

Commentary: Approaches to the Urban Past

Reuben Bellan

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COMMENTS

Following a brief review of the foregoing three papers, Professor Bellan made the following comments:

It is of the profoundest significance to me that the words city and civilization derive from the same root and express the idea of orderly relationship. The Greek word for city, "polis", expresses the same idea; as a matter of fact our word, police, meaning people who enforce the law, was originally used only in the sense of orderly arrangement. The orderly arrangements referred to are those governing the relationships of a large number of people living in closest proximity, mutually independent, mutually interacting.

That a large number of people should live in close proximity reflected the advantage of concentration, the gain that could be achieved by close integration and co-ordination of human efforts. Agriculture did not require such concentration; it required in fact dispersal. The city, by massing human capacity, was able to achieve production and generate benefits in a quantity and variety that was totally beyond the reach of dispersed agricultural society.

The role of the city and the size it might attain altered through time as the result of technological advances which broadened the area from which the city could obtain food and materials and to which to could furnish its products, and enlarged the range of services it could perform. Cities were both alike and unlike. They were alike in that all had broadly similar features: all had their complements of residential buildings, commercial, industrial and administrative structures, and streets. They were alike in that they had to furnish the same services to their inhabitants: water supply, sewage disposal, and protection of life and property. They were unlike in that in each the buildings and layouts were the products of unique imaginations, and were affected by the vagaries of natural environment and the vicissitudes of historical development.

Improvements in transportation and communication tended to have a homogenizing effect. The superior techniques, the attractive styles

developed in one locality were quickly reproduced in others. Throughout entire countries and in fact extending beyond national boundaries, a certain urban sameness developed in the course of time, modified chiefly by local residuals of a unique past.

There is no end of tasks to be performed by urban historians. Studies should be carried out of those broad historical movements, those major technological changes which again and again reshaped and redirected the pattern of urban development generally. Studies should be carried out of the particular histories of individual cities, revealing how the peculiarities of natural advancement, the activities of particular individuals combined to produce unique local development. Studies should be carried out on the social arrangements that emerged, whether by law or by concessual practice, and how these social arrangements altered in the course of time and in the face of new pressures, new needs and new outlooks. Studies should be carried out of the physical characteristics of cities, and their relation through time in consequence of the emergence of new possibilities, views, needs and ideas. Cities are a multi-faceted phenomenon and the full chronicle of their movement and change through time must necessarily be elaborate beyond measure.

The revolutionary technological advances in agriculture and transportation of the last half century have nearly eliminated the farm population of economically advanced nations. With virtually all their people living in cities, their future history will consist of chronicles of what happens in their cities. Urban history will broadly be coincident with national history.

In extending the bounds of our knowledge about the urban past, historians will be performing invaluable service. Many present problems are the contemporary face of secular trends; they can be properly understood only in historical perspective. Other problems reflect in their nature behavioral regularities that have manifested themselves time and time again upon the urban scene; the historian perceives and understands a current happening therefore not as a purely stochastic event, but as an instance of an ascertainable behavioral pattern. The historian's scholarship should make possible more knowlegeable and therefore presumably more effective handling of problems that arise.

The historian's research will yield important benefits of another sort. It makes us vividly aware of the seamless continuity of life and events; it affirms our identity as members of communities that extend long back in time and provides us therefore with the psychic security of membership in a durable community that long outreaches at both ends the span of our own lives.

Reuben Bellan