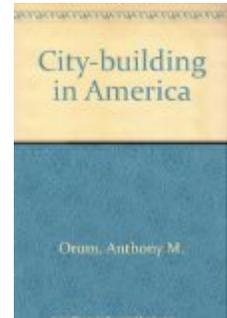




Anthony M. Orum. *City-Building in America*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1995. xiv + 261 pp. \$77.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8133-0842-5.



Reviewed by Thomas J. Jablonsky

Published on H-Urban (April, 1997)

This historiography on Milwaukee is an intriguing example of how an early classic from the city biography tradition may have stifled the natural progression historical re-writings of this one-time *Machine Tool Capital of America*. Even as urban history has matured over the past few decades, remarkably little has been written about Milwaukee in the aftermath of Bayrd Still's monumental narrative, which rapidly nears the fiftieth anniversary of its 1948 publication.

Now, Professor Anthony Orum, head of the Department of Sociology at University of Illinois--Chicago, has undertaken a case study of America's former brewing capital as a means of examining the nature of American cities: how they have developed and how they have been transformed. He seeks to understand motive and timing, geography and demography, employment patterns and civic culture.

In terms of Milwaukee history, Orum offers an admirable effort although one wounded in the end by some larger ambitions. As to his brief comparative overviews of Cleveland, Austin, and Minneapolis-St. Paul, he is less successful, in part, be-

cause of time constraints but also because he tries to explain too much process with too little evidence.

The author opens with two chapters that set the theoretical and thematic underpinnings for the next nine units before he returns once again to a broader, interpretive essay as his conclusion. The UIC professor argues on behalf of the evolution of cities through stages, with varying influences dominating at different moments. To him, industrialization and its capitalist promoters are but a chronological step with subsequent time periods dominated by either the local or national governments. Orum appreciates the impact of expansion (demographic, economic, and geographic) upon these various stages but rejects the notion that impersonal, global forces determine the nature of cities. Instead, he believes that individuals and collectives of individuals (boosters, entrepreneurs, ethnic concentrations, etc.) shape the particular character of any city.

With an approach that one would expect from a sociologist, Orum opens with a review of Robert Park, Ernest Burgess and their colleagues

before moving on to the works of Manuel Castells, David Harvey, and Harvey Molotch. Suddenly, however, he swerves toward an unexpected direction, and forcefully argues on behalf of history as an intellectual lens through which to examine the natural transformation of cities. He chastises contemporary urbanists for being preoccupied with today and even tomorrow as if these moments were somehow independent from yesterday and yesterday's yesterdays.

Professor Orum opens his analysis of Milwaukee with a consideration of the geographical advantages that nature afforded the city's earliest residents: the confluence of three rivers feeding into Lake Michigan, protected high land for settlement, lowlands rich in resources including tamarack trees for a future leather industry, and sufficient timber. Its biggest locational drawback was—and may still be—the presence of Chicago ninety miles to the south. The author proceeds to identify city-builders who, either through vision or greed (or a most human combination of the two), brought Milwaukee to life. He correctly identifies the interplay between self-centered ambitions and civic consciousness in the lives of people such as early Milwaukee promoters Byron Kilbourn and Alexander Mitchell.

Milwaukee found its first economic niche in tanning and milling. Eventually, of course, it would become the machine shop of America as well as its brewing capital. Along the way, the influx of Germans beginning in the 1840s shaped the socio-cultural traditions of the city and thereby the political economy of Milwaukee. Families such as the Pabsts, Uileins, Pfisters, and Vogels worked to establish profitable corporate enterprises that provided thousands of jobs and millions of dollars in profits. These families created schools and clubs that kept them physically and socially detached from their workers and, in the process, endorsed a value-based political system that emphasized municipal frugality and governmental circumspection. Public authority existed

in Milwaukee, according to Orum, more to maintain the social order than to promote a democratic society or even to facilitate economic expansion.

Like self-absorbed industrialists in other locales, the city's biggest visionaries eventually found Milwaukee too confining. So Charles Allis created the city of West Allis to accommodate his company's machining and tooling ambitions and Patrick Cudahy founded Cudahy to house his meatpacking empire. In the early part of this century, Milwaukee's political leadership sensed the fiscal potential of the region's expanding suburbs. Annexation wars took place with the city winning most of the early scuffles. In Milwaukee, an Office for Annexation was created under longtime Socialist mayor, Daniel Hoan. Eventually, though, as it happened in Boston, Chicago and even Los Angeles, the streetcar suburbs resisted and state legislators were more than happy to frustrate their urban colleagues in favor of suburban constituents.

Milwaukeeans have waited for a long time to see an updated, full-length, scholarly history of their city. Now there are some local civic and political leaders who wish that Professor Orum had kept his scholarly interests south of the state line. Orum's sweeping review of the rise and fall of Milwaukee has not been happily received around town. False boosterism aside, however, there is excessive negativism in Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight, which describe the departure of Milwaukee's industrial heart (including the companies Allis-Chalmers, International Harvester, Schlitz, A.O. Smith, and, most recently, Pabst) to union-free pastures in the South or corporate graveyards. Industrial abandonment and death have indeed crippled the local economy, but Milwaukee as well as the state of Wisconsin have rebounded admirably in the past decade—as has the Midwest in general. Whereas California and other Sunbelt states were battered by the slowdown of weapons-oriented R & D monies after the Cold War, the Midwest has reclaimed some of the eco-

conomic vitality it had a century, through product retooling and through an emphasis on family-based businesses. For the past few years, it has been a shortage of skilled workers that has inhibited economic growth throughout industrial Wisconsin and Illinois, not the reverse.

Orum is correct when he contrasts the earlier and heartier renaissance of Minneapolis-St. Paul compared to Milwaukee and Cleveland, but he confuses fundamentally different circumstances when he lauds the vision and ingenuity of a Sunbelt city/state capital/university town such as Austin over older, industrial cities like Milwaukee. He acknowledges the role of the federal government in securing of Austin's economy through high-tech endeavors. For political reasons as much as anything, that "sugar-daddy" of an option was not available to the industrial Midwest. Moreover, the author's argument that Austin's political fathers anticipated its city's growth demands and thereby gobbled up hundreds of square miles of land before suburbs could grow and place a geopolitical noose around Austin's neck is certainly true, as it has been the case in other municipalities such as San Diego. However, to fault Milwaukee or Chicago for not devouring Waukesha or DuPage counties at the end of the last century in anticipation of a world that no one could envision does not provide illuminating insight into the prognosis for metropolitan America in the twentieth-first century. To learn from the history of industrial cities as many Sunbelt cities have done is one thing; to place blame upon nineteenth century leadership for not anticipating the last half of the twentieth century is not fair or particularly useful.

Orum is also accurate when he describes the belated response of Milwaukee's corporate and political leadership to the deindustrialization of the Upper Midwest during the sixties and seventies. Indeed, when local civic leaders finally realized what was transpiring, they appeared mystified by the nature of these changes. The civic tra-

dition of minimal government did not serve the region's industrial workforce or political economy particularly well. But Orum is not justified in insinuating that clear and reasonable alternatives rest with easy reach of Milwaukee's leadership. Detroit, Dayton, Youngstown, Pittsburgh, Benton Harbor, and dozens of other Midwestern industrial dynamos all felt overwhelmed and baffled by the events unfolding over the past three decades. Even Chicago with its diversified economy suffered mightily in terms of manufacturing jobs. But what measures could have realistically been employed at that moment are never revealed by Professor Orum. In fact, his conclusions as to the strengths of Austin and the Twin Cities may be the most troubling of all because he claims unwarranted advantages for these two centers precisely because they were not Cleveland and Milwaukee, that is, they were not great capitals of industrialization. To declare that cities of recent incarnation do not have the problems of cities that came of age three quarter of a century ago is a safe judgment to offer but then to claim vision for the former's political and economic leadership over the latter because of differing historical conditions is frustrating and ahistorical.

Another example of this mismatch of evidence-with-conclusion can be found in his argument that Minneapolis and St. Paul did not experience the racial diversity that Milwaukee and Cleveland experienced and, therefore, had an advantage in not having race inhibit regional cooperation. That racism holds back intercounty cooperation in Greater Milwaukee is sadly true but it is disingenuous for Professor Orum to suggest that the absence of racial diversity would have provided a solution to Milwaukee or Cleveland's region's transportation, sewer, or housing problems. Non-whites constitute the central city population of Milwaukee and Cleveland. This is largely a consequence of the city's industrialization process, accompanied by a generous dosage of residential segregation. To argue that the absence of these de-

mographic realities might afford solutions to the region's problems is pointless at best.

In conclusion, then, as a work of urban history, *City-Building in America* is a sound and valuable addition, especially as a narrative interpretation of Milwaukee's evolution. As a reinterpretation of contemporary urban social science, especially in terms of macro-scale urban processes, *City-Building* fails to realize the ambitions that the author had in mind.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact h-net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban>

Citation: Thomas J. Jablonsky. Review of Orum, Anthony M. *City-Building in America*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. April, 1997.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=929>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.