NEW CONTRIBUTIONS TO COMPARATIVE URBAN HISTORY

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From Tenochtitlan to Abeokuta and Xian, major civilizations have always produced urban centres. But has any of them ever raised a claim like the Europeans?

The European city came into being with Europe itself. In some sense it begot that region, historically defining European civilization and continuing to be its most salient characteristic as the subcontinent rose to world dominance. . . . The history of the European city and the history of Europe are to a large extent one and the same. . . .

Therefore, one of the first volumes of the fashionable new popular series *The Making of Europe*, edited by the unavoidable Jacques Le Goff in five European languages simultaneously, deals with the European city, authored by the equally world famous Italian historian of architecture, Leonardo Benevolo, who starts his argument with the statement quoted above. But in spite of Max Weber's theories on the European city, we can still not be sure if this is true or just an outdated remnant of the notorious eurocentric superiority complex. In my opinion,

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1 Benevolo, *European City*, 1.
the problem can only be solved by comparative historical research. But, because “every city is distinct, of course”\(^3\) and urban history more often than not is inspired and sponsored by parochialism, most of it consists of studies of just one city, especially for the early modern period, before industrialization and Americanization had created a kind of standard city to be found in local varieties everywhere in the world. As a rule, historians refrain from the risk of a comparison of cities inside Europe and even more so when other civilizations are concerned. Certainly, comparison is not a very well established constituent of the art and very often is still restricted to the identification of differences between historic individualities, granted that the task of revealing their common traits is equally important and compatible with dignified historical scholarship. Therefore, three recently published books on general or comparative urban history have still a slightly exceptional character.

Benevolo’s general history of the European city, after some remarks on the heritage of antiquity, proceeds to the urbanization of Europe 1050-1350, when the European landscape of 130,000 bell towers within reach of each other—but not all of them urban, of course—was created under favourable climatic and economic conditions in a politically still not centralized world. Founding new cities was also an essential component of colonial expansion in eastern Europe, on the Iberian Peninsula, and finally overseas in America and Asia. Very often “mediocre practicuers"\(^4\) reproduced European models or, because of “the geometric mentality of the Renaissance,"\(^5\) applied the square grid plan, which soon became the favourite of all colonial powers. In the end it was used to subdivide entire continents. Planning of complete towns according to the rules of geometry and perspective had begun in the European Renaissance, with Alberti and places like Pienza and Ferrara, to become more sophisticated down to the eighteenth century, especially when European monarchs used it as an instrument of representation. With the rather chaotic growth of new industrial cities in a liberal age, especially in England, there came planning without reference to the classical rules of perspective and the disengagement of building composition from town planning. The post-liberal new order of cities, initiated by Haussman, prefect of Paris, which to a certain extent tried to cope with the problem of providing infrastructure for

\(^3\) Friedrichs, *Early Modern City*, 7.

\(^4\) Benevolo, *European City*, 121.

\(^5\) Benevolo, *European City*, 121.