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Rae, Douglas W. *City: Urbanism and Its End*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003. Pp. xix, 516. Tables, maps, illustrations, bibliography, index. US$30.00 (hardcover)

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Rae, Douglas W. *City: Urbanism and Its End*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003. Pp. xix, 516. Tables, maps, illustrations, bibliography, index. US$30.00 (hardcover).

This beautifully turned out, weighty volume offers a detailed, thoughtful history of the decline of New Haven, Connecticut. Its strength is that it is meticulously researched and well written, and places its dismal tale in a context broad enough to do full justice to the complexity of the story.

The author's biographical details provide an interesting background to his study. Douglas W. Rae, who is Richard Ely Professor of Management and Professor of Politics at Yale University, teaches politics to MBA students. He served as chief administrative officer of New Haven, where Yale is located, under the city's first African-American mayor, John Daniels. His writing is informed by the blend of theoretical and practical understanding that one might expect from such a background.

The book's central contention is two-pronged:

- That New Haven, like many other North American cities, has suffered serious depredations, and much of what was once a lively inner city has been reduced to ghetto status, by virtue of population dispersal, rapid development of surrounding municipalities, and de-industrialization.
- That both economic and political power residing outside the city leaves the city helpless in the face of these developments.

The author adds a touch of dignity to this grim course of events by labelling it "the end of urbanism," a term that seems fitting enough in the circumstances he describes, but that would have made for a much less compelling argument had the subject of his study been, say, Rome, Copenhagen, San Francisco, or Vancouver.

To be sure, the essentials of his argument are indisputable and are in fact widely understood, at least among students of city life. Developments throughout most of the 20th century have deprived city neighbourhoods of many of the functions that formerly bolstered their importance as lively centres of public life. Among these developments are the displacement of most water, rail, and urban public transportation by road-based, individual transport; the development of high-tech communications; deindustrialization; the destruction of a great deal of neighbourhood retailing by competition from large-scale stores serving entire regions; the relocation of much entertainment from the public sphere into the home, and single-use, low-density zoning, especially the strict separation, in Canada and the United States, of residence from commerce.

The strength of the study is not these observations in themselves, but in the intelligent way they are marshalled into an argument, the careful selection of case study material that fleshes them out and brings them to life in a vivid portrayal of New Haven's sad journey through the past century, and in writing that flows easily. Rae not only shows the direct impact of major technological change, but also maps the influence of such indirect effects as the rise and decline of voluntary associations and the professionalization of social service delivery.

The study begins with a portrayal of how 19th-century industrialization produced the lively streets and viable neighbourhoods that residents of New Haven were still enjoying well into the 20th century. It then proceeds to document the height of New Haven's urbanism—Rae chooses the years 1910–17—during which Mayor Frank Rice, portrayed as a mediocre leader, is nevertheless able to preside over a prosperous, dynamic city.

A plethora of carefully chosen detail vividly portrays life in the homes, streets, and workplaces and shows how commerce and civil society combined to produce a city that "worked" superbly, despite inadequate governance structures.

Part 2 of the book paints a similarly detailed picture of New Haven's decline under the influence of deindustrialization, exurban development, and social and racial change. This part also centres upon the tenure of a mayor, Dick Lee—unlike Rice, an extraordinary leader—who was nevertheless unable to reverse New Haven's decline. The contrast between a mediocre mayor under whom the city prospered, and an exceptionally capable one who could not halt decline, effectively supports Rae's contention that forces beyond its control determined the city's fate.

Throughout this account of New Haven's odyssey, Rae authoritatively addresses theoretical debates while demonstrating a chief administrative officer's grasp of the daily exigencies of running a city. A look at some of the details of his argument shows the strengths, as well as the occasional weakness, of this mixture of theoretical insight and practical understanding.

One of the characteristics of urbanism he identifies is the intricate network of voluntary associations that provided personal support and fed civic activism during New Haven's heyday. In a sly swipe at the excruciatingly fashionable work of Robert Putnam, Rae refers to this phenomenon as civic density, and dubs the network *civic fauna*, studiously avoiding Putnam's term, *social capital*, and, for a *coup de grâce*, citing a 1916 reference to the term *social capital*. He also notes in passing that Jane Jacobs independently discovered the concept long before Putnam published his famous *Bowling Alone*.

A manager's perspective is brought to bear in chapter 5, Rae's closing chapter on the height of New Haven's urbanism, where he foreshadows some of the causes of its decline by focusing on the rigidity of local government structures and the even more paralyzing multiplicity of detailed restrictions on local government action found in state legislation. This catalogue of reasons why city government was unable to accomplish anything more ambitious than routine administration of such mundane matters as the condition of sidewalks once again reinforces his argument that New Haven was prevented by the limitations on its power from arresting its decline.

His grasp of administrative detail also stands him in good stead when, in his portrayal of Dick Lee's efforts at urban renewal, he

provides a carefully nuanced portrayal of New Haven's "wrecking-ball" approach to downtown redevelopment that succeeds in casting doubt upon the widely asserted judgment that it constituted an avoidable folly. He does not deny that urban renewal and the massive, centralized low-income housing estates it produced had many ill effects, but he demonstrates that, in a city such as New Haven, it is easier to decry what happened than to demonstrate workable alternatives.

In at least one instance, he allows his managerial expertise to crowd out a wider perspective. He argues—against the academic conventional wisdom and in favour of the "practical" one—that the most dramatic impact of automobiles was not to draw residents out of the city, but to inundate city centres with traffic (223–30). In this case, the academics seem to have the stronger case. The suggestion that traffic congestion kills cities flies in the face of the obvious fact that all of the most successful cities suffer from serious congestion, while unsuccessful cities build roads in vain, in many cases until there is no city centre left.

If we could find an example of an obviously successful city—say New York, Tokyo, London, Toronto—whose economy was harmed by excess traffic, the road engineers' argument might gain a small measure of credibility. Ordinary observation, however, suggests that complaints about traffic and parking are not a major concern in those cities that actually have serious traffic and parking problems, but are a constant refrain in the New Havens and the Winnipegs of this world.

My observations in research in Winnipeg, Toronto, and Vancouver suggest to me that, rather than traffic being a cause of city failure, *complaints* about traffic and parking are *symptoms* of city failure. In Winnipeg, complaints about parking that would be considered laughable in Vancouver are offered as reasons for not spending time in a downtown that is beset by decay.

Such contrasts as the one between Winnipeg and Vancouver raise a fundamental question about Rae's argument. He makes it clear that, in his view, the era of urbanism is over. A quotation from Andrew Carnegie at the beginning of chapter 1 even hints that the advanced state of decay in many U.S. cities is a symptom of the advanced state of American civilization. But if this is true, why is it so easy to think of examples of vital cities—including such U.S. ones as San Francisco and New York—as well as neighbourhoods in less vital cities, where urbanism is obviously alive and well?

Toward the end, it appears that the author is not altogether satisfied with his own argument, because, after spending 421 pages convincing his readers that urbanism is dead, he decides, on page 422, that it is only "the hard-edged features of urbanism" that have been irretrievably lost in the face of de-industrialization, wired and wireless communications, and the internal combustion engine. He suggests that "the 'soft' side of urbanism" (422), apparently meaning neighbourhood and community life, can be recaptured, and spends two pages offering some not altogether convincing examples of how this can be done.

"The end of urbanism" is a superb slogan, but it is not a very good argument. Urban life has been part of human life since prehistoric times, and it is a tribute to the strength of urbanism that even the unquestionable toll that de-industrialization, modern communications, and the automobile have taken on cities has not snuffed out the irresistible attraction that city life, and a lively street life, holds for many.

Nevertheless I recommend this book highly. It is an impressive piece of scholarship and a fascinating story, remarkably well told. Urban scholars should have a copy in their library, and for students, the book, or various chapters from it, will provide excellent text materials for courses in urban history, politics, planning, administration, sociology, geography, and more.

The problems with Rae's "end of urbanism" argument are not his alone. They are part of a wider malaise of North American urban studies, and to some extent urban studies elsewhere. As students of city life, we have put a great deal of energy into bemoaning the sad state of cities, especially U.S. ones. A good deal of the literature on the impact of globalization upon cities has over-generalized these arguments, seeking to establish that urban ills are caused by globalization and are therefore the same everywhere.

What Rae is describing is not the end of urbanism, but a particular situation, that of a city with a shrinking population at the centre of a metropolitan area in which surrounding municipalities take all the growth. There are many such cities, as well as cities otherwise similar, but growing slowly instead of shrinking. If we analyze their situation carefully, as Rae has done, we can look for solutions to their problems.

Rapidly growing, dynamic cities in wealthy countries have problems of their own—different ones—and the problems of Third World cities are yet another story. Problems of cities also differ according to their economies and those of the surrounding regions. As students of city life we generalize too much, and do not devote enough effort to understanding different problems and the corresponding differences in possible solutions.[1] Rae's only shortcoming is that he has focused on imagined uniformity rather than real difference. In itself, the account of New Haven, and the analysis of its significance, is exactly the kind of thing we need more of.

Note

1. Christopher Leo and Wilson Brown, "Slow Growth and Urban Development Policy," *Journal of Urban Affairs* 22, no. 2 (2000): 193–213.

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