

Urban History Review Revue d'histoire urbaine

URBAN HISTORY REVIEW
REVUE D'HISTOIRE URBAINE

Erenberg, Lewis A. *Steppin' Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930*. West-port, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981. Pp. xix, 291. Table, illustrations. \$23.95 (U.S.)

Howard P. Segal

Volume 12, numéro 2, octobre 1983

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1018972ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1018972ar>

[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

Segal, H. P. (1983). Compte rendu de [Erenberg, Lewis A. *Steppin' Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930*. West-port, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981. Pp. xix, 291. Table, illustrations. \$23.95 (U.S.)]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 12(2), 151–152. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1018972ar>

All Rights Reserved © Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine, 1983

Cet document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

Numerous experiments followed along these lines. Whether organized cooperatively by housewives, or on a business basis by paid workers, communal eating was always cheaper than individual food preparation at home — a reflexion on the low cost of labour and bulk purchasing of foodstuffs. Yet from Melusina Fay Peirce in the 1860s to Jane Addams and Ethel Puffer Howes in the 1930s, these women underestimated the strength of capitalism and the growth of a consumer society which, Hayden maintains, eventually led to the demise of their alternative vision while consecrating suburban living and single family home ownership. Material feminists, Hayden shows, fell victim to Red-baiting and consumerism. In the meantime, the United States had witnessed dozens of experiments initiated if not by feminists themselves, by reformers, architects, trade-unionists or disgruntled housewives.

Hayden has chosen a subject of great relevance: Melusina Fay Peirce's demand of wages for housework in 1868 sounds very familiar. Today's feminists who regard domestic work by women in the nuclear family as an essential feature of patriarchal oppression are echoing a long line of women from Peirce to Mary Stevens Howland, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Ethel Puffer Howes. One striking difference between these two waves of feminism is the inability of material feminists to challenge the sexual division of labour: whether transferred to cooperative undertakings or the care of experts, domestic chores they made the preserve of women.

We may ask ourselves if contemporary social and economic changes — the setting-up of fast-food services, laundromats, apartment buildings — have in fact taken place under the control of women, as wished by the material feminists. It would appear that women had diminishing influence as these innovations left the experimental stage to cater to mass consumption. Many of the material feminists had unrealistic expectations, although some visionaries foresaw that an increase in domestic appliances would not necessarily cut down on the time spent on housework unless also accompanied by a change of attitude towards housekeeping. Witness today's sophistication in food preparation at home where food processors succeed food blenders for a more complicated recipe. Hayden has a message for feminists: for her the issue of housework is so fundamental that its neglect by present-day feminists may have weakened their cause.

Of interest to urban historians are the spatial consequences of the material feminists' schemes on urban communities, the planning of new neighbourhoods and their infrastructures. The erection of apartment buildings favoured the introduction of communal services, even of kitchenless homes. Unfortunately, as more collective services developed, feminist filiation was not always evident, and with the enshrinement of post-World War II suburban living, the failure of feminist considerations to influence design and architecture is self-evident.

This book, in which the author attempts so many connections, is full of facts gleaned from a variety of private papers, obscure publications, and the rereading and reinterpretation of better known collections. A large number of illustrations complete a fascinating narrative.

Among the brilliant insights, the reader also finds dubious assertions. For instance, many would dispute Hayden's contentions that nuclear energy was developed to meet the increasing demand for *domestic* consumption (p. 23), or that free love is "the demand that women control their own sexuality and reproduction" (p. 205). It was more than that. If Hayden's work is not free of contradictions, it remains a milestone in the historiography of American feminism and architecture and design.

André Levesque
Department of History
University of Ottawa

Erenberg, Lewis A. *Steppin' Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981. Pp. xix, 291. Table, illustrations. \$23.95 (U.S.).

Steppin' Out is the first scholarly study of nightlife in the leading American metropolis or, for that matter, in any major American city. Previously explored only by popular writers and gossip columnists, this fascinating segment of modern urban culture has now finally received serious, sophisticated, and, not least important, sympathetic academic treatment. For Lewis Erenberg, a historian at Chicago's Loyola University, has presented nightlife — its history, values, institutions and leading figures — as reflecting not the pathology of urban culture, as have so many others, but its positive expression, its unique identity. Contrary to generations of evangelical preachers, genteel critics and even social workers, nightlife, he claims, was a healthy, prolonged rebellion against Victorianism in America: in particular, its social and sexual rigidities; its restriction of respectable women to the home; and its double standards for males vs. females, whites vs. blacks, and native-born vs. foreign-born citizens.

One might casually associate New York City nightlife with the 1920s, the "Jazz Age." Erenberg, however, carefully shows that decade to have been not its beginning but its culmination, at least until the post-World War II era. He traces the successive development of (1) Fifth Avenue restaurants and hotels; (2) Broadway "lobster palaces"; (3) cabarets, cafés, vaudeville houses, ragtime parlors, and movie theatres; (4) individual entertainers and their establishments; (5) revues; and (6) nightclubs. He emphasizes the gradual rise of a public realm of culture separate from the traditional private realm based in the home. One result of

its rise was unprecedented social mobility, if only at night, for even greater numbers of Americans. Another was the breakdown of the physical and psychological distance between entertainer and audience, performer and patron, in so many of these night-time establishments.

And Erenberg is aware of nightlife's psychic dimensions, of its role as a realm of fantasy and of dreaming — of hidden desires realizable, if at all, only in the anonymity of the urban world. He describes the release these activities provided from the daily grind of domestic and business chores alike, of self-discipline and willpower, of formality, and of repressed passion and asceticism. Public display not permitted elsewhere were tolerated, even encouraged, in these institutions. Yet, curiously, Erenberg employs virtually no psychology in his analysis and, indeed, save for a few references to the late Erving Goffman's sociological theories, studiously avoids social scientific findings which might have enhanced his observations.

The absence of comparative data of any kind also weakens the book. We are apparently to accept on faith Erenberg's assertion that New York City's nightlife was representative of (if also superior to) that of other major American cities. One cannot necessarily expect equivalently detailed studies of the next largest metropolises in these pages, but in their absence, at this point in urban scholarship one can as readily assume that New York City was in this as in other respects a unique city.

Steppin' Out is amply illustrated and clearly written. Based on entertainers' scrapbooks and memoirs, reformers' accounts, *Variety*, contemporary newspapers and other publications, it is, despite these drawbacks, a significant contribution to urban history.

Howard P. Segal
Department of Interdisciplinary Technology
Eastern Michigan University

McComb, David G. *Houston: A History*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981. Pp. 288. Illustrations.

The fastest growing city in Texas since 1925 and now the fifth largest city in the United States, Houston has drawn its share of scholarly, not to mention popular, attention. McComb's book, first published in 1969 as *Houston, The Bayou City*, is but the most recent of the studies that have attempted to clarify why and how Houston has grown. His approach to the subject however, is distinguished by its application of W.W. Rostow's stages of economic growth as the guiding model. Houston's development is separated into three major chronological periods, the first of these being the frontier years from 1836 to 1875. Set apart as an era of

transition, is the middle period, 1876 to 1930. The first years of the twentieth century which saw the completion of a Houston-centred rail network, the construction of a fifty mile ship channel giving direct access to the Gulf making Houston a port city and the discovery of nearby oil fields, are presented as being of particular importance. In the context of the model, this development established the conditions for "take off" and the "drive to maturity." The final or "post-maturity" phase from 1930 has been characterized by years of almost continuous dramatic growth.

The new edition incorporates into the analysis of the city's development, the roles of blacks, Hispanics and women, as well as an assessment of the most recent decade's frenetic petro-fired expansion. While the raw material up-dates and adds appropriate detail in certain areas, other important dimensions of Houston's urban experience remain less satisfactorily developed. The rich and abundant literature on urban politics is not reflected in McComb's discussion. While there are interesting sidelights on the almost constant rivalry between Houston and other Texas cities, Houston's place in the evolution of State politics is not defined. It similarly is apparent that Houston has gained the material regard of immensely powerful friends in Congress, but the role of this major metropolitan centre in national political affairs is not considered. The careful discussion of Houston's business elite and economic development is not balanced by a substantial analysis of the labour force and working conditions.

Consideration of the ultimate significance of Houston's history is left to the epilogue. "Once and a while" the author explains, "in the history of a civilization, nation, or city, there occurs a moment when all of the dynamic forces of existence flow together to produce extra-ordinary greatness" (p. 191). Such forces, it is alleged, came together in the 1890s to produce in Chicago, the energy and vitality that bestowed on that community a mantle of national leadership in the arts, business and politics. Houston, in 1980, is seen by McComb to be on the verge of such an urban renaissance. But without comparative measure or the supporting backdrop of the contemporary urban scene in America, the verdict on this observation must remain outstanding.

If, in places, the focus of this study may seem too narrow, there is nonetheless much here to engage anyone interested in comparative urban history. Canadian readers of the Houston biography cannot help but be drawn to think of Canada's fifth metropolitan centre — Calgary. The common cattle ranching and oil based economies of their respective hinterlands has for example, in a profound and similar way shaped the development of both cities. Moreover, the international oil business has meant much direct interchange between the two communities. At the same time key structural differences are apparent. In contrast to mineral title resting originally with the individual surface title holder in Texas, all rights in Alberta mainly reside with the Crown. This, with Canada's centralized and eastern domi-