



“Upon the hills? Cities and the anti-urban impetus in American history”, Lutherstadt-Wittenberg, Feb 8-10, 2008. A Conference Report.

Organized by Hans-Juergen Grabbe (Halle-Wittenberg) and Oliver Schmidt (CMS Berlin), the 31st annual meeting of the historians' section of the German Society for American Studies (*Deutsche Gesellschaft fuer Amerikastudien*) took place in Lutherstadt-Wittenberg between the 8th and 10th of February 2008. Entitled “Upon the Hills? Cities and the Anti-Urban Impetus in American History,” the conference scrutinized the deep-seated ambivalence marking the history of urbanization in North America.

The symposium had a packed schedule, consisting of three hour-long **keynote speeches by Kenneth Jackson, Werner Sewing and Lizabeth Cohen** delivered on the first day, five panels with ten half-hour presentations by several established and some younger scholars followed by discussions, as well as a roundtable devoted to “Contemporary History and Politics of Cities and their Environment,” dealing mostly with New Orleans and Venice – not to mention several further social events. The aim of the conference was to link historical explorations with contemporary debates in the burgeoning field of urban studies, to thereby revisit and test the analytical applicability of the metaphorical notion of an anti-urban impetus in American history, besides the self-evident aim of bringing together the scholarly community of North American history and renown scholars of US urban historical studies in the framework of scholarly exchange and the exceptionally pleasant setting of the LEUCOREA Foundation.

As the first keynote speaker, Kenneth T. Jackson (Columbia University) provided a panoramic overview of urban development in the United States, pointing to a discrepancy between the continued appeal of the foundational agrarian ideology and the massive urbanization of the 19th century and also covering the most essential development of the past century, the suburbanization of American society, of which he is considered to be one of the foremost experts. Jackson closed on a note of “optimism out of pessimism,” predicting a revival of American cities in the 21st century, based on his understanding that the current patterns cannot be sustained for much longer. Matthew Lassiter (Ann Arbor) a member of a younger generation of scholars, presented his ideas in a creative and critical dialogue with Jackson, acknowledging the latter's *Crabgrass Frontier's* lasting impact and finding some of its assertions problematic.

Lassiter's current scholarly aim is to cover the suburban crisis in the shape of a forthcoming monograph, linking politics to culture and moving beyond the false simplistic dichotomy of city and suburb, for example by investigating diversity within the suburbs, showing how the original definition has become outdated – even if cultural representations admittedly have yet to catch up with this fact. Lassiter's project includes an attempt to dissolve the current amnesia related to the massive public funding and racist basis of the early suburbanization processes.

In his thoughtful though perhaps somewhat sketchy presentation, Werner Sewing aimed to explore the dialectical relationship of the impact of physical and ideological developments on lifestyles. He dissected various historical representations of the “urban” and ‘suburban’ realm, referring to several countries and centuries, including England and Germany. Pointing to the fact that the American suburban discourse of the 1950s was, at least from a sociological point of view, quite false, he pointed to the ever-present class subtexts and the primary contexts of

various suburban discourses, including the influential current critique of suburbia of the baby boomer generation, who seem to have often moved on to “Bohemia.”

In a second keynote, Lizabeth Cohen (Harvard) and later Christopher Klemek (Washington D.C.) both addressed the aspirations and limitations of the New Deal Order, of which the urban renewal order was one of the important pillars. Addressing the theme of federal urban renewal and mostly focusing on the career of Edward J. Logue and understanding his career as a symbol of “planning with people,” Cohen critiqued the outcomes of such initiatives by assessing them on the basis of three criteria – physical viability, economic prosperity and social equitability, – and claiming that they did not produce satisfying results on any of them. Klemek, in turn, critiqued both the idea of American exceptionalism by comparing and contrasting New York with Toronto (where an alternative class-coalition and the much lesser role of racist considerations have led to much better outcomes) and the simple narrative that links Jane Jacobs and her celebration of the neighbourhood to the “collapse of the urban renewal order” and the demolitions. Klemek pointed to the lack of causality and, more generally, aimed to move the narrative away from its focus on the collapse of the modernist, functionalist vision. In his view, Jacobs’ own community organization in West Village won only a defensive victory and in fact no large-scale alternative planning replaced the liberal, progressivist one, i.e. the post-urban renewal order meant a policy vacuum. Nancy Kwak (New York), also pointed to the international horizon of American policies, dealing with American housing policy makers in the context of the Cold War. Drawing on her own field work, she presented the interest of the experts have shown and impact they have had on public housing in Southeast Asia. One of her aims was to show how American foreign policy has been intertwined with matters such as housing policy, pointing to the emergence of a way of conducting policy related to the so-called developing world. Kwak critiqued how the massive rushed urbanization of Singapore has been presented as a great success since, and, more generally, how globalization has actually worked on the ground. Kwak also remarked the intriguing way the language has been adapted in Singapore where 93% of the people today live in what they call public housing that they in fact own.

The discussion panel on “Shrinking and Sinking Cities” started with Berndt Ostendorf’s (Munich) listing of the commonalities of the situation in Venice and New Orleans. Ostendorf raised ten reasons why New Orleans should be rebuilt, bearing in mind “the dialectic between ecology and human intervention,” i.e. the idea that protection of both goals cannot be achieved at the same time. The panel took a controversial turn when Kenneth Jackson listed several reasons to show that New Orleans qualifies as a failed city that has massively lost in city competition, and arguing that the USA “doesn’t need it.” While several others claimed the need for a new civil rights movement, in order to not only save this city but save it for all its citizens, the panellists agreed that *the tragedy of New Orleans* has revealed the lack of people’s continued attention and involvement beyond the first four weeks. The early history of New Orleans, incidentally was the topic of a presentation by Marion Stange (Berlin), who presented her findings on the early public health policies in French Colonial New Orleans, a city built in a no doubt inhospitable environment, thereby reflecting on the competing understandings of the city as sickness and as cure.

Let me address the other presentations in somewhat more telegraphic style. Jessica Gienow-Hecht (Frankfurt) addressed the boosterism involved in the emergence of institutions of classical music in the US and the veritable orchestra boom around the turn of the century. She related this to the competitive climate of the times (certainly not unlike what is going on in our age) and the militaristic language of description of their national tours (with metaphors of ‘invasion’ and ‘conquest’ in frequent use). She also pointed to the profound ironies that,

firstly, these imports that were supposed to attest to local refinement reflected nothing truly local and, secondly, how high culture remained not generically 'American' in perception, but rather something European, elitist, snobbish. Sabine Meyer's (Mainz) presentation on the temperance movement in St. Paul aimed to read this phenomenon as a text and presented her case for this movement leading to the invention of 'German-American' and the reinvention of 'Irish-American' identity.

Nadine Klopfer (Berlin), in turn, discussed one of Montreal's iconic spaces, Mount Royal. While reflecting reasons often conflict understandings of the Cross that was put up there in 1924 became a consensual symbol without the different underlying motives and interpretations being erased. Dominik Nagl (Berlin) applied the Foucaultian concept of governmentality to the history of slavery, exploring the question of when slaves have simply been understood as property and when it was assumed that they also have personhood. Nagl pointed to the important differences between New England (Massachusetts) and South Carolina in this respect, his two case studies. Marcus Funck (York/ Canada), currently researching civic aviation as a global process, analyzed on the extensive debates related to airport dilemmas in the early years of aviation history, namely the 1920s and 30s, and related these observations to the recent development from city airport to airport city - the development of the so-called Aerotropolis. In his film-based contribution, Rob Kroes (Amsterdam), discussed the widespread fantasyland associations with Florida, reading them as dystopic visions of the urban landscape but also showing them to be creative material for popular entertainment (just as in the movie *The Truman Show*).

All in all, besides the excellent opportunity for extended discussion and personal exchange, the conference offered insights into a plethora of research directions and quality coverage of recent trends in American historical urban research, though admittedly without aiming at a systematic analysis of these directions and trends. While the crucial anti-urban impetus was interpreted, discussed and debated in several meaningful ways, as Oliver Schmidt pointed out in his closing remarks, a stricter typology and periodization of this impetus would require more elaboration, which could then also further clarify its use value and limits as an analytical category.

Written by Ferenc Laczo
(ferenc.laczo@metropolitanstudies.de)