

Urban Histotry in the British Idiom

S. G. Checkland

Number 1-78, June 1978

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1019440ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019440ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (print)

1918-5138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Checkland, S. G. (1978). Urban Histotry in the British Idiom. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, (1-78), 57–77.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1019440ar>

URBAN HISTORY IN THE BRITISH IDIOM

- - - - -

S.G. Checkland

1. The British approach

Five volumes have now appeared in the series *Studies in Urban History*.¹ They are sufficient to provide a basis for some consideration of the state of British urban history and the progress it has made since the Leicester conference of 1966.² The British have, of course, their own way of doing things, deeply rooted in their own experience. It is perhaps rated by Canadians as below that of the Americans. Among the reasons for this is the fact that the historical evolution of Canadian cities approximates more to the American than to the British; this is reinforced by the British reserve about compelling conceptual frameworks either economic or sociological. There is also a British unwillingness to make more than minor concessions to the quantitative. And, of course, as in all fields of scholarship, there is a good deal less British output than American.

Certainly British urban historians, like others, have felt the contemporary yearning for thematic treatment, earnestly desiring to be analytical, to investigate the city in Cartesian fashion, and at the same time to be relevant, making their contribution to problem-solving.

-
- ¹Studies in Urban History - General Editor, H.J. Dyos.
Volume 1: Anthony Sutcliffe. The Autumn of Central Paris: The Defeat of Town Planning, 1850-1970 (1970).
Volume 2: E.P. Hennock. Fit and Proper Persons: Ideal and Reality in Nineteenth-Century Urban Government (1973).
Volume 3: C.W. Chalkin. The Provincial Towns of Georgian England: A Study of the Building Process, 1740-1820 (1974).
Volume 4: James H. Bater. St. Petersburg: Industrialization and Change (1976).
Volume 5: Anthony S. Wohl. The Eternal Slum: Housing and Social Policy in Victorian London (1977).

All volumes are published by McGill-Queen's University Press and Edward Arnold.

²See the proceedings of the conference in H.J. Dyos, editor, The Study of Urban History (London: Edward Arnold, 1968).

But there is another attraction which has proved the stronger--the lure back to the sources, to historical time, to evolutionary concomitance, for the specific situational study. All five of the present books are of this kind (though some are perhaps more strongly so than others). Each is a monograph in true historical terms, setting up a close consideration of particular ranges of experience, never letting go of observed reality as it comes from a wide range of sources, and never conceding too much to current vogues that would propose organisation of the treatment around a compelling set of concepts that might exclude a significant part of reality. The authors are certainly not without conceptual grasp; indeed part of the fascination is to see how theoretical notions operate in their work. But they typically start with a situation and a set of sources, rather than with a range of concepts.

All the volumes are most generously illustrated. This of course adds a further set of problems, namely how to maintain perspective in the midst of all this intense visual immediacy, which of course carries its own biases; the visual like the textual, and the statistical, has its own tyranny. Nor can the illustrations make the volumes 'popular' ones: they are too demanding for that.

2. The Dyos phenomenon

A distinguishing feature of British urban history is the part played in it by a single scholar, Professor H.J. Dyos of Leicester University. He is not only the parent and editor of the present series, he is in the rare, if not unique, position of acting as midwife to an emergent branch of history in Britain, a complex phenomenon of entrepreneurship and guru-ship, worthy of the attention of the sociologist of scholarship. He provides a preface to each volume: the evolution of these is a study in itself. He does not preside over a school of urban history, for that is not his approach to the subject. But he is a centre and focus of endeavour, a function reflected in his founding and editorship of the Urban History Yearbook.

3. Building the English provincial cities, 1740-1920

Our first set of questions arising from the Dyos series has to do with the growth of English towns in the formative years of the industrial

revolution. If, as in Dr. Chalklin's case, the intention is to operate at both the aggregative level of towns as a generalised phenomenon, and at the dis-aggregative level of particular places, the source problems are enormous. His has been a highly labour-intensive activity, demanding incredible patience in pursuing dispersed material, with facts as Dyos puts it, to be "wrung drop by drop" from vast but scattered deposits of all kinds. Chalklin is certainly to be congratulated on this aspect of his work--in this respect more has been demanded of him than of any of the other authors under consideration. He offers the first full-scale study of the building process in Britain, set within a comparative framework.

But he does not provide a great deal which the student of urbanisation can quickly uplift for use as part of a more general synthesis. The variety and specificity of his towns is such as to make the reader yearn for a pattern. And yet one sympathises with the author in his limited success in providing one. To be told that the most rapidly growing towns were the ports and the manufacturing centres is certainly true but hardly unexpected. Yet even here one can learn much that helps in the establishment of perspective, though this is often, paradoxically, by demonstrating the difficulty of ordering such diversity into general statements.

Of the actors on the housing scene there is much about landowners and developers, and through them of the controlling mechanisms that fed agricultural or country estate land onto local house-building markets. But the builders, even after Dr. Chalklin's searches, retain their secrets. Between urban and business history there continues a great gulf--no significant body of material arising from the activities of a house builder has been found. Nevertheless through the landowners and developers (illuminated by much work on legal documents), we learn a great deal about the processes of local land dealings, about financing, and about the controls on housing shapes, entire streets or whole areas, either through covenants entered into by builders or by local byelaws. There is real insight into the way in which particular towns, under the operations of such factors, ate into the land resources that surrounded them (altering values as they went). The extension of the town involved

an alteration in its morphology, including the generating of slums in its inner parts.

The concluding section seeks to relate the course of town building to the performance of the British economy as a whole. The general attempts to integrate housing supply with the macro economy, made by T.S. Ashton, Parry Lewis, A.K. Cairncross and others, are considered in terms of the experience of particular towns. The aggregate data from the brick tax and from timber imports is set alongside observations of housing activity on the ground, together with local marriage and birth rates and employment and incomes. The outcome would seem to be that local deviations from the national experience as thus defined could occur. This was so because of differences in local circumstances, especially perhaps as between London and the lesser places. This non-homogeneity was greatest in the earliest phase considered, namely 1740-60. Does this suggest that in house building as in so many other aspects of national life, the trend was toward generalised and more or less unified experience, so that by 1820 housing was, more or less, pulsing with the economy, with local variants of only minor significance? If so, this would seem to imply that variety of regional industrial structures was of diminishing importance to housing supply. It would mean also that macro explanations like that derived by Ashton from changes in the rate of interest would presumably become more important. Chalklin, so aware of the difficulties of the subject, seems unwilling to speculate in these terms.

Such a thesis might well be tested over a longer time span: is it possible that in the phase of maturity of the British economy regional differences in housing supply re-emerged, related to increasing structural differences? To conduct such an investigation would require the disaggregation of Britain, on Chalklin's lines, into regional sub-economies. Such an exercise would have a value far beyond the particular question of housing. But as Chalklin's work on 1740-1820 shows, it would be a highly demanding task.

4. Who governed and with what motivation? Birmingham and Leeds in the nineteenth century.

Professor Hennock provides a pioneer study of the world's first

mass municipal collectivism: he explores with a new vividness and depth the implications of the fact that Britain was not only the arena of the industrial revolution but of the urban revolution as well. The questions he poses comprise an agenda of immense scope and importance. How were the frightening new cities of the industrial north and midlands of England, and of Scotland, regulated, serviced and embellished? How did the municipalities respond to and relate to the policies of the central Government as these were expressed by one statute after another? How did the reverse causation operate from municipal experience and example to generalised state prescription? How was the traditional bureaucracy of the centre renovated and extended, while a whole new set of bureaucracies, one for each city, emerged? Behind all this, what can we learn of the men who carried through the municipal revolution, the motivation that powered them, and the political means they employed?

All of these questions are raised by Hennock, and much light is thrown on many of them. But his book is not systematic. It is the product of a pilgrimage typical of British historians. Its foundation is its investigation of the politics of Birmingham. This interest stemmed from the author's doctoral work on the role of religious dissent in that city. Starting from the motivation that lay behind the "civic gospel," he has underpinned this with an investigation into the changing social composition of the city council and has then projected the discussion forward to a summary of the Birmingham programme and its implications for other cities. Wishing then to proceed from the particular in the direction of the general, he has extended his treatment to Leeds. Once again the composition of the Council is considered. There follows a narrative of the principal issues as they were treated in Leeds.

Attention then turns to a three-part thematic consideration: the international comparison, especially with the cases of Prussia and the U.S.A., the evolution of the concept of the town councillor (especially his character and functions), and finally, the problems of English local government management as reflected in the discussions of the Radcliffe-Maud Committee which reported in 1967.

The result is a book which, like the cities it considers, is the

product of an evolutionary process, rather than of a structured analysis. It is not possible, therefore, to make hasty incursions into it in order to extract a formulation of particular problems of urban government. In a term of increasing currency in some circles, Hennock does not present an explicit "problematic." It is necessary, rather, to take his treatment on its own terms, accompanying the author along the path of study he has followed for some twenty years. The reader will learn much about how an urban historian, in contrast to an urban analyst, works.

The principal conclusion from the study of the Birmingham Council would seem to be that a marked shift came about between 1862 and 1882, after which its composition remained more or less constant to 1914. This change consisted of a dramatic fall in the small business men on the Council, and a modest rise in the larger, while other categories, especially the professional classes and working men, grew to fill the gap left by the decline of the petty traders. In order to provide an understanding of the effects of these changes in the government of the town the author embarks on the second aspect of his treatment, a discussion of the introduction into Birmingham politics of a "municipal gospel." This begins with a study of the ideas and impact of George Dawson (1821-76), a Baptist preacher who combined rationalism, charm and charisma in an extraordinary way, such as to make a profound impact on a generation of hearers in the Birmingham of the 1860s somewhat reminiscent of that of Thomas Chalmers in the Glasgow of some forty years earlier.³ But whereas Chalmers had no real successor, Dawson had one even more potent than himself, the person of R.W. Dale (1829-1895), the Congregational minister of Carrs Lane Church. These were the two overlapping prophets who prepared the way for Joseph Chamberlain. Perhaps not since the puritan divines of the seventeenth century had the pulpit been so potent in calling men to their public duty. The account of their role in attempting to synthesise

³R.A. Cage and E.O.A. Checkland, "Thomas Chalmers and Urban Poverty: the St. John's Parish Experiment in Glasgow 1819-37," The Philosophical Journal (Glasgow, 1976).

the state of man and his relation to God with the challenge of the industrialised city is of great interest. It is the best available discussion of the projection of both "rationalist" and evangelical Christianity as they sought to bring their influence to bear in the new urban context.

Their success was considerable. Much of the remaking of Birmingham in Chamberlain's day and after derived from this impetus. But it was limited in time and in space. The municipal gospel proved incapable of generalising itself throughout British cities, for the favourable conditions present in Birmingham were not available elsewhere, at least not in the strength and mix required. English Nonconformity thus proved incapable of generating a sustained urban initiative: this was to be the last great phase of the English pulpit prescribing for policy. Partly this was because the inspiration could not be generalised, and partly it was because changes in the social composition of the Council were not propitious, especially the invasion of the Council chamber by the workers who were little affected by evangelicalism.

What of Chamberlain himself, the dominant "heroic" figure? How far did his success depend upon his personal dynamic (derived or not from Dawson and Dale), and how far did it depend upon the presence of a cohort of middle-class men made ready by Dawson and Dale for the demanding effort of sustained civic duty?

Then there is the particular direction that Chamberlain took. During his mayoralty (1873-1876) he was a frightening radical, and carried his newly-emergent Birmingham caucus with him in this direction. This was the second great burst of Birmingham radicalism, preceded in the 1830s by that of Thomas Attwood's day.⁴ The received wisdom in explanation of the earlier outburst is based on the mode of production: a Birmingham of small masters not greatly removed from their employees. The discussion of the Chamberlain phase of urban radicalism does not, in any explicit way, descend to this level, except perhaps by such implications

⁴Asa Briggs, "Thomas Attwood and the Economic Background of the Birmingham Political Union," Cambridge Historical Journal (1948).

as might be drawn from the changing composition of the Council. The impression left is that the real causality lay in the call to civic duty by Dawson and Dale and their generation. Certainly it would be unwise to underestimate the reverberations, both in time and space, of a statement like that of Dale that "The man who holds municipal or political office is a 'minister of God.'"

Leeds provides an atmosphere in many ways antithetical to Birmingham. No municipal gospel was generated within it; there was no elevation of the middle classes into redemptive activity. Instead, action sprang not from idealism, but from the rivalry of the two political parties, now provided with organisations and programmes, together with the drive for managerial efficiency and the acquisition of earning assets such as gas, electricity and trams. Leeds, it seems, was dominated by an atmosphere of political bidding, being barren of appeals to non-material motivation or striking pulpit dicta.

Birmingham and Leeds thus offer diverse formulae for the explanation of civic action. The Chamberlain model is based upon a political allegiance so strong as to be unchallengeable, but powered by idealism: the Leeds model contains no gospel, but depends upon an active interplay between more or less equal political parties, each able to threaten and thus stimulate the other.

5. The attack on the housing shortfall: Victorian London

Anthony Wohl is concerned with the Victorian working-class housing default in London, its nature and scale, the reasons for it, the ameliorative response it provoked, and the general state of the matter by the end of the century. His study is one of absorbing interest to those concerned with Victorian social history and with the interplay of philanthropic action and public policy. To those who ask generalised questions about the functioning of nineteenth century capitalism it illuminates the operation of one of its most important aspects, namely its capacity to make available a housing supply appropriate to need.

The history of slums is made manageable if approached through ideas and policy - what the offended and alarmed middle class thought, said, wrote and did. In the main this is Wohl's emphasis. The much

more inaccessible and difficult aspect is the substantive phenomenon of the slums themselves, and the dwellers therein. Indeed we have recently had reservations posed against one of the few 'authorities' in the character of Mayhew, now criticised by Professor Himmelfarb⁵ as presenting merely a set of unrepresentative street types, and not the true life and labour of the lower orders. Though Wohl provides much new information about the quality of working class life as affected by housing, a direct attack upon it as a historical phenomenon remains to be made.

Marx held that housing shortage was endemic in capitalism. It sprang directly from the inadequacy of the workers' incomes. Because of the exploitative role of their capitalist employers the workers could never significantly improve their position. The fundamental relationship governing working-class housing supply was, then, a shortfall of workers' incomes such that they could not provoke in the market an adequate supply response. In general terms, just as the system must by its own logic produce the reserve army of unemployed labour, so too workers in general were subjected to a housing famine, the projection of the inadequacy of their incomes. There was, therefore, no escape: housing presumably would form one of the points at which class tension would build up. Only a new society could provide a remedy.

This was not, of course, the approach made to the problem by Victorian philanthropists and politicians. With them something like the following sequence operated. First there was concern, not with the housing supply, but with the health risk arising from general living conditions. The response to this was the movement for sanitary and medical improvement. In this phase there was a somewhat inconsistent tendency on the part of the middle classes to regard housing conditions as part of a general moral failure on the part of slum dwellers. Only from the 1850s onward did the problem present itself in terms of the availability of housing units. This shifted the emphasis onto the supply aspect. It began to dawn on the more percipient of the middle classes

⁵Gertrude Himmelfarb, "Mayhew's Poor: A Problem of Identity," Victorian Studies, XIV.

that there might be a basic discrepancy between working class incomes and the cost of housing space, and that morally impugning the slum-dweller was out of place.

To this there could be three sets of responses. Efforts might be made to raise pay. But to do this by state action would mean an interference in the labour market and in the level of industrial costs would involve far-ranging interference with the market system. This, of course, was unacceptable. The second line of attack was to try to lower house costs. Here the philanthropists led the exploration of possibilities. They sought improvements in design, sponsoring experiments in model dwellings. They tried to make sites cheaper and more generally available by simplifying the laws governing property, by finding new sites by sponsoring suburbs and thus reducing the competition for space in the inner city (a solution not really appropriate to London given its size and the then state of public transport). They tried to educate workers in house use and discipline so that maintenance costs could be reduced. But these devices were severely limited in their scope. There was, too, the possibility of reorganizing the building trades, but this, on market assumptions, would come about of itself if the income position of the working classes was improved. There remained the ultimate recourse: that of subsidy. But this led to the heart of the fiscal system, the relationship between central and local governments, and the burden and incidence of taxation and their effects on the operation of the economy. Only very late in the century had this solution begun to be discussed. Given the situation, and the ideas currently governing outlook, it was necessary that all other possibilities be exhausted before this final step could be considered.

Meanwhile, however, the story had not been one of continuous and relentless deterioration. In crude quantitative terms, relating the ongoing supply of houses to the family units requiring them, over England as a whole it seems likely that supply kept up. But the problem was not one of mere numbers of housing units: it was necessary that the element of supply be appropriate to the changing pattern of need, both in shape and in location. Thus attention is forced back to the inner slums of the great cities. Even here, however, there had by 1900

been significant progress, with, as Wohl tells us, the worst elements of the London slums a thing of the past; the same was true of the provincial cities. But at the same time expectations of amelioration were rising, especially among the ameliorators. The First World War was to bring the first effective demands from the working classes themselves.

In the Victorian age with which Wohl is concerned attitudes were complicated by a kind of circularity of reasoning. Lack of decent housing meant that for a significant element of the working classes the family and the home (those basic requirements of a fulfilling life as seen by the middle classes), could not function. This meant not only lack of security, and of sound character formation and general personal fulfilment; it meant also low productivity on the part of the individual. This was reflected in low incomes, with inferior housing, and so the circle was complete. Could it be broken into? Could working class families be lifted to a new plateau of family life and economic productivity and so escape the housing trap? There was lacking then, as there is now, middle class knowledge of how working class life was lived. Though there were invasions into working class life, as with the temperance movement, the sponsoring of thrift through savings banks and the like, the middle classes, perforce, stopped short of the attempt to enter directly into working class life in order to amend it. But there were, of course, efforts to alter working class behaviour by generalised means, of which the school system after 1870 was perhaps the chief.

6. Planning and the city centre: Paris 1870-1914

Dr. Sutcliffe's book is a spatial study, concerned with what happened, on the ground, in a defined area, or, as Professor Dyos puts it, "the ordering of social space." He investigates the evolution of the right bank centre of Paris, the historic core of that capital of capitals, the four arrondissements of "Old Paris" contained within the city walls. Having deftly set the longer historical perspective, his story effectively begins with the grand design of Haussmann; it then proceeds to the present. It is a study that should become a classic, a delight for historians who value close scholarship, and for planners

who can never escape from the fundamental problems arising from the pattern of land use.

The picture that emerges is an intriguing one. The historically pre-eminent position of the right bank centre was maintained and even enhanced in Haussmann's time. But from 1870 for a hundred years the story presented is one of decline, abandonment and failure of renewal. Though Sutcliffe provides little systematic argument in comparative terms, mention is made of the great rival, the City of London, where there was a massive rebuilding by private enterprise during the second half of the nineteenth century. Manhattan too is invoked as a self-renovating central area. It is thus not possible to state a general law to the effect that urban growth in the nineteenth century required the relative abandonment of the old centre in order to escape from its constraints, with a move of the central business district westward to open ground and undefiled air.

The Paris syndrome has powerful unique features. The limitations of renewal appeared at the outset with Haussmann himself. His problem (shared with Louis Napoleon) was how to carry out a large-scale renovation that would relieve the congestion that was choking the inner city, acting within narrow financial constraints. To lessen the latter Haussmann went for minimal cost, together with the hope of generating new values from which the city would benefit. To drive new streets was cheaper than to widen old ones, because the former meant buying up cheap slum properties behind existing street facades, rather than paying high compensation for commercial premises with frontages; at the same time a contribution could be made to the health problem. New frontages were thus created, which the city could sell. Moreover it was intended that the operation taken as a whole would so greatly improve the infrastructure of the city centre that tax revenues (especially the octroi on goods brought into the city) would rise. Thus was conceived an almost self-financing programme. Speed was essential, in order to forestall the property speculators. Hence an attempt to carry out a reconstruction that was sudden and surgical, with an inevitable recourse to brutalism.

But speed was not enough. Such an operation generated local sectoral inflations - in the building trades and in the land market.

Hausmann had hoped that legal means would be found to attract the betterment values to the city authority that was generating them, but this was not done: the city found itself paying prices raised by its own redevelopment actions. Inevitably costs rose above income; the debt mounted alarmingly, so that whereas the city owed 163 million francs in 1853 its debt by the time of Hausmann's fall was 2,500 millions.

A good deal was done by way of improving communications in the right bank centre. But it was not enough. If the accumulated obstacles to real renewal were to be removed much more required to be done. To create conditions such as would re-activate private business within the area to such a level as to cause its modernisation by new building involved both a theory of urban regeneration, and further enormous resources to implement it.

The municipal authority was the only agent for such public works. It was never to find the means and the will to carry them out. The twenty years of the seventies and eighties and into the nineties saw a progressive weakening of the case for public action in the right bank centre. Commerce and business moved west and north west out of the area; the dangerous classes (from whom revolutionary action had so often come), moved eastward. Each element followed its own logic of migration. This mutual distancing left a hiatus between two social elements. The result was to deprive the right bank centre of any priority in the minds of civic politicians. Moreover the city's taxable resources did not keep pace with the outward growth of the city: all wards now demanded equal treatment.

There followed a switch of city priorities, from 1890 into the new century, to the building of the Metro. It was to be the great agent of renewal, by easing the problem of circulation; it generated vast enthusiasm. But not only did it divert resources from a possible further programme for the right bank centre, it had the perverse effect of increasing congestion there by raising to a new level the general propensity of people to move about.

From 1918 onward the notion of a grand design following a strategy

of massive street improvements, with the right bank centre playing a focal role, was finally abandoned. In its place came a wider and more comprehensive approach to the planning of the city and its environments as whole. By this time, also, the automobile had arrived in force, bringing a massive shift in the concept of the city. Whereas in the past the case for street improvements had been largely one of promoting public health and political security, the operative justification was now in terms of traffic flows. Inevitably the centre of the city receded yet further in the scale of priorities. Its depopulation accelerated, running well ahead of that of the city as a whole.

By the 1950s the suburbs had come to rival the centre in civic concern. The city could no longer be thought of as radiating from a single centre: instead the plan of 1960 was intended to revitalise the suburbs by giving them their own identity in the form of four 'urban nodes' and eight or nine secondary nodes beyond the city boundaries. The city was also divided into functional zones. In all of this the fate of the right bank centre was of little concern.

Finally, over the past twenty years or so the right bank has apparently found a new equilibrium. It has not become derelict, but is still an area of economic importance for the city as a whole. But this is the result of a complex algebraic sum of gains and losses, reflecting its own realities and those of the city at large, indeed those of the nation as a whole. Even at this level of activity matters are not static nor is stability assured.

The right bank centre has now assumed a new role, or rather re-assumed an old one a good deal argued about in Haussmann's time. It has been taken up by the preservationists as an embodiment of the past of the city and indeed of the nation. At long last the centre has been able to attract attention to itself once more, the result of the search for meaning in urban life. The very proliferation of more or less homogeneous suburbs that had so cast the centre into the shade, had now generated an urge to rediscover the city's soul, an urge felt mostly by those who lived elsewhere in the city. But this of course presented a new dilemma: how were the demands of conservation and modernisation to be reconciled?

Sutcliffe may have exaggerated the degree to which the right bank centre has been kept inviolate. Professor Chevalier⁶ has lately argued that immense damage has been done by the technocrats of the Fifth Republic, the young, a-historical *énarques* with their widenings, tree fellings, underground car parks, clearing away of wrought-iron urinoirs, and so on, with their 'rethinking' of Paris based upon considerations of circulation. But Sutcliffe's discussion of the core of Paris remains of a very high order.

7. The backward city and industrialisation: St.Petersburg 1860-1914

The organising concept for Professor Bater's study of St.Petersburg could be taken to be the notion of the 'late' city, large before industrialisation (by virtue in this case of being the result of the tyrants' fiat), and then subjected to the influences of industry. In this sense it was very different to Hennock's British industrial cities, which grew pari passu with their industry in a kind of mutually regulating empathy. Bater's study is concerned with the pattern which emerges when industry is introduced as a kind of exogenous factor into an urban context already established by other means. The result, in the case of St.Petersburg, is especially dramatic, as the order imposed by authority throughout the eighteenth century was intruded upon by hectic new activity. From the official point of view the change was partly wanted (and was indeed induced by official will), but it was also partly frightening and difficult to contain. St. Petersburg epitomises the problems of backwardness and of official attempts to modernise, in terms of the city. Is St.Petersburg unique in its category? What other artifact cities are there which were thus subjected to a modernisation sponsored by a conservative regime?

The result was a hectic growth of the population of the city (from half a million in 1850 to two millions by 1914). This was mainly by influx of peasants. Many of them were males who left their families in the villages and returned to them after a period of urban employment.

⁶Louis Chevalier, L'assassinat de Paris (Paris, 1977).

They helped to provide a factory labour force of some 200,000 by 1913. This transient peasantry was the basis of the urban proletariat, the revolutionary potential of which Lenin had to gauge. Employment in the factories was the magnet that attracted the peasants, though many of course had to take jobs in the other echelons of employment that had responded to the industrial stimulus.

Bater discusses the geographical source of these peasants. Central Russia with its impoverished soil produced most of them, with St.Petersburg and Moscow apparently rival attractive poles. In general it would seem that, consistent with experience elsewhere, the greater the distance of a village from a city the fewer the migrants it produced. Permits to leave the village and permits to enter the city were required, and yet the peasants came. Their reasons remain mysterious.

The flows of persons inward and outward were paralleled by flows of goods. Inward came fossil fuels, foodstuffs, the products of the forest; outward went manufactured products. The railway system made St.Petersburg a focus of the communication system, causing a continuous extension of market linkages. But another phenomenon typical of the growth of a manufacturing centre apparently did not occur. There seems to have been no major development of a belt of intensive agriculture round the city to provide it with the more perishable foodstuffs. The terrain was poor and the peasants preferred to seek a cash income within the city. Wealthy city folk bought country land for summer residences. Moreover the villagers took in great numbers of urban foundlings as a source of income. But Bater is cautious over this phenomenon: he is raising the question and its implications rather than making confident statements.

The sequence of industrialisation was a two-phase one, beginning with textiles and then extending to metals and engineering. The factories got progressively bigger, so that the scale of unit in St.Petersburg, measured in manpower, was as large as anywhere in the world, and larger than most. This related to the fact that much of the work was labour intensive. This fits Gerschenkron's model of a shortage of skills. In production this caused a low level of mechanization; in management it

caused the formation of large units. Thus could the largeness of units thus measured be an indication of backwardness.

The state, of course, played an important part. Under its encouragement entrepreneurs were certainly forthcoming. But in technological terms they were not an enterprising breed. Patents were few; Russian scientific ability found little effective application.

While the city was modernising in some of its aspects, as in industry, transport and large scale banking, the basic commerce of the place reflected its peasant character. The pedlar, the bazaar, the wide dispersal of small retail outlets, all meant that petty commerce was dominant. In this sense the peasants imposed upon the city their own way of doing things, rather than being wholly and suddenly urbanised.

As in London, there was, of course, housing shortage. In terms of location, it would seem that even factory owners continued in large measure to live near their place of work, so that the classic withdrawal of employers to suburbs was much less obvious than elsewhere. The workers were even more limited in their mobility. There appears to have been no marked spatial separation of social classes, in spite of social unrest (especially in 1905), with strikes and urban violence. Disease and death were present too, and on a frightening scale, a reflection of the failure to generate effective urban government. The St.Petersburg council, indeed seems to have been a kind of reverse of Chamberlain's Birmingham.

In many aspects Bator arrives at qualified verdicts, for urban phenomena, like others, are relative things. For example in studying the degree of spatial clustering in different industries he offers a guarded conclusion. He does however suggest that external economies were not a sufficiently powerful influence to cause a spatial concentration of related industries. It would appear, also, that accessibility to major transport networks played only a minor role in determining the location of plants. In these senses the expectations derived from standard models do not seem to fit. Of this explanation is not easy. Either the peculiarities of St.Petersburg are responsible, or the models are wrong.

This is a geographer's book in concepts and agenda; concerned with a spatial anatomy, a morphology, and the forces that formed it, with "structure, pattern and process" as they operated on the ground. It would be an excellent basis for a discussion of the relationship between geography and history. Compared with Hennock, Sutcliffe and Wohl, Bater is not concerned with the problems of policy as they arise in running a city, but rather with the background with which policy must deal.

8. The historical perspective: its forms and its worth

The five volumes discussed above suggest two sets of reflections on the present state of the study of urban history in Britain and elsewhere. The first has to do with method, the second with utility.

Editors of series, at least in Britain, have largely had to take what comes. They can propose, inspire and operate on the forming of the product. But ultimately they have been obliged to wait upon the daimons of individuals to drive them to sustained inquiry, choosing their own subject and direction. Does this reliance on the individual lead to an arbitrary, unsystematic, fragmented and sometimes wasteful pattern of effort? Or does it, at least in the British context, yield the best result? There are signs that the Social Science Research Council in Britain would like to see a move toward more co-operative or corporate effort. There may be some danger that, just as the limitations and indeed destructive, aspects of large-scale collective operations are becoming visible in many fields (not least in the manipulation of our cities), they may be about to invade British historical scholarship. For there is undoubtedly a sense in which costly research techniques can involve a loss of contact with reality. Perhaps such a trend will be held in check by the pursuit of the Ph.D. It is notable that of the five works in the Dyos series at least three are developments from doctoral thesis, the fruit of three or more years alone among the sources.

Nevertheless it may be that generalised insights not available from particular studies, or from a set of such studies (even when carefully and co-operatively structured so as to make a comparative approach possible), are now becoming necessary for the progress of the subject. This could mean taking the towns and cities of an entire nation as inputs, using

very large comprehensive sources, working in standardised aggregative terms.

Chalklin has indeed attempted to treat towns in terms of "families," looking for common characteristics, but he has worked under great difficulties and in a necessarily primitive way. To be truly comprehensive it would be necessary to start from the only source which covers the nation and yet allows for regional disaggregation, namely the census. Peter Hall and his colleagues have attempted something of the kind which may hold lessons for historians.⁷ Their starting point has been the effect of planning activity on the spatial changes generated by the economy and society from the 1930s to the 1970s. In particular they were concerned with the agglomerative process, the tendency for a megalopolis to emerge in England stretching from South Lancashire to London. To deal with such a phenomenon a view had to be taken of urbanisation on a national basis. But the traditional units in which urban historians work--the towns and cities, with their arbitrary shapes and shifting boundaries, were inappropriate as units of inquiry and measurement. It was necessary to design new standardised units, in the forms of the metropolitan and the urban area. One hundred metropolitan areas were thus defined, in terms of which the analysis of population and employment could proceed. This yielded conclusions about the operation of the system in general. Five areas were then chosen within the "megalopolis" for study in their own, regional, terms, thus bringing out significant differences. This kind of study is the generalised approach pushed to its limits. It required a large resource commitment, perhaps some fifteen to twenty man-years of research costing some £100,000. Moreover, though the data gathered may be useful for other purposes, it is concerned basically with spatial functioning, and so can illuminate only those questions with a spatial aspect.

⁷ Peter hall, et al, The Containment of Urban England (1973): Vol. I - Urban and Metropolitan Growth Processes; Vol. II - The Planning System: Objectives, Operations, Impacts.

A second such generalised inquiry is in progress. David Donnison and Paul Soto have started with a different set of questions, both analytical and normative.⁸ They want to know which types of towns (or urban configurations) are most favourable to equity and opportunity, and whether it is possible to change cities in a desired direction (in general expansion of employment and incomes), without becoming involved in the fallacy of composition whereby a "successful" town merely adds to the difficulties of others. Donnison and Soto, working from the 1971 census, have chosen a range of variables, and established their clusters of cities according to the patterns of concomitance thus revealed. Each cluster is then capable of yielding conclusions about the relationships between economic, social and political mix and their bearing on equity and opportunity and the potentialities of policy.

Perhaps methods such as these, no doubt modified and reduced in scope because of difficulties of sources and resources, are capable of giving British urban history a new dimension. In this way the comparative thematic method could be augmented by the aggregative. But such an enterprise would require a change both in idiom and in scale.

What of the policy utility of urban history as it is at present practised? The dust jackets of these volumes proclaim the usefulness of historical studies to planners, social scientists, economists and the like; courses in the subject are given in schools of planning and architecture. How far are such claims justified? The answer would seem to be that the explorers of past experience cannot provide direct guidance, but can operate only through warnings and reminders. Do not tear at the existing fabric, do not seek to replace it with living units inappropriate to the formative experience of those left with no range of choice. Inform yourself of the complexities of patterns of human relationships, a form of self-education that only the past can yield. Remember that an urban analysis like any other is an abstraction and may

⁸David Donnison and Paul Soto, provisional title, The Good City. David Donnison was formerly Director of the Centre for Environmental Studies.

omit much of reality. Similarly too with the choice of a programme, which necessarily reduces the perspective to a narrow range of fairly gross objectives. Be sure to take account of all the implications of acting on any one part of the system lest distortion be created elsewhere-- historical studies can certainly aid in this by demonstrating organic relationships, as in the case of Sutcliffe. Do not lose sight of the fact that cities require to be self-governed, which invokes a knowledge of and sensitivity to political processes, an aspect illuminated by Hennock. Finally, it may be that planners, like other humans, will find consolation in historical studies of cities such as the present five volumes, discovering that they are not alone in time or space with their problems; that cities have for a long time been challenging those who presume to manipulate them.