

Urban History Review Revue d'histoire urbaine

URBAN HISTORY REVIEW
REVUE D'HISTOIRE URBAINE

Barrett, Paul. *The Automobile and Urban Transit: The Formation of Public Policy in Chicago, 1900-1930*. Technology and Urban Growth Series. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983. Pp. 295. Biographical note, index. \$34.95 U.S.

Michael H. Frisch

Volume 13, numéro 2, octobre 1984

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1018130ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1018130ar>

[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

Frisch, M. H. (1984). Compte rendu de [Barrett, Paul. *The Automobile and Urban Transit: The Formation of Public Policy in Chicago, 1900-1930*. Technology and Urban Growth Series. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983. Pp. 295. Biographical note, index. \$34.95 U.S.] *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 13(2), 176–178. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1018130ar>

To the urban historian, what will perhaps be of greatest initial interest will be the unusual development of Berlin. Not only did the seemingly less qualified centre beat Guelph and Galt out as Waterloo county seat but without any of the usual natural advantages.

World War I changed Berlin. Not only did anti-German feeling force a name change, it also marked the advent of a more cosmopolitan centre: the end to industrial peace, and a more concerted effort at a carefully planned city initially utilizing the expertise of Thomas Adams. The final chapter is perhaps the least satisfying as one gets the impression that there is a rush to the end.

Throughout *Kitchener*, it is, as it should be, people that dominate. One gets a real sense of the links between the prominent industrial families such as the Schneiders, the Kings and the Rempels and the development of Berlin-Kitchener. A. R. Kaufman, planner, birth control advocate and industrialist is also a dominating figure.

Similarly, as one might expect, the national and provincial political figures such as Mackenzie King, W. D. Euler and members of the Breithampt family appear. Nonetheless, the most fascinating politicians are the "eccentrics" who appear to be yet another unique aspect of the city's history. Such characters as Allen Huber and Joe Meininger bring true life to this story; it is urban biography in its best sense.

This work will appeal equally to both the academic and the interested layman. Although it is quite obvious that two different hands were at work on this project, the styles are complementary and the result is a flowing, easy to read manuscript. Perhaps the ultimate compliment was delivered by a Kitchener student taking a university course in which this was the mandatory text who commented, "until I read this book, I didn't realize I lived in such an interesting place."

Gerald J. Stortz
Department of History
University of Western Ontario

Barrett, Paul. *The Automobile and Urban Transit: The Formation of Public Policy in Chicago, 1900-1930*. Technology and Urban Growth Series. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983. Pp. 295. Biographical note, index. \$34.95 U.S.

High on the list of misleading conceptions about the study of history must be the notion that the confusions of a given present become magically clear in the illuminating light of history. This may usually be correct, but magical clarity is not quite the same as truth. As often as not, the distance of history can blur detail and flatten perspective to the point of gross distortion, resulting in a two-dimensionality that stands

as a barrier to any useful understanding of the history involved. In such circumstances, the real task of serious historical study becomes recovery and restoration: to seek not distance but proximity, so that the processes of actual change, set once again in visible motion, can be reconstructed and studied on their own terms.

This proposition is at the core of Paul Barrett's exceptionally thorough and important study of auto and mass transit in Chicago in the early twentieth century. The triumph of the automobile is one of those obvious results that obscure less obvious causes, leaving us with simplistic images that seem validated by the world around us. Thus has it been conventionally assumed that the automobile destroyed mass transit in head-to-head combat, a battle decided by technological imperative, by the needs of modern cities and a new urban economy, and by the auto's closer fit to the values and preferences of the middle-class individualist ethos dominating American culture. Those rejecting this view have not necessarily rejected the conflict it assumes: they have argued that the fight, while decisive, was not fair. Urban mass transit in this view, was undone by a campaign, even a conspiracy, intent on removing all obstacles to the hegemony of the automobile and the interests crystallizing around it.

If his book is itself regarded as a head-to-head battle against such notions, Barrett wins by a decisive knockout, a victory built on relentless body blows of meticulous research, impressive right crosses of complex argument, and fancy footwork that traces to a fine sense of irony and paradox, enabling the author to seem to get at his opponent from several sides at once. When it is over, there is still no question as to the triumph of the automobile, but Barrett helps us see how it came about, and what this has to teach.

Public policy turns out to be the somewhat surprising heart of the story. The development of the modern city inevitably required decisions about public space, regulation, and spending; government functioned as a kind of switchbox for everything from developmental imperatives to particularistic economic and political pressures. Barrett wants to show that in shaping transportation policy, such inputs were not nearly as important as the mechanics within this switching mechanism itself — how issues were understood and engaged, which responses were accessible or not, and how responses at one point conditioned and limited possibilities later on.

The book demonstrates this powerfully by showing that there never was that head-to-head battle: rather than a struggle among different approaches to something that could be called urban transportation policy, we encounter two parallel and perhaps tragically separated histories: the regulated streetcar system collapsing of the weight of its own contradictions, while in the very different arena of street and traffic policy the groundwork was being laid for the accommodation of the automobile and all that it implied. What mattered

most, Barrett argues, is how little these engaged each other, except insofar as both shared a policy environment that doomed one to failure and permitted the other to survive. The actual triumph of the automobile came, in a curious sense, by default; and the consequences of this victory for the shape of the modern city had to do less with the auto itself than with the way it serendipitously fit the evolving assumptions of urban planning policy.

Both stories are told in fascinating and compelling detail. However rapid, Chicago's transit could never outrun Yerkes' shadow, and the politics it had produced. Barrett focuses particularly on the comprehensive 1907 agreement that forged a compromise between the elusive goal of municipal ownership and the unrestricted power of the traction monopolists, by making the streetcars a strictly regulated but privately owned utility. This was fatally flawed on several levels: profit was regulated but guaranteed as a percentage of valuation, a policy producing endemic overcapitalization. More deeply, there was simply no way to reconcile the contradictory goals of the regulation: economic efficiency proved incompatible with the quality of service and amenities demanded by the public, yet both were required by the regulations and the fixed fare they imposed. And on yet another dimension, an integrated system of streetcars and heavy commuter rails was, in the political context, literally unimaginable, since the Loop railroads and subway plans were understood as centralizing forces designed by and for the CBD, while reform hopes and neighbourhood support for streetcars centered on their dispersive and deconcentrating effect.

All this set the streetcars on a track to oblivion. Traced through the 1930s, this story confirms the lesson suggested by 1907: the inherent instability of a publicly-regulated but profit-dependent transportation utility, and the inevitable resolution of this instability in favour of the private interests. When it finally came in 1947, municipalization meant little more than a banker-engineered public bail-out, once private profit-making had become impossible.

If the political obsession with regulating streetcars ironically kept mass transit from being understood as transportation policy and planning as such, Barrett shows that the *inability* to effectively regulate the traffic problem led in precisely the opposite direction: if you couldn't control how horses, teamsters, carriages, and, incipiently, autos and trucks used the streets, the streets themselves would have to be manipulated to produce the desired results. Such redesign was at the heart of Burnham's famous plan, and had advantages never possessed by streetcar regulation or municipal ownership, in that it involved a more traditionally legitimate area of governmental authority, and it touched interests so dispersed and fragmented that it could not be immediately politicized, as were any and all proposals involving mass transit.

The automobile could not have better been suited to exaggerate the limits of street regulation, and thus to fall more squarely under the umbrella of positive policy, soon inheriting all the dispersal-oriented reform hopes once attached to the streetcars. Barrett traces this as well through to its logical conclusion: the emergence in the 1930s of streets specially designed for automobiles only, apt symbols of a transportation policy conceived and defined in terms of automotive needs.

Thus public transportation never escaped from essentially private definitions, being corporate-run with direct users primarily responsible for meeting costs. Meanwhile, private transportation was accommodated, planned for, subsidized, and ultimately managed publicly. The irony involved in this paradox, Barrett suggests, could not be more central to an understanding of modern cities and policy.

The book is somewhat limited in exploring this centrality, however; Barrett might well have pushed further in several senses. The 1930 cut off date, for one, makes little sense, since the chords being struck on each hand seem to have been conclusively resolved only after World War II. One understands why doctoral theses have a discrete focus and why publishers these days like two-hundred page books, but the richness of Barrett's research and themes would have been more fully realized if permitted to expand to their natural limits. This should have been a three-hundred fifty page book reaching to the 1950s.

Barrett is also somewhat reticent about expanding on the significance of his case study. He works so hard to show us what policy isn't — it isn't a conspiracy, it isn't technologically determined, it isn't cars defeating trolleys — that there isn't sufficient energy, it seems, to examine very extensively what it *is*. This is reinforced by Barrett's editors, who hail him for showing that things are complex, not simple, noting that "by avoiding facile labels and refusing to editorialize, his study fits squarely into the emerging school of sophisticated transportation history" [vii]. It is to be hoped that this school has more on its banner than this. Barrett's work would certainly suggest so; his re-drawn map of urban policy history seems dominated by some broad if unnamed and undeveloped avenues, of sufficient focusing and shaping power to make a Daniel Burnham proud.

Closest to a theoretical formulation is the focus on the contextual dynamics of the policy-formation process itself. Intersecting with this is the suggestion that the broader political economy of urban capitalism stands at the very centre of this process — not in terms of particular conflicts, but in the shaping, over time, of the basic assumptions within which the city's business is transacted and conflicts are presented for political resolution. But here, Barrett merely draws the circle these values describe. Without engaging them more conceptually, he is left with little to do except remark, repeatedly, on the revealed contradiction of a commitment

both to public service and to private profit in urban transportation. But the story invites more powerful generalization — about the way the city's spatial divisions complicated and hence deflected for many decades the power of capital, for instance, and why the domination of all aspects of policy by the corporate and banking interests of the CBD came only with the transformation, largely by the automobile, of the politics of urban space.

Similarly in need of more analytic comment is the rich portrait of city government itself. Barrett suggests the deeper tension involved when democracy is supposed to hold economic power in check, but when the state is also expected to rationalize this power, to be the increasingly visible hand doing what business is unable or unwilling to do on its own. In this, the inadequacy of government regulation virtually by definition seems to be the most useful of Barrett's discoveries; there is much to be learned by tracing through the reasons behind his suggestion that either extreme — total deregulation or total government ownership — would have been more likely to produce a viable mass transportation system than the middle ground of regulated private enterprise. On this compromised terrain, the fight against the traction monopolies proved to be a dramatic battle more or less won but to no constructive effect, while elsewhere a more consequential yet barely recognized battle for control of the streets — and for the future of transportation planning — was being lost to the auto by almost invisible degrees.

Citing the urban role in the birth of progressivism has long been one of the mainstays of conventional historiography; Barrett's complex story suggests that the urban context and dynamics may be equally central to the demise as well, in which all that was politically challenging was absorbed by a corporate vision that redefined society, culture, and politics in its own image. Extrapolated to the national level, all this seems strikingly apropos today, when conventional regulatory approaches have come to seem as inadequate to the realities of the modern economy as were the 1907 regulations to the realities facing Chicago's streetcars.

This seems more clearly understood on the contemporary Right, as witness the successful appeal of deregulation, and the frequently strong objective case to be made for it. American liberals, and much of the Left, however, seem often to be riding the streetcars to the end of the line, understanding neither the kinds of economic realities nor the policy-formation dynamics so clearly described here. Barrett's understated and imposing work thus reaches far beyond its carefully-delimited period and topic, ably suggesting the broad promise, for urban studies and history, in the "emerging school of sophisticated transportation history."

Michael H. Frisch
Departments of History &
American Studies
SUNY-Buffalo

Parot, Joseph John. *Polish Catholics in Chicago, 1850-1920: A Religious History*. DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 1981. Pp. xvii, 298. Illustrations. \$22.50 U.S.

Keil, Helmut and John B. Jentz, eds. *German Workers in Industrial Chicago, 1850-1910: A Comparative Perspective*. DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 1983. Pp. viii, 252. Illustrations. \$22.50 U.S.

The eruptions of Chicago into an urban metropolis in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries coincided with the arrival of hundreds of thousands of European immigrants. Germans and Poles were among the most numerous, each establishing settlements making Chicago, depending upon one's origin, one of the largest German and Polish cities in the world. Nevertheless, both groups, while altering Chicago's urban environment, had, in turn to adapt traditional patterns of individual and communal behaviour into new social, cultural, economic, and political configurations. This dual process is one underlying theme of both books under review.

For the devout, rural Polish peasant immigrants and their priests, adjustment required accommodation with the Americanizing, Irish-dominated Catholic hierarchy. Parot, in his important work, states the dilemma thus: "How is it possible to retain the ethnocentric character of Polish nationality while at the same time giving way to the centrifugal force of Catholic universality?" (p. xii). In Chicago, Bishop George Foley granted a monopoly to the Polish Congregation of the Resurrection of Our Lord, which in turn organized the immigrants in a community-national parish structure imitated elsewhere. This ethnocentric parish-community complex, rooted in Old World patterns of religious and communal behaviour, provided invaluable cradle-to-grave care. When American bishops in the 1920s began to convert national parish-community complexes into territorial parishes to accelerate Americanization, the pastors, to ensure the survival of their parishes erected at such cost, worked even harder to keep them exclusively Polish, which meant keeping the neighbourhood Polish; they succeeded well into the 1950s in the preservation of communal ethnicity.

Parot's recounting of the religious history of Chicago's Polish Catholics in their formative period is a well-documented account of rural immigrant adaptation and community self-organization in urban, industrial America. Parot writes with affection, and in great detail explains the central role of the parish in the Polish immigrant community; the activities of Rev. Vincent Barzynski and the Resurrectionists; the inter-community clashes between the nationalist and clerical factions; how the Resurrectionists' monopoly (which was eventually broken) provoked independent, ultimately schismatic currents; the successful