A Project in Social History

Philadelphia. Work, Space, Family, and Group Experience in the Nineteenth Century. Essays toward an Interdisciplinary History of the City. THEODORE HERSHBERG, Ed. Oxford University Press, New York, 1981. xviii, 524 pp., illus. $29.95.

Is the study of history too important to be left to the traditional historians?

The answer is yes, according to the exponents of what is known as the "new urban history." Since the late 1960's, the new urban history has strongly advocated approaches that are perceived to be unrepresented in traditional history—the formulation and empirical testing of hypotheses within the framework of the scientific method, concern with the lives of ordinary people ("studying society from the bottom up"), and the use of mainstream theories and research from a variety of other disciplines such as economics, geography, and sociology. The new urban history also proclaims the importance of interdisciplinary cooperation in the research process.

In support of their position, a group of the new historians have produced this impressive study of Philadelphia's population in the period between the late 1830's and 1880. Led by Hershberg, the Philadelphia Social History Project turned to favorite data sources of the new urban history, the manuscripts of the U.S. Census Bureau in the 19th century and quasi-official enumerations of the population such as city directories and locally conducted surveys (conducted by the Quakers in this case). Samples of native white, Irish, German, and black residents of Philadelphia were developed, and other data were collected on characteristics of manufacturing enterprises and their work forces. As the book title suggests, the primary dependent variables of interest relate to what might be called the material aspects of life—employment, residential location, family structure. These population characteristics are frequently favorite variables for the new urban historians, partly owing to the fact that census data focus primarily on them.

This study far outshines previous work in the new urban history. Most fundamentally, the data base is relatively broad in sample size and number of variables covered. Clearly the papers in this volume only touch the tip of the iceberg in terms of possible research projects. The study is most impressive in its effort to develop what might be called "middle-level" theory of Philadelphia's development as a city. The Philadelphia social historians are not so ambitious, or so naive, as to produce a general theory of 19th-century urban development. At the same time, the study adds up to much more than a simple cataloguing of low-level empirical relationships. The authors of the 13 empirical papers come from a variety of disciplines and deal with different subjects, but their work clearly intermeshes. We simply learn much more than from most previous studies from the new urban history, which have typically focused on very specific aspects of urban life such as occupational mobility or residential distribution of social groups.

Several themes emerge from the study, but the most central is the importance of Philadelphia's transportation technology and emerging industrial character in shaping the lives of its citizens. Philadelphia, like many major American cities of the time, was undergoing a gradual transition from a largely pedestrian city with very slow movement patterns to a metropolis with more rapid (although still slow by modern standards) movement by electric streetcar. Furthermore, it was in transition from a small-scale to large-scale manufacturing center.

The influence of movement on residential patterns is particularly emphasized. This is not a new point, but it is especially well developed here. In the 19th century, particularly before the 1870's, the slowness and cost of travel forced most workers to locate their residences near their workplaces. This phenomenon and the mixed ethnic character of many industries heavily restricted the possibilities for residential segregation by ethnicity and type of occupation. However, the authors strain overly hard, in my opinion, to explain almost all residential patterns as a consequence of workplace location. It appears that the spatial relationship between home and work was less close for workers in some industries than for those in others.

The conclusions concerning spatial relationships are sociologically relevant, as the authors suggest, if spatial relationships were highly correlated with social relationships—that is, if the lack of residential segregation in Philadelphia was correlated with or had consequences for social relationships such as club memberships, friendships, intermarriage, and political movements. However, the study provides very little evidence on these issues, and we must await further work from the Philadelphia social historians before accepting fully the implications of their analysis.

Eschewing a simplistic conception of the 19th-century transition in work, the Philadelphia project presents some highly interesting analysis of the diverse patterns of work organization, wage payments to workers, and extent of employment among household members. The studies clearly demonstrate the weakness of classical conceptions of the work transition as movement from small, unspecialized, highly paid, socially integrated establishments to large, highly differentiated, poorly or moderately paid, socially alienating workplaces. But the papers on the organization of work are not as well related to each other as they might be, and thus less coherent theory emerges than in the study of home-workplace patterns. For instance, a paper by Laurie, Hershberg, and Alter suggests significant variations in wage levels within industries, by size of establishment, but in subsequent analyses by Haines and Goldin of variations in individual workers' household organization the workers are simply assigned average wage levels for all persons in a specific industry.

Throughout the analysis, one group stands out as a striking exception to almost any generalization, the black population, which apparently lived horridly in a segregated ghetto environment. Those who believe that current black characteristics such as female-headed households, low income, and poor health are simply a gradually disappearing relic of a slave society will have to take into account the evidence in this study, which finds many of those conditions in Philadelphia's largely free black population, tending in fact to be more evident among freeborn blacks than among ex-slaves. Unfortunately, in common with many contemporary and historical analyses, the study is stronger at documenting the pathology than explaining it, except by such useless, tautological terms as "racism."

Clearly, more will be forthcoming from Philadelphia. It seems likely that the future work of this project will heavily shape our understanding of the growth

and social development of urban populations in the 19th century.

As a final comment, I might note that the work on the Philadelphia project would not have been possible without substantial federal financial support, particularly from the National Science Foundation and National Institutes of Health. By the standards of much natural science research, the amount of money that has been spent to study Philadelphia is trivial. What an appreciation of our American heritage has been gained! What an appreciation of the roots of many contemporary urban problems has been provided! It is thus a real tragedy that research such as the Philadelphia Social History Project will probably suffer greatly when the Reagan Administration finally gets the government off our backs by almost completely eliminating federal funding for the social sciences.

AVERY M. GUEST
Department of Sociology,
University of Washington,
Seattle 98195

Roots of a Change

Women's Work and Family Values, 1920–1940. WINIFRED D. WANDERSEE. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1981. xii, 166 pp. $18.50

The entrance of increasing numbers of married women into the labor force in the 20th century has been of interest to social scientists and historians alike. Many such women claim they have been driven into the labor force in response to their families' needs for income. Yet men's average earnings have increased substantially over the course of the 20th century, doubling between 1900 and 1940 and again between 1940 and 1960. Shouldn't home-makers have felt less rather than more pressure to supplement their husbands' incomes? Orthodox economists have explained this apparent contradiction by noting that women's real wages—the "opportunity cost" of staying at home—have also risen in the 20th century, pulling them into the labor force, while the mechanization of housework has made it less labor-intensive. This book, written by a historian, puts forward a different argument—qualitative changes in "family values" have sent wives into the labor force. Wandersee pinpoints two central changes.

First, and most important, accompanying the rising real incomes of workers in the 20th century was a qualitative transformation in the family's relationship to consumption. "The 'scarcity psychology' of the nineteenth century, with its emphasis on hard work, thrift, and capital accumulation, had come under attack before the 1920s, but during this decade it finally gave way to an 'abundance psychology,' capable of wasteful consumption of surplus products and wasteful use of leisure time" (p. 15). A symbol of this transformation was the incorporation of the automobile into the standard of living. The automobile "represented a new attitude toward family spending. As was true of many of the modern conveniences, the auto was something that the American family could have done without, but nearly all families were willing to sacrifice much for the pleasure, freedom, style, and convenience it offered. . . . it was symbolic of a new value system that was to have its impact upon American cultural life in general and upon the family in particular" (pp. 20–21). In this new value system, the family's perceived needs were not determined by its income—its "standard of living" continually outstripped its "manner of living." Ironically, the expansion of wealth brought with it increased neediness.

Though Wandersee does not give a convincing explanation for this development, she artfully documents it. After examining the myriad of family budget studies done in the '20's, which found "substandard" living among the majority of American families, she shows that even the income elite was feeling needy. A 1928 study of Yale University faculty members showed that they were dissatisfied with their purchasing power at all income levels. "At $3,000 [yearly family income] the group in question felt that 'for a man and wife it is life on the simplest plane,' although probably not even 5 percent of all American families enjoyed this level of income." Those with $8,500 claimed that they lived "on the edge of a deficit" (pp. 21–22). Standards of living, Wandersee argues, were relative, always exceeding income regardless of its level. By the time the Depression hit, she shows, this pattern was firmly established; families did not give up their new standards of living, but strove to retain their "luxuries" by deficit living and by sending additional family members into the labor force.

The second basic change in family values was the development of a new conception of childhood. The 20th century brought compulsory schooling, laws against child labor, and social psychology, which stressed the importance of the mother-child relationship. This caused a decline in the 19th-century practice of sending children into the labor force when the family needed supplementary income. Thus in response to the pressure of expanding family needs, married women and mothers were instead drawn into the labor force, notwithstanding the increased emphasis on childrearing. During the Depression, public pressure against the employment of married women was high (they would take jobs from men, the real providers, it was argued), but high family living standards combined with falling wages and unemployment for husbands to bring a net increase in the proportion of married women who earned wages. In the 1940's, and with World War II, the trend continued. So whereas at the turn of the century fewer than 6 percent of married women were "gainfully employed," this percentage had risen to 15.3 by 1940. Today, it is over 50.

Although the entrance of married women into the labor force has brought a significant transformation of the marriage relationship, it does not, argues Wandersee, represent a rejection of woman's traditional role in the family; married women workers have continued to "place family first." Hence, she claims, most have not identified with feminists who have attacked the family as oppressive to women and seen jobs as a means to women's liberation. Though she is certainly correct to emphasize married women's attachment to their "vocations" in the family, she is on thin ice when she suggests that the movement of married women into the labor force is without contradictions. Her book lacks a cohesive analysis of the traditional marriage relationship, in particular of the manner in which the difference of activities between husband as income-provider and wife as home-maker has underlain their identities as men and women. Even though married women have entered into the labor force as home-makers, to fill the needs of their families, this extension of home-making has upset the sexual division of labor in marriage. Wandersee fails to grasp the significance of this development, arguing vaguely that a "companionship marriage" has resulted, one in which "there may be a dominant partner, but this arrangement is basically satisfactory to both partners because the dominance is defined by them as part of the relationship, rather than forced upon them by tradition" (p. 103). Furthermore, she ignores the movement of privileged, college-educated women into careers, including the elite men's jobs. Many of these women are a clear exception to her rule, for they have sought jobs not to fill family needs but for their own