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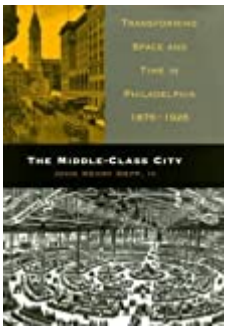

John Henry Hepp IV. *The Middle-Class City: Transforming Space and Time in Philadelphia, 1876-1926.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003. ix + 278 pp. $36.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-3723-8.

Reviewed by Ann Greene (Department of History, University of Pennsylvania)

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Bourgeois Philadelphia

The Middle-Class City studies the cultural roots of progressive politics by examining middle-class culture in Philadelphia between 1876 and 1926. John Henry Hepp IV provides an interesting take on Robert Wiebe's characterization of progressive politics as a "search for order" driven by the middle and upper classes anxious and ambivalent about change. In contrast, Hepp see this "search for order" as the perpetuation, through politics, of an optimistic, confident, bourgeois world that emerged as the middle class "reordered its world along new, rational lines" in the years between 1876 and 1926. "What inspired this search for order was the application of science–as the Victorian middle class understood this term–to every day life" (p. 2). According to Hepp, in the Victorian mind "science" meant the methodology of taxonomy inspired by the "Darwinian revolution in popular middle-class thought" (p. 10). The Victorian middle class constructed their mental world and their physical urban environment around a new taxonomy of space and time. By the twentieth century, the middle class expanded its cultural order "to encompass politics as well" (p. 8). To describe this bourgeois world, Hepp uses exhaustive research into diaries, memoirs, letters, oral histories, business records, floor plans, photographs, newspaper articles and other written sources and physical artifacts, to examine changes in middle-class life reflected in three institutions he feels were central to bourgeois Victorian life: mass transit, department stores, and newspapers. These institutions of movement, consumption, and communication each reveal "a consistent reorganization of time and space" (p. 8) that resulted in a distinctive middle-class city by 1900.

Hepp focuses on Philadelphia because it was a large, expanding, industrial city "exemplary of Victorian bourgeois culture" (p. 4). Defining class as a cultural category that reveals "the activities, beliefs, and institutions that members shared and often used to differentiate themselves from others in a society" (p.14), and using "bourgeois" interchangeably with "middle class," Hepp argues that a common bourgeois culture united the middle class across different layers of income, religion, ethnicity, race, gender, and experience. "These middle-class Philadelphians shared activities; these were the rituals that helped define bourgeois culture." In particular, "almost all of middle-class life revolved around institutions ... that used

logic and order and (in the language of the time) 'science' to reorder the world" (p. 209). However, bourgeois Philadelphia proved fragile. By the early-twentieth century, the very taxonomy of time and space that constructed it provided the means to transform it into the multi-classed city and growing suburbs of the twentieth century.

In part 1, "Late Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia," Hepp explores the creation of bourgeois Philadelphia by dissecting the three kinds of spaces in which he sees this broadly defined middle class reordering their world along scientific lines. In the first two chapters, Hepp takes the reader onto the trains and trolleys and into the railroad stations to explore the evolving mental and physical geography of the middle-class city. The "bourgeois corridors" of the transit system linked one "distinctly middle-class location" to another (p. 27). Contending that fares were too high for the working class, Hepp defines the trolleys and trains as safe, middle-class spaces that in particular gave middle-class women the freedom to move around the city. The transit system expanded the city beyond the "walking city" and created a more specialized urban geography as middle-class residents differentiated residential neighborhoods from business and commercial districts. It represented "modern society's triumph over nature" (p. 47). Hepp feels that "the rhythms of bourgeois life can be found in and around the Victorian trains stations [sic]" (p. 48). In the 1880s, and 1890s, the Pennsylvania Railroad and the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad relocated their depots from the city's fringe to the business district. Unlike older, smaller stations, these new stations were rationally organized spaces that carefully separated people, passenger trains, and freight trains, and contained smaller spaces carefully delineated by function, gender, and class. Railroad stations acquired restaurants, reading rooms, ladies waiting rooms, baggage rooms, etc., and guided different groups of passengers along separate routes. The Reading railroad had a different waiting room for "immigrants," while the Pennsylvania Railroad brought them separately into the South Philadelphia station, not the bourgeois Broad Street station (p. 66). Time as well as space was remade and reclassified, Hepp argues. Through the creation of standard time and the growing precision of timetables, the railroads created a new world of time organized around the trains, even if this abstract world did not always correspond to actual railroad operation.

Chapter 3, "A Pretty Friendly Sort of Place," shows the role of retailers in shaping and changing bourgeois definitions of time and space. Department stores were important "nodes in the geography of the middle-class city" (p. 76). Their large and impressive buildings were part of the new urban landscape, and their interior spaces were increasingly specialized and classified, and controlled the physical environment, through electric lighting, forced air ventilation, and elevators, and the human behavior of consumption. Department stores (a phrase not widely used until the twentieth century) based their success on high volume cash sales that kept their prices low. A plethora of services and special events made it possible to "spend an entire day within a single dry goods store" (p. 78). The taxonomy of interior space grew in precision as retailers used increasingly sophisticated methods of presenting merchandise and keeping sales statistics. Department stores were "spectacles of sophistication and modernity" that became "effective selling machines" (pp. 81, 83). Innovations such as returnable merchandise, approval buying, and a calendar of sales events throughout the year all contributed to the new rhythm of Victorian bourgeois life.

Finally, Hepp regards Philadelphia's newspapers as important material artifacts that shed "light on the broader cultural impulses of the time" (p. 88). In "A Sober Paper," he examines them as an "overlooked element of urban geography" in the mental world of the middle-class city (p. 91). Newspapers were a vital link connecting bourgeois commercial culture to its customers. As "social class became an increasingly important determinate of spatial use," a group of four papers–*The Times*, the *Public Ledger*, *The Press*, and the *Evening Telegraph*–defined the "genteel metropolitan press" (p. 92) and a distinct bourgeois space, even though all newspapers had middle-class readers. The location of newspaper buildings near each other defined a newspaper district–known by the nickname "Chestnut Street"–that was another public space, never exclusively middle-class in fact yet perceived as such by the bourgeois mind. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, dropping prices, growing circulations, and changing technologies brought about changes in the content and appearance of Philadelphia newspapers. In keeping with trends seen in transportation and marketing, newspapers became more "rational and structured" (p.103). Bigger headlines, hierarchical layouts, photographs, more drawings, and specialized departments changed the way in which people read newspapers, guiding them toward "important" stories, and allowing them to skip around rather than reading the paper from beginning to end. Furthermore, consumer-oriented advertising grew in importance. As newspapers supported the new calendar of sales created by retail

establishments, a correlation developed between certain advertisers and the genteel press. Hepp concludes that by the end of the century, "middle-class Philadelphians found themselves living in a rational, scientific city" that reflected their faith in progress (p. 114).

Hepp argues from the beginning that this middle-class city was fragile, and in part 2, "Early Twentieth Century Philadelphia," he traces how the market forces that had created the middle-class city transformed it again into the multi-classed city of the twentieth century. The very structures that defined Victorian Philadelphia became the means by which institutions such as department stores and newspapers reached out to larger and broader clienteles and audiences, driven by a growing culture of consumption and by the rising wages of the working class. In chapter 5, "If Dad Could Not Get ... the *Evening Bulletin* It Was Practically the End of the World," Hepp uses the rise of the *Evening Bulletin* as a case study for the transformation of the press. He shows how the techniques of rationality that had characterized the genteel press–changing layouts, categorization of information, advertisements–enabled the paper to transcend its middle-class market and appeal to a mass market.

In chapter 6, "We Never Realized That Department Stores Had an Upstairs," Hepp shows how department stores changed from "middle-class havens to multi-class institutions" (p. 144). Department stores emphasized services and spectacles that required large staffs and innovative technologies, and demanded larger sales to a broader customer base. John Wanamaker and others established bargain basements to attract working-class shoppers, and elite areas on their upper floors to retain their upper end clientele. They "classified not only time and space but also people" (p. 164), becoming distinctly female spaces, separating different classes of customers, screening for race and ethnicity in their employment practices, and attracting, discouraging, or limiting members of different racial and ethnic groups as shoppers.

Finally, in "One Great Big Stretch of Middle Class," Hepp argues that Philadelphians were able to expand the carefully defined order of the Victorian city to dominate the region, from center city, through specialized residential and commercial areas, to new suburbs and vacation spots such as the Poconos and the Jersey Shore. Suburban expansion was at first not in keeping with the classic model of the railroad suburb, but an expansion of the taxonomy of the bourgeois city beyond the city limits. However, the fundamental difference between the nineteenth century and the twentieth century, he suggests, is that this middle-class spatial world came under growing pressure as more non-white and working-class people moved in. Middle-class men and women "fought to maintain their sense of order, first through private action and later through politics" (p. 169). Here lie the cultural roots of progressivism. Though bourgeois Philadelphians were accustomed to sharing their spaces with others (pp. 180-181), the expanding transportation network of trolleys and trains, soon augmented by buses and cars, and a growing mass market, made urban space less "exclusively middle class and more multi-classed" (p. 188). The taxonomy of time and space that Hepp finds distinctively bourgeois and scientific expanded to include new outlying communities such as Cynwyd, and the new suburban railroad schedules that imposed rational order over "nature's time" (p. 198). However, the dynamic of free-market capitalism that had driven this taxonomy also drove changes that made it difficult for middle-class Philadelphians to maintain their "grammar of space" and undermined the Victorian bourgeois urban order (p. 201). Increasingly, Philadelphians turned to government regulation, bureaucratic reform, and political activism to maintain their rationalized world. Nevertheless, in the long run, this would prove untenable.

Hepp concludes that the legacy of the Victorians is still present, and extremely mixed. The rational order of the nineteenth century is still physically apparent in the twenty-first-century city, and is socially and legally apparent in the structure of laws, regulations and agreements that classify people and neighborhoods. He concludes that understanding nineteenth-century urban history in terms of the Victorian taxonomy of time and space–"their paradigm for order"–is critical to understanding twentieth- and twenty-first-century urban history. This paradigm, not "technological or demographic imperatives" provides the basis for understanding linking politics to its cultural roots (p. 215).

This book successfully recreates the texture of middle-class Victorian urban life. Hepp's use of "thick description" works particularly well in the narrative sections titled "prelude," "interlude," and "postlude," in which he follows individuals to the Centennial of 1876, to Willow Grove Park in 1901, and to the Sesqui-Centennial in 1926 respectively. I think that Hepp is accurate in his insight about the role of "science" in the Victorian period, and he recaptures for a more jaded and cautious age the excitement about new technologies, such as electricity, the awe of technological spectacle, and the optimism about the ability of new knowledge to reshape the world. In addition to the narratives that bracket the book's two

sections, the last two chapters on department stores and regional expansion are extremely strong in this regard.

Yet, despite the skill of these portions of the book, Hepp's portrayal of the middle-class city seems very disconnected from the urban history of this period. The prosperous, optimistic, complacent, bourgeois world he describes seems abstract and distant from the gritty history of this Gilded Age industrial city. The rituals of middle-class transportation, recreation, and consumption do not include the world of work. Even the physical descriptions of the city, at which Hepp excels, seem in their rational order to bear little resemblance to the city as shown in photographs from this period, its dirty streets clogged with pedestrians, horse-drawn vehicles, and trolleys. Philadelphia's streets were contested space, between residents and streetcar companies, social reformers and street urchins, animal welfare activists and teamsters, hose companies and sanitarians. The streetcars, which Hepp claims were safe middle-class spaces, were also sites of struggles for access by African Americans. Moreover, it was precisely because classes, races, and ethnic groups jostled together on the streetcars that the middle class eventually welcomed automobiles as a private solution to the problem of public transportation. Finally, Hepp pays little attention to race, except in two short sections in chapters about department stores and housing, which feel a bit like an afterthought. In addition, Philadelphia's distinctive, redoubtable, and powerful elite is strangely absent from his portrayal of a confident, autonomous, empowered bourgeoisie. However, perhaps this is Hepp's point, and the medium is the message–perhaps the white middle class was so successful in creating a mental and physical taxonomy of space and time for themselves that they were this self-contained and insulated from the social, political, and economic conflicts of the late nineteenth century.

Given Hepp's cultural argument and his emphasis on science and technology, I also wish that he were more sensitive to the interdependence of technology and culture. He makes much of the way that the railroads delineated time and space, but does not place them into a larger historical context where they are part of a continuous interplay between technology, space, and time. He seems to understand neither the way in which the nature of steam power governed some of the decisions about railroads and city streets, nor the importance of animal power in urban expansion and commerce. For example, horses pulled the streetcars for the first half of the period he studies, and instead of being "expensive and inefficient" (p. 49) as he claims, they were profitable enterprises, part of multi-city syndicates invested in by leading Philadelphians. Finally, by making much of the ways in which the railroads and department stores governed middle-class schedules and calendars, he forgets there are other ways in which "nature's time" had already altered for many Americans by the postbellum period, and misses the ways in which ideas about nature and ideas about cities were mutually constitutive.

However, much in this study is fresh and thought-provoking. Hepp succeeds in redirecting attention to the middle class in a consideration of late-nineteenth-century change. He rejects the tired convention of explaining politics as the product of anxiety about change. His alternative to the classic suburbanization model for Philadelphia bears further investigation and consideration, especially in light of later developments in the twentieth century. The strength of this book is Hepp's insistence that we understand the people of the past on their own terms, look for underlying continuities, and pay attention to the cultural and material world from which political action grows.