

## Urban History Review Revue d'histoire urbaine

URBAN HISTORY REVIEW  
REVUE D'HISTOIRE URBAINE

Lindner, Rolf. *The Reportage of Urban Culture: Robert Park and the Chicago School*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pp. xiv, 237, 6 black and white plates, bibliography, index. \$54.95 (cloth)

Peter McGahan

Volume 26, numéro 1, octobre 1997

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1016669ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016669ar>

[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

McGahan, P. (1997). Compte rendu de [Lindner, Rolf. *The Reportage of Urban Culture: Robert Park and the Chicago School*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pp. xiv, 237, 6 black and white plates, bibliography, index. \$54.95 (cloth)]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 26(1), 55–56.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1016669ar>

service districts were formed, as well as municipal leagues. While suburbs resisted suggestions that service districts might include central cities, they were willing to cooperate among themselves. The adaptation of, especially, county government to suit changing needs was, as Teaford puts it, a struggle. It involved a delicate balancing act, on the one hand attracting and accepting offices and industry in order to bolster the tax base, and on the other holding back the tide of development so as not to destroy too much open space, or the small-scale and residentially homogeneous character of the suburbs. The result in Teaford's view was no mean achievement: county residents "fashioned organs of local government for the world of the future." (p. 8)

Although the title of the book sounds contemporary, Teaford's account is surprisingly dated. It takes little account of important developments in both the design and management of suburbs, and also in their historiography. In terms of design he ignores the so-called New Urbanism. The latter has been hyped excessively, but it surely should be fitted into the story. Are these denser and more intimate forms of development proof of the persistence of the village ethos, or are they a sign that the 'burbs are finally becoming urbane? More importantly, Teaford glosses over the new forms of shadow government, notably homeowner associations. In one sense they fit his thesis about the importance of intimacy and homogeneity, but they clearly undermine the significance of county, and indeed any type of, conventional government. For enlightenment on this rapidly-emerging subject one must turn elsewhere, to Joel Garreau, Mike Davis, and above all Gavin McKenzie's *Privatopia*.

Teaford's understanding of the history and modern historiography of suburban development is also outdated. Pre-WWII suburbs were not all affluent havens, and many contained a good deal of employment. Contemporaries, notably Graham Taylor, Harlan Douglass, and Chauncy Harris knew this very well. If a postwar generation of urban historians temporarily managed to forget the fact, more recent writers have rediscovered it. In part, the gaps and imbalances in Teaford's account reflect his decision to focus on the most affluent counties in each metropolitan area, and within that context to give greatest emphasis to those portions that were incorporated (which were the most likely to be affluent). In part, however, he simply seems to be out of touch with recent scholarship to which, incidentally, he makes only the briefest of references. (His short 'bibliographic essay' makes no reference to the work of Ken Jackson!)

Perhaps the underlying problem is that Teaford, like Garreau, is simply not sufficiently critical. Relying heavily on local newspapers he constructs a boosterish account of struggles and achievements. Unlike Garreau, he does not even broach the question as to what effects the strategies of county residents might have had on the residents of cities, or of less affluent counties. He hardly alludes (p. 122) to the possibility that suburban governments were designed to be socially exclusive,

both on the basis of income and race. (There are no index entries for "race", "blacks", or "African-Americans".) Although one of his chosen counties is St. Louis, he ignores Ken Jackson's seminal research there, which demonstrated the impact of racially-exclusionary policies of the Federal Housing Administration. This is a white-wash.

Teaford has provided some historical depth to current debates about Edge Cities. His locally rooted narrative provides a fuller account than previously available as to how the governments of affluent counties have typically evolved. But his account is incomplete and uncritical. This book should come with a warning: read with care.

Richard Harris  
Department of Geography  
McMaster University  
The Research School of Social Science  
Australian National University

---

Lindner, Rolf. *The Reportage of Urban Culture: Robert Park and the Chicago School*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pp. xiv, 237, 6 black and white plates, bibliography, index. \$54.95 (cloth).

The essence of the Chicago School of Sociology, as it developed under the leadership of Robert Park in the 1920s, was "nosing around." Using the language of journalism, it encompassed the art of seeing the city as it is, not as we would like it to be. This, indeed, represented the beginning of the "naturalistic tradition" in sociology.

Rolf Lindner seeks to demonstrate how the emergence of the "New Journalism" during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries shaped the Chicago School. Mass-circulation newspapers responded to the growth of large cities. A fundamental change in the nature of the press involved the definition of what was "newsworthy": big city life in itself, that which was unusual, different, all became now the focus of attention. The goal of urban journalism was not to seek moral reform, but to expose, uncover, illuminate. Big city reportage, Lindner persuasively argues, planted the basic seeds of urban sociological research. Investigative reporting, portraying the inside of an unfamiliar world, served as a fruitful model for the early development of a "realistic sociology."

Park's own career as a journalist, prior to his appointment at the University of Chicago, was certainly influential in developing his view of what sociology was to be. As an urban journalist, he had already begun to approach the city as a social laboratory. The "art of looking" is essential for acquiring knowledge. Reflecting the influence as well of William James, Park was committed to the notion of "learning by experience," of the development of concepts from experience. "Acquaintance with" some social institution or social phenomenon must always precede

"knowledge about." Such an epistemology was keenly cultivated in the "New Journalism."

After his transfer to the academic milieu, Park continued to see his role as similar to that of a city editor, or "a captain of inquiry." He served as leader of a team of empirical researchers — selecting topics for study, guiding the investigations, shaping the final analyses — much as what an editor did at the time for a daily metropolitan press.

In adopting what he saw as the primary advances of the new urban journalism, Park did not desert an appreciation of the contributions of European social theory. In particular, he sought intellectual guidance from the work of Simmel: actually, Lindner argues that Park "Americanized" Simmel. Society as process rather than as structure was an underlying focus throughout the Chicago School's research. Yet, Park sought to "correct" Simmel's overly-philosophical approach with a greater degree of empiricism.

Lindner points out that the Chicago sociology of the 1920s intersected two worlds — that of the reformer and that of the reporter. Urban journalism represented a new attitude toward the social world. A "reporter in depth" and a "sociological field researcher" shared a commitment to understanding that world in all its richness. Without the momentum of urban journalism, sociology would have been less able to overcome the shortcomings inherent in the social gospel ideology to which many social commentators were so passionately attached. Lindner has made a valuable contribution in underscoring this point. To dismiss the Chicago School as nothing more than "journalism in disguise," as some critics have done, represents a superficial understanding of the evolution of urban sociological analysis.

Aside from documenting his main argument, Lindner presents additional analyses which are of considerable value. For example, he briefly demonstrates how some of Park's students — for example, Nels Anderson and Clifford Shaw — in their own work adopted some of the techniques and approaches of urban reportage. The results, of course, are what remain as classics in urban sociological studies. Lindner also reviews how the increasing "interest in real life," which journalism nurtured, influenced the growth of "naturalistic literature," as evident in the novels of Theodore Dreiser.

One possible weakness in Lindner's treatise is the need for better integration of the material. The logic of presentation of the different sections is not always clear. The book could have benefited from a tighter flow between sections. Lindner is insufficiently critical of Park's inability to evolve elaborate theoretical statements from empirical observations. The "chains of empiricism" are repeatedly evident. Yet, the weakness in his epistemology is only briefly mentioned.

Overall, this is a very rich study of the origins of the Chicago School and of the intellectual influences on Robert Park. That he saw a sociologist as in reality a poet, committed through "intui-

tion and sensitivity" to dissecting "the ossified shells of conventional thought," suggests why this discipline still has much to contribute to the study of the urban world.

Peter McGahan  
Department of Social Science  
University of New Brunswick / Saint John

---

McNamara, Kevin R. *Urban Verbs: Arts and Discourses of American Cities*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996. Pp. vii, 310. 16 black and white figures, bibliography, index. \$39.50 (US).

My background includes twentieth-century literary studies and inter-art explorations that involve verbal and visual signs, and so the opportunity to explore Kevin McNamara's analysis of the representation of urban realities in built landscapes and narrative, journalistic, and cinematic forms is a welcome one, consolidating as it does, my appreciation of the correlations that exist among media as they respond to contemporary sociological, political, economic, and spiritual values.

The "trajectory" of *Urban Verbs*, McNamara advises, takes the reader from "the rise of the American industrial city to what is often remarked as its obsolescence" (p. 209). Beginning with Henry James's *The American Scene* (1907) — which exhibits the potential anarchy of turn-of-the-century New York in relation to James's nostalgia for "a more homogenous, more pastoral city" — *Urban Verbs* takes us to "the romance of metropolitan life" in Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) and the idealizations of 1920s "visualist" Hugh Ferriss's *Imaginary Metropolis*. The study moves next to William Carlos Williams's *Paterson* (1946-63) whose "archaeology," McNamara advises, recognizes the significance of vigour, dissonance, and provisionality within urban actualities, contrasted with film-noir resistance to urban energy and the desire for containment in anti-urban pieces like *The Naked City* (1948). McNamara concludes with a discussion of the sensitivity to "urban heterogeneity" (p. 221) exhibited in the 1960s plans and projects of Robert Venturis and Denise Scott Brown, a sensitivity commensurate with McNamara's own allegiance to pluralism: "conflict is not just a demon fretting the naked city, because we can work together even as we pull apart. In this, if in anything, lies the vitality of American urban culture" (p. 248).

There are many appealing dimensions to McNamara's commentary. Intrigued by the languages disciplines develop to name and excavate their chosen terrain, my understanding is enlivened by the way he "reads" urban texts, referencing, for example, the "direct speech" of "individual buildings" (p. 22) to explore the economic and sociological forces that support the "argument" of a particular design — like the functionalist approach that encourages Ferriss to dress-down the "architectural signifier" (like Pound's castigation of the word) to curtail its circulation (p. 119).