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THE PROMISED CITY: OPENNESS AND IMMIGRATION IN THE MAKING OF A WORLD METROPOLIS

1. INTRODUCTION

At least since the Great Depression, urban specialists have spent much of their time searching for patterns common to all cities, thinking about the similarities among crowded human settlements, and devising new terms—such as central business district, strip mall, gentrification, and edge city—to describe phenomena that occur in most metropolitan regions. All cities, for example, must somehow deal with water supply, sewage and garbage disposal, fire prevention, criminal justice, public health, affordable housing, and adequate open space, and all have to establish governmental structures to cope with those issues.

Indeed, the Chicago School of Sociology, founded in the 1930s by Ernest W. Burgess, Louis Wirth, and Robert E. Park, became famous for developing a model of the spatial structure of the modern industrial metropolis. Using the Windy City itself as the prototype, the Chicago School shaped the dominant theoretical and methodological assumptions about urban development for more than half a century. Even after the Chicago School came under attack from scholars like Milton Gordon, Nathan Glazer, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Nancy Foner, Herbert Gans, and many others, it continued to be the paradigm against which other models were measured.¹

The focus of my remarks is something else entirely. My purpose is threefold: first, to make the case that the study of history is essential to understanding the present and future of any urban area; second, to suggest that in terms of age, size, density, and demographic patterns, New York has been *different from*, rather than typical of, American cities; and third, to argue that Gotham has been unusually successful for almost four centuries because of its heterogeneity, not in spite of it; because of its openness, not in spite of it; and because of its immigrants, not in spite of them. Certainly, the Hudson River metropolis has not won many accolades for being gracious or charming. As John Steinbeck noted decades ago: “It [New York] is an ugly city, a dirty city. Its climate is a scandal. Its politics are used to frighten children. Its traffic is madness. Its competition is murderous. But there is one thing about it. Once you have lived in New York and it has become your home, no other place is good enough.”

The little settlement that began at the southern tip of Manhattan has, however, been welcoming in a more important sense—it has provided a haven and opportunity for a larger and more diverse population over more centuries than any other city in human history.

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2. THE FOUNDING OF NEW YORK

By American standards, New York is old. Founded as Fort Amsterdam by the Dutch in 1625, it predates Boston (1630), New Haven (1636), Newark (1666), Charleston (1670), Philadelphia (1682), Colonial Williamsburg (1699), and a hundred other places that we generally regard as more historic than Gotham. St. Augustine (1565) is assuredly older than New York, but for three centuries and more it consisted simply of a fort, a couple of chapels, a school, and a few hundred unremarkable human and animal inhabitants. St. Augustine was not a city by any reasonable definition and it gained prominence only in the twentieth century, when it became a tourist destination because of its age, not its prominence. Similarly, Jamestown (1607), the first English settlement, never found its niche and ultimately disappeared into the muck of the James River, where anthropologists continue in the twenty-first century to search for what little remains of the town. The same is true for Plymouth, the Pilgrim village in Massachusetts that was founded in 1620. It never grew beyond a few small buildings, fell quickly into ruin, and found new life only in the twentieth century, when it was reborn and reconstructed as a kind of historical theme park. Meanwhile, thousands of miles to the west, Santa Fe began in 1610 as a Spanish colonial administrative center. But it remained a wide place on a dusty road until the twentieth century, and not until after World War II did it find success as an art and cultural center.

New York does not seem “historic” to most people because it has been so successful for so long that its population has exploded, its real estate prices have risen dramatically, and its building lots have seen repeated development. Quite simply, because it was important in history, it does not have many buildings that testify to its age—the structures having been torn down repeatedly by successive generations of developers eager to cash in on rising real estate values. Charleston, South Carolina, by contrast, has much of its historic value within its boundaries precisely because little of historic importance happened there. Charleston went into long-term decline after 1820 and grew only slightly over the next half-century. Property values remained low, change was glacial, and old antebellum houses continued to stand along the waterfront into the twenty-first century. Such an outcome would be impossible to conceive in Manhattan, where turbulence, congestion, and constant building—not to mention fires in 1776, 1778, and 1835—contrived to destroy virtually everything of the city’s important colonial past.

Of course, other parts of the world boast great cities that are centuries older than New York, whose age is unimpressive

when compared with Athens, Rome, Beijing, Tokyo, London, Paris, or a thousand other cities. What was Manhattan when Aristotle and Plato were musing in ancient Greece or when Caesar conquered Gaul? Of what did the Empire City consist when the Ming Dynasty moved its capital in 1421 from Nanking to Peking? And Istanbul, the exotic meeting place between east and west, was already 900 years old in 1492, when Christopher Columbus first set sail for a new route to the Indies.

3. SIZE

If New York is not old as a settlement by world standards, it is nevertheless old as a big city by world standards. Indeed, it was a major metropolis by 1860, when (including Brooklyn) it had 1 million inhabitants and was larger than any city on the European continent except Paris. By the end of the century, Gotham had 3.4 million citizens and was, after London, the second-largest city on earth and the richest metropolis anywhere. In 1900, for example, approximately half of all the millionaires in the United States, and perhaps a third of those in the entire world, lived in the New York metropolitan region.

In 2005, Gotham remains the only American municipality ever to exceed 4 million residents, and each of its five boroughs would rank as an important city in its own right. Brooklyn alone was almost as big as Chicago; Queens was larger than Philadelphia; the Bronx was bigger than Detroit and Cleveland combined; and Staten Island was more populous than Pittsburgh, St. Louis, or Atlanta.

Figures for the New York metropolitan region have been even more impressive over the past century. In 1930, New York became the first urbanized area in the world to exceed 10 million residents; in 1970, it became the first to exceed 15 million. Although its current thirty-one-county metropolitan region of 22 million people is exceeded by Tokyo and possibly by São Paulo and Mexico City, the Hudson River metropolis remains a human agglomeration of almost unimaginable size.

These statistics remind us that New York has a significance in history unrelated to the date of its establishment as a Dutch trading post. Its size and wealth over the past 150 years has meant that Gotham has had to deal with issues of public health, public transportation, public safety, fire prevention, water supply, and a hundred others before they were addressed in a modern way by Athens, Rome, Moscow, or Istanbul—all of which were smaller and poorer than New York a century ago.

4. DENSITY AND DEMOGRAPHIC PATTERNS

Why should anyone care whether any city is particularly old? What does history have to do with our present circumstances?

Demographers have long regarded the spatial arrangement of the United States as so outside the mainstream that they have settled on a term, “the North American pattern,” to describe it. Quite simply, the model of urban settlement in this nation is a donut, meaning that all the life, energy, and vitality of the American metropolis is on the edges—in shopping malls, corporate office parks, and residential subdivisions. In the older, urban neighborhoods, one finds pathologies of every description—poverty, public housing, decrepit schools, graffiti-infested playgrounds, racial minorities, prostitution, heavy drug use, and visible homeless problems. While the central business district may feature a few high-end restaurants and glittering skyscrapers, perhaps even a sports arena, Main Street is essentially deserted after dark. Indeed, this pattern is so ingrained in our culture that Americans have devised special ways of discussing it that are understood by the general population. When we mention “inner-city problems,” for example, it is not necessary to spell out what we mean.

New York differs from the North American pattern in three fundamental ways: 1) the socioeconomic distribution of the population, 2) the population density of the inner city and the outer suburbs, and 3) the change in gross density over the past half-century. Let us consider each of these demographic patterns in turn.

First, the Hudson River metropolis in some ways follows the North American pattern. Gotham has more than its share of famous and expensive suburbs—from Scarsdale, Chappaqua, Bronxville, and Bedford to the north; to Greenwich, Darien, and New Canaan to the northeast; to Saddle River, Metuchen, and Short Hills to the west; and to the Five Towns and Great Neck to the east. Similarly, the five boroughs include many desperately poor neighborhoods as well as a disproportionate share of the region’s public housing and homeless population.

But so it is with all American cities. What makes New York unusual is that the greatest concentration of wealth on earth is in the middle of Manhattan, the wealthiest ZIP code address is 10021, and the most expensive real estate is along Park Avenue, Fifth Avenue, and Central Park West. Moreover, of the 3,137 counties in the United States, the poorest in 2000 was in western Nebraska, with a per capita income of less than \$3,000. By that measure, the wealthiest single county in the entire nation was New York County, otherwise known as Manhattan, with a per capita income in excess of \$70,000 in 2000.

This statistic is astonishing, if only because Manhattan has long been the locus of so much concentrated poverty. After all,

Manhattan contains the nation’s largest Dominican population, which is mostly poor, as well as Harlem, the nation’s most famous black community. It includes tens of thousands of newly arrived Chinatown residents who are working for below-minimum-wage rates as well as thousands of unemployed and underemployed actors and actresses. And the Manhattan total excludes many wealthy families who own apartments near Central Park but who go to great lengths to prove that their official residence is somewhere else, the better to avoid Gotham income taxes. Yet despite all that, Manhattan comes out as the richest county in the United States, a place not on the edges but at the center.

Second, New York is assuredly not a donut in terms of population density or activity. Its central business district far overshadows any shopping mall or corporate office park, and no one would argue that the city is deserted after dark or quiet at night. And no teenager growing up in Fairfield County or Westchester County or Morris County would likely argue that the Stamford Mall or the Galleria or the Paramus Mall is where the action is or is representative of a lifestyle they want to emulate. They know that the shopping opportunities, sports arenas, concert halls, restaurants, and nightclubs of Manhattan easily eclipse anything they will ever find in White Plains, Garden City, or Saddle River.

But this demographic characteristic goes well beyond the preferences of young adults. As even a casual examination would reveal, the United States is a low-density civilization, and its metropolitan regions spread over larger spaces than those of any other advanced nations. Rare is the American city (Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, San Francisco) with a population density of more than 10,000 per square mile (a number that would be typical of cities in Europe or Asia). Many municipalities (San Jose, Denver, Portland, Houston, Seattle) have densities of fewer than 5,000 per square mile and some American cities (Memphis, Jacksonville, Oklahoma City, Kansas City) have densities of fewer than 2,000 per square mile, or about as many as who live in completely rural parts of India or Bangladesh. New York, of course, is quite different. Its population density in 2000 was more than 25,000 per square mile for the entire city, and many times that number in most of Manhattan.

Third, Gotham’s density is also unusual in that it is not declining. In the United States as a whole, especially since 1950, metropolitan regions have been hollowed out even as the fringes have developed at a rapid pace. The American city could be described as a balloon in the twentieth century that was squeezed in the middle, thus forcing expansion on the edges. In cities that did not expand their boundaries in the twentieth century, the total population declined. Thus, Cleveland went from 915,000 inhabitants in 1950 to 478,000 in 2000; Detroit went from 1,850,000 to 951,000; Philadelphia went from

2,072,000 to 1,518,000; Pittsburgh from 677,000 to 335,000; and Buffalo from 580,000 to 292,000. St. Louis is perhaps the most dramatic case, as it declined from 857,000 in 1950 to 348,000 in 2000.

The same phenomenon is true as well in the exploding cities of the south and west that expanded their boundaries over the past 100 years. So that even though Houston, Dallas, San Antonio, San Diego, Phoenix, and Memphis have grown since 1950 in total population, their densities have declined, meaning that their area has increased even faster than new families have moved in.

Only two American cities had population densities that were higher in 2000 than they were in 1950: New York and San Francisco. Thus, what is unusual about Gotham is not that millions of its citizens left for Westchester County or Florida. Rather, what makes New York City unusual is that somebody took their place.

And contrary to what has often been the popular perception in the United States, the density and diversity of New York have made the city safer than other large American agglomerations. For example, even in 1992, when the murder toll in Gotham reached its horrendous peak of 2,245 in a single year, the city ranked no higher than tenth in the nation in its homicide rate. In the next thirteen years, the number of murders in New York plummeted so far (to fewer than 600 per year between 2002 and 2005) that the city no longer ranks among the country's 150 most dangerous places.

5. IMMIGRATION AND DIVERSITY

New York has other unique characteristics, among them its heavy reliance on public transportation, its twenty-four-hour orientation, and its diverse cultural offerings. Indeed, it would be easy to argue that taken as a whole, the numerous opera houses, symphonic opportunities, rock concerts, jazz choices, dance performances, legitimate theaters, and art museums in New York provide residents with a cultural richness that Paris, London, Vienna, Berlin, Tokyo, Milan, Moscow, and Los Angeles cannot challenge.

The most important characteristic of New York City, however, has been its openness to newcomers. Essentially, Gotham has never had a majority culture. It was founded by the Dutch to trade and to do business, and for that reason the ruling elite of the small colony were not particularly concerned about religious, racial, or ethnic differences. Even in the 1640s, for example, more than eighteen languages were being spoken on New Amsterdam's streets—and the town had fewer than 1,000 total residents at the time.

The early history of New York contrasted sharply with that of Boston, where the Puritan's "city on a hill" worked mightily to prevent religious dissent and to enforce a kind of theocracy on the inhabitants. When one strong-willed resident, Anne Hutchinson, dissented from the ruling orthodoxy, she was put on trial for heresy and banished from Boston and the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

Such an action would have been inconceivable in the Dutch settlement at the mouth of the Hudson River. Following the traditions of the Netherlands, then the most liberal and tolerant nation in Europe, the city fathers of New Amsterdam followed a kind of "live and let live" policy. They did not particularly care whether one went to church or believed in any god at all, regarding such issues as matters of personal preference.

When the English took the city in 1664 and renamed it New York, they retained much of its Dutch flavor and its tradition of openness.

After the thirteen colonies won their independence and transformed themselves into the United States, Gotham continued to be unusual in the heterogeneity of its citizenry. In 1900, for example, New York had more Irish than Dublin, more Italians than Naples, and more Germans than Hamburg. Indeed, the *kleindeutschland* neighborhood below Fourteenth Street in Lower Manhattan would have ranked as the third-largest city in the Kaiser's German Empire. The almost unbelievable diversity on the streets was captured in print by the young radical John Reed, who gained fame by joining the Russian Revolution in 1917 and writing about his experiences in *Ten Days That Shook the World*. Before he died of tuberculosis in his adopted land, however, he wrote about his early life in Gotham:

New York was an enchanted city to me. I wandered about the streets, from the soaring imperial towers of downtown, along the East River docks, smelling of spices and the clipper ships of the past, through the swarming East Side, alien towns within alien towns, where the smoky glare of miles of clamorous pushcarts made a splendor of shabby streets. I knew Chinatown and Little Italy, Sharkey's and McSorley's saloons, the Bowery lodging houses and the places where the tramps gathered in winter, the Haymarket, the German village and the dives of the Terderloin. The girls that walked the streets were friends of mine, and the drunken sailors off ships from the world's end. I knew how to get dope, where to go to hire a man to kill an enemy. Within a block of my house was the adventure of the world. Within a mile was every foreign country.

Even in 2005, many global cities remain largely homogenous. In Tokyo, for example, ethnic homogeneity is so ingrained in the culture that Koreans who have lived in Japan for their entire life are derisively called *Zainichi*, which means to stay in Japan. In school, boys and girls shun them as playmates; as adults, they are considered inferior and are not eligible for important or prestigious government jobs. Similarly, in Shanghai, Beijing, Seoul, Moscow, Hong Kong, and São Paulo, one or two ethnic groups make up more than 90 percent of the total population. Other cities have become heterogeneous only since World War II—one thinks of Paris, Vancouver, Toronto, Sydney, Melbourne, and Berlin. London, as always, is a leader among cities. Leo Benedictus, for example, noted in 2005 that 300 languages were being spoken by the people of London, that 2.2 million people in the city had been born outside England, and that the city had at least fifty nonindigenous communities with populations of 10,000 or more. As he wrote, “Virtually every race, nation, culture, and religion in the world can claim at least a handful of Londoners.”

But New York remains in a class by itself, as it has been since the middle of the seventeenth century. According to the 2000 census, 2.93 million foreign-born persons, up from 2.18 million in 1990, lived in the five boroughs, and unlike the British, who count persons from Wales and Scotland as foreign born, Americans do not classify persons from California or Texas or Mississippi as foreign born, although they have to travel farther than someone from Northern Ireland to get to the cultural and financial capital. Significantly, the largest group of foreign-born persons in Gotham—those from the Dominican Republic—account for only 14 percent of the newcomer total. Quite simply, New York is *the* immigrant metropolis, and it has a more diverse population than any other city in the history of man. Queens alone is the most polyglot place on earth, with 1,028,339 “official” foreign-born persons in 2000, or 46 percent of the total.

6. THE JEWISH EXPERIENCE

New York has transformed many ethnic and racial groups—the Dutch, the English, the Irish, the Germans, the Italians, African-Americans, the Greeks, for example—who in turn have transformed the metropolis. No other group, however, reveals the peculiar history and challenges of New York better than the Jews.

Quite simply, the major events in New York’s Jewish history reflect the larger history of the metropolis. The first small band of Jews to reach New Amsterdam arrived on September 1, 1654, from Portuguese Brazil, where they had been forced to leave.

Their initial reception in Manhattan was not much better because Peter Stuyvesant, the last of the four Dutch governors of the town, had no use for the newcomers and wanted to send them on their way. But his superiors in Amsterdam learned of the controversy and reminded Stuyvesant that the purpose of the colony was to encourage trade and to welcome opportunities for business growth, not to encourage some sort of Christian conformity. Properly chastened, the governor allowed the Jews to remain, and even to hold religious services in their homes. By the time the English captured the city in 1664, the Jews were already holding public services. Called Shearith Israel, the congregation rented quarters on Beaver Street and had about 100 members by the end of the seventeenth century.

The second major shift in Jewish New York came between 1825 and 1875, when a large number of German, Austrian, Bohemian, and Hungarian Jews came, largely after the revolution of 1848. This group, which later formed the core of what Stephen Birmingham would call “Our Crowd,” exemplified the theme of aspiration.

The third major moment in New York Jewish history lasted from about 1881, when the Russian pogroms began in earnest, until 1924, when restrictive immigration laws at least temporarily cut off the flow of newcomers from eastern Europe. These were the peak years of immigration, captured in prose by Emma Lazarus’s famous poem *The New Colossus* and in physical form by the Statue of Liberty. And while life on the Lower East Side was never easy, those years and those streets exemplified the theme of hope.

The fourth major moment came in the 1930s, when German refugees fleeing Hitler congregated in Washington Heights and when second-generation Jews from the Lower East Side became, as Deborah Dash Moore has argued, “at home in America,” moving away from Rivington and Essex and Delancey and Orchard Streets to places like East New York in Brooklyn and the Grand Concourse in the Bronx.

Since World War II, there has been an exodus of the Jewish population from the five boroughs to places like Scarsdale and Great Neck or to Florida and the Sunbelt more generally. At the same time, the growth of the Orthodox and Hassidic populations in Crown Heights, Williamsburg, and Borough Park has meant that the Jewish proportion of the city’s population has stabilized.

7. THE DECLINE OF INDUSTRIAL AND PORT EMPLOYMENT

So what? Are there larger lessons to take from the New York experience in terms of tolerance and openness to newcomers?

The suggestion of my remarks is an emphatic yes. New York has not only been the Promised City for the Jews, but also for a succession of other immigrant groups. Both the city and the immigrants themselves benefited from the exchange, whether successful entrepreneurs like Andrew Carnegie and Alexander T. Stewart or penniless newcomers who only dreamed of economic success, political opportunity, and religious freedom. Taken as a group, they transformed what in 1775 was a second-tier city in the British Empire into what by 1950 was variously considered the Capital of the Twentieth Century, the Capital of Capitalism, or, as the late Pope John Paul II famously said, the Capital of the World.

The constant infusion of new energy and ideas into the metropolis over the years enabled New York to meet economic and technological challenges that destroyed the prospects of competing cities. Consider how the engines of Gotham's prosperity have changed over the past half-century. In 1955, the twin underpinnings of the metropolitan economy were manufacturing and the port. Indeed, at midcentury, Gotham was the most important industrial city in the world. German and Japanese competitors had of course been blasted into ruins, and other European cities were still recovering from the conflict. Chicago and Pittsburgh were of course dominated by factories of every description, but their populations were so much smaller than that of New York that the value added by manufacturing and the total employment in production was less than half that of Gotham. The same was true of Detroit with its automotive plants or Los Angeles with its aircraft construction. What made New York unusual was the absence of heavy industry and instead the presence of thousands of little factories where operatives were sewing buttons onto overcoats, building and repairing warships, making razor blades and file cabinets, producing chewing gum and caskets, bottling milk and brewing beer, printing checks and magazines, and turning out hats, blouses, and skirts by the millions—usually in businesses with fewer than 1,000 employees.

What happened to New York's industries? In the past half-century, more than three-quarters of them have disappeared as manufacturing employment in the city declined from more than 1 million in 1950 to fewer than 200,000 at the turn of the century. Brewing is perhaps typical. In 1900, Gotham was home to more than ninety breweries, mostly concentrated in Greenpoint and Williamsburg in Brooklyn; as late as 1960, New York produced more beer than Milwaukee and St. Louis combined. By 1975, however, the industry was dead in the city, and in 2005, not a single brewery, other than a micro-pub, remains in the five boroughs.

The harbor has followed a similar trajectory. A half-century ago, the Port of New York was the busiest and most important in the world, and it had held that position for more than a century.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, there were many years when the volume of trade passing through the Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Staten Island docks was greater than that of every other harbor in the United States *combined*. It was not just a world port, it was *the* world port. During World War I, freight trains backed up all the way to Pennsylvania and beyond awaiting their turn to unload cargo destined for France and the Western Front. The pattern was similar during the Second World War, when Gotham was again the major point of transshipment for men and material heading for North Africa, Italy, and England, and through Normandy and France to the German heartland. Practically every tank, gun, soldier, and uniform involved in the invasion of Europe passed through the New York docks on their way overseas.

The 1954 motion picture classic, *On the Waterfront*, starring Marlon Brando, illustrated the powerful role of the harbor in the economy, as it depicted the tens of thousands of stevedores who showed up every morning and afternoon in the hope of getting the chance to unload boxes or bags from a ship. Recreational boating and swimming were rare because the East and Hudson Rivers were so crowded with tugboats and commercial shipping.

What happened to the Port of New York? In the past half-century, it has been eclipsed by Rotterdam and Hong Kong and Los Angeles and Long Beach. More important, its thousands of jobs were rendered unnecessary because of the switch to containers. These rectangular metal boxes, now forty feet in length and longer, are stacked and unstacked on great container ships that ply to waterways of the world. But they no longer require gangs of stevedores; instead, one man in the cab of a hoist, another who places a hook onto a container, and another who guides it to the ground (or onto the rear of a tractor-trailer truck) are able to accomplish the entire process in less time and with less pilferage and loss than a hundred men could have done a half-century earlier.

Thus, manufacturing and the port have both essentially disappeared from the economy of New York. But unlike Detroit or Cleveland or Newark or Buffalo or Pittsburgh, Gotham reinvented itself as a different kind of city, a place on the leading edge of the service and white-collar economies. As a result, New York City has more and better jobs in 2005 than it did in 1905 or 1955.

8. OPENNESS, TOLERANCE, AND CHANGE

Change, openness, and tolerance are at the heart of what New York is and what New York represents. For more than three centuries, it has been more diverse and more open than any

other important city. Because of its history and its diversity, Gotham has long been a haven for dissent. It is no accident that the NAACP traces its origins to Manhattan and not to Mississippi, or that the Communist Party made New York its headquarters for the entire twentieth century, or that the Gay Rights Movement reportedly began in the Stonewall bar in Greenwich Village in 1969. New Yorkers as individuals are probably no more tolerant than residents of South Carolina or Oregon, as racial and ethnic confrontations too numerous to mention in the city's boroughs (fatal incidents in Howard Beach, Crown Heights, and Bay Ridge, are just a few examples) remind us. But the density, diversity, and size of New York have made public dissent possible by granting anonymity to almost anyone who wants it. A troublemaker in Mississippi could easily be identified, located, and punished. But New York is far too big and complex for its residents to concern themselves with the politics, religion, or ethnicity of strangers.

No one has done a better job than E. B. White of describing this essential characteristic of the great American metropolis. "New York," he wrote in 1949, "blends the gift of privacy with the excitement of participation, and better than most dense communities New York succeeds in insulating the individual against all enormous and violent and wonderful events that are taking place every minute." He continued with what remains the most succinct sentence yet written about the big and gritty city: "New York is peculiarly constructed to absorb almost anything that comes along, whether a thousand-foot line out of the East or a twenty-thousand man convention out of the West, without inflicting the event on its inhabitants, so that every event is in a sense optional, and the inhabitant is in the happy position of being able to choose his spectacle and so conserve his soul."

ENDNOTES

1. On the use of theory by urban historians, see Gilfoyle (2001).

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