

**Saunders, Peter. *Social Theory and the Urban Question*.
London: Hutchinson University Library, 1981. Pp. 310. Tables.
\$18.95**

Ruth Fincher

Volume 12, numéro 2, octobre 1983

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1018978ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1018978ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (imprimé)

1918-5138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Fincher, R. (1983). Compte rendu de [Saunders, Peter. *Social Theory and the Urban Question*. London: Hutchinson University Library, 1981. Pp. 310. Tables. \$18.95]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 12(2), 158–159.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1018978ar>

are themselves characteristic of this setting of limits within urban studies, and strike an explicit political note:

Someone mentioned that some years ago we were much concerned with the ghetto and its turmoil but we do not seem to be worried about that anymore. . . . The blacks have quieted down, so there is no longer a crisis . . . as a group we wish to be experts and reformers, and, like our predecessors, we are concerned with the elaboration and multiplication of middle-class lifestyles. . . . If we notice our own behaviour in the past, and the unexpected behaviour of cities, it seems that we should be constantly talking about the processes whereby people do not get so badly hurt as they have in the past. . . . We should not lose sight of our equity concerns; which probably are one of the nice things about the bourgeois liberal tradition. (p. 292-3, 295-6).

The value of these two collections is that they give one cause to pause and think over the meaning and limits of such words and such politics. After some reflection it may be possible for urbanists to address these limits of their discipline, and to realize that they have more to tell us about than a reified urban experience. For it should be apparent that the current crisis engulfs the modern industrial city at the same time that it extends beyond it. The urban, as part of a larger totality, is too important to be left to itself.

Bryan D. Palmer
Department of History
Simon Fraser University

Saunders, Peter. *Social Theory and the Urban Question*. London: Hutchinson University Library, 1981. Pp. 310. Tables. \$18.95.

Social Theory and the Urban Question is a fascinating and sophisticated review. Its stated purpose is to make a critical assessment of major theories in urban sociology and the way they have conceptualized "the urban" (p. 8). But it succeeds in doing far more than this. For, contributing to a recent debate on social science epistemology which seems to emanate from the University of Sussex (see Sayer, 1979),¹ Saunders confronts controversial issues such as the empirical validation of theory and the question of structural determination versus human agency in urban explanation. These are matters which have been discussed in many other disciplines than urban sociology.

The book, then, has one central theme and various sub-themes. With consideration of the three major social theorists in capitalism, Marx, Weber and Durkheim, Saunders begins his search for a specifically "urban" theory for urban sociology. These three are found to have theorized the social relations of capitalism but not to have proposed any theory

of the city or the urban: the modern city is seen in their work "simply at the most visible expression of developments in society as a whole" (p. 47). Human ecology, though its earliest applications were to urban communities, now has no necessary link to urban phenomena. It has become a specialized sort of structural functionalism concerned with "how human aggregates adapt to changing conditions, and there is nothing specifically urban about that" (p. 78).

Recent attempts to found a new sociology of the city on the concept of housing classes are argued to have failed for several reasons, including the need for patterns of housing consumption to be analyzed with a theory of class structure or ideology rather than a theory of the city (p. 147). And detailed critical discussion of Marxist explanations, especially those of Castells and Lefebvre, find they have treated urban theories as ideological rather than scientific. Even Marxist work which conceptualizes the urban as a spatial unit of collective consumption uses the process of consumption as theoretically significant and the city as one expression of this. "Urban struggles," similarly, are theorized in their relation to class struggle rather than to the spatial context in which they arise.

The point is clear. Sociologists have not been able to theorize the urban. Rather, they have linked theories of social processes to particular spatial outcomes. Saunders concludes that urban sociology, despite its name, must have a non-spatial theoretical core. He proposes the development of a distinctive urban sociology based upon theoretical analyses of three themes: social consumption, local government and competitive politics.

Perhaps the books' sub-themes are of greater interest. They certainly are more contentious. Consider the two mentioned above: the question of the empirical validation of theory and that of the merits of structural explanation versus explanation according theoretical primacy to human agency or voluntarism. Saunders ends his book with an Appendix entitled "A Note on the Empirical Testing of Theories." Here he agrees with the proposition widely advanced in recent epistemological discussion (e.g. Sayer, 1979) that "facts" are not theory-neutral. But, he argues, any theoretical perspective must be testable, if only on its own terms; it must specify "disconfirming instances." Marxist approaches which do not develop such "counter-factuals" are assessed as tautological, and a Weberian "ideal-type" framework is advocated instead. Tackling Marxist work again, Saunders indicates insight in his discussion of structural determination and human agency in social science explanation. Castells' writing on urban social movements is criticized here. It is argued that Castells' explanation of urban social movements as the "automatic" expression of structural contradictions is unsatisfactory, since it cannot account for "the question of how actors understand their situation" (p. 203). Clearly, "if the same structural contradictions manifested in the same sorts of crises can result in different modes of political strug-

gle . . . then practices clearly cannot be explained within a theory of structures" (p. 201).

As a critical assessment of the major social theories claimed by urban sociology, the book is an unqualified success. Quite apart from the fine substance and writing, Saunders is to be commended for "respecting" work to whose perspective he does not subscribe by assessing it in detail and presenting it in its most sophisticated formulations. He is to be commended also for taking thoughtful stands on some difficult and controversial epistemological issues. One could criticize the book for several reasons. The alternative epistemology for urban sociology, the Weberian ideal-type "dualistic" approach which is argued to avoid tautology, is not as well developed as are Saunders' criticisms of other perspectives. The theoretical basis for the proposed ideal types is not clear. Finally, there seems to be the same confusion for which Saunders castigates human ecology in his designation of social consumption, local government and competitive politics as both processes *and* their observable outcomes. It is a pity, furthermore, that Saunders has labelled his book as a search for a new urban sociology, for much of what he says is common to other disciplines. One could also criticize his focus on Castells' writing as a means to criticize Marxist explanation: though Saunders deals with it well, much criticism of Castells has been made elsewhere; it is unnecessary to dwell on it to the exclusion of a large Marxist literature which has tried to build upon Castells' work rather than just replicating it. None of these points detracts from the quality of the book as the critical review it claims to be.

An advanced undergraduate honours class whose students have some background in the assessment of urban theories might make good use of this book. But I suspect that its concern with epistemology will place it more generally on graduate reading lists. That concern makes the book relevant to any course or discipline in which there is interest in explaining urban change. I recommend it most highly.

Ruth Fincher
Department of Geography
McMaster University

NOTES

- 1 Andrew Sayer, *Theory and Empirical Research in Urban and Regional Political Economy: A Sympathetic Critique*. Urban and Regional Studies, Working Paper no. 14. (Brighton, U.K.: University of Sussex).

Reader, W.J. *Bowater: A History*. London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981. Pp. xv, 426. Tables, figures, maps, illustrations. £25 and \$49.50 (U.S.).

The Bowater Corporation is a British multinational organization particularly active in North America and significant in the Canadian setting as the founding agent and dominant corporate force in Corner Brook, Newfoundland. Born a century ago as a modest wholesaler of paper, it has in recent decades become involved in many activities, including the manufacture of products as diverse as drainage pipes and fine furniture. A merger in 1973 with the commodities trading firm of Ralli International doubled its sales volume, so by 1979, total sales of the Bowater Corporation measured nearly £2 billion. Yet, for all that diversity and trading activity, the Bowater Corporation remains firmly identified with the production and sale of paper and paper products, especially newsprint.

Bowaters' first venture into manufacturing was the paper mill at Northfleet, near London, England. It had been built in consequence of a decision in 1924 to take advantage of a rapidly rising demand in England for newsprint (itself caused by a fierce circulation war among the national newspapers of the Fleet Street press barons). From the manufacture of newsprint, the firm expanded into the production of wood-pulp in England, and then overseas through the acquisition of pulp and paper mills in Scandinavia and Newfoundland, as well as of vast timber leases in Newfoundland. This growth, completed in 1939, was governed by a perceived need to protect Bowaters' British operations by reducing its dependence on independent suppliers of wood and wood-pulp. The Newfoundland expansion, however, was also encouraged with an eye towards penetrating the lucrative American market. That penetration began during World War II with sales of surplus newsprint produced at the Bowaters mill in Corner Brook, Newfoundland, and led eventually to the construction of pulp and paper mills in the United States itself, in the 1950s and 1960s. Bowaters' gradual diversification into other kinds of paper—and forest-products in the 1960s was similarly designed to protect the Corporation, only by then the perceived risk came from an overdependence on the newsprint industry.

Responsibility for practically all of these decisions rested with one man — Eric (later Sir Eric) Vansittart Bowater, grandson of the firm's founder. It had been at his insistence that the firm went into newsprint manufacturing, and it was in response to his initiative that the firm became a vertically integrated operation, and then a multi-national one. Most importantly, Eric Bowater singlemindedly engineered this aggressive expansion through heavy borrowing, trusting in a steadily growing market and the sheer will and force of his personality to keep the company's creditors docile. In short, the history and character of the Bowater Corporation seemed to be given shape by this one man.

It is therefore understandable that in writing *Bowater: A History*, W.J. Reader would place Eric Bowater at the centre of his narrative. Thirteen of the book's fifteen chapters con-