Hypothesizing a trend from structural to more cultural approaches to the urban past in American and European historical writing, the author discovered to the contrary that social historians have consistently seen the subjects of urban history as a place, a population, and the social-cultural relations between and among individuals, families, institutions, and place. Urban historians in the 1990s, however, have moved towards subjects not easily treated with a purely structural approach. [Culture, urban ethnography, urban history, anthropological theory, urban migration]

THE VOLUME EDITED BY STEPHAN Themstrom and Richard Sennett Nineteenth Century Cities: Essays in the New Urban History, was first published in 1969; it included some of the papers from a conference held at Yale that addressed the nineteenth-century industrial city the previous year. The editors' "Preface" noted, "It may be premature to claim that a . . . 'new urban history' has emerged as yet, but it is clear that the burgeoning field of urban history is now in a state of creative ferment. New questions are being raised, new sources are being exploited, new methods of analysis are being employed by a generation of younger scholars" (Themstrom and Sennett 1969:vii). Themstrom (a student of Oscar Handlin at Harvard) had published his revised dissertation as Poverty and Progress: Social Mobility in a Nineteenth Century City in 1964, and Sennett (also a Handlin student) published Families against the City: Middle Class Homes of Industrial Chicago, 1872–1890 in 1970. The two scholars, the historian Themstrom and the sociologist Sennett, attributed three interrelated characteristics to the new urban history: 1) “an interest in linking sociological theory to historical data, moving back and forth across the boundaries separating the traditional disciplines; 2) an understanding of the uses of quantitative materials; 3) an eagerness to broaden the scope of urban studies to embrace the social experience of ordinary, unexceptional people” (Themstrom
and Sennett 1969:vii). This agenda clearly linked the new urban history to the contemporary rise of social history; indeed, it was a bellwether of that rise.

What Was the New Urban History?

LET'S TAKE A CLOSER LOOK at those two studies and some contemporaneous works. In Poverty and Progress Themstrom took a hard look at the twentieth-century sociological notion of the United States as a land of opportunity as it was represented in the studies of W. Lloyd Warner and his associates, including Yankee City (Newburyport, MA) which had been published in the 1940s. Warner and his colleagues had collected evidence from contemporary residents, but since they did no systematic research on the past, looked only shallowly at trends in occupational and social mobility. Themstrom instead used the nineteenth century U.S. census manuscript individual and household schedules from 1850 to 1880 for Newburyport to address his question: To what extent did nineteenth-century working-class Americans experience upward social mobility over several generations? What made this possible to do, of course, was the computer which could handle large numbers of cases coded in machine readable form on what were then called IBM cards which were fed into the clanking mechanical card sorters then analyzed on electric calculators (miniaturized electronic computers were way off beyond the horizon). Another facilitating factor was the Joint Center for Urban Studies of Harvard and MIT, in which students (like Themstrom) and young faculty (like Sennett) from the two institutions from other Boston-area universities as well met and discussed each others' work.

Although he relied on quantitative analysis of evidence about individual's occupations from three United States censuses, along the way Themstrom was equally capable of using individual life histories which he had traced manually across vital records and censuses, diaries and autobiographical success stories, and business histories to enliven his narrative. He livened his story and kept his readers' attention by alternating what he found through census analysis and his major finding of the transience of most of the city's working-class residents between the decennial censuses. Newburyport both attracted migrants seeking work and sent them on to another locality in a temporary economic downturn or a
lucky break. Thernstrom's temporal comparison of censuses catches only those who stayed (to be included in the mobility study over at least two of the three censuses)—thus those who were less mobile—were also much more likely to be native born, and most likely to be the more successful in terms of acquiring wealth and status. Thernstrom's analysis of workers across thirty plus years was also compromised by the relatively small numbers who could be traced.

When he turned to intergenerational mobility prospects, however, Thernstrom was able to demonstrate a sometimes brighter process, and when he looked beyond occupational mobility to property ownership and savings he found that the possibility of mortgages made this upward path more likely than occupational mobility. Thus the thesis is saved: Massachusetts workmen were able to upgrade themselves into owners of small property—the houses in which they lived.

Richard Sennett picked Chicago, a much larger city, and the middle class rather than workers for his focus in order to study the "complex triad of city life, family, and work [that] must give shape to the lives of middle class people" (p.3). Given the size of Chicago, Sennett focused on family life in but one neighborhood, Union Park, from its first settlement to the World's Fair of 1893; the book's first section considers the history of this neighborhood. Its second section looks at the household composition, families in those households, and the characteristics of the 12,000 individuals who belonged to these Union Park family/households. All the fathers and sons who had listed occupations in 1880 were tracked in the third section through city directories from 1872 to 1890 to see the extent to which their occupations and place of residence changed, and how. Sennett is more interested, however, in qualitative change, as when he states his purpose, to demonstrate "how an intense and warm family life under certain conditions destroyed bonds between father and son" and sometimes their ability to deal with aspects of urban life. And fortunately, he had two autobiographies (published in the second decade of the twentieth century) of upper- and middle-class men who had grown up in the Union Park neighborhood in families which were wealthy but austere in their approach to urban life and morality. These autobiographies provide Sennett with much more qualitative evidence than Thernstrom had, making possible an inside look at a few middle and upper-class family lives. Perhaps that explains the way the city fades from Sennett's study and the family becomes the central bulwark against the isolation and fear of possible disorder of the
city (a glance at the date of publication of Sennett's book, 1970, reminds us as well of its reflection of urban concerns of the period in which it was written).

Looking once again at the collection of essays edited by Themstrom and Sennett, it becomes apparent that most of the work done in the U.S. on urban history addressed United States urban history (just as most of the history written by historians in the U.S. had and still has for its subject the United States). There were exactly three essays out of the twelve presented there which were concerned with the world outside the borders of the United States; these were Joan Scott's essay on the French glassworkers of Carmaux; Michael B. Katz's study of Hamilton, Ontario; and Anthony P. Maingot's study of urban Colombia.

For historians studying Europe, British sociologist Michael Anderson's *Family Structure in Nineteenth Century Lancashire* (1971) paralleled in importance the books by Themstrom and Sennett. Although Anderson's title mentions the county of Lancashire, this study is almost exclusively about the city of Preston around 1850. Further, its stated subject is the extent to which family structure changed with early English industrialization and urbanization; this topic grew out of the importance of Parsonian sociology in the 1950s and '60s, which took an evolutionary view of family structure as responsive to changing broader social conditions. Anderson's study was written at least partially in response to *Social Change in the Industrial Revolution* (1959) by Neal Smelser (one of the most influential and successful students of Talcott Parsons—who was then the foremost voice in American structural/functionalist sociology). Smelser's study argued that the move from family household-based textile production in northern England to factory-based industrial production produced a crisis in family relations that was solved by children and parents being able to work together (thus maintaining paternal authority over children) in the early cotton textile industry. Anderson took up the question of the functionality of the small family household during the early years of the Industrial Revolution using a one in ten sample of the census enumerator's books for Preston from three censuses, plus comparable information from the surrounding villages in which many of Preston's heads of household and their wives had been born. The structure of the study was complex but its findings were clear and persuasive. Anderson writes,

"Together . . . [the evidence] suggest[s] very strongly that, in spite of migration, residential mobility, industrial employment, ..."
and high mortality rates, most people managed to maintain relationships within their family, both the current nuclear family and family as a web of wider kinship relationships. [p.66]

To conclude this review of the early years of urban history written in English (I leave aside here the rich harvest of French urban social histories published in the 1970s and ‘80s by Adeline Daumard and Pierre Deyon on Amiens in the early modern and nineteenth century respectively, Louis Trenard on Lille-Roubaix-Tourcoing, and Yves Lequin on the Lyon and the Lyonnais, to mention a few outstanding examples), I’d like to discuss the first year of publication of the Journal of Urban History, starting with issue number one, November, 1974. Its editor’s introduction (then Raymond A. Mohl of Florida Atlantic University) remarks on the rapid growth of the field over the “past decade;” the journal had been established “to provide urban scholars with a forum for interpretation and new research” (p.3). Continuing, he quotes the comment of one of the members of the editorial board: “urban history is a big tent.” The journal editors hoped to attract articles which see cities as interactive systems, “comparative studies of urban societies and systems over space or time,” studies examining urban historiography as written elsewhere in the world, and those which use interdisciplinary approaches. In its third issue, a thematic volume, “Family in American Urban Society,” guest editor Tamara Hareven discussed “Family Time and Industrial Time: Family and Work in a Planned Corporation Town, 1900–1924” (based on company records of a large New England textile producer) and Sally and Clyde Griffen explored “Family and Business in a Small City: Poughkeepsie, NY, 1850–1880, an analysis again based (as its inclusive dates betray) on the manuscript schedules of U.S. censuses; both these articles are exemplary examples of the kind of interdisciplinary empirical work done by the urban history pioneers. Over its first year, most of the articles in the journal were either commissioned review essays or methodological essays, plus a few substantive articles along the lines of the books which were appearing in the same period, with quantitative, often census-based evidence providing the basis for discussion of urban life.
What's Happening Now?

My first answer is "more of the same," for the very important reason that writing urban history has been highly empirical and the sources require going to the local level in whatever country the study is based. Hence it takes a long time to do the research; I for example never wrote the book I intended to write comparing the demographic and social history of three cities in northern France: one (Roubaix) that grew rapidly with mid- and late-nineteenth century textile industrialization, a second (Anzin) which also boomed due to the exploitation of its coal mines, and a third (Amiens) which deindustrialized and became an administrative center in the period. To these I added a Paris suburb in which a tobacco monopoly manufacture was the major local employer at the end of the nineteenth century for about forty years but which since has also deindustrialized. I published many (sixteen) articles on these places, but never did the book which I had planned as a synthesis of French nineteenth century urban history. In 1998, I participated in a conference (Social Science History Association) book panel in which two books about migration to German cities which had been twenty years in the making were discussed; both authors had stuck to their projects through years of research and teaching at small, demanding colleges, and finally produced the books: Steve Hochstadt, (1999) and James H. Jackson, Jr., Migration and Urbanization in the Ruhr Valley, 1821–1914 (1997). Migration and tough-to-trace migrants are a subject that deserves attention, but the time needed to do the subject justice is daunting.

Several more recent historical studies of European cities—also published in the 1990s—deserve mention for the way they have moved decisively beyond the more structural accounts of the past and used the history of social change in a specific city as a way to talk about cultural change. Les grammaires d'une ville: Essai sur la génèse des structures urbaines (1996) had been presented as a doctoral thesis in geography by Marcel Roncayolo in 1981; he revised only slightly for publication fifteen years later. This is a beautifully written, almost poetic study of Marseille; the first volume discusses the social construction of its urban space—adding history and culture to the geographer's special focus on space and quantitative evidence—from the 1830s and '40s to the 1970s. The second volume looks again at the same years, but focuses more on urban politics and the ups and downs of the city's economy and how that
impacted on the qualitative aspects of city life in Marseille. Peter Scholliers' *Wages, Manufacturers and Workers in the Nineteenth-Century Factory: The Voortman Cotton Mill in Ghent* (1996) focuses centrally on the workplace, but builds out from workplace to community. Like U.S. urban historian Tamara Hareven who also used company records as well as demographic ones to look analytically at Manchester, New Hampshire textile workers and their lives on and off work, Scholliers is able to look at a particular employer and his workers in a single city; he sees the mill as a battlefield about wages. Building on earlier studies of the Dutch-speaking Belgian city and its social relations Scholliers combines both a well-documented analysis of material well-being based on worker earnings and both popular and elite cultural understandings of the rise of a wage economy.

Five books suggest where French urban history has been in the last ten years: Rachel Fuchs' *Poor and Pregnant in Paris: Strategies for Survival in the Nineteenth Century* (1992) combines a study of the women (many unmarried, but some merely poor) who gave birth in the city hospital from the 1830s to 1914 with a discussion of the panic in the French popular press about morality and immorality and, even more alarming, about the threat of depopulation because of France's exceedingly low birth rate. Donald Reid's *Paris Sewers and Sewermen: Realities and Representations* (1991) documents the fascination of fin-de-siècle Parisians and tourists alike with the tours by boat or railed car of the city's sewers, which continue today. Arlette Farge published her *La vie fragile: Violence, pouvoir et solidarité à Paris* in 1986—*The Fragility of Life, Violence, Power and Solidarities in Eighteenth Century Paris,* neatly sums up its contents. Catherine Kudlick's *Cholera in Post-Revolutionary Paris: A Cultural History* (1996) takes the appearance of a new (to Europe) epidemic disease, cholera, which first hit Paris and most west European cities in 1832 and 1849, as an opportunity to write about cultural responses to mass, sudden and unanticipated death. Kudlick's study is markedly more oriented toward cultural responses to killing epidemic disease than Richard Evans' massive *Death in Hamburg: Society and Politics in the Cholera Years, 1830–1910* (1987), a structural study of the nineteenth-century cholera epidemics in Hamburg (the last of which—in 1892—hit only that city in Europe).
Conclusions

When I agreed to do this overview of urban history over the last thirty years I thought I would find sharper trends from structural to more cultural approaches to the urban past in American and European historical writing. Having looked analytically at the studies published in the earlier years of my period that I reread, I find that the purely structural study I recalled from the early years was a figment of my imagination, or perhaps merely a lapse of memory. American, French, and Belgian social historians have consistently seen the subjects of urban history as a place, a population, and the social-cultural relations between and among individuals, families, institutions, and place. It is apparent, however, that urban historians in the 1990s have moved towards subjects not easily treated with a purely structural approach; death and disease, the life of the streets, urban subcultures, and the history of twentieth-century spectacle and cultural phenomena (singers, film, travelers' experience, world's fairs) are not easily reduced to structural aspects. The result arouses strong feelings—of horror and disgust, of shared enjoyment of the leisure of others in time past, of aesthetic pleasure—distancing urban history from its flirtation with structural social science in the 1970s and '80s and bringing it closer to urban anthropology.

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