

## Reforming Municipal Government

**Liazos, Ariane. *Reforming the City: The Contested Origins of Urban Government, 1890–1930*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019. 400 pp. \$35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-2311-9139-5.**

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In *Reforming the City: The Contested Origins of Urban Government, 1890–1930*, Ariane Liazos offers a well-researched study that explores why modern American cities are governed by appointed city managers and nonpartisan, at-large city councils. Liazos's history is nothing short of an explanation for how the activism of previous centuries remade our municipal governments: she argues this history is vital for scholars and activists of our own time, particularly in light of American uprisings ranging from Ferguson to Minneapolis. "This book tells the story of how the forms of city government that now dominate the urban landscape came to be," Liazos explains. "In doing so, it examines the silences and paradoxes of the movement that led to their creation" (3).

Liazos focuses her study on the end of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth. As she explains, in just thirty years American urban reformers were able to drastically alter the shape, form, and function of municipal governments. Nearly one-third of all states passed laws allowing for so-called "home rule" for their city governments, entailing nothing short of a drastic reorganization of municipal life, with increasing numbers of U.S. cities using unelected "city managers" to oversee public agencies, and commissions and ward-based city councils replaced by at-large, elected nonpartisan elections.

Although these reforms were pushed by a host of Progressive Era individuals and organizations, the book's main focus is on the work of one particular group—the National Municipal League (NML). First formed in the 1890s, the league's origins resided in the piecemeal efforts of Gilded Age reformers and middle-class business interests increasingly concerned with American municipal political structures. As Liazos notes, electoral fraud, corruption, and the spoils system were not new phenomena to politics, but by the end of the nineteenth century there was an increasing "perception that something needed to and could be done to eliminate these problems" (29).

Prior to the 1890s, reformers came together sporadically and formed special committees. These committees existed largely out of necessity to combat urban special interests, or "rings." What reformers realized was that these rings benefited numerous groups. The only way to combat these organized forces, therefore, was to form alternative organizations. Immediately after the Civil War and continuing through the 1880s, committees, typically comprised of various non-elected city residents in business and civic affairs, would gather and formulate plans to oust ring leaders from

city government. The most well-known and celebrated of these committees was the so-called "Committee of Seventy." In 1871, genteel residents of New York City responded with outrage to the revelations that William "Boss" Tweed was guilty of theft and misuse of city funds. The Committee succeeded in ousting Tweed and many of his Tammany Hall supporters.

Reformers were bolstered by the success of groups like the Committee of Seventy, and, more importantly, began to see America's various urban settings not as distinct, regionally specific entities, but instead homogenous constructions that could be fixed piecemeal. The issues of New York City, for instance, were the issues of Philadelphia. This meant a more overarching program of urban reform needed to be pursued at the national level, drastically increasing the push to develop a national program of urban reorganization. Out of such energy the NML and other efforts were born, and, as Liazos shows, consisted primarily of four major goals: provisions for direct democracy, nonpartisan elections of representatives, at-large elections, and the appointment of city managers to oversee public interests.

Liazos shows that the aim of the reformers was to bring both efficiency and greater democratic participation to municipal politics. This served the dual purpose of bringing public services into a predictable and transparent method of maintenance and guaranteed that individual residents could count on their participation impacting government more effectively than in the era of machine politics. Ironically, while the NML and other groups succeeded in reshaping municipal governments, in the process they created a political system with even less voter participation. "Today, political scientists continue to debate the overall impact of such changes," Liazos explains, "but there is a general consensus that many of these reforms lead to lower turnout in local elections, which in turn creates unrepresentative councils that pass policies that favor some residents over others" (4). Reformers succeeded in reforming, but failed to accomplish their stated goals.

The field of political science is a large presence in this book. Liazos, in the process of offering a detailed history of American urban politics, shows how intellectuals harnessed the zeal for reform to implement ideas that often came from the budding field of political science. "Among political scientists," Liazos argues, "the emergence of what contemporaries termed the 'realist' movement encouraged practitioners to use investigatory techniques to probe the real working of political institutions" (53). These intellectuals were less political aspirants and more self-purported observers who researched, presented, and published their works on what was the "best government" for American cities. As such, a large portion of the urban reform movement was born from the academic presentations, published articles, and legislative reports of public intellectuals.

Although Liazos's model has widespread applicability for urban historians, she focuses on five American cities: Worcester, Massachusetts; Norfolk, Virginia; Toledo, Ohio; Fort Worth, Texas; and Oakland, California. From these five she shows how reformers accomplished drastic change in the span of only a few decades.

Liazos's *Reforming the City* is a well-researched and accessible work that answers some of the most pressing questions facing American democracy today. As she writes, this history offers nothing less than an analysis of how reformers "intended to make city government more accountable to voters [yet] ended up contributing to the creation of the systems in Ferguson and cities like it across the country" (4–5).