

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**David Halle, ed.** *New York and Los Angeles: Politics, Society, and Culture, A comparative View.* Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003. 558 pp. \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-31370-2.

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This book is edited by David Halle, a professor of sociology at the University of California, Los Angeles and an adjunct professor at the City University of New York's Graduate Center. This double institutional affiliation facilitates the opportunity to build an urban perspective through the dual lenses of the theoretical frameworks offered by the New York and Los Angeles schools. The author's background helps explain the special character of the book, which is a comparative analysis of two cities; heretofore the production of urban studies in the United States (and in many other countries)[1] has privileged single city monographs.[2] David Halle's book thus informs the reader immediately that he wants to reconcile two lines of thought that structure the field of urban studies in America, while taking a multidisciplinary approach. As such, the book analyzes both the sprawling, polycentric character of the urban, built environment as well as the fabric and future of the central city.

The focus of the Los Angeles school is the de-centered metropolis, whose founding text is historian Robert Fogelson's *The Fragmented Metropolis, Los Angeles 1850-1930*, which focused on peripheral development and the fragmentation of metropolitan politics. The school is also interested in the post-Fordist economy and its bifurcated labor market: a prosperous managerial and professional elite and a struggling lower sector.

The New York school of thought—the doyen of which is Jane Jacobs—is interested in the central city, and has a fascination for Manhattan and a belief in the superiority of city life for the upper, middle and working classes. The New York school, which has not been yet explicitly identified as a school—partly because scholars do not tend to

identify themselves in this way—shares with the Chicago school (1920s and 1930s) a tendency to see city life as of great interest and value. Therefore, gentrification becomes a central theme—with Soho as the model—in analyzing the preservation of the neighborhood and the consequences of phenomena such as loft-living on the working class.

The book is divided into fifteen chapters, the first five of which constitute an overview. The rest are organized around three themes—social problems, politics and power, and conflict and culture—all central to the two schools, although neglecting transportation issues. Half of the chapters are written by two or three authors, and share a common framework for the comparative analysis of the two cities. Since one purpose of the book is to challenge traditional stereotypes of New York and Los Angeles, most of the analyses tend to express how the two cities differ because of their different histories—but also how they tend to become more similar as a result of technological changes and economic trends.

The stereotype that Los Angeles is far more diffused than New York and other urban areas in America is true only if stated with a distinction between geographical spread (where it is correct), and population density/housing size (where it is less true). Both cities have residential areas that are densely packed. And there is no question that much of New York City is far more densely populated than anything in the Los Angeles region. Manhattan has 68,200 people per square mile, which contrasts with the city of Los Angeles's 7,027 persons per square mile. However Staten Island's population density (7,043 persons per square mile) resembles that of the city of Los

Angeles. Orange County's population density of 3,410 persons per square mile is substantially higher than that of Westchester (1,948) and not much lower than that of Nassau County (4,439). Much of the single-family housing in the Los Angeles region is as closely packed as in the New York metropolitan area, outside the borders of New York City, Newark, and in older cities. Furthermore, Los Angeles, which is the model of the de-centered metropolis, also has a project to make the central city attractive to the wealthy and middle class, and has built a series of major cultural centers downtown, of which the latest is the Disney Center (the home of the Los Angeles Philharmonic). The conclusion of the first chapter indicates that the NY region now in many ways resembles the LA region, with large proportions of the higher income group, non-minorities, and non-foreign born living beyond the urban core. Gentrification has occurred only in limited areas.

Two chapters of the book explicitly deal with globalization trends: chapter 2, which is about the economy and global flows, and chapter 4, which is about new immigrant Chinese communities. This latter is of great interest for a foreign scholar, since it revisits the pattern of the transitory nature of inner-city ethnic enclaves as springboards for integration into mainstream America. The traditional American model is challenged: newcomers continue to settle in the central city but some immigrants are moving directly into affluent urban neighborhoods or suburbs. The analysis focuses on Flushing in New York City—an urban neighborhood located beyond the inner-city core—and Monterey Park, a suburban municipality in Los Angeles county beyond the city boundaries. New York and Los Angeles serve as the largest urban centers of Chinese settlers, and in both of them suburbanization of the Chinese population has occurred. New Chinese neighborhoods are visible in Queens and Brooklyn (far from Manhattan's old Chinatown, but within the City) and in the NY metropolitan region, such as Stony Brook in Long Island. In 2000, only 15 percent of the metropolitan New York Chinese population lived in Chinatown. In Los Angeles, there is a concentration of Chinese in suburban municipalities such as Monterey Park (41 percent of its population is Chinese), San Marino, San Gabriel and, others, while only 2 percent of the metropolitan Chinese population live in Chinatown. This pattern of settlement of the Chinese newcomers may be explained by the fact that they arrive with higher than average education and economic resources, with the capabilities of creating their own ethnic economy. They are therefore better connected to the outside

world on economic, social, and political terms. Flushing and Monterey Park both have a strong economy, a mixed model of an "East meets West" development driven by economic globalization. However, as stressed by the authors (two faculty members at UCLA), rapid economic growth not only creates opportunities, but also causes pains associated with soaring real estate prices, overcrowding, and more traffic congestion. These new communities may be perceived, then, by non-Hispanic white middle-class communities as a threat to their sense of place and identity and their notion of "Americanness". In other words, the perspective of a correlation between levels of acculturation and residential mobility is no longer valid. For immigrants the choice of living in the suburbs is no longer a sign of being Americanized. This analysis is well argued along with figures, tables, and photographs comparing the two urban regions.

This book is not just a collection of articles written by twenty-three "bright" scholars working on two eminent and distinguished American cities. It is rather a collective book which is conveying a clear message about the changes American cities are going through, influenced by economic change, the influx of immigrants, and the globalization of American culture. Some chapters stress the need for reconceptualizing urban issues such as residential mobility and neighborhood change. New York and Los Angeles represent two different "motifs" of urban studies—the decentralized periphery and the revitalization of city centers—and David Halle has succeeded in reconciling them. As a consequence, he has succeeded in covering the central issues facing urban America. Contrary to a certain number of books belonging to the New York and Los Angeles schools, this book is far from pretentious. It does not proclaim that the trends affecting New York and Los Angeles should be understood as universal or that these two cities represent the two models of what is occurring in the rest of the urban world. For all these reasons, I highly recommend this book to American and foreign scholars in urban studies—even though they may not be necessarily involved in the study of these two cities—for the high quality of the comparative analysis and its perspective on current urban issues. However, I think David Halle could have been more critical of the New York and Los Angeles schools, and explained why he so carefully avoided the modern/postmodern debate which is also another characteristic of the American production in urban studies.

#### Notes

- [1]. I personally published a monograph on Los An-

geles in French, *Los Angeles, the Non-Achieved American Myth* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 1997, 2003).  
[2]. With the exception of Janet L. Abu-Lughod's

book, *New York, Chicago, Los Angeles: America's Global Cities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

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