

Urban History Review Revue d'histoire urbaine

URBAN HISTORY REVIEW
REVUE D'HISTOIRE URBAINE

Blumin, S. M. *The Urban Threshold: Growth and Change in a Nineteenth-Century American Community*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976. Pp. xiv, 298. Maps

A. F. J. Artibise

Number 3-76, February 1977

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1019481ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019481ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (print)

1918-5138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Artibise, A. F. J. (1977). Review of [Blumin, S. M. *The Urban Threshold: Growth and Change in a Nineteenth-Century American Community*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976. Pp. xiv, 298. Maps]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, (3-76), 73–74. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019481ar>

its achievements and its problems - is representative of the contemporary urban environment. Chicago is seen as a city that has manifested the best and worst of urban technology; a city that has presented a perfect paradox of brilliant architectural achievement standing beside the failure to produce a decent human environment for the majority of its citizens. This failure, Condit argues, was part of the United States becoming "the city of the Apocalypse, and no amount of democratic actions, liberal programs, common causes, urban coalitions, and metaphors like the 'greening of America' could deflect it from its course. If Chicago seemed to be a more malignant cancer than other cities, it was partly because it represented its own special mixture of the American diseases and partly because of the incredible contrast between its evils and its unparalleled artistic, architectural, structural, and planning achievements. Only a radical program ... could restore the promise of an earlier day (Vol. II, p. 281). [A.F.J. Artibise, University of Victoria].

* * *

Blumin, S. M. The Urban Threshold: Growth and Change in a Nineteenth-Century American Community. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976. Pp. xiv, 298. Maps.

In 1820 Kingston, New York, was a long-settled rural community, displaying all the characteristics of a town seven generations removed from its frontier experience. In the decades that immediately followed, Kingston, like many other American communities touched by the transportation revolution of the nineteenth-century, grew into a small but thriving commercial city. In this book, Stuart Blumin traces that transformation and examines the effects that crossing the urban threshold had on the lives of individual citizens and the community as a whole.

After detailing changes in the economy, population, townscape, political organization, and social and political life of the community, the author concludes that the growth of Kingston, and its acquisition of the people, institutions, sights and sounds of a small city, enhanced

rather than diminished the sense of local community membership, and enlarged rather than reduced the spheres of collective social action.

Generalizing from the specific findings of this study, the author concludes that the rapid growth of national and regional institutions during the age of Jacksonian democracy did more than expand the consciousness and activities of previously insular American farmers. By creating large and small urban centers, it produced as well a countercurrent of parochial identity and increased the significance of towns within the emerging national society. [A.F.J. Artibise, University of Victoria].

* * *

Stave, Bruce M., editor. Socialism and the Cities. Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1975. Pp. ix, 212. \$13.50.

This is a book about some of the rare successes of twentieth century American socialism and, paradoxically, about the failures inherent in that success. It is a study of municipal socialism, or more accurately, of six urban parties or governments that called themselves socialist. For the common theme of these collected essays is that the purveyors of socialism at the local level could sell their product only by adulterating it - they could establish socialist governments only by ceasing to be socialist.

As Walter Lippmann concluded in 1913, after his own disillusioning experience as administrative assistant to the socialist mayor of Schenectady, the basic reason for this defeat in victory was that socialist governments in America were voted into office by an essentially non-socialist electorate. Anxious to win power and then to successfully exercise and retain it, socialists moderated their radical rhetoric and jettisoned the parts of their program that demanded heavy taxation of business or personal property. As socialists championed open, honest government, tighter regulation of business, an eight-hour day for municipal employees, or even public ownership of streetcars and waterworks, it was difficult to distinguish socialism from advanced