Jacobs and Mumford do.

At least one major historian has been influenced by Jacobs: Richard Sennett, who has taken up her role as urbane New York City promoter. For instance, in his book *Families Against the City*, Sennett fueled the anti-suburban debate by demonstrating that family suburbs were worse than boring, that they actually crippled their residents when it came to coping with the complexity of modern urban life. Focusing on an unnamed suburb of Chicago at the turn of the century, Sennett's book, based on research in the manuscript of the 1880 census, purported to show that families retreated inward, that sons of successful fathers slipped down the occupational scale because of their overprotected youthful lives, and that by escaping urban complexity, the families had succumbed to even worse urban evils, economic failure in particular. Since the publication of this book in 1970, Sennett has become a major New York intellectual figure, addressing in subsequent books such issues as the question of the civic-spirited "public man," of urban creativity. In general he has carried on Jane Jacobs's promotion of the Greenwich Village lifestyle. From both the message is the same: be different, be creative, be diverse, be just like us. Sennett's historical work has been rejected by some historians as riddled with hopeless methodological flaws and poorly analyzed data, but nevertheless it is appreciated as a brilliant polemic.<sup>13</sup>

### An American Tradition: The Statistical Approach

The present situation of U.S. cities can be better understood by reading those historians who have a long, technically demanding tradition that bridges local history, law, and the social sciences. By the end of the nineteenth century, a solid beginning to the scholarly investigation of the American city had been established.

Among these early historians, Adna F. Weber, Richard T. Ely, and Carroll D. Wright contributed monographs or sponsored survey research which is still useful. Others have followed in their historical approach. None has been as self-publicizing as Mumford, nor have they been as confidently prescriptive as Jacobs. But caution is not always a vice. In the case of a subject as diverse, complex, and unfinished as the modern American city, it would be all too easy to show how lucky we are that flamboyant prescriptions have largely been ignored.

The end of the nineteenth century saw the real flowering of systematic urban scholarship. The scholars in this generation included, notably, reform-minded social scientists who believed that the primary vehicle for social reform was information, and that once the systematic basis for a social science had been created, all right-minded people would agree in the course of action. To this end they compiled masses of statistics in works which began the explosion of data gathering which has continued through the twentieth century.<sup>14</sup>

The next data collecting breakthrough came during the Great Depression, when nearly overwhelming fiscal crises mobilized probing and systematic empirical research. Again the motivation was to address massive economic and social problems through statistical knowledge, though without the earlier optimism that with numerical knowledge would come the obvious course of reform action. Some of the scholars of this generation, Arthur M. Hillhouse, Paul Betters, Bessie L. Pierce, and Arthur M. Schlesinger, produced the foundations of what should have been a continuing scholarly literature. But in the aftermath of World War II, their work went unheralded, partly because prosperity masked continuing urban problems. The baby-boom generation seemed unique, and many in it may have felt that previous decades had no relevant guidelines to offer. War, growth, and prosperity created a demographically and economically distinct era. A clean intellectual break with the earliest years occurred. Consequently, promising research agendas from the Depression era fell apart as quickly as the poor-quality paper on which the original studies had been printed. How could analyses framed two decades earlier, in the grimmest years ever faced by the United States, apply to the breathtaking new world of the 1950s?

The statistical approach to understanding the city, dedicated

as it was to exact information and critical analysis of sources, expanded knowledge but limited the chronological scope of understanding the past. Post-World War II scholarship slighted the Depression era, partly because the data did not seem consistent with postwar data. New questions created new data for which no prewar concomitant existed. The vast expansion after 1945 in federal government data gathering and publication unintentionally encouraged research that concentrated primarily on the postwar era. Consequently, the most methodologically advanced work was not only ahistorical but it was based on the data from a few decades at most. The enormous difficulty of constructing any analysis that can cross the data boundaries of the war years means that research which does so cannot take advantage of modern theory and statistical methods, while conversely, any consistent data spanning the break will be so limited that the consistency may defeat all gains. Ironically, any research which does accept the historically artificial but empirically real boundaries of World War II is doomed to be built on an extraordinary era in American history. We are almost forced to see the Depression and World War II as periods of transformation, because during those years our information base was expanded so dramatically. A considerable part of the literature of social science is thus temporally bounded by unconsidered and essentially accidental data limitations.

One may construct a measure of the growth and consequent boundedness inherent in the statistical approach to the city from the Time Period Index to the *Historical Statistics of the United States*. This index lists, by subject, the time at which new data series were initiated. Not all series are equally meaningful, and occasionally one subject series simply replaces an earlier one. The total population of the United States, for instance, is probably more important to know than the population of places between 1,000 and 2,500 persons. The former we know from 1790; the latter from 1890. Moreover, some series were constructed by researchers long after the fact: many price series which stretch back to the mid-nineteenth century were painstakingly constructed by economists only recently. Nevertheless, the Time Period Index gives a reasonable, if imperfect, sense of the rate of expansion of information over the past two centuries.

The graph of new population data series in figure 6 demonstrates the three primary expansion phases in this most elemental

aspect of official statistics. The first burst of activity, in the 1790s, reflects the initial establishment of the census to count white males in order to determine congressional representation for each state. The second burst, in the 1890s, represents the activity of the great nineteenth-century social data collectors, in particular the efforts of Francis Amasa Walker and Carroll D. Wright, both great campaigners for and administrators of expanding federal data collection efforts from 1870 to 1910. But this was not just the role of a few individuals, for the last decade of the century saw the flowering of the American side of an international social statistics movement, with which Adna Weber and Richard Ely were also prominently associated.<sup>15</sup> And the most recent burst, in the 1940s, represents the postwar refinement of census data collection. That so many of these most elemental series were added in two bursts, illustrates the limitations on any easily performed, consistent, and national historical data analysis. For as much as each new series may represent a conceptually significant refinement, it also represents another door to the past which is unlikely ever to be opened. The more finely tuned our understanding of the postwar era, the less probable any bridging of the longer span.

Given the trend toward practically more of everything in the United States since 1790, the growth in statistical information is not surprising. But the bursts are of substantive interest. We may turn from the actual number of statistical series added every decade to the proportional amount added beyond what might have been expected: that is, the expansion over and above the longer trend. This is done by looking at the residuals (the difference between the actual and predicted value) of a regression predicting the natural log (which transforms the actual number into a value that shows proportional rather than absolute size) of the total series for all subjects added every decade. In other words, the residual values show how much any one decade differs from the long linear trend.

This residual analysis adds some interesting insights to the actual numbers. First, it shows the initial dramatic burst of data from the census.<sup>16</sup> And then it highlights the continuous, aggressive expansion of data from 1900 through the 1940s. Data from the 1940s, which came to publication in the 1950 census, had the largest absolute expansion. And the 1940s is also the twentieth century decade that takes the prize for the largest expansion beyond what might have been expected. The exceptional data expansion of the

TABLE 1

THE PEAK OF MAJOR NEW SOURCES OF INFORMATION BY CENSUS DECADE, 1790-1960

Year	Burst of New Subjects
1790	Population
1800	-
1810	-
1820	-
1830	-
1840	-
1850	-
1860	-
1870	-
1880	-
1890	-
1900	Government, Labor
1910	Housing, Minerals, Agriculture
1920	Migration, Services, Income, Forests, Transportation
1930	Energy, Prices
1940	Vital, Social, Land, International Commerce, Communications, Business, Manufacturing, Consumer Activity, Productivity, Finance
1950	-
1960	-

NOTE: This table is determined by the year with the highest count in each subject, unadjusted for trend.

SOURCE: Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1975), A-4-A-9.

first half of the twentieth century represents the flowering of modern data-oriented social science, the result of seventy years of statistical work. This expansion has also provided a kind of natural limit to social inquiry, for the questions can only go forward from the first point of data collection. Each decade, as the statistical approach gained in power, it also became more ahistorical, ironically strengthening the humanist critics' interpretive bite.

Riding both the trend toward more information and the secondary crest of exceptional expansion, the post-World War II census additions, while not as unexpectedly large as those published in 1910, still reflected the most additional data of any census. In addition, as shown in table 1, with ten new statistical categories—vital, social, land, international commerce, communications, business, manufacturing, consumer activity, productivity, and fi-



nance—more new series were added in the 1940s than in any other decade.

One-fourth of all historical data series began in the postwar era, over half since the 1920s. And as each new series of data tends to represent newly formulated conceptions about society, so also each new series cuts off another avenue of social inquiry by creating a discontinuity in the data. Virtually by definition, the most advanced social research must be ahistorical. And research that tries to consider history must be periodized by the exigencies of data collection, rather than by the nature of the subject.

The precision ushered in with Adna F. Weber's *The Growth of Cities* has continued to create retrospective gaps and to make the sweeping and imprecise work of Mumford and Jacobs seem much more satisfying. As new research questions have been asked, they have often been able to be answered only for more recent periods, the unintended consequence of which has been to periodize or foreshorten our statistical views of the American city. The culmination of such foreshortening may be seen in such policy oriented work as comes out of the Brookings Institution, an organization with the highest social scientific standards. A recent publication, *Urban Decline and the Future of American Cities*, exhibits almost no knowledge of the relevant historical research, and in spite of a few graphs with pre-World War II data, focuses all too much on the post-1960 and even post-1970 period. And even when the authors do glance at historical work on urban crime, work which suggests that poverty does not in itself account for other urban social problems, and which therefore raises subtle problems for urban policy advice, they continue to make policy recommendations that disregard past experience.<sup>17</sup>

### The New Urban History and City Biography

The 1960s saw a flowering of university-based historical research accompanied by both substantive and methodological breakthroughs. And of all the "new" histories that were launched in the 1960s, the "new urban history" probably flew the highest. It promised to use the statistical approach's tradition of exact work and detailed, replicable analyses to ask empirical and social historical questions about the American city. The work ignored the humanist critics as well as pioneers like Adna F. Weber. More specifically,

the new urban historians rebelled against urban biography, creating a divide between two kinds of urban history. Each of these two different modes of thinking and writing embodies a particular way of grounding description, understanding, and explanation in concreteness and empirical particularity. One comprehensively tells the "story" of a single city, while the other analyzes thematic subjects, its geographical coverage ranging from a small section of a single large city to many small cities. These two modes—the new urban history and the city biography—illustrate the analytic difficulty that modern urban societies pose for historical understanding.

The new urban history and city biography, while satisfying in themselves, show no conscious or developed relationship to each other. Neither asks nor answers questions posed by the other. In certain ways this is fitting, for many urban observers, not only historians, are struck by the fragmented nature of the modern city. So, too, the historical research itself seems fragmented and lacking in a sense of self-awareness, of unified purpose, of historical continuity and discontinuity. Thus the concept of "fragmentation" offers an interesting insight into those who employ it, for as much as it may reflect urban disorder and chaos, it may equally suggest that the observer has failed to see order and cohesiveness, lacking the necessary perceptual conditioning to unify a set of observations.<sup>18</sup>

Beginning in the late thirties, the earlier form of urban history—urban biography—treated an individual city as an anthropomorphic entity with a unique personality, working out its individual destiny. This genre is best exemplified by Constance M. Green's work on Holyoke, Massachusetts, Bessie L. Pierce's on Chicago, Blake McKelvey's on Rochester, and Bayrd Still's on Milwaukee. Like individual biographies, these studies balanced the city's unique personality with larger external forces. For example, Pierce depicts Chicago as a brash newcomer to the Midwest in the 1870s, competing for business and commercial dominance with stodgy and slightly inept St. Louis. Filled with useful information, these urban biographies represent traditional historical methods at their best and are vast improvements over the hundreds of local city and county histories written during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. But these urban biographical styles tended to compress important archival research into the conceptual framework

provided by the chronology of an individual city. Some have recently become even more specialized, narrating the history of one ethnic group or organization in a single city, telling, for example, the story of Italians in Tampa, Florida. Alternatively, some urbanists have taken this narrative mode and selectively applied it to a particular topic across several cities.<sup>19</sup>

The new urban history mode of urban writing implicitly conceptualizes the city as an arbitrary container of some socioeconomic activity, a social "process." The nature of the container, the city, merits no more attention than the theater design would in a play's script. This new urban history deliberately ignores most unique aspects of a particular city, which provides no more than a concrete, almost accidental case study site or historical laboratory. The most notable work of the new urban historians studies social mobility, examining the economic and occupational mobility of ordinary people in the nineteenth century. When historians and reviewers familiar with the more traditional urban biography discussed this somewhat acontextual history, they inevitably complained that the new urban history told them nothing about the particular city, only about social processes. Representing perhaps an extreme case, my own first book focused on Columbus, Ohio, solely because it met all my previously stipulated requirements for a case study site. Thus this mid-Ohio city, although very interesting in its own right, simply represented the urbanization and industrialization process, just as Cleveland or Brooklyn might well have done.<sup>20</sup>

Although the new urban history flew the highest, it also came down the quickest, apparently having covered little actual distance. Within a scant four years after the field's most prominent scholar, Stephan Thernstrom, had coined the term, he disavowed it in a way which probably insured the subject's renown. He essentially claimed that it was neither new nor urban nor history. If Thernstrom's *Poverty and Progress* in 1964 was the finest substantive example of the new urban history, his *Other Bostonians* in 1973 may be seen as the last well-known example of the genre. Although several fine monographs in this mode appeared in the following decade, they were based on research begun when the new urban history was at the peak or even still ascending its brilliant but brief parabola; and few or none were started after the mid-seventies. Each subsequent monograph raised the level of research intensity,

and theoretical and technical sophistication so that the most recent examples, for instance Olivier Zunz's massive study of Detroit, represented enormous research efforts. What is perhaps most remarkable and telling about the field is that few of the historians most closely associated with the new urban history have yet published a second monograph, a delay partly explained by the enormous research requirements of this kind of history. Thus, in a very important sense, the exemplars of the movement have become exemplars of its demise.<sup>21</sup>

### Where Did the New Urban History Go Wrong?

Where did such a promising movement go? There has been, after all, continued activity in other forms of "new" history. The new economic history is firmly established, with its own journals, and the list of subjects earning its scrutiny has expanded as new economic history moves through a rather careful research agenda. While the new political history has not become quite as entrenched, either as a method or as a subject, it and its practitioners continue to be active and visible. And the new rural history has proved to be a lively field, and has moved comfortably into an established journal, *Agricultural History*.<sup>22</sup>

First, a brief description of what the new urban history was. Because the field has generated its own extensive historiographic essays, this description need not be burdened with extensive exemplification. The new urban history started out by asking, "Was it easier to get ahead in the past?" and ended up asking, "Where did all those people go?" Its historians found that it was relatively hard to get ahead in the past and that Americans have always been a geographically mobile lot with something like half of any city moving on within a decade.<sup>23</sup> These empirical discoveries came from the detailed analysis of large samples drawn from census manuscripts, representing generalizations based on thousands of ordinary urban dwellers.

These two findings are quite important and have ramifications throughout the American past. Given the imprecise work of Mumford and Jacobs, these early results gave a thrilling sense of the power inherent in numbers. And as contrasted with the statistical approach's exclusive attention to aggregated information, the new urban history illuminated genuine individuals in their social con-

texts. But as many who teach urban history quickly discovered in their lectures, a little mobility goes a long way. A course in the new urban history which stuck to its essence—mobility tables filled with “climbers and skidders,” exact analysis of the relationship of job descriptions and occupational status, the details of father-son occupational change, “intergenerational skill transfer,” all in myriad cities, from Newburyport to Atlanta to Omaha to Roseburg, Oregon—became as stupefying in its detail as it was lacking in any arguments that could be transferred to other history courses.

The new urban history was in fact highly research oriented, possibly the reason for its favor among graduate students during the years when graduate enrollments in history were at their highest. But as a research oriented subject, the new urban history had two possible developmental paths to follow, and it did not take either. The first and most obvious was to make the methodology more subtle in order to overcome the interpretive problems created by hundreds of tables, which authors wearily referred to as “mounds of computer output.” Such in fact has occurred in sociological mobility studies, where advanced statistical and mathematical techniques continue to try to attack the problems inherent in the tabular analysis and percents so favored by the new urban history. That the data analyzed by the new urban history are amenable to more sophisticated analysis has been recently demonstrated in two reanalyses of Thernstrom’s data.<sup>24</sup>

The second path, also a path not taken, would have been to pursue the implications of the new urban history’s research findings, that it was hard to get ahead and that people moved a lot. These simplified observations raise many questions. What does the concept of community designate when only a handful of people remain over any long period of time? How does a stratified but mobile society differ from a stratified but immobile one? What difference did this make to Americans? How did this differ from various other nations, and therefore for immigrants from these nations? Did the high mobility create a national identity in politics, or did movers quickly pick up local political culture? What difference did mobility make to organizational activity: did it give stayers an automatic advantage or did organizations adjust to a fluid membership?<sup>25</sup> A comparison with mobility research in Britain suggests that American mobility research was not, in fact, properly

housed in history departments. In Britain, vigorous research on mobility is being carried forward by geographers, not historians. For geographers, the study of residential mobility is particularly important as it resolves several important theoretical questions relating to migration fields and spatial concentration. Occupational mobility is less important for this research, to be sure, except as it impinges on residential mobility. In any case, for the geographer, analysis of migration has been important for over a century, and British geographers have followed a research path that shows the genuine promise inherent in mobility research.<sup>26</sup>

Instead of following these obvious leads, mobility studies in the United States caved in to criticism, criticism that should have sharpened the researchers, not terrified them. These critiques argued forcefully that occupational mobility did not matter, for as a question and research agenda it violated historical sensibility. Rather than asking what happened, the new urban history should have been asking, what did the actors want to happen and did that happen? The critics claimed that the seeming objectivity of mobility studies actually forced twentieth-century academic careerist values onto the past. One scholar, Herbert Gutman, quoted Sartre to sum up this critical perspective: history is not about what people did but about what they did with what they had. Others argued that in defining those who had increased pay over their careers as “successful,” the researchers were imposing their own values on the past. They argued for a radical relativism, where each actor would be comprehended in his or her own cultural sphere. The argument paralleled that made by ethnohistorians, who made similar demands on the writers of Indian history. Rather than defend these charges of cultural imperialism, the new urban historians disbanded. The timing of this criticism appears in retrospect to have been perfect, as the field was already in disarray. The new urban historians had had enough intellectual self-doubt that their critics were able to counter their arguments permanently, if prematurely.<sup>27</sup>

The sum of the critical attack was to condemn occupational mobility studies because they implied that an Irish laborer who stayed a laborer all of his life was not “successful.” Because the study did not ask what he considered life success to mean, it was to be junked. This critique threw out the baby with the bathwater, and the great pity is that the baby’s parents stood by and watched

passively. The subtlest mobility monographs to be published, including those by Kathleen N. Conzen and Clyde Griffen and Sally Griffen, had been in press prior to the angry critical outburst of the late seventies. No subsequent studies of occupational mobility have been published in the United States, other than the two recent methodological articles reanalyzing Thernstrom's data.<sup>28</sup> Like a river flowing into a delta, one can trace the impact of the original new urban history into many rivulets, and could even argue that these many areas carry on the traditions of the new urban history. Social historians Olivier Zunz and Suzanne Lebsack, for instance, ask quite different questions, but with a research methodology that flows directly out of the new urban history—census and other lists of names, wealth and occupational variables, a single city focus, an interpretive dependence on quantitative evidence.<sup>29</sup> But the hope that a new kind of history of American cities would be written has faded.

Neither the humanist critique, the statistical approach, nor the new urban history has provided a lasting, dominant analytic paradigm. But from each approach we can take something. From the humanist critics, we can learn to define the concept of city broadly, encompassing the medieval walled corporate entity and the suburban village. From the statisticians, we can take seriously the need to use large numerical overviews. And from the new urban historians, we can learn to look for the impact of urban structures on individuals.

---

## 2 ☆ The Premodern Heritage

---

Compared with their European and British counterparts, American cities retain far fewer characteristics to identify them with the very earliest cities. In fundamental ways urban Americans live in a New World. Modern U.S. cities, both in their pasts and in their prospects, have a dual relationship to the ancient city. On the one hand, they build, change, and evolve in seeming contradiction to and ignorance of all ancient traditions, taking as their models only one another. On the other hand, until as recently as the early eighteenth century, they had at least one foot anchored in the ancient past.

As social and spatial forms, cities have had a continuous 5,000-year history. That is, for the past 5,000 years there have been cities, even though no single city has been in continuous existence for that long. Damascus, with the longest history as a city, is some 4,000 years old. Millennia of human experience with cities has made their physical forms, their social traditions, and the conceptual framework in which we comprehend them all an essential part of our culture. Most people "know" and have "known" what cities are.

A long evolving growth in the understanding and imagery of cities has been disrupted and challenged in the past 300 years. John Winthrop used the then easily visualized metaphor of a "city upon a hill" in his famous sermon to the early Massachusetts Bay colonizers to give them a clear model of their enterprise. His metaphor is not quite so clear to us in the twentieth century, but for Winthrop's listeners, it evoked an image stretching back thousands of years before Christianity. If he had said "castle upon a hill," our instant image would be close to what he meant, for he evoked a