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EDWARD C. BANFIELD

THE CITY AND THE REVOLUTIONARY TRADITION

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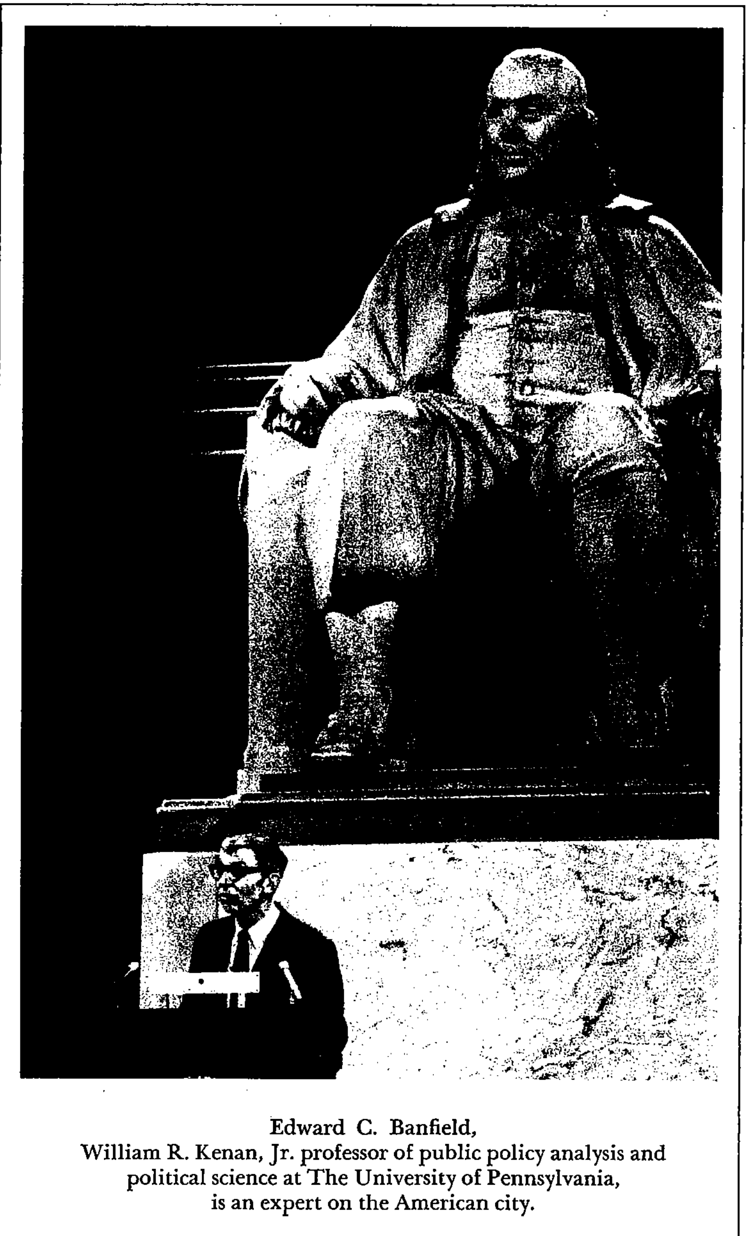

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It would be very pleasant on such an occasion as this to say that the American city has been and is a unique and unqualified success—and to be able to show that its successes all derive from adherence to principles established and given institutional form in the American Revolution, whose bicentennial we are here to commemorate.

Unfortunately, it is all too evident that even if this were the Fourth of July I would not have license for that sort of oratory. In many important respects the American city is a great success, but there are certainly many things about it that are thoroughly unpleasant, and some that are—or ought to be—intolerable. Moreover, it is obvious that in most important respects—the good and the bad alike—the American city differs more in degree than in kind from cities elsewhere. What we have to be proud of and what we have to worry about are, for the most part, features of modernity and not of anything specifically American.

If we limit ourselves, as this occasion requires, to those features of the city that have been distinctively American over a long period of time, we shall nevertheless have a rather long and varied list. I shall begin by offering *my* list. Then I shall try to account for the items on it with a simple explanatory principle. In the hope of making this explanation more convincing, I shall draw a contrast—necessarily based on fragmentary and impressionistic evidence—between urban development in the United States and Canada—having chosen Canada because it was a British colony which did not revolt and to whose development my explanatory principle

applies, so to say, in reverse. Finally, I shall point to what I consider one of the great ironies of history—that the Founding Fathers created a political system whose essential character turned out to be the very opposite of what most of them intended.

I

My list of features which have distinguished the American city over time will be more manageable if I break it down into three categories. The first I shall call growth and material welfare, the second civility, and the third government. I hope that no attention will be paid to the order of the listings, or to the fact that some items would fit about as well in one category as in another.

Growth and material welfare. It should not be necessary to remind a Philadelphia audience how astonishingly fast was the growth and spread of cities in this country. Philadelphia, which in 1775 had a population of 44,000, was the world's eighth largest city a little more than a century later. Of the nine cities in the world with more than a million population in 1890, three were American, and there were then 351 others in the United States of more than 10,000 population.

The cities were built by that often ludicrous and sometimes contemptible fellow—the Worshipper of the Almighty Dollar, the Go-Getter, the Businessman-Booster-Speculator—an upstart, a nobody, but shrewd, his eye on the main chance, always ready to risk his own and (preferably) someone else's money. "Americans," Thomas Low Nichols wrote in 1864,

> are sanguine, and hope to succeed in the wildest speculations; but if they do not, they have little scruple about repudiation. A man cares little for being ruined, and as little about ruining others. But then, ruin there is not like ruin in older countries. Where a man can fail a dozen times, and still go ahead and get credit again, ruin does not amount to much.[1]

[1] Thomas Low Nichols, M.D., *Forty Years of American Life, 1821-1861* (reprinted, New York: Stackpole, 1937), p. 58; (first published 1864).

In search of the dollar, the American has been constantly on the move. The historian, Stephan Thernstrom, has estimated that, over the past 170 years, probably only 40 to 60 percent of the adult males in most cities at any point in time were in the same city ten years later.[2] "A migratory race" Tocqueville called us, "which, having reached the Pacific Ocean, will retrace its steps to disturb and destroy the social communities which it will have formed and left behind."[3]

The ethnic diversity of our cities has been unparalleled. As early as 1890, one-third of the residents of cities of over 100,000 population were foreign-born. Ten million foreign-born were counted by the 1970 census, and their median family income, it is interesting to note, was not appreciably lower than that of all U.S. families.

The American city has always provided a high level of living for the great majority of its residents. (It was because of what he saw in Europe that Thomas Jefferson came to loathe the city.) The American city dweller has always had more and better schooling, housing (in 1900 one-fourth of the families in most large cities owned their own homes), sanitation, and transportation than city dwellers elsewhere.

Civility. Organized philanthropy has always been conspicuous in the American city. Museums, libraries, symphony orchestras, asylums, hospitals, colleges, parks and playgrounds—the number and variety of such institutions begun and supported in whole or part by "service" clubs, foundations, and other private efforts is impressive and, I believe, peculiarly American (a point which Tocqueville also made).

Most of these achievements are largely to the credit of the Go-Getter. But he must also be mentioned as a doer-of-evil—as one who, to get things done, has been ready to go to any lengths. Politicians took bribes, Lincoln Steffens remarked, because businessmen paid bribes, and so it was they, the businessmen, who were the real corrupters.

[2] Stephan Thernstrom, *The Other Bostonians, Poverty and Progress in the American Metropolis, 1880-1970* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973), p. 225.

[3] M. Gustave de Beaumont, ed., *Memoir, Letters, and Remains of Alexis de Tocqueville* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1862), vol. 1, p. 154.

The extent of corruption in American city government has long been the wonder of the civilized world. Some have tried to account for it by pointing to the masses of poor and politically inexperienced immigrants, but this is surely only a partial explanation. Boss Tweed and his "Forty Thieves" (there were then forty New York City councilmen) were in business before a great many immigrants had arrived. Frank J. Goodnow, writing at the turn of the century in one of the first textbooks on city government, stated the puzzling facts:

> Philadelphia, with a large native-born and home-owning and a small tenement-house population, with a charter which is largely based on what is considered to be advanced ideas on the subject of municipal government, is said to be both corrupt and contented. . . .[4]

The experience of cities like Philadelphia, he concluded, encourages the belief that "there must be something in the moral character of the particular populations. . . ."

Moreover, if corruption was common in American cities, so was violent crime. As far back as records go (as much as 100 years in only two cities) the homicide rate has been extraordinarily high by the standards of other countries.

Class differences have, of course, existed in all countries. In America, however, where there has probably been more upward mobility than anywhere else, to be socially defined as "no account" has been crushing in a way that it could not be where everyone knew that rising in the world was out of the question. Perhaps because most have expected to rise, if not themselves then through their children, the American city, unlike cities in most countries, has never produced a radical working-class movement of importance. Perhaps because some have been demoralized by their failure to rise in a society where rising is supposed to be easy, the American city has had a *lumpenproletariat,* a lower as distinguished from a working class—one more conspicuous and possibly more resistant to absorption into normal society than the lower class of other countries.

[4] Frank J. Goodnow, *City Government in the United States* (New York: The Century Co., 1904), pp. 304-305.

If the openness of American urban society has produced total alienation in some, it has created disaffection in many more. In a society preoccupied with getting and spending, those who have not managed to get as much as others with whom they compare themselves are likely to feel poor and perhaps to blame themselves and the society for their being relatively badly off even if they are in absolute terms reasonably well off. This is no new thing. Josiah Strong in his book *Our Country,* written in 1858, observed that

> within a century there has been a great multiplication of the comforts of life among the masses; but the question is *whether that increase has kept pace with the multiplication of wants.* The mechanic of today who has much, may be poorer than his grandfather, who had little. A rich man may be poor, and a poor man may be rich. Poverty is something relative. . . .[5]

Nichols, from whose book (written at about the same time as Strong's) I have already quoted, pointed out wider implications of this "struggling upward."

> There is no such thing in America as being contented with one's position or condition. The poor struggle to be rich, the rich to be richer. Every one is tugging, trying, scheming to advance—to get ahead. It is a great scramble, in which all are troubled and none are satisfied. . . . Every other ragged little boy dreams of being President or millionaire. The dream may be a pleasant one while it lasts, but what of the disappointing reality? What of the excited, restless, feverish life spent in pursuit of phantoms?[6]

Government. What is perhaps most conspicuous to the foreigner is the localism of our politics—localism in two senses: First, every city, even every village, has, by the standards of other countries, an extraordinary degree of independence in dealing with a wide range of matters, including police and schools. (Where else

[5] Josiah Strong, *Our Country,* ed. by Jurgen Herbst (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1963), p. 147.

[6] Nichols, *Forty Years of American Life,* p. 195.

could the voters of a small town decide not to permit the construction of a $600 million oil refinery?)[7] Second, in America city politics turns on local, often neighborhood, concerns, not on national issues or on ideologies.

Our cities have been, and still are, run—to the extent that they can be said to be run at all—by politicians (meaning persons whose talent is for managing conflict), not by career civil servants or planners (meaning persons whose talent is for laying out consistent courses of action to attain agreed-upon goals). To be sure, thousands of documents called "plans" have been made under the auspices of American local governments. It would be hard to find one that has been carried into effect, however, unless perhaps by an accident of politics.

The "problem of metropolitan organization" exists in this country in a form that may be unique. Actually, it is really two quite different problems. One comes from the multiplicity of more or less overlapping jurisdictions within a single metropolitan area, and the other from the absence, in any such area, of a general-purpose government having jurisdiction over the whole of the area. It is a peculiarly American practice to refer a great many matters to the electorate—not only the choice of mayors and councilmen (and, in many places, of judges) but decisions about capital expenditures, zoning, and governmental structure as well.

Finally, it is remarkably easy for a small number of persons, especially if they are organized, to prevent an American local government from carrying out undertakings which are alleged to be—and which may in fact be—in the interest of the large majority. Ours is, in David Riesman's phrase, a system of "veto groups."

II

This has been a sketchy listing of what I take to be the distinctive features that American cities have exhibited over time. I turn now to what I regard as the "key" difference—the one which, better than any other, accounts for or "explains" the items on the list. This "key" difference is the extreme fragmentation of authority in the federal system, especially in state and local government. Our constitutions and charters divided authority into a great many small pieces and distributed the pieces widely. The fragmentation, great to begin with, was further increased in the half-century from 1830 to 1880; governors and mayors were mainly for show and the executive function was carried on by a multitude of separately elected boards and commissions, most of them subject to constant interference by legislatures, courts, and electorates. In recent decades there has been a considerable amount of centralization, but even now ours is, by the standards of other countries, an extraordinarily fragmented system.

How does this explain the features of the American city that I have held to be distinctive? Let me begin with the governmental category. Fragmentation of authority explains why the cities have been run by people adept at managing conflict—the "politicians"—and not by people adept at devising comprehensive and internally consistent courses of action—the "planners." It also explains both sorts of localism. The wide distribution of authority has meant that in order to exercise power on the state or national scene one had to have a local base. Political parties in the United States are not really national organizations; rather they are shifting coalitions of those who, by winning elections or otherwise, have assembled enough pieces of local authority to count.

Because there is power at stake locally, able and ambitious men and women exert themselves to get it. They have always been able to afford to offer the voter (enough voters to make a difference) inducements more substantial than mere ideology—jobs, favors, ethnic recognition. Politics in the American city has been serious business—that is, the politician has been a sort of businessman and the businessman a sort of politician. Obviously this would have been impossible if power had been centralized.

The fragmentation of authority has not only permitted but also encouraged its informal centralization by means—notably the machine and the boss—that were corrupt. If, as Steffens said, businessmen gave bribes because they had to—because it was impossible to operate a street railroad without doing so—it is also true that politicians took them because they had to—because, to centralize enough power to get things done, they had in one way or another to

[7] *New York Times*, March 8, 1974.