

REVIEW

The Accidental City: Improvising New Orleans by Lawrence N. Powell

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New Orleans' layout, at least the Vieux Carré, is a star example of the Enlightenment's "*mania for balance, order, and clarity*". This pathological tendency, so central to Western consciousness, privileges abstraction, perfectionism, and attendant uniformity, and is most preeminently manifest between two conceptions of the state—the non-instrumental versus the instrumental. Lawrence Powell crisply elucidates this historical tension between Cartesian-inspired rationalism (in planning) in contradistinction to localized and "messy" spontaneous social orders—it is thus this aspect that constitutes the focus of our discussion.

Why does New Orleans matter? Well, because it has, throughout its history, been a bellwether for rationalistic excesses—not only in urban planning, but also in the context of the flattening or homogenization of the broader cultural landscape. The palpable sense of cultural vibrancy *and* of place, so essential to New Orleans' identity, makes absolute nonsense of the currently fashionable phrase "cultural appropriation", a conceptually illiterate term of abuse, a newfangled fundamentalism, espoused by the authoritarian "regressive" left. New Orleans, as a culturally emergent phenomenon par excellence, is continental North America's most original contribution to world culture, and for that we should be grateful. One cannot even begin to conceive how impoverished our lives would be without the *emergence* of gospel, blues, and jazz music and the several permutations thereof.

If ever there was a "petri dish" for the study of socio-cultural and geophysical development, and the destruction, scarring and mutilation of some vital aspect of the natural vibrancy of a New World city, it is New Orleans.¹ Powell judiciously ends his history at the dawn of what might be termed the city's modern era: that is, the end of the 19th Century. As a historian Powell seems to have intuitively grasped the philosophical idea that the historical outlook, properly speaking is a *dead* past, whereas the 20th

century still lies within the realm of the *practical* past. If the title of Powell's book sounds familiar, it's because Robert Fulford (a disciple of none other than Jane Jacobs) wrote a journalistic account of the development of 20th Century Toronto, published in 1995, entitled *Accidental City: The Transformation of Toronto*. However contentious the idea of Toronto an "accidental" city, this is definitely not the case with New Orleans.

For the purposes at hand, two names are significant—Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville (1680-1767), the Montréal-born four-time governor of French Louisiana, and Martin Navarro (1738-1793), the Treasurer General of the Province of Spanish Louisiana (i.e. the chief financial officer).

It appears that Bienville had a natural aptitude for what Powell terms "decentralized diplomacy", the idea being that Bienville fully understood that the far reaches of empire could not (as was the European way) be effectively ruled by—nor indeed demand claims of allegiance to—any one person, in this case, Louis XV. It seems that Bienville's governance could hardly be less rationalistic (perhaps even recklessly so); even *foreseeable* problems were consigned to post-hoc solutions. Though characteristic of many a frontier community, this "improvisational style" was, Powell emphasizes, raised to an *organizational* principle in New Orleans. And yet, when it came to planning, early New Orleans may well have been one of the most deliberately planned towns in all of colonial North America. As Powell points out: "Its designation came at the acme of enlightened absolutism, when crown and court were experimenting with visionary projects for reorganizing the 'social' problem."

The social problem was that New Orleans had come to epitomize "disorder and debauchery", manifested by the shared proclivities of the French and the Canadians to "drown their regional differences" in ways functionaries

could not comprehend—that is, through drink, gastronomy and other forms of carousing. The hyper-rationalistic and ultimately doomed attempt to do away with this raucousness, totemic of “a wider and deeper illicitness intrinsic to the colony at large”, harked back to efforts by Enlightenment planners to reform the dregs of France and keep the underlying population in its place by “etching a new and better hierarchy into the town’s original grid”. For one thing, racial segregation was to be part and parcel of “enlightened” planning. Bienville was having none of that; moral concerns aside, not only was reverse social engineering impractical, it was counter-productive. Bienville was well aware that the social structure of the New Orleans region, now in its second generation, had by then well and truly established an emergent cultural hybridization; that is, Creolization. This “undesirable” and probably irremediable state of affairs meant that Paris was resigned to the crown’s transfer of Louisiana to Spain, but not before using the schooling system to vainly try to eradicate practices, usages, and customs that had arisen among the local population. Absolutists of all stripes would easily recognize this tactic. A raucous reputation has always attracted the coercive forces of state trying to dampen things down, a case in point being that of Storyville, a district that anticipated relatively recent advances in zoning policy, and enclaves such as De Wallen (Amsterdam) or St. Pauli (Hamburg).

It was New Orleans’ status within a large and unwieldy landscape conducive to smuggling that came to frustrate the prevailing New World mercantilism. A centralized authority that prized balance, order and regularity could not conceptually, nor of course in practice, grasp the decentralized and spontaneous character of a market, albeit an intimate bartering one. Enter Martin Navarro. Navarro had the insight to realize that one couldn’t stamp out illicit trade merely by fiat. Instead, Navarro proposed the “heretical remedy” of decriminalization by designating Louisiana as a free-trade zone, allowing ships under any flag to enter the port of New Orleans, the “sole and only mode of causing this province to flourish, populate, and advance.” As Powell rightly observes, this innovative and perhaps even sacrilegious outlook that Navarro presented to the crown in 1798, could have been drawn from Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations* (1792). A not insignificant footnote within the history of ideas is that many of Smith’s ideas were already cautiously familiar to the Spanish via an expurgated translation of Condorcet’s synopsis of *The Wealth of Nations*, though the original was still officially condemned (Smith 1967). Needless to say, illiberal censoriousness (the Royal

Council of Castile, the Royal Academy of History, and the Inquisition) objected to freedom of religion as well as a naturalistic worldview. This said, under Navarro, Spanish Louisiana was able to enjoy economic stability, good financial management and prosperity—hardly virtues one associates with late 20th Century Louisiana. As the protagonist in the novel *A Confederacy of Dunces* put it New Orleans had long since become “a comfortable metropolis which has a certain apathy and stagnation which I find inoffensive” (Toole 1980).

Though the intimations of Bienville and Navarro still permeate New Orleans, deeply imbued within highly localized traditions, this is only given lip service when it comes to public policy. Post-War New Orleans is a litany of over-scaled and out-of-character development. As recently as 2010, a post-Katrina report/consultation document is blithely replete with rationalistic talk—“master plan”, “blueprint” and so on—side by side with other empty bureaucratic platitudes such as “effective strategies, livability, opportunity, and sustainability”. The elephant in the room is the longstanding notion of *lagniappe*, which one can’t ever see being effectively addressed. Had New Orleans fallen under the gaze of anti-rationalist theorist-activists such as Jane Jacobs (New York and Toronto) or Walter and David Hardwick (Vancouver, B.C.), the worst excesses, such as the elevated Claiborne Avenue/I-10, would possibly have been ameliorated.

Powell’s history is very elegantly written and, though scholarly, is always entertaining. It will have even more resonance for those who have spent time in New Orleans and who are curious about the distinctive cultural DNA of the region. Whatever else has befallen the city (hurricanes, floods, inhospitable and in flux geography, poor governance), having the lineages of three continents (Europe, Africa, Caribbean/South America), innumerable races and ethnicities, crowded together on the slopes of a natural levee, is a thoroughly underappreciated achievement and a contribution to the civil condition. The residents of New Orleans “somehow had to learn to *improvise a coexistence*”. It is therefore an inspired choice of epigram (from Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science*, §283) that Powell uses: “The secret for harvesting from existence the greatest fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyments is—to *live dangerously!* Build your cities on the slopes of Vesuvius!”² This aphorism, centrally concerned with the existential *contingency* of life, seems to be congruous with Mill’s “experiments of living” (*On Liberty*, XVIII: 260). The spontaneous and distributed nature of culture—the *sine qua non* of a vital culture neces-

sarily *downstream* from politics, a temperamental affront to rationalism's inherent attachment to power for power's sake (the "regressive" left's cultural Marxism)—points to the eternal value and significance of New Orleans.

NOTES

- 1 Back in 1954 a Grande École student, the future Mayor of Paris and French President, Jacques Chirac, thought so and made the port of New Orleans the topic of his dissertation.
- 2 Original: Denn, glaubt es mir!—das Geheimniss, um die grösste Fruchtbarkeit und den grössten Genuss vom Dasein einzuernten, heisst: *gefährlich leben!* Baut eure Städte an den Vesuv!

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