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Cities in Civilization

Hall, Peter. 1998. New York: Pantheon. \$40 hardcover

Matthew Adams

One of the oldest ideas in Western thought is that of the golden age—a bygone era in which men and women, by virtue of exceptional creativity, were briefly able to live the good life. In *Cities in Civilization*, Peter Hall argues that most of these golden ages are urban ages. But why should creativity be concentrated in urban areas? What brings about golden ages in great cities? And why does this creativity dissipate so quickly?

Hall seeks to answer these questions by examining historical cases of urban innovation. Some (Periclean Athens, Renaissance Florence, Elizabethan London, Hapsburg Vienna, Belle Epoque Paris, and Weimar Berlin) were golden ages of artistic creativity. Others (Manchester, Glasgow, 19th century Berlin, Detroit, Silicon Valley, and Tokyo) are notable for their technological advances. Still others (Los Angeles and Memphis, Tennessee) successfully combined art and technology to produce mass culture. A fourth group undertook innovative efforts to establish urban order, whether physical (Rome, New York, Paris, Los Angeles, and contemporary London) or social (Stockholm and Elizabethan London).

These case studies showcase Hall at his erudite best. Each one is densely packed with historical details as interesting as they are insightful. Indeed, were it not for the subtle elegance of Hall's refined prose, these chapters would read more like encyclopedia entries than historical sketches. More remarkable than the amount of detail in any single account, however, is the fluidity of the narrative as a whole. Hall moves seamlessly between continents and across epochs, discussing Pericles and Picasso with equal enthusiasm. The result is a majestic urban history that is both comprehensive and precise—in short, essential reading.

But *Cities in Civilization* was not intended to serve only as descriptive history. "This is an urban history," Hall reminds us, "and urbanists—most of them—share the affliction of their fellow social scientists: they do not feel secure until they have embarked on long theoretical side-trips before they start properly on their way." In *Cities in Civilization*, these excursions are designed to mold bits and pieces of previous research into a unified theory capable of explaining when, where, and why golden ages occur.

This is an extremely ambitious undertaking, even for a scholar of Hall's prodigious talents. Unfortunately, the theoretical sections of *Cities in Civilization* are not entirely successful. At times, Hall successfully

employs existing theories of urban development to identify socio-economic dynamics common to several cases. For example, cultural creativity seems to take place in urban environments characterized by accumulated wealth, social tensions, and the presence of outsiders. In the end, however, he is unable to mold these bits and pieces into a single theory of urban innovation. As Hall himself concludes, these generalizations “apply to only some of the case studies; and as we work outwards to embrace them all, it becomes increasingly hard to find any single satisfactory explanation” (282).

This shortcoming has little to do with Hall's own scholarship. Indeed, his theoretical discussions are marked by the same combination of imagination and precision that makes his case studies so special. The real problem is that existing theories of urban dynamics are ill-suited to the study of golden ages. Some emphasize the timing of innovation, but not its location. For instance, Hall found that Schumpeter's long-wave theory (as well as its Marxist analogue, Kondratieff cycles) seemed to be consistent with the timing of golden ages in London, Tokyo, New York, and Berlin, but could not explain why these cities were the site of particularly intense innovation. Other models focus exclusively on the location of urban innovation, but do not explain the changes that mark the onset of a golden age. Neoclassical economic thought, for example, can guide cross-sectional analyses of the geographic distribution of various enterprises, but cannot account for the dynamic forces that cause cities to grow or decline over time. As a result, Hall is forced to rely on rather vague ideas about “accumulated cultural advantages” to explain why some cities have golden ages and others do not. Although this rickety theoretical framework ultimately proves incapable of supporting his colossal enterprise, Hall deserves full credit for fashioning it into a coherent, if not wholly convincing, theory.

In sum, Peter Hall's *Cities in Civilization* provides an elegant history of cities in their golden ages, but is unable to generate a silken model of urban innovation from the sow's ear of existing theory. Indeed, it seems unlikely that any single theory could properly explain 2500 years of urban creativity. And for that, we should be thankful. After all, so long as the alchemy of urban innovation remains a mystery, every city—and therefore each of us—can hope to be part of the next golden age.