

CORRESPONDENCE

To the Editor:

In a recent review article,¹ Dr. Sylvia Thrupp raised a number of significant theoretical and methodological issues with respect to my own work, *The Preindustrial City*. Her observations are all the more striking because of her comments about Lewis Mumford's *The City in History* and the book edited by Carl H. Kraeling and Richard M. Adams, *City Invincible*. Dr. Thrupp's analysis demands attention, not because of its immediate bearing on my own effort, but because of its general relevance for so much comparative research in social science.

Clearly, Dr. Thrupp has a right to her own views. But when she imposes her theoretical and methodological commitments upon the writings of others, without outlining her own assumptions, then an intellectual debate may well serve the cause of scholarship.

My commentary is complicated by Dr. Thrupp's concentrating upon my methodology (which I summarized in a short methodological note) while more or less dismissing my substantive findings. At the same time, she ignores the methodological premises of the other works under review, either because they remain unexplicated and are thus more difficult to cope with, or, what is perhaps more likely, because she agrees with the assumptions of the authors—i.e. Mumford and the various contributors to the work of Kraeling and Adams.

Although my focus herein is mainly methodological, I feel obliged to consider briefly the observations Dr. Thrupp has made regarding my substantive findings, for these reflect the differences in orientation between the two of us. She argues that the uniformities I sought to isolate in the structure of preindustrial cities "could well be summarized in terms of Weber's conception of a society organized around kinship and other particularist social relations." Yet, my description of the spatial (or ecological) patterning of preindustrial vs. industrial cities finds no clear counterpart in Weber's work. Further, I did attempt to delineate (whether successfully or not is for the reader to

¹ Sylvia L. Thrupp, "The Creativity of Cities: A Review Article", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, IV (November, 1961), pp. 53-64.

judge) the preindustrial urbanite's conception of nature and his relation to it—vis-à-vis that of industrial-urban man. In the process I examined a range of issues which Weber tends to ignore or barely touches upon. My conceptualization regarding the preindustrialite's "world view" makes possible a reformulation of Weber's theory of authority, lays the basis for a theory of magic that diverges from current thinking, and provides us with a different perspective on the nature of knowledge and the educational system of the preindustrial city—a point of view that finds support in recent works on the history of science and technology.²

Dr. Thrupp objects specifically to my failure to give sufficient attention to change. Here she stands on firmer ground. Yet her reasoning at points is disturbing. For instance, she invokes Parsons as a sociologist who has been concerned with social change—as one who has moved beyond my kind of analysis. Such an assertion will startle many of my fellow sociologists, for their most persistent criticism of Parsons has been that his theorizing emphasizes statics to the neglect of dynamics. Furthermore, I explicitly set forth (in more pages than I devoted to my methodology) a theoretical framework for explaining the rise, spread, and decline of cities. I sought to account for these shifting tides of urban life in divergent cultural settings, not in terms of something inherent within the city, but rather with reference to changes in the power structure in the broader society—notably the rise and fall of empires. Such has not, to my knowledge, previously been attempted. Nevertheless, my central argument has been that across cultures and through time, and despite often marked flux, preindustrial cities have maintained certain constant structural forms that contrast with those in the industrial city. Contrary to Dr. Thrupp, it is not just a few static preindustrial centers that have displayed the patterns I describe.

By suggesting that I am simply "tidying up" Weber, Dr. Thrupp overlooks an essential distinction between Weber's approach and mine. Weber took cultural values as his main independent variable and was concerned primarily with explicating the stylistic, i.e. cultural, differences among societies like Europe, India, China, and so on; my primary emphasis is upon the common elements in cities (and societies) across these cultural systems.

Unquestionably, social scientists must lend careful attention to stylistic, or cultural, differences. But these so-called "differences" are largely without meaning unless one poses the question: What are the similarities? Whereas the similarities among cities of the traditional type are for the most part only implicit in the work of Weber (and others), I have sought to make them explicit—so that the cultural, and consequently structural, differences among cities might be made more understandable. And by abstracting out the common features of preindustrial cities we will have a common basis for

² See e.g. Charles Coulston Gillispie, *The Edge of Objectivity* (Princeton, 1960) and Charles Singer *et al.* (eds.), *A History of Technology*, III (Oxford, 1957).

evaluating the impact of industrialization in societies about the world.

It is, in other words, hazardous to assume that a given pattern, or process, is “different” or “unique”—unless one *explicitly* seeks to isolate the uniformities or similarities. For on closer inspection some of the supposed differences may disappear. All too frequently we encounter observations by social scientists that such-and-such a society or culture gives unique or special attention to family life, or that such-and-such a group is unique in its stress upon hospitality, or honor, or whatever. To apply the term “unique” so often and so loosely is to divest it of any significance. To reiterate: a major argument for discovering similarities is that these enable us to interpret differences, or unique patterns, in terms of some common standard.

It follows that much so-called “comparative” study is not comparative at all. For scholars who discuss differences without any sustained effort to isolate the similarities inevitably lapse into “historicism”—whereby each culture is seen as having its own, laws and patterns of development.

Unfortunately, most (though not all) of the contributors to *City Invincible*—which Dr. Thrupp eulogizes and sets forth as a model to be emulated—evinces historicism of one sort or another. Generally these writers fail to state explicitly what they are comparing—nor do they examine the implications that flow from their premises. This emerges rather clearly from the discussions and arguments concerning city life in Egypt and Mesopotamia. Here a number of scholars are obviously talking past one another—largely each is seeking a definition of “the city” in terms of the distinctive cultural orientation of the particular society he is discussing. Willey, in his comments on the Maya cities, seems to follow a similar line of reasoning.³ The result is that we come to have almost as many different conceptions of what is a city as we do cultural traditions. And this leads to a major impasse that Dr. Thrupp seems to ignore—that it is hardly possible to compare noncomparable social phenomena.

We have in a sense reverted to the age-old argument between the humanists and scientifically oriented social scientists. Regrettably, this debate has hardened around certain issues—issues that demand reconceptualization if social scientists and humanists are jointly to carry out comparative investigation. Still, there is a way out of this dilemma.

The humanities are, in fact, rent by two rather divergent traditions. One calls for emphasis upon studying the unique—as significant in and of itself. This has been the intellectual stream in which most contemporary historians

³ Another reason for this failure to achieve any consensus regarding the nature of the urban patterns in ancient Egypt, in Mesopotamia, and in the Maya area is that the protagonists neglect to view the earlier cities in light of those on which fuller data are available. Consequently, they fail to ask themselves certain simple sociological questions—e.g. Where did all the persons supporting the upper class reside? Thus, the notion that the ancient Maya centers were merely ceremonial foci, and not “true” cities, is slowly but surely being overturned by research currently underway in the region.

have chosen to swim. But still another stream within the humanistic tradition has flowed on through the centuries—one that has received surprisingly little formal attention from either modern historians or social scientists. This latter perspective is reflected in such an expression as: “Shakespeare was a great writer because he dealt with human problems that transcend both space and time.” That is, he treated facets of human action that span eras and diverse cultures. The novelists, playwrights, and other humanists who have received lasting acclaim are often those who have captured and effectively dramatized human failings and achievements that hold for many peoples in many areas.

A rapprochement is possible between the scientifically oriented social scientist and those humanists who seek cross-cultural universals. And is not the search for universals the prime goal of comparative study? To be sure, the social scientist and the generalizing humanist are likely to proceed along rather different methodological pathways. But a healthy respect for one another and mutual give-and-take are not only feasible but essential.

On the other hand, scholars committed to a scientific value system will find it difficult, if not impossible, to communicate with those humanists who, like Dr. Thrupp in her review, lay stress upon the search for differences and for unique patterns in socio-cultural development.

I am tempted to offer still other observations. Dr. Thrupp’s discussion of my use of the “constructed type” suggests that she is not familiar with the Howard Becker tradition in sociology. And I could comment at some length on the nature and use of historical evidence. But such sallies would lead us far afield, for my aim has been to focus attention upon the need for comparing social units or processes that are comparable—and studying similarities in order to effectively interpret and understand the impact of differing value systems. Only in this manner can we achieve a sound basis for a comparative study of history and society and forge a common bond between the humanist and the social scientist.

GIDEON SJOBERG
University of Texas

REPLY: OUR OBJECTIVES

One of my hopes as Editor is to foster debate that will remain amicable or at least impersonal. The advice that Professor Sjoberg tenders and his protest against my criticism of his work on “The Pre-Industrial City” deserve an amicable reply. Since *CSSH* has lately imposed on the publisher’s goodwill by exceeding its contractual length, the reply will be briefly directed to three questions: Should *CSSH* devote itself exclusively to historical sociology of the kind that concentrates on structural uniformities? Is it a waste of time