

Morton and Lucia White: The Anatomy of Antiurbanism

Almost half a century ago, Morton and Lucia White revealed the depth of antiurban sentiment in American culture. Their work is now more relevant than ever.

IF POPULAR CULTURE is anything to go by, Americans like to think of themselves as city people. From Manhattan's skyline to the street canyons of Chicago, from subway stations to penthouse balconies, from Washington, D.C.'s avenues of power to the dream factories of Los Angeles, the metropolis seems to define the American imagination. Comic book superheroes and the noir crime characters of Raymond Chandler brood over seething cityscapes. Novelists, filmmakers, and journalists reporting from Wall Street and Congress have stamped into popular consciousness the notion that the city, with its countless deals, dramas, schemes, projects, boardrooms, and ever-fermenting ideas, is where the future is invented. Despite all this, however, Americans are not quite as urban as they assume. An astute and impressive documentation of this fact, together with an illuminating reflection on its implications for public attitudes and policies, was provided in 1962 in one of the 20th century's most perceptive works of urban commentary: *The Intellectual Versus the City, from Thomas Jefferson to Frank Lloyd Wright*, by Morton and Lucia White.

Morton Gabriel White, professor emeritus of intellectual history at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey (once the academic home of Albert Einstein), is internationally recognized as one of America's most distinguished schol-

ars, a respected colleague of some of the greatest minds of the past century, such as historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., and philosophers Isaiah Berlin and W.V.O. Quine. Born and educated in New York City, he has been a professor at Harvard University (1953–1970), a Fellow of the Center for Advanced Study in

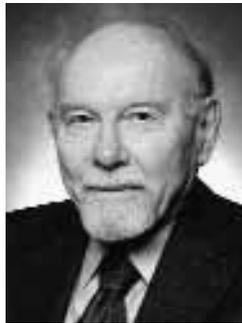
the Behavioral Sciences in Stanford, California (1959–1960), and a Fellow of the American Council of Learned Societies (1962–1963). He is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. His wife and coauthor of *The Intellectual Versus the City*, the late Lucia Perry White, was a graduate of Vassar College, where she studied history and literature. She later worked as a psychiatric social worker at New York's Columbia-Presbyterian Hospital. They also cowrote *Journeys to the Japanese, 1952–1979* (1986), an account of several trips

to Japan. Morton White's many books include *Social Thought in America: The Revolt Against Formalism* (1949), *The Age of Analysis: Twentieth-Century Philosophers* (1955), *Toward Reunion in Philosophy* (1956), *The Foundations of Historical Knowledge* (1965), *Science and Sentiment in America* (1972), *The Philosophy of the American Revolution* (1978), *A Philosopher's Story* (1999), *A Philosophy of Culture* (2002), and *From a Philosophical Point of View* (2004).

There are at least two reasons why anyone concerned with urban design should be familiar with *The Intellectual Versus the City*. White's eminence is one. When the book

was first published by the MIT–Harvard Joint Center for Urban Studies (several editions followed, including a New American Library paperback), works on urban issues were largely limited either to specialized studies or, at the opposite extreme, to journalism. The subject received relatively scant attention as a topic worthy of sophisticated philosophical deliberation on a general, interdisciplinary level. This was one of the reasons for Lewis Mumford's mid-century success: he was one of the few writers who was both interested in and able to bring a philosophical intellect to the study of the city. Weighed against this background, *The Intellectual Versus the City* was significant in that one of its authors was an academic philosopher of the first rank. (By contrast, although he held academic posts at various times, Mumford was essentially a nonacademic whose writing was sufficiently important to draw the interest of scholars.) For anyone seriously concerned with the evolution of urban ideas, this fact alone makes the book a landmark. It represented a coming-of-age of the city and its problems, as an arena not just of decision-making and local politics, but of serious philosophical challenge concerning very large questions both practical and abstract: What exactly is the city? How does it relate to our national life? What do we want to do with it? The significance of the work is not limited to historians. By better understanding the turning points in the unfolding of the urban consciousness over generations, a benchmark can be established against which current progress can be assessed.

The second principal reason the book is important to anyone occupied with urban policy today is its well-documented thesis that American thought is shot through with a deep-rooted antipathy toward urban-



INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDY, PRINCETON, N.J.



INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDY, PRINCETON, N.J.

ization. To many people it appears so obvious that cities are commercially, culturally, and politically central to the life of a nation, especially one as sophisticated and geared to development as the United States, that to claim a substantial antiurban bias in American thought sounds absurd. But the existence of public tendencies that contradict popular expectations is by no means unfamiliar to historians. The concept of free enterprise is widely regarded as a key feature of the American national identity, but scholars as politically diverse as the conservative Milton Friedman and the liberal John Kenneth Galbraith have disputed the degree of freedom that is genuinely prevalent in the U.S. economy. Similarly, a society that likes to see itself as idealistic but generates cultural products riddled with materialism is certainly open to a diagnosis of flawed self-knowledge. This is the kind of service Morton and Lucia White performed for urban thought when they wrote their classic work on America's animus against the city.

According to the Whites, America has no innate literary or philosophical tradition of romantic attachment to the city, comparable to the Greek attachment to the polis or the French affection for Paris. "And this confirms the frequently advanced thesis that the American intellectual has been alienated from the society in which he has lived, that he has been typically in revolt against it." While American society became increasingly urban throughout the 19th century, they argue, the tendency to denigrate the city increased in intensity, and the growing city "became the *bête noire* of our most distinguished intellectuals." The Whites describe an "antiurban roar" in the national literary pantheon. In vivid, readable prose, carefully substantiated, but devoid of any specialist jargon, they reveal this antiurban predisposition in the thought and writings of major historic figures such as Thomas Jeffer-

son; urban sociologist Robert Park; essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson; storytellers Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, Henry James, and Theodore Dreiser; philosophers Henry Adams, William James, George Santayana, and John Dewey; social worker and community activist Jane Addams; and architect Frank Lloyd Wright.

The Intellectual Versus the City has, in fact, two chief theses. The first is that there has long been a strong antiurban intellectual current in America, and that to understand this current it is necessary to look not only at the specialist literature of urban planning, but also at a broad range of cultural products. The second thesis, less explicit but no less important, is that if the first thesis is true, then it matters, or should matter, to people who concern themselves with the condition of our cities.

The concept of urban hell, which is a product of the antiurban mindsets that the Whites describe, is a well-stocked source of disturbing images in contemporary cinema, television, prose fiction, video games, and comic books. Examples are the film *Blade Runner*, portraying the city of the future as an overpopulated, collapsing nightmare of pollution and crass commercial exploitation, and the Gotham City of the Batman mass entertainment franchise, which presents the city as a cesspool of corrupt politicians and cynical moguls.

Blade Runner is based on a story by the influential science fiction writer Philip K. Dick, whose astute visions of the future are steadily winning ever greater critical recognition. He represents a science fiction tradition that probes the workability of cities and expresses profound misgivings. Another example is Leigh Brackett's 1955 novel *The Long Tomorrow*, whose postapocalyptic rural and small-town America has amended the Constitution to forbid the construction of cities. A city is referred to as a "megalopolis, drowned in

its own sewage, choked with its own waste gases, smothered and crushed by its own population." The Batman media empire taps into the contemporary science fiction movement known as cyberpunk, which imagines the transformation of humanity by manipulative technologies, often with bleak results set against depressing urban backdrops.

Mumford holds an authoritative position in urban matters because of his willingness to frame his questions about urban policy in the context not only of town plans, but also of imaginative literature and philosophy. It is such contextualization that *The Intellectual Versus the City* provides. The worlds of *Blade Runner*, Gotham City, and cyberpunk are direct descendants of the tropes that the Whites analyze; their book thus offers a window on the origins of the antiurban currents of our present day—and not only broad cultural currents, but, specifically, political ones.

The Intellectual Versus the City explains why the city is the subject that, perhaps more than any other, brings together all present political, social, technological, and environmental crises under a single, cogently unified heading. The Whites show how contemporary America's founding intellectuals set the tone for a tradition of antiurbanism.

Regardless of the particular brand of antiurbanism that an intellectual represents, the primary goal of the Whites in this valuable volume is to encourage more informed debate by showing the strength, depth, and literacy of the antiurban tradition. Admirers of the American city, they tell us, "would do well to realize that the American antiurbanist has lived not only in the Kentucky mountains, in the Rockies, on the farm, or in the Ozarks. He has also lived in the mind and heart of America as conceived by the intellectual historian. The intellectual, whose home is the city, according to some sociologists, has produced

the sharpest criticism of the American city. Because these notable figures [from the past represent] certain phases of American intellectual development, they form a body of intellectual lore and tradition, which continues to affect thought and action about the city today."

Although it has been 45 years since the Whites published their book, their opening words seem to reflect events today:

"The decay of the American city is now one of the most pressing concerns of the nation. Every day we hear of a continuing flight from the central city; of explosions into the suburbs and more distant places; of sprawling supercities; of automobiles crawling through and around the city on roads that strangle it; of a city-based culture that is allegedly destroying our spiritual life; and of lonely crowds of organization men."

The Whites note that it is now fashionable to express concern for the city's future and its need for revitalization. But they add that for "a variety of reasons, our most celebrated thinkers have expressed different degrees of ambivalence and animosity toward the city, attitudes which may be partly responsible for a feeling on the part of today's city planner that he has no mythology or mystique on which he can rest or depend while launching his campaigns on behalf of urban improvement."

Although the Whites did not set out to provide such an urban mythology, their work, more relevant now than ever, enlarges the context of the obstacles confronting the promoters of the 21st-century city. **U**

N. J. SLABBERT is U.S. representative of the Truman Group, a Brussels, Belgium-based group focusing on geopolitical and economic analysis for leaders of business and government.