

**Beauregard, Robert. *Voices of Decline: The Postwar Fate of U.S. Cities* (New York: Routledge, 2003), revised edition**

Robert Lewis

Volume 35, Number 1, Fall 2006

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1015999ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1015999ar>

[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

Lewis, R. (2006). Review of [Beauregard, Robert. *Voices of Decline: The Postwar Fate of U.S. Cities* (New York: Routledge, 2003), revised edition]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 35(1), 52–53. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1015999ar>

some context about GAY's rather limited Canadian competition—the *ASK newsletter* (a homophile publication based in Vancouver) and *TWO* (a magazine for the Toronto gay club crowd). In part because much of McLeod's tale is relatively unknown, he provides significant detail about the changing editorial composition of the periodical, its struggle to define a 'voice' for the magazine, and some of the personal trials of its second and last editor, Robert Marsden of Middletown, PA.

The section on Marsden's fortunes is quite fascinating, and a testament to the doggedness of McLeod's research skills (combining as it does archival material with oral histories with one of Marsden's former associates Richard Schlegel). Marsden was the son of a prominent Presbyterian clergyman and educator, and after university he embarked on a business career in electronics. Yet, that left him unfulfilled, and as a young gay businessman with a comfortable trust fund income, he longed to indulge his passion for photography and physique studies of young males. Hearing that the small Canadian periodical *GAY* was for sale, Marsden leapt at the chance to realize his dreams of creating his own gay magazine. Under Marsden's ownership *GAY* was rechristened *Gay International* and the editorial balance shifted in favour of photographic portraits (many taken in the basement of the family home in Middletown, PA); more risqué fare, including anonymous articles about inter-generational sexual attraction; more eye-catching cover art, and re-prints of American material. Despite these changes, it continued to be printed and distributed from Queen Street in Toronto. Struggling to find the right editorial mix, with debts piling up, and annoyed distributors clamouring for copy, *GAY International* teetered on the verge of insolvency in June 1965. Erroneous criminal charges laid against Marsden for consorting with underage youth at a Pennsylvania cabin pushed the magazine over the brink. By 1966, *GAY International* had ceased publications.

Despite this short-lived and tumultuous tenure, McLeod argues that *Gay* deserves a place in the history of gay and lesbian publications. The substantial circulation across news-stands in Toronto, Hamilton and Montréal, as well throughout the United States, marks *GAY* as unique in this time period. On circulation alone, McLeod claims that Canadian gay publications would not surpass the print run of *GAY* until the publication of *Xtra!* Similarly, he notes that *GAY International* unlike most of its peers was not a homophile magazine, but rather a general interest periodical. Cultural historians and historians of sexuality will critique McLeod's assertion that *GAY* was "non political" as his definition of political is too narrow. Yes, it was not political in the sense of advancing either an "assimilationist" or "liberationist" view (32) but to print gay material in 1964 was to offer material that was political. Much as feminist historian Veronica Strong-Boag has argued for the politicization of 'everyday acts' in the 1930s, a time when formal feminist activity was in decline, so should historians of sexuality and gay activism regard as political, cultural and associational activity in the pre-Stonewall era. *GAY* presumes a self-identified gay audience. Furthermore, it does not argue, as many middle-class

homophile organizations would for acceptance and equity, indeed it does not concern itself at all with such 'respectable' notions. Instead, it argues for a 'gay' world view and is unrepentant about that stand. Given what we know about how people 'find' other gays and lesbians, we know the cultural materials are extremely important, as they frequently serve as the entre-points to the homosexual community. What message did it send gay youth and gay men, when they discovered a copy of *GAY* on their local news-stand? That, I suggest, was a politicized and important message for this magazine to make.

Despite my criticisms of the issue of *GAY*'s 'political' nature, McLeod is to be commended for an excellent book. As he himself notes, he hopes that this book will stimulate other scholars to further advance our knowledge of the importance of gay and lesbian periodicals. I would concur most strongly, and hope that this "brief history" sparks many investigations of the gay and lesbian periodical press.

V. J. Korinek  
University of Saskatchewan

---

**Beauregard, Robert. *Voices of Decline: The Postwar Fate of U.S. Cities* (New York: Routledge, 2003), revised edition.**

Bob Beauregard's *Voices of Decline* joins a long list of books that deal with the American postwar urban crisis. While covering many of the concerns raised by other writers, the distinctive aspects of Beauregard's work are the breadth of issues covered, the types of sources employed (mainly popular magazines and government reports), and the concern with how cities are represented by authors writing in these publications. His main purpose is to trace out discursively how public intellectuals, journalists and policy makers understood postwar urban decline. In the process he argues that this discourse has been instrumental in the rise and fall of the American city and has underpinned the marked inequalities of capitalist America.

After an introduction to the debates on urban change and American reactions to the city (chapter 1), he outlines the optimistic discourse of urban boosters and policy makers before the Second World War (chapters 2 and 3). The prewar city was one of growth, prosperity and hope. In contrast, postwar urban America experienced decline, deterioration and despair. Decline because the city lost out to the suburbs and the town; deterioration because capital flight undermined the city's physical and social conditions; and despair because racial and class conflict became the central mode of inter-group interaction. Beauregard establishes these issues by following a chronological narrative of postwar urban growth in which discourse is organized around a unique central theme (chapters 4 to 10). During the 1940s and 1950s the discourse revolved around physical decline and regional change. Over the last 40 years issues of race and class, fiscal crisis and urban decay, capital and population flight, and racial and class segregation have taken over central stage at different times and in different

ways. Despite urban revitalization and incorporation by cities of an urban festivity into their development plans in the 1980s and 1990s, Beauregard argues that social disparities and urban decline continues to characterize the American city.

While the empirical part of the revised book is very similar to the original one published in 1993, the sections at the beginning ('Framing the Discourse') and end ('Reading the Discourse') of the book have been extensively rewritten. Shorter in length, the postmodern musings of the original have been "stripped away" (p. 249) so as to make the new version a traditional urban "history book" (p. xiii) rather than a cultural text. The result is a much more successful book. Meanwhile, the strengths of the substantive sections of the original book remain, namely a fascinating account of popular writings on the American city, the linking of postwar America urban development to themes and issues of the prewar period, the elucidation of suburban space as a 'spatial fix' to the endemic problems of the city, and the elaboration of discourse as legitimatizing capitalist inequalities.

The central organizing concept of the study is discourse, which he defines in one place as "a collection of contentious interpretations" (p. 21). Surprisingly, and despite the idea that ideas are fought over, Beauregard has little to say about those responsible for manufacturing the discourse describing and driving urban development. Everyone it seems, from those living in the suburbs to those writing in academic papers and business meetings, is equally responsible for the manufacture of urban discourse. Regardless of expertise, the commentators' voices appear to be equal. But was this the case? Should we, as Beauregard does, accept as equal the musings of the President of the College of Idaho on the supposed universal desire of all Americans for wide-open space, the exhalations of Lewis Mumford on urban decline, and the precision of George Sternlieb's calculation of central city and suburban growth? I found myself wanting Beauregard to make sense of the cacophony and diversity of the voices that jostled for credibility and power. Similarly, I looked for some discussion of the interests (class, racial, etc.) that underpinned the voices. What is missing from the story that Beauregard tells is some sense of how the voices, all of which came from a thin slice of (white) middle-class America, were linked to a broader political economy.

The emphasis on the opinions of a select yet influential set of writers leads Beauregard to round out the jagged actualities of American cities and to overemphasize the uniqueness of the postwar period. Two examples illustrate this point. First, a central focus of the book is the rise of white fear about African Americans after 1945, especially from the 1960s. In his opinion, black migration to northern cities was only a "cause for alarm" (p. 79) in the postwar period. But how does this account for such episodes as the 1919 Chicago race riots, the development of ghettos in all northern cities by the 1920s, and relentless discrimination that forced blacks into the lowest echelons of the urban labour market? Second, he makes the point in several places that population and economic growth

in central cities continued through the interwar period and only stopped after World War Two. But was this the case? There is good evidence to show that the history of the central-city is more nuanced than that. In the first place, annexations, such as those taking place in New York in 1898, Chicago in 1889, and Philadelphia in 1850, provided both the material and discursive space for much of the city's growth before World War One. Secondly, the onset of central-city decline can be identified from as early as the 1920s, once the major wave of annexation had finished. Decline was central to the prewar city.

What are the book's lessons for the historian of Canadian cities? Certainly, the issues that so trouble the American city—most notably race and the peculiar and contradictory relationship Americans have to the state—are not so sharply delineated and work themselves out in quite different ways in the Canadian scene. That said, there are important parallels. There can be little doubt that the tensions between urban, suburban and non-urban ideals have shaped the specific types of spaces constructed on the expanding peripheries of Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver as much as they have in New York, Chicago and San Francisco. It is a truism that Canadian cities have experienced and continue to experience, among other things, damaging social and economic effects of uneven flows of capital investment and disinvestment in similar ways as in the United States. Indeed, the central cities of Hamilton and Winnipeg are not that indistinguishable from those south of the border; they are not immune to the ills plaguing the capitalist city—capital disinvestment, the loss of decent-paying manufacturing jobs, deteriorating infrastructures, poor housing and high rents. Similarly, even in Canada's prosperous cities, such as Toronto and Vancouver, neighbourhoods of the poor, drugged and disabled stand cheek by jowl with revitalized residential and commercial landscapes. Urban decline takes many forms.

More than a decade after the first edition was released, *Voices of Decline* remains an important and impressive book. Beauregard raises issues and questions that continue to be central to our understanding of the city. He has much to tell us about how middle-class, professional commentators viewed and fought over the American city and, in the process, the Canadian city as well.

Robert Lewis  
University of Toronto

---

**Heron, Craig, and Steve Penfold. *The Workers' Festival: A History of Labour Day in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005. Pp. xviii, 340, illustrations, index. \$39.95 (paper).**

In *The Workers' Festival: A History of Labour Day in Canada*, Craig Heron and Steve Penfold take us into the vibrant life of a holiday that is at once culturally familiar and historically obscure. It is the story of "labour's day" that never entirely belonged to labour; and a story of the frustrations of the modern labour