# Urban History Review
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## Abrams, Phillip, and Wrigley, E. A., editors. *Towns in Societies: Essays in Economic History and Historical Sociology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978. Pp. vii, 344. $17.10 cloth

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Bailey's essay is useful because it reveals the splits within classes and the interaction of classes. The other contributions in this collection deal primarily with the machinery of social control and its operators, rarely with its "victims." And here one can see why Gareth Stedman Jones' strictures of historians' use of the concept of social control are important. (Why Jones -- whose name is cited in several of the essays and whose presence seems to trouble one or two others -- is not listed in the index is a puzzle.) Clearly there is the danger of becoming so hypnotized by the workings of institutions that one accepts the "problematic" as given by the operators and fails to discern accurately the actions of those whom they seek to control. Where these essays are most useful is in revealing that in the nineteenth century attempts to simply consecrate the status quo were rare; there were a variety of conservatisms and each had its own internal contradictions.

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The point of departure for Phillip Abrams' own contribution to this volume of essays in Fernand Braudel's contentious statement that "a town is a town wherever it is." By "towns," of course, Braudel and the editors of this volume are referring to cities; in the context of European history the terms are practically interchangeable. But it is not semantics which concerns Abrams; rather, it is a more fundamental conceptual problem. Should towns be treated as social realities? Should historians deal in typologies categorizing towns and alloting them specific roles as dependent, independent or intervening variables in explanations of the complex processes of historical change? Certainly in the past historians as well as sociologists have inclined toward generalizations. For Pirenne the commercial town of medieval Europe was the leaven required to transform the lump of feudal society; for Sjoberg the "pre-industrial city" was a parasitical growth draining off surplus production from the countryside; for almost all there was an inescapable duality between town and country.

The twelve essays in Towns and Societies serve not only to challenge these conclusions but also to examine cities from a thoroughly historical perspective. With two exceptions they are about particular towns in particular societies at particular times. It is the diversity rather than the uniformity of the urban experience which their authors are at pains to emphasize. In her excellent and provocative contribution, "Urban Growth and Family Structure in Medieval Genoa," Diane Owen Hughes emphasizes the fact that Genoa was different from Florence and also "in its extended families and constricted enclaves, its private spaces and inchoate civil life, its noble clans and artisan couples, an urban reality of its own."

In the process she demolishes the assumption that there exists some necessary relationship between urbanization and the emergence of the nuclear family.  A similar conclusion is reached by M. J. Daunton, in "Towns and Economic Growth in Eighteenth-Century England."  By comparing Bristol and Liverpool; Exeter, York and Norwich; London and the industrializing northern cities; towns with medieval charters to those without, Daunton clearly reveals how towns developed in similar or dissimilar ways at different rates.  In the process he rejects the duality of town and country and reiterates William Diamond's warning against the "dangers of an urban interpretation of history."  "Certainly, the towns of the eighteenth century merit study," he concludes, "but perhaps not as useful analytical tools in explaining economic growth."

If these authors share a critical attitude toward traditional assumptions, their contributions do not indicate the emergence of a new consensus.  To the central question, "What is the purpose of urban history?," they would seem, by implication, to offer differing replies.  One can discern two main schools, each identified with one of the editors of the volume. Abrams praises the efforts of historians "to get behind the presence of the town" and to concentrate on studying "relations of social power which towns embody and in which they are deeply and thoroughly implicated."  He subordinates the "urban reality," - indeed he dismisses the notion - to the larger social issues of class formation and "the complex of domination." E. A. Wrigley links the study of cities directly to the problem of economic growth and contributes two interesting essays on the subject.  The one, "A Simple Model of London's Importance in Changing English Society and Economy 1650-1750," is an essentially empirical study; the other, "Parasite or Stimulus:  The Town in a Pre-industrial Economy," is thoroughly deductive. In both Wrigley rejects the parasitical model and implicitly contradicts Daunton's claim that "the town is simply not a useful heuristic device." The essays tend to divide according to these two categorizations.  Keith Hopkins in "Economic Growth and Towns in Classical Antiquity," for example, is mainly interested in understanding a period of economic growth.  In contrast, A. B. Hibbert, "The Origins of the Medieval Town Patriciate," Christopher Friedrichs, "Capitalism, Mobility and Class Formation in the Early Modern German City," and Diane Hughes concentrate on the study of social structure.  The two approaches are not mutually exclusive; the "complex of domination," as Abrams notes, sheds light on the process of economic development.  The best blending of the two is David Herlihy's contribution, "The Distribution of Wealth in a Renaissance Community:  Florence 1427."

The inherent danger in weighting everything toward the study of social class or economic growth is that the historian's concern for the urban phenomenon itself might be lost.  If towns do not serve readily as "social realities" per se, there is still no denying their physical presence. Among other monuments which dot the landscape of past and present societies, they deserve explanation.  This fascination with individual towns as objects worthy of historical study is evident in many of the articles, but the editors choose not to emphasize its importance.  Nevertheless, it is precisely this insight into the heterogeneity of town life and diversity of urban experiences which constitutes the major value of this publication.

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