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1-1-2019

Daniel Amsterdam's Roaring Metropolis: Businessmen's Campaign for a Civic Welfare State

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of a process of primitive accumulation comparable to the sell-off of monastic lands under Henry VIII. The passage of the land, buildings, and mills of the Church into the hands of the bourgeoisie, and their transformation into productive capital, constituted the keystone of the French capitalism that issued from the Revolution, but it scarcely registers with Sprang.

Sprang does understand the relationship between the dearth of money and the creation of private money in the form of the so-called *billets de confiance*. She rightly points out the connection between the creation of these local currencies and the initial belief in the decentralization of money and banking. She properly notes the fact that consolidation of the assignats as national money arose out of a popular reaction against private banking, to which the Jacobins, in particular, responded. On the other hand, she considers the assignats a failure, while the political reality is that the assignats succeeded in that printing them allowed the Revolution's political and social gains to be consolidated. In revolutions, the short-term (that is, political considerations) trump the economic long-term. She misses the importance of the conflict between the private bankers trying to hold onto their privileges and the demand of the sans-culottes for productive work and sound money as keys to the revolutionary struggle compelling financial capital to link with productive capital. As a result, she judges the Terror as essentially negative and as a result of popular panic, and does not realize its creative part in helping to force financial and industrial capital together.

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doi:10.1017/eso.2017.28

Published online November 10, 2017

Daniel Amsterdam. *Roaring Metropolis: Businessmen's Campaign for a Civic Welfare State*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. 230 pp. ISBN 9780812248104, \$45.00 (paper).

Daniel Amsterdam's *Roaring Metropolis: Businessmen's Campaign for a Civic Welfare State* challenges the conventional narrative of early twentieth-century American businessmen as promoting laissez-faire or antistatist politics. Instead, as Amsterdam argues, elite business leaders campaigned vigorously for greater municipal spending

on civic welfare projects, which included building and improving public schools, public health infrastructure, parks and playgrounds, libraries, and museums. Rather than focus on national-level business-in-government, his narrative traverses multiple cities (Detroit, Philadelphia, and Atlanta) to demonstrate both the diversity of political challenges and institutional constraints that civic-minded reformers faced as well as the striking convergence of civic welfare policies in the 1920s. At times, business leaders worked with an array of politically active groups—such as local unions, middle-class women’s organizations, immigrant groups, African American activists, and even the KKK—to achieve their goals. By weaving together this variegated tapestry of people and places, Amsterdam explains how the business elite in each of these cities pursued a similar “network of programs” to “foster social and political stability as well as economic growth” (1). The civic welfare state thus emerged from business elites blending urban reform and boosterism in pursuit of development, while simultaneously solidifying their own positions of political power, embracing “inegalitarian politics” (178), and reshaping their urban environment in their own interests.

The book is organized into five chapters, the first of which chronicles how the urban reform movement reconfigured city governance and empowered business elites in the decade before the armistice. Generally, these municipal reforms “weaken[ed] local political machines or dilute[d] the strength of the working class vote” (15) while enabling business leaders to pursue government spending on their chosen civic welfare projects. Generally, after World War I, businessmen’s advocacy of civic welfare projects eclipsed their interest in municipal reform. Amsterdam attributes that shift to the continued population growth that strained municipal services, the pent-up demand due to wartime controls, and the rise of labor activism and strikes. By 1919 these events created “an acute urban crisis” (49), which galvanized new political alliances and reoriented political priorities “for social spending as arguably never before” (7).

The heart of the book, comprising Chapters 2–4, provides detailed studies of civic welfare projects in Detroit, Philadelphia, and Atlanta through the 1920s. Due to the advantageous municipal reforms that preceded the war, Detroit’s commercial and industrial elite easily used the city council to allocate funds for their favored development projects, and they deployed the Detroit Citizens’ League to organize and campaign for electoral support. Despite brief challenges forged by organized laborers, immigrant groups, or the KKK, no effective interest group emerged to rival business elites. In turn, the major public improvement projects sponsored by business-guided groups sailed through citywide referenda, approving high levels of debt spending.

These “immense bond issues” (56) funded sewer and water systems as well as roads and sidewalks, and contributed to “residential decentralization” (57) that elites supported because it reduced urban density, fostered “a suburbanesque lifestyle,” and tampered the “vice, crime, and political radicalism” (57) that they feared. Detroit’s Citizens’ League and Board of Commerce achieved their City Beautiful goals but also facilitated racial segregation and excluded other citizen groups from governance—trends highlighted in each of these case studies.

Philadelphia’s business elite, operating through its chamber of commerce, pursued quite similar infrastructure projects in water and sewage systems, school facilities, and rapid transit; however, unlike Detroit, their city’s economy stagnated and Philadelphia’s new charter did little to curtail the Republican political machine’s control of political priorities or patronage positions. Challenges to the patronage network only delayed development projects, such as planning for the Declaration of Independence sesquicentennial celebration. Working within the political machine seemed the path of least resistance, as W. Freeland Kendrick’s 1923 mayoral victory demonstrated, and the chamber of commerce acquiesced to such pressures. The massive development projects associated with the sesquicentennial also fostered both residential dispersion, which political and business leaders “rarely bothered to justify” (103), and corruption and graft. Ultimately, “most of Philadelphia’s upper crust had come to prefer boss rule to government inaction” (105); and “as the machine’s power grew unchecked, white politicians allied with local political bosses found it increasingly easy to ignore African Americans’ political demands” (108), and the same proved true for immigrant groups, laborers, and female reformers.

Atlanta faced a distinct set of political challenges; yet there, too, “elite businessmen ... viewed government as an essential tool for developing a business-friendly city” (113). In order to secure electoral support for debt-financed public spending, business leaders had to secure support from newly enfranchised women as well as African Americans, who still voted in bond referenda despite widespread disenfranchisement in the state and region. Nevertheless, “successful white businessmen” (116) initiated all the public spending proposals and retained control of the city planning commission, which used zoning laws to mandate racial segregation, promote homeownership, and encourage residential decentralization. A different city but a familiar story.

The final chapter, “Businessmen’s Social Politics Beyond the Civic Welfare State,” shifts gears to highlight several projects that existed at the interstices of civic welfare and “welfare capitalism,” which

Amsterdam defines as “the provision of services ‘for the comfort or improvement of employees’ that are neither ‘a necessity of the industry nor required by law’” (156). Company-sponsored sports teams, tracks, gyms, and movie screenings followed a similar logic to state-financed recreational facilities—to promote healthy and content workers. Amsterdam concludes that “businessmen’s experiments with welfare capitalism ... sought to turn workers’ economic vulnerabilities to employers’ advantage” by “leverag[ing] economic security” to “make workers more dependent,” and thus more loyal to their firms (166). A short epilogue explains how municipal debt burdens exacerbated the crisis of the Great Depression and curtailed city unemployment relief. The civic welfare state, Amsterdam concludes, has proven necessary but not sufficient for building modern cities, fostering robust citizenship, or providing for impoverished urban populations; yet this ideal has continued to animate political debate for a century.

Roaring Metropolis provides a detailed description of how business elites parlayed municipal reforms into their own political power and then enacted “an opportunistic amalgam” (145) of public spending projects. Many of their civic welfare projects benefited the entire community, such as sewage and water systems, but most of their initiatives catered to the white working class, if not solely the elite, as was the case in school reforms and residential decentralization. More attention to the broader economic context—such as the surfeit of cheap credit, the soaring real estate prices and tax receipts, and the historical responsibility of municipal spending on infrastructure development—might raise additional questions on the exceptional nature of these businessmen’s efforts. Given the strikingly similar outcomes across these cities, one might also wonder whether national-level coordination—perhaps by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, other trade associations, or the U.S. Department of Commerce—mattered. Or, was there an alternative model pursued in another major American city? Regardless, Amsterdam’s highly engaging political and business history of urban reform and development convincingly demonstrates that business elites played decisive roles in shaping the substance, size, and scope of civic welfare projects, as well as limiting who benefited from them.

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doi:10.1017/eso.2017.52

Published online October 17, 2017