

Americans Against the City: Anti-Urbanism in the Twentieth Century. Steven Conn. 2014. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 392 pages. £23.99 (hardcover). ISBN: 978-0-19-997366-8.

In *Americans Against the City*, historian Steven Conn offers a rigorously researched exploration of the longstanding antipathy Americans hold against cities and the impacts of urban life on society. Conn traces American disdain for cities back to the colonial, Jeffersonian gentleman farmer, the small New England town, and farming communities serving as mythic ideals for American community. These rural or small-town ideals of American community emphasize the opposite of dense, diverse, public urban realities. This incongruity acts as a powerful force shaping the political decisions and planning strategies that have consistently undermined the health and future of American cities.

Conn examines over 100 years of work, writings, and policies of key historical figures – philosophers, politicians, urban planners, and academics – whose ideas both embodied and shaped the nation’s posture toward its cities during important historical periods. Politicians and public figures often sought to reverse what they considered to be the city’s biggest threats to American community – dense concentrations of people and the collective nature of urban political life. They believed it was impossible for people to live well amidst the congestion and chaos of modern industrial cities. More importantly, it was impossible to live a good *American life* in urban space where private property ownership and an idealized public sphere dominated by the interests of whites were both challenged. Conn asserts that such anti-urban ideologies of community and political life bred an unwillingness to acknowledge the increasing urban character of the nation and a refusal to tackle anything that implied public solutions to collective problems.

While it is tempting to characterize this anti-government, anti-urban orientation as a conservative ideology, a distinctive strength of Conn's argument identifies the anti-urbanism that afflicted leaders of all political stripes. The negation of the city itself lies at the heart of most solutions to remake or revitalize cities, seen in the idealizations of mythic small town America in historic and contemporary liberals such as Franklin D. Roosevelt and Amatai Etzioni. Similarly, Conn identifies the same anti-urban orientation in characters as diverse as Lewis Mumford, Frank Lloyd Wright, and contemporary proponents of "New Urbanism", creating a crisis of urban identity for liberals and conservatives alike.

This fragmented urban identity indicates deeper disconnections between Americans' sense of place and sense of the common good. It is a disconnection that fosters political rhetoric that "plays on people's fears of others, on their selfishness toward those on the losing end of our economic system, and on a more diffuse anger at a changing world" and a physical dimension that "allows us to retreat into our own paranoias, that shields us from our public obligations as citizens, and where everything is controlled for us because we pay for the pleasure" (297). This is as much a story of national political formation as a story about arrangements of physical space. The ideological battles between liberalism and libertarianism are bigger than the city, per se. But, it was through America's reorganization of urban space that the battle has been drawn so clearly and given physical shape during key historical periods.

Americans Against the City begins by establishing the ambivalent soil from which anti-urbanism grew during the nation's expansion through the mid-19th and early 20th centuries. As the frontier closed, America's attention shifted to its growing cities. While philosophers like Josiah Royce and Frederick Jackson Turner grudgingly accepted the inevitability of the city in a rapidly expanding nation, progressive reformers embraced the

potential of cities. For progressive reformers, the problems of the city were not about the city itself. Rather, it was the location of emblematic problems of the nation, which could be rationally solved. Reformers also saw the political potential in the democratic public created by these teeming, diverse cities. Both elite planners and reformers during the Progressive era sought to reinvigorate civic loyalty by making (or remaking) neighborhoods in order to integrate residents into the common life of the city.

But this hopeful Progressive perspective on urban potentiality was reversed as the relatively new field of urban planning attempted to minimize the perceived damage that urban concentration might do to American society. Both urban planners and New Deal politicians attempted to confront urban density, concentration, and unwieldy diversity through highly controlled, rational, and large scale projects whose main goals were to decentralize urban populations. In both cases, anti-urban sentiments were crystallized in physical space by attempting to replace America's old cities with new (often rural or suburban) communities. Additionally, various intellectual projects created an imagined community against which the city was positioned. Americans began to imagine a folk past that valorized the political life of New England small towns and connected Appalachian rural life to a sense of distinct regional-folk traditions, positioning them as the mythic foundation of American democracy and the antithesis of cities.

Conn then moves into a discussion of the 1950's through the 1980's, an era when the federal government put its full weight behind decentralizing cities. Urban renewal and federal highway construction projects effectively and literally tore apart cities at the expense of suburban expansion. Simultaneously, Sunbelt cities eschewed previous ideas of planning and controlled growth, often using federal funds to accelerate their expansion in unplanned, decentralized modes. Cities shrunk, the suburbs grew, and the ghettos hardened.

Conn ends the book with an appeal for something he argues America has never had, a positive urban vision – a commonly articulated and shared goal of what the urban is and what it could be. America's priority, rather than create a new national urban policy, should be to remove the preexisting anti-urban tilt in current policies. Conn believes that urban areas can flourish and provide benefits to society not otherwise possible if they are able to capitalize on their density and diversity as assets, and not as blights to be eradicated.

Conn asserts anti-urbanism is the driving force behind many historic movements of Americans away from cities as well as attempts by city dwellers to remake their cities. However, focusing on the ideas of key individuals may obscure other social forces shaping the relationship between the urban and the non-urban. While beyond the scope of this project, further research might examine the degree to which participants' constructions of non-urban movements did or did not align with anti-urbanists' to determine when and how other social changes shaped anti-urbanism. Regardless, *Americans Against the City* presents an excellent resource for urban historians and theorists seeking to track the common threads of America's seemingly schizophrenic behaviors toward its cities. Conn rigorously connects the formation and manifestations of anti-urbanism with deeply held ideological frameworks governing America's ideas of community, inclusion, and political life. This would be a very useful text for urban sociologists, urban planners, and urban policy students as well as historians of the American city.

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