

# SOCIAL SERVICE REVIEW

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That debate was ongoing and wide ranging. Stromquist brings a carefully balanced and subtle attentiveness both to its strengths and its patent inadequacies. His account helps us see both how hard the progressives worked to imagine a path toward the social commonwealth and how painfully sharp the limits of their vision often were. It should be no surprise that the debate Stromquist retells mirrors so well our own struggles, almost a century later, to articulate a program of the common good in a diverse and multicultural United States. The Progressive Era reflects, once more, the burdens we bring to it.

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## Notes

1. See Maureen A. Flanagan, *Seeing with Their Hearts: Chicago Women and the Vision of the Good City, 1871–1933* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002); Sarah Deutsch, *Women and the City: Gender, Space, and Power in Boston, 1870–1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Linda Gordon, *The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

2. Frederic C. Howe, *The Confessions of a Reformer* (New York: Scribner's, 1925).

**Sprawl: A Compact History.** By Robert Bruegmann. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. Pp. 306. \$27.50 (cloth); \$17.00 (paper).

This is one of the most flawed, yet fascinating, academic books I have read in a long time. The main thrust of its argument goes as follows. Throughout urban history, in many times and places, people who could afford it have moved away from the bustling crowd to quieter areas. Although there are some seeming exceptional areas (e.g., the enduring popularity of central Paris or the revitalization of American downtown areas), the densities are much lower even there than they used to be. Humans apparently seek privacy, freedom, and mobility. They feel that they can achieve this best by having their own piece of land while remaining in reasonable proximity to others (and the jobs and services that entails), but not too close. From the wealthy ancient Romans who moved out of Rome to the cooler hills to the British middle class in the nineteenth century to the working class of America's Levittowns, the process of deconcentration (or sprawl) apparently reflects a basic human desire. Therefore, attempts to explain sprawl as the result of the interstate highway system, federal tax subsidies for home ownership, or zoning practices are nonsensical. Sprawl exists in places where none of these factors have ever been present, and sprawl was well underway in the United States before there were highways or a federal tax system. Furthermore, since deconcentration obviously meets such basic human desires, any attempt to slow it or stop it needs to weigh carefully the loss of happiness this would cause. In any event, efforts to stop it are doomed, because most public policies do not work and, in fact, often have the opposite effect from what is intended. Therefore, sprawl is virtually universal, and it neither can nor should be stopped.

If you agree with this argument, you will love Bruegmann's book. But try this slightly modified version of the argument: throughout human history, in many

times and places, people have waged war. Humans apparently seek power and dominance and feel that they can achieve this best through violence. Therefore, attempts to explain causes of specific wars are a waste of time, and attempts to stop it . . . well, the reader can fill in the rest.

If this sounds like a simplification of Bruegmann's argument, it only borrows his own method: create a straw man and then relentlessly beat it. Use ridicule and nonstop polemics.

Just because developing technology and rising affluence allowed people in many places and times to seek decreasing densities hardly means that sprawl as a social and economic problem is eternal. There are huge differences across societies, cities, and times in the rate at which this deconcentration happens, what policies and processes facilitate or impede it, how well the negative consequences are addressed, and the benefits shared. Indeed, the book is full of clauses like, "it was very much the same, except for the scale" or "except for the rate." Bruegmann is very intent on showing that there is nothing new under the sun; sprawl has always existed. This sounds much like the lament of the underappreciated historian. Of course, it is useful to have the historical perspective; the book provides wonderful information about times and places past. But a temporary exception in the historian's grand sweep may be several hundred million people's entire lifetime, and a mere difference in scale can have qualitative effects. All one has to do is think about tipping points and global warming.

If one sets aside this fundamental disagreement about the scientific logic of Bruegmann's argument, the book contains a wealth of material and reviews a huge literature. It shifts from a perceptive and informed architectural historian's personal observations of cities across the world to extensive social science critiques. It provides a real service by discussing some of the early urban deconcentration patterns, once a certain level of affluence is reached, in a city like London. Bruegmann also examines the similar processes in twentieth-century cities worldwide.

Bruegmann acknowledges that "after World War II, the American experience and the European experience diverged for a brief period, with sprawl much more visible in the United States than in Europe" (42). He attributes this to greater affluence and population growth in the United States and to more activist public planning in Europe. It is, of course, precisely this period that has given rise to most of the literature on and current concern with sprawl. The European experience provides one model of how urban form could develop differently, also demonstrating how social policies and urban form are interrelated. Interestingly, Bruegmann also points at the larger role of European governmental bodies in preserving central cities, even though he generally argues that public policies have little or no effect.

The chapter on the causes of sprawl is a very concise critique of various explanations for postwar sprawl. Bruegmann shows that no single factor (tax policy, technology, or racism) can explain sprawl. In the absence of affluence and political freedom, he argues, sprawl may not emerge, but there is no single cause. His tone is unnecessarily polemical, and his argument is focused around straw men. Although some publications from advocacy organizations focus on just one cause or only focus on one negative consequence without counting any of the benefits of current development patterns, most serious analyses take a much more sophisticated and multivariate approach. (See, e.g., Janet Rothenberg Pack, ed., *Sunbelt/Frostbelt: Public Policies and Market Forces in Metropolitan Development* [Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2005].) Bruegmann makes a good contribution in showing that, in addition to their base in more or less objective social science and economic arguments, the objections to sprawl

have a mixture of social and cultural roots. He unmask some of the elitist and culturally biased critiques of sprawl by observers like Lewis Mumford. Even Joni Mitchell ("They paved paradise and put up a parking lot" [132]) and Pete Seeger ("Little boxes made of ticky tacky" [135]) do not get off scot-free.

The last main part of the book reviews antisprawl policies. The gist of the argument here is that most policies and programs have never really been implemented (such as postwar plans for the Washington, DC, area to steer growth along public transportation corridors) or have not worked (such as American new towns); if they have had an effect, it has either been perverse or mostly consisted of unintended consequences (such as no-growth provisions, zoning regulations, and development prohibitions that drive growth further out into the country). Alternatively, Bruegmann argues that, where growth restrictions have worked, the benefits are largely gained by current landowners and residents at the expense of others (as in Boulder, CO; Nantucket, MA; and Portland, OR). In an apparent attempt at evenhandedness, Bruegmann praises the effectiveness of Soviet planners in laying out and controlling Moscow's urban form. This is no doubt a model with which antisprawl advocates will gladly associate themselves!

There are also minor quibbles. While the book is extensively documented, there are strange lacunae. A claim about travel modes in the Netherlands (141) has a footnote, but the sources do not have that information; Bruegmann laments the absence of serious cost-benefit analyses of sprawl but ignores Joseph Persky and Wim Wiewel's *When Corporations Leave Town: The Costs and Benefits of Metropolitan Job Sprawl* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000), which lays out a comprehensive cost-benefit framework. He frequently compares the United States with Europe, but Europe seems to consist primarily of London and Paris; after some brief mentions early in the book, the rest of the world rarely makes an appearance. Bruegmann clearly loves cities and has much to say about them. This could have been a great book; instead, it is so marred by its main logical flaw and its polemical style that one cannot help but distrust every argument.

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**Shock Cities: The Environmental Transformation and Reform of Manchester and Chicago.** By Harold L. Platt. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004. Pp. 592. \$49.00 (cloth).

Chicago and Manchester are two classic sites of working-class battles against the legendary greed and grind of nineteenth- and twentieth-century capitalism. They are also places where some of the most important battles for environmental justice occurred. They are shock cities: urban centers that inspire both awe and horror at their immensity, their efficiency, and the pain and misery that often accompanies their growth and development. Harold Platt's study of these cities is a monumental achievement in environmental history and environmental justice studies. It is a model of interdisciplinary comparative research, careful analysis of evidence, and wonderfully written prose. It is expansive in its range and remarkable in its attention to depth and detail.

Platt frames this study around what he calls the paradox of progress: the fact that, in capitalist societies, growth and wealth seem inextricably tied to poverty, inequality, and ecological harm. He reminds us that Alexis de Tocqueville was not just a keen observer of social forces in the United States in the 1830s but