

Approaches to the Study of the Urban Past: Geography

James T. Lemon

Number 2-73, October 1973

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1020593ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1020593ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (print)

1918-5138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Lemon, J. T. (1973). Approaches to the Study of the Urban Past: Geography. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, (2-73), 13-19.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1020593ar>

FOOTNOTES

1. The term planning is used synonymously with 'urban or city and regional planning' (North American usage) and 'town and country planning' (British usage). No distinction is drawn between these.
2. For a brief summary, see John W. Reps, *Town Planning in Frontier America* (Princeton, 1969). For greater detail, see Zelia Nuttall, "Royal Ordinances Concerning the Laying Out of New Towns", *Hispanic American Historical Review*, Vol. 15, 1922.

.

APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF THE URBAN PAST: GEOGRAPHY

What I have to say, then, is more about what "geographers" are doing than about geography. A central struggle among geographers now is between the ecological/behavioural perspective and the planning/political view. By ecological I mean a tendency toward reductionist view of human existence, an uncritical acceptance of processes operating below the surface of consciousness, notably competition.¹ This connotes "economic man" who defines self-interest in the narrowest of terms. Behaviouralism, a more recent development, while more subtle, says much the same: man the manipulator. Society is made up of a bunch of individuals who adapt and sort themselves out by competition. This may overstate the position of Robert Park and Edward Burgess, the classical writers of urban ecology,² but it has been the basic thrust of most studies on urban geography. A rejoinder to my proposition, namely that the ecologist's view of North America cities fits the American ideology, can be countered by another proposition that the students of ecology not only describe conditions, but imply a normative state. Everybody has to adjust if we follow them. Besides, North American cities have not always followed the ecologist's descriptions.

The alternative approach is that of politics and planning. This view cannot deny the dominance of competitiveness in our society, and so there can be a continuity with the ecological/behavioural, but it brings out conscious stances. This view may be seen as a continuation of the decision making and process concern of behaviouralists, yet it is a jump

beyond them. It does make conscious what is assumed. Today, we have to talk of the power of groups in the planning process. And in the historical context understand who planned cities in the past. That this means "bias" and participation in the events, is in fact no less biased than the ecologists, whose politics is whatever is good. What is going on now with historical geographers reflects both the ecological and political tendencies. To consider trends we can separate the studies into two groupings: first, the urbanization process and urban system, and second, patterns within cities.

Urbanization Process and the Urban System

At this macro-level, the regional, the national, even continental scales are the focus. The central question is: Why and how have cities grown? This cannot be answered without asking about how particular cities connect with one another in a hierarchy or some arrangement of sizes and functions, and how they are distributed over regions as nodes of activity. Also important here historically are the demographic problems of rural/urban differentials and of mobility, rural to urban, urban to urban and international movements.

Much has been written on these matters. Among historians the classic study by N.S.B. Gras³ was mostly ignored until a decade or so ago, when Eric Lampard in particular brought out his calls to action in the study of urbanization.⁴ Both set general frameworks that have been followed since then by a variety of scholars. Among geographers, Walter Christaller's central place model of the 1930's gained much ground in the fifties with urban geographers and finally was used in the sixties by historical geographers.⁵ His work certainly helped to break historically orientated geographers away from simple minded and dull discussions of the sites of cities at bridging points and the like, yet remained weak on understanding processes of change.

Christaller's view has been criticized as static and also as unable to incorporate towns with special interests such as mining, and manufacturing cities. He does in fact have a dynamic element, that of threshold. A city would "move" from one rank to a higher rank when it was able to support or reach a threshold of more specialized higher

order activities when it expands its population and its range or hinterland. But given that Christaller's work was on rather stable rural southern Germany, it is not surprising that he lacked a strong developmental perspective, and also has nothing to say of newly-settled areas.

Many of the recent studies by geographers⁶ have been on creating a developmental framework while based in part on Christaller's pioneer work. Many of the statements lack the conceptual rigour of Christaller's theory, but that may be just as well since they allow more flexibility. Nor are the "stages" of development as temporally linear as the sequence developed by Gras for Metropolitan growth, based in order on wholesaling, industry, transport and finance. The present work on the model ignores none of these but recognizes that they are all involved at all times. To these factors need to be added public administration and population movements.

Following Gras, innovations in material technology and organization of society are of critical importance. Dynamic concepts have been introduced such as by Allen Pred: that of circular and cumulative causation leading to a multiplier effect on growth and on innovation, as drawn from Gunnar Myrdal. This emphasis on change utilizes the concepts stressed by Lampard of specialization and integration. (Few writers want to look at decline, so we have little about stagnating models.) Finally, we have to recognize that the idea of the urban system refers in fact to regions with nodal centres from the continental scale to local areas. In other words, the metropolitan theme of Harold Innis, Donald Creighton and Maurice Careless has become a central organizing principle for geographers and historians. I suspect Americans came late to this view because the "frontier" myth had a greater hold on them than it did on Canadians. The open relatively featureless west can be contrasted to a dendritic pattern of the fur trade and to a shield-blocking agricultural settlement.

In the long sweep, the central social question is organization, or who runs society. If American historians in their populist bias gave too much power to small farmers, certainly most students of urban systems have ignored the underlying political implications.

Internal Patterns and Processes

Until recently, geographers working on differentiation within the city have stressed sorting out by ecological processes pretty narrowly based on demographic characteristics and socio-economic status. The current trends are to broaden the base of analysis by introducing behavioural categories or by going beyond these to explicitly political views. Sam Warner, in his *Private City: Philadelphia in Three Periods of its Growth*, if inadequate in techniques of analysis and some concepts, has helped us to establish the new outlook: In Philadelphia the politics of privatism were responsible for the form and style of the city. Some of my own students are moving in this direction. Francis Mellen, working on Toronto's waterfront started out interested only in port morphology, later picked up behavioural decision making with its introduction in my department, and then found that the really interesting questions are political ones.⁷

Geographers have mostly followed the path laid out by the Chicago sociological school of the 20's, though with increased sophistication.

In historical studies using the ecological approach, the chief distinction of the pre-industrial and industrial city, identified with Gideon Sjoberg⁸ has been undergoing rough treatment lately, notably from Martyn Bowden, whose work is based in part on that of James Vance.⁹ Likewise the Burgess model, out of the Chicago, school has been discredited as a result of the work of Michael Doucet and Ian Davey on Hamilton in the 1850's. A search for new models for differentiating the city is well under way, for example that of Sherry Olson, who has analyzed combinations of six personality types in three areas of Baltimore to show how these districts were sources of innovation or stagnation.¹⁰ This psycho-behavioural approach is worth pursuing, and certainly opens up possibilities to understanding politics by isolating power groups.

Some parts of the city have been scrutinized fairly carefully, others not. The Central Business District or the core area has been intensively studied by Davey and Bowden, noted above, and by David

Ward.¹¹ The development of residential areas and neighbourhoods is becoming a large area of concern. One suspects that ecology, though focussing on residential differentiation, could not come to grips with the neighbourhood because of a basic disbelief that neighbourhoods existed in the city. In recent years movements within cities have been receiving a great deal of attention though it is technically difficult to handle changes. Doucet's simple study of a few Yorkville families perhaps has told us as much as some complex work.¹² One of my students, Linda Bunn, is handling some Toronto Annex data now with a rather sophisticated technique called Automatic Interaction Detector (AID) in which the computer selects the variable which best separates the whole into two groups, and then continues to differentiate them until the groups are small. In this way, a dendritic pattern of connections can be diagrammed.

The housing of North Americans has received less recent attention than that of the British, I suppose because of a more general acceptance there of housing as a social good. The concern for analyzing working peoples' housing possibly springs from the British intellectuals' sympathy for labour.¹³ Certainly the housing of the poor in North America has received persistent contemporary concern, as shown by Amyes in pre-1900 Montreal and Dennis and Fish today.

Suburbanization has normally been analyzed from the perspective of the expansion of internal transport network from the omnibus (1830's-1850's), the horse car (1850-1890), the electrified streetcar (1890-), interurbans (1890-1940), cars, trucks, and buses (esp. 1920-), and commuter rail-lines (1930's-).¹⁴

Other issues have received only marginal attention. Spelt has given us some sense of the development of the distribution of industry in Toronto where large operations sprang up in the suburbs along new rail lines.¹⁵ Outlying commercial areas have not been studied except slightly in connection with street car/suburban expansion.¹⁶ On parks, one of my students has just finished a piece on Toronto, in part to learn what planning programmes there were, particularly for neighbourhood playgrounds. The interest seems to have been rather in large parks and parkways, influenced by the "City Beautiful" movement.

As I said at the outset, planning is now firmly in the public consciousness and Toronto's planners this year are to receive 50 per cent more from the public purse than they did last year. We should now take advantage of this wide interest and the revival of the neighbourhood as something more or less real, to look into how the very special actions of speculators, developers, innovators, merchants, and governments formed our cities. Obviously, this will be an interdisciplinary task.

James T. Lemon

FOOTNOTES

I wish to thank Michael Doucet for reading the first draft.

1. Peculiarly in man-environment studies to think ecologically is something quite different: cooperation with nature. When used earlier in biology it did refer to competition. Times have changed but urban geographers still follow the earlier view.
2. Gohen, Peter, *Victorian Toronto, 1850-1900* Chicago: University of Chicago, Department of Geography, Research Paper (27, 1970), pp.21-28.
3. Gras, N.S.B., *An Introduction to Economic History* (New York and London: Harper, 1922).
4. Lampard, Eric, "The History of Cities in Economically Advanced Areas", *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 3 (Jan. 1955), pp.81-136. This is a seminal work in developing a model, and discussion of various countries.
5. Christaller, Walter, *Central Places in Southern Germany*, trans. Carlisle W. Baskin (Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, 1966). See also Brian J.L. Berry and Allan R. Pred, *Central Place Studies: A Bibliography of Theory and Applications* (Philadelphia, Regional Science Research Institute (Bibliog. Series 2, 1961). See Berry, Brian J.L., *Geography of Market Centres and Retail Distribution* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall, 1967), esp. pp.59-73.
6. The author included a three page bibliography of recent works which space did not permit the inclusion.
7. "The Role of the Municipal Government in the Development of the Toronto Waterfront", HUNAC paper, Jan. '73; (Ph.D. thesis forthcoming).

8. *The Preindustrial City* (New York, Free Press, 1960).
9. "The Internal Structure of the Colonial Replica City: San Francisco and Others", Paper at Association American Geographers, Kansas City, April, 1972. See also "Downtown through Time: Delimitation, Expansion and Internal Growth" *Economic Geography*, 47 (April, 1971), pp.121-135. Vance, *The Merchant's World: The Geography of Wholesaling* (Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, 1970).
10. "Creative Linkages in Nineteenth Century Baltimore", HUNAC paper, Jan. 1973.
11. "The Industrial Revolution and the Emergence of Boston's Central Business District", *Economic Geography*, 42 (1966).
12. *Nineteenth Century Residential Mobility: Some Preliminary Comments*, Discussion Paper No. 4, (Toronto: York University, Department of Geography, May 1972). See also Knights, Peter, *The Plain People of Boston, 1830-1860: A Study in City Growth* (New York: Oxford 1971). Both have bibliographies.
13. Chapman, Stanley D., ed., *The History of Working Class Housing: A Symposium* (Newton Abbot, Eng., David and Charles, 1971). Note references to British urban development. Vance, "Housing the Worker: The Employment Linkage as a Force in Urban Structure", *Economic Geography*, 42 (1966), pp.294-325.
14. Smerk, G.M., "The Street Car: Shaper of American Cities", *Traffic Quarterly*, 21 (1967), pp.569-584. Useful introduction, but too deterministic. Due, John F., *The Intercity Electric Railway Industry in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1966). Pursley, L.H., *Street Railways of Toronto Interurbans*, Special No. 25 (Los Angeles, 1958). Tarr, Joel A., "The Relationship between Transportation Innovation and Changing Spatial Patterns in Pittsburg, 1850-1910: A Preliminary Report", Paper Association American Geographers, Kansas City, April, 1972. Krim, Arthur L., "The Development of Internal Urban Transport in North America, 1830-1860", *Ibid.* On England see Dyos, H.J., *Victorian Suburbs: A Study of the Growth of Camberwell* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1961).
15. Kerr and Spelt, *Changing Face of Toronto*, pp.74-78.
16. Warner, *Street Car Suburbs*, Simmons, James W., *Toronto's Changing Retail Complex: A Study in Growth and Blight* (Chicago: University of Chicago, Research Paper 104, 1966).

NOTE: "Some of HUNAC papers, noted above, will appear in a series of discussion papers (4 or 5 collections), York University, Geography Department."