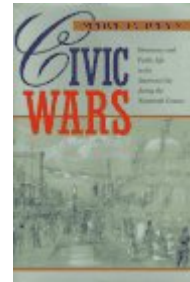


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Mary P. Ryan. *Civic Wars: Democracy and Public Life in the American City during the Nineteenth Century*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997. xii + 376 pp. \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-21660-0; \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-20441-6.



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Numerous scholars and social commentators have lamented the apparent decline in civic cohesion in the last decades of the twentieth century. From Robert Putnam's "Bowling Alone" to Arthur Schlesinger's *The Disuniting of America*, critics have captured the feeling of alienation from the larger body politic that many believe plagues American society as we approach the new millennium.[1] As Mary Ryan explains, there exist in America a popular notion that the end of the twentieth century represents "a withdrawal from the civic project as we [have] known it" (p. 1). This apparent rupture in civic consciousness is the theme of *Civic Wars*. Ryan looks at three regionally diverse nineteenth-century cities—New York, New Orleans, and San Francisco—to understand the historical roots of modern political fractiousness. What she finds is not a golden age of civic cohesion but "a trail of contestation that goes back well beyond a century" (p. 3). Her story of urban politics suggests that civic wars are not an anomaly of late twentieth-century politics, but an essential feature of modern American democracy.

Ryan begins by defining her use of the terms "the public" and "democracy." She points to Habermas's definition of the public sphere, one shaped by rational-critical discourse, as too limiting, and turns to philosophers Iris Young and Nancy Fraser, who stress the importance of recognizing "decentered publics" that exist in a variety of social and cultural spaces. Ryan empha-

sizes the instability of national identity in the nineteenth century, arguing that "democratic civic life is not a simple transcription from a singular national culture, nor is it centered in a singular political institution such as the state" (p. 12). Along with historian Philip Ethington,[2] Ryan recognizes the importance of understanding the multiple ways people defined themselves as political actors in a democracy, and how they represented these identities in a variety of public spaces.

Ryan divides the book into three sections to highlight the changes in urban politics taking place in the nineteenth century. The first section, "Heterogeneous Compounds and Kaleidoscopic Varieties: Creating a Democratic Public, 1825-1849," focuses on the ways in which the growth of New York, New Orleans, and San Francisco brought different groups together into what she calls an urban kaleidoscope. She examines how a variety of public spaces became central sites for the enactment of civic identity. Plazas, squares, small parks, theaters, guild halls, and especially streets provided legible spaces in which political identities could be read. Ryan calls the performance of identities in public space an example of "ceremonial citizenship," where urban residents "entered into public time and space to represent themselves in a profusion of custom-made identities" (pp. 59-60). These differences could play themselves out in violent fashion, especially during local elections. Yet Ryan shows how

American cities in the mid-nineteenth century tolerated this public jostling as a regular feature of democratic politics.

Perhaps Ryan's most significant contribution to urban political history is the way she effectively links the fractiousness and violence often associated with local urban politics to broader trends at the national level, thereby forcing us to rethink the traditional narrative of national rupture. In part two, "The Interregnum, 1850-1865," Ryan highlights how the boisterous street life that was an emblem of public democracy and active civic engagement gave way to more divisive and violent public demonstrations aimed at silencing opposition. The rise of Vigilance Committees in New York, New Orleans, and San Francisco was symbolic of the breakdown of public belief in and support of the principles of public assembly, popular sovereignty, and majority rule in American democracy. These committees represented, in part, the erosion of the party system and illustrated how race, nativism and sectionalism became increasingly central elements of political debate, reshaping both local and national political discourse.

The final section of the book, "The Huge Conglomerate Mass': Democracy Contained and Continued, 1866-1880," illustrates how the fissures of the Civil War, along with the rapid growth of the urban population, "disrupted the spatial foundations of meeting-place democracy" (p. 185). New technologies reshaped cities into modern industrial landscapes, with tenement buildings, apartment houses, and downtown skyscrapers symbolizing the rising power of corporate monopolies in the post-bellum American economy. This new landscape shifted the center of urban life away from previous civic landmarks, such as public squares and plazas, and toward privatized spaces like department stores. The forms of civic ceremony changed as well, with the "politics of publicity" taking the place of earlier forms of group self-representation. Fireworks displays, for example, replaced ethnic parades as the appropriate means of celebrating holidays like the fourth of July.

Ryan intricately weaves together a variety of sources, including newspapers, city council records, petitions, architectural plans, political cartoons, and engravings to examine the diversity of the urban fabric in nineteenth-century America. She effectively highlights how association, confrontation, and opposition became the foundations of urban politics in the mid-nineteenth century. Yet

she also illustrates the apparent failure of urban democracy to sustain this fragile balance of differences during and after the Civil War, leading to increasingly coercive methods of patrolling city space and enforcing public order. In addition, Ryan shows how this increased regulation shifted the boundaries of private and public space, with public spaces like parks becoming increasingly regulated and inscribed with markers of private largess, and commercial spaces like amusement parks and baseball stadiums becoming primary sites of public interaction. Ryan stops short, however, of accepting these commercial leisure spaces as legitimate sites of civic culture. She does not fully address how these sites might function as new arenas of public discourse, resituating debates over urban identity formation through consumerism and recreational activity. This kind of analysis of the public function of leisure spaces would have enhanced her argument about the importance of recognizing "everyday and festive citizenship" as an essential element in shaping public spheres (p. 315).

Civic Wars provides a richly textured analysis of the changing political culture of the nineteenth century, both nationally and locally, with fine discussions of how civic wars unfolded differently in New York, New Orleans, and San Francisco. Ryan's compelling narrative captures the drama of urban life and the regional variations that resulted as issues of race, ethnicity, class, and gender shaped cultural representations in each place. Ryan highlights the centrality of pluralism in shaping nineteenth-century definitions of the public and suggests that the acceptance of difference as a central feature of American democracy could help reanimate the public sphere at the start of the twenty-first century.

Notes

[1]. Robert D. Putnam, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," *Journal of Democracy* 6:1 (1995); and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. *The Disuniting of America* (New York: Norton, 1993).

[2]. Philip J. Ethington, *The Public City: The Political Construction of Urban Life in San Francisco, 1850-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

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