

Urban History Review Revue d'histoire urbaine

URBAN HISTORY REVIEW
REVUE D'HISTOIRE URBAINE

Walter, Richard J. *Politics and Urban Growth in Buenos Aires: 1910–1942*. (Cambridge Latin American Studies). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. Pp. xii, 278. Tables, maps, photographs, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$59.95 (US)

David Sheinin

Volume 23, Number 2, March 1995

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1016645ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016645ar>

[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

Sheinin, D. (1995). Review of [Walter, Richard J. *Politics and Urban Growth in Buenos Aires: 1910–1942*. (Cambridge Latin American Studies). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. Pp. xii, 278. Tables, maps, photographs, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$59.95 (US)]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 23(2), 63–64. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016645ar>

This book deserves to be read by anyone wanting to learn more about inner city neighbourhoods between the wars. The oral history sources are skilfully woven into a graphic account that rings with authenticity. The book provides a wonderful example of urban cultural assimilation and ethnic succession. Perhaps most important it gives a vivid impression of ethnicity as the "primary organizing principle for the spatial distribution of residents". But with the passage of time, ethnicity and ethnic institutions became submerged by a community identity associated with the urban industrial landscape and a powerful sense of place.

Ian MacLachlan
Department of Geography
University of Lethbridge

Walter, Richard J. *Politics and Urban Growth in Buenos Aires: 1910-1942.* (Cambridge Latin American Studies). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. Pp. xii, 278. Tables, maps, photographs, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$59.95 (US)

Though many have written about their fascination for Buenos Aires, there are few archive-based histories of this leading Latin American capital. This study is not only one of the few, but represents the most compelling and thorough historical analysis of municipal politics for any Latin American city. Drawing on city council debates and a broad range of published works, Richard J. Walter explores the struggle after 1915 to make local government more democratic, party politics at the municipal level, and a handful of key issues that came before city leaders and contributed to the growth of Buenos Aires (including notable public works projects, transportation, and the provision gas and electric power). Despite that, this is an insightful and incisively written study; Walter is

very clear on what he is and is not trying to achieve. This is not a cultural history of the city, an assessment of changing neighborhoods, or a gendered analysis of urban growth (though the author does touch on the roles of women at a handful of junctures). Nor does it delve into a range of other recent sub-themes in urban history. This is an assessment of politics and government at the municipal level.

In three context chapters Walter presents "snapshots" of Buenos Aires at different historical stages. These concise samplings of city life include the fascinated descriptions of prominent visitors such as Federico García Lorca and Waldo Frank, summaries of cultural offerings, reflections on architecture and town planning, and comments on the impact of class differences on the urban landscape. Making use of a 1913 *Baedeker*, Walter whisks his readers on a tour through the downtown core. He also covers the emergence of a street cafe culture in the 1920s, and the rise of professional soccer as a popular spectator sport. He makes poignant use of the exploits of the dashing aviator Jorge Newbery as a metaphor for the vibrancy of the city—and conceives of his untimely death in 1914 as a symbol for the dramatic slowing of urban expansion after the outbreak of the First World War. But as Walter forewarns his readers, there are only tentative links between these varied components of city life and the main emphasis of the remaining nine chapters, municipal politics.

There is rich detail on urban political structures. Tense negotiation often characterized the interaction between the elected municipal council and the mayor appointed by the president of the republic. Walter deftly considers the interaction between mayors and municipal councils, and how the political process was frequently drawn to issues of vital importance for urban growth. Mayors tended

to be prominent members of elite society while, increasingly, the make-up of the municipal council represented the vociferous Socialist party and the middle class-based Radical party. Notable periods in municipal government include the mayorship of Joaquín Llambías. Appointed in 1917 by the first Radical party president of the nation, Hipólito Yrigoyen, Llambías presided over a period of financial retrenchment during the world war and the extension of the municipal franchise to all male voters. With more progressive councilmen elected from poorer neighborhoods, municipal leaders shifted resources to a building boom in outlying areas of the city during the 1920s. Walter devotes considerable attention to profiles of the Buenos Aires electorate. Working with material in the third national census (1914) and the 1918 municipal voter registry, he finds that political party leaders had a sophisticated understanding of city voters, often designing their platforms in an effort to craft a voting alliance of the middle and working classes.

The growing strength of the Radicals and the Socialists was reflected in lasting changes in the kinds of issues municipal politicians considered. The council became increasingly involved in the regulation and fostering of mass transit as the city grew, to the point where political leaders intervened in and mediated the settlement of wage disputes between streetcar workers and transportation lines. In the 1930s, politicians became consumed with the construction of Buenos Aires's great avenue, the Nueve de Julio—complete with an *Obelisco* modeled on the Parisian equivalent—and played a vital role in the construction of the Buenos Aires subway system. Walter also makes reference to many smaller topics of municipal debate, some of which were intimately tied to larger national political and cultural questions. In 1941, for example, mayor Carlos Alberto

Pueyrredón raised a storm of protest when he banned Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* at the request of the foreign minister who was trying to chart a neutral course in wartime.

Walter demonstrates effectively that local government had an instrumental role in building Buenos Aires before the Second World War, particularly in regard to the creation of a leading transportation infrastructure and the sometimes frantic pace of construction. While those interested in urban culture may be disappointed, Walter follows through expertly on his stated objectives.

David Sheinin
Department of History
Trent University

Adamson, Walter L. *Avant-Garde Florence: From Modernism to Fascism*. (Studies in Cultural History). Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993. Pp. xiv, 338. 12 illustrations, bibliography, index. \$39.95 (US).

That beautiful medieval Florence, with its magnificent museums and glorious architecture, should have been a fascist stronghold well before Mussolini's march on Rome in October 1922 seems to suggest a painful contradiction. History, beauty, and good taste do not cohabit, some of us still like to think, with vulgarity, brashness, and violence. Uffizi and squadristi belong neither in the same city nor in the same sentence. Yet, through Walter Adamson's fine study of a group of Florentine intellectuals—the circle that founded and dominated the cultural reviews *Leonardo*, *La Voce*, and *Lacerba*—we discover, yet again, how former definitions and distinctions have collapsed in our century and how, whether we like it or not, modernism and fascism are indeed related phenomena.

It is that very collapse of fixity and form and the advent of a new fluidity and transience that in the end characterizes the modern experience. The optimists of course put a positive gloss on all this; they talk of emancipation rather than *dis*-integration, of vitality, not nihilism. Like their intellectual confrères elsewhere, the turn-of-the-century Florentine avant-garde—represented here primarily by Giovanni Papini, Giuseppe Prezzolini, and Ardengo Soffici—argued that beauty and violence, thought and action, history and actualism, were not opposites but merely the sterile categories of a rationalism whose time was up. The alternative to that rationalism and its lowbrow appendage, sentimentalism, was a cult of youth, action, genius, hardness, and spiritual renewal, through which the old categories and moral confusion would be transcended and a new age, purer and bolder, would dawn. Indicative of the approach was Soffici's interpretation of Papini's physical ugliness as "beauty at a higher level."

If the morally bankrupt compromise politics of Giolittian Italy and the endless tourist invasions of their Tuscan homeland made these men apoplectic, the war in Libya in 1911–12 against the Turks gave them a taste of violence as "spiritual educator" and made their mood apocalyptic. The excitement, danger, and intensity of that war induced visions of what Papini called "a true Dreamland." When less than two years later all-out European war erupted, with its potential for revolutionary change but with Italy initially on the sidelines, all three writer-performers became ardent interventionists. Civilization, they said, had to be plunged into barbarism in order to reinvigorate itself.

Italy of course jumped alliances in May 1915, joined the Entente, and experienced the Great War fully, its horror, dislocation, and frustration. If the war did not become the "magnificent event" that

Prezzolini had hoped for, ineffable and incredible it nevertheless was. As such it intensified the dissatisfaction with the old order, its values and its politics, particularly when, after the peace treaties, the Italian victory became politically as well as morally suspect.

Mussolini acknowledged his debt to the Florentine cultural critics, especially Prezzolini. He had read, applauded, and even contributed to their journals. Their response to him and his movement was not without ambiguity, but, as Adamson rightly points out, any attempt to translate into practical, and invariably mundane, political terms the "militant idealism" of these intellectuals was bound to elicit skepticism from them. Still, if thought and action were one and the same, as the Florentine avant-garde, together with the premier philosopher of fascism, Giovanni Gentile, were wont to claim, then Benito Mussolini, in all his vital and vulgar splendour, was their brainchild.

Adamson's study is, despite its title, less about Florence than about some influential thinkers who happened to reside in Florence. Based on extensive research in primary sources, written with clarity and verve, it is an important contribution to the debate on modernism and deserves attention.

Modris Eksteins
Division of Humanities
Scarborough Campus, University of
Toronto