



BOOK REVIEWS

John D. Fairfield, *The Public and Its Possibilities: Triumphs and Tragedies in the American City* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010).

John Fairfield offers a passionate reading of American political history that tries to reinvigorate democratic traditions in the face of neoliberal capitalism. He thinks that Americans can build a more equitable society, and that we can best do so if we understand past efforts, what they accomplished, and how and why they often fell short. In short, he is writing to create a useable past for progressive activists. In this sense, we can view the book as a product of a long effort, dating back to a wave of young, insurgent historians in the 1960s and 1970s who challenged the idea that there has been an American consensus around liberal notions of economic organization and growth. Here are the author's own words: "In showing that our past contained multiple possibilities and that our choices shaped which of those possibilities would be realized, historians provide us a fuller understanding of our past and underscore the importance of the choices we make" (p. xi).

Fairfield touches on many of the influential theories of American civic life, with the pragmatic political philosophy of John Dewey coming closest to his intent, and the book's title pays homage to Dewey's classic *The Public and Its Problems*. Fairfield's goal is to recover the cooperative or community-centered alternatives to the excesses of individual-focused and unregulated capitalism. He locates the greatest possibilities for these alternatives in the active life of heterogeneous cities. His heroes, by and large, are workers who organize for self-improvement and empowerment. The bad guys are malefactors of great wealth, hypertrophied corporations, urban elites, and their comfortable minions of the middle class. The book is dedicated to the memory of Christopher Lasch, one of Fairfield's professors and another critic of the excesses of individualism and consumer society.

The book proceeds in four sections. The first is explicitly about practical political economy, detailing early nineteenth-century efforts to create institutions to support active citizenship, and the failure of the free labor ideal to satisfactorily incorporate racial difference. The second is about ways in which nineteenth-century Americans contested the formation of a democratic culture in the interlocking realms of physically accessible urban space and the political space of discourse and debate. The third covers the resurgence of progressive citizenship in the early twentieth century and its collapse in the repression and aftermath of World War I as "public opinion" became transmogrified into "public relations." The final section focuses on the replacement of the goals of republican citizenship and industrial democracy with individual consumerism, labor security, and the rise of privatized suburbia to supplant the shared space of the public city. It ends by invoking a second intellectual hero in the person of Henry George and his "public vision of the good city."

The quick summary in the preceding paragraph does not do justice to the richness of the discussion. Each of the major arguments takes subtle twists and turns, just as the progress of national politics has never followed a straight line. The chapters are divided into more than 80 subsections of 2–4 pages, each of which is a semi-self-contained mini-essay.

As I read *The Public and Its Possibilities*, I thought repeatedly of Vernon Louis Parrington's great, unfinished interpretation of American literature and political theory *Main Currents in American Thought* (1927). Like Parrington, Fairfield takes the contrast of Hamiltonian and Jeffersonian approaches as central to the fate of the American republic. Writing in the 1920s and 1930s, Parrington worked to keep alive the progressive intellectual spirit of figures such as Frederick Howe, Herbert Croly, Randolph Bourne, and Jane Addams, all individuals who figure prominently as well in Fairfield's history.

This is a dense book. It is thickly argued, deeply embedded in 40 years of historical scholarship, and filled with references to people, organizations, and events. The reader gets adequate background on some of the episodes (the Astor Place riot, for example) but perhaps not on others (the 1877 railroad strike, the settlement house movement). For this reason, I might not assign the entire book in a class on urban history or urban politics, except perhaps for an advanced seminar. For classroom use, however, individual subsections or chapters could easily be the basis for contrasting reading and vigorous discussion. One example is Fairfield's very negative treatment of the rise of the popular newspaper in the last decades of the nineteenth century, which might be contrasted with Gunther Barth's more positive evaluation in *City People* (1976). Another might be the discussion of the City Beautiful Movement, in which Fairfield emphasizes the politically oriented writing of Charles Zueblin and links to the ideas of Henry George, in contrast to the traditional narrative that centers on engineers, architects, and designers such as Daniel Burnham.

I do have some criticisms. Although religion appears occasionally, the book is essentially a story of secular activism and its problems. There is not much place for the powerful role that religiously motivated activists have played in American reform, from John Woolman and Lucretia Mott to Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King, Jr., from Oberlin College to Sanctuary Churches. And one of the nation's most successful experiments in substituting community for capitalism, of course, was Mormon Utah in the nineteenth century. Perhaps what is at issue is that Fairfield tends to introduce religious ideas as emanating from the countryside and small towns, and thus not fully part of the urban discourse.

At times, particularly in the second section, this reads like a book about New York rather than American cities more generally. There are nods to Boston and Chicago, but it is New York where the battle for the soul of America plays out—both in the streets and parks and in the editorial offices. By the count of lines in the index, New York examples equal those of the next five cities combined, and only a dozen individual cities merit index entries. A contrasting point is that cities and urban life sometimes drop into the background, as in the discussion of free labor ideology, responses to slavery, and Radical Reconstruction, or in the discussion of the labor movement from the IWW to the Taft-Hartley Act.

This said, nobody can cover every facet of American civic life in 280 pages. In making the effort, John Fairfield has provided a valuable book that will stimulate and inspire its readers—perhaps to argument and hopefully to action.

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Catherine L. Ross (Ed.), *Megaregions: Planning for Global Competitiveness* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2009).

Don Phares (Ed.), *Governing Metropolitan Regions in the 21st Century* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2009).