

**Richard J. Schneider, *Civilizing Thoreau: Human Ecology and the Emerging Social Sciences in the Major Works*. Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2016. 212 pages. ISBN: 978-1-57113-960-3.**

In the autumn of 2015, *The New Yorker* published an article entitled “Pond Scum: Henry David Thoreau’s Moral Myopia,” which generated a flood of comments and journal articles. The academic world rallied to Thoreau’s defense against what many had rightly perceived as both narrow-minded criticism and willful misreading. On the plus side, however, the editor of *Sierra*, Jason Mark, expressed his hope that Katryn Schultz’s attempted deconstruction of the Thoreau myth might actually “provide a fresh start for considering Thoreau’s influence. It’s past time to toss out the cartoon of the wilderness hermit many of us still hold in our minds and replace that woodcut with a picture of a more complex, more contradictory, and more confounding Thoreau.”<sup>1</sup>

Schneider’s *Civilizing Thoreau* is a valuable contribution to such a revision, with the complexity and contradictions surfacing already in the title’s playful ambiguity. The ambition of the book is to argue that in many respects the Walden nonconformist was shaped by the scientific doctrines of his times and thus inevitably spoke for, not against, the advance of civilization. To civilize Thoreau then means to situate him within western civilization and depict his “civilizing” mission to the “wild” frontier.

Richard Schneider is an old-hand in the field: author and/or editor of books and journal articles on Thoreau, member of the board of directors of The Thoreau Society, and editor of *The Concord Saunterer*, he has insight into state-of-the-art research and knows the Thoreau oeuvre inside-out. Few researchers would be better equipped to try to resolve the “Thoreau Problem”: namely, the tendency to compartmentalize the man into the “green” and the “rebel” Thoreau. This split, according to the author, can be healed if one reads the Thoreau canon in the context of the emerging social sciences. The nature/culture dichotomy dissolves then, the Thoreau problem disappears — and so does the comforting image of a man who supposedly renounced civilization to “go west.”

*Civilizing Thoreau* is a densely written, closely argued, erudite work.

1 Jason Mark, “In Defense of Henry David Thoreau,” Oct 27, 2015 <http://www.sierraclub.org/sierra/2015-5-september-october/green-life/defense-henry-david-thoreau>.

The book's first part, "Thoreau's Human Ecology," sets the agenda for the analytical parts that follow, in that it argues for the inseparability of the social and natural sciences in the nineteenth century. Scientists, as much as the transcendentalists, believed that the laws of nature are universal and that they provide insight into the working of human and non-human worlds. Thus, the law of succession and ecological dispersal, when applied to the social sciences, seemed to justify the inevitability of racial succession. Schneider's discussion of the Harvard-educated Thoreau's engagement with the racial theories and other "prejudices" of the day is an eye-opener. Whether separate races (the polygenist argument) or one human race in different stages of development (the monogenist belief), blacks, Indians, and the Irish (the Irish immigration was at its peak in mid-nineteenth century) were believed to have germs of civilization, which could flourish in appropriate conditions, but only within the limits established by those germs. In general, the non-white races were seen as incapable of developing a philosophical outlook and were, therefore, believed to be meant for physical labor. In keeping with the law of succession, therefore, their role was to prepare the way for the coming of the superior (Anglo-Saxon) race, and by the same token, either perish (Native Americans) or remain in the condition of racial inferiority once their time was up. This is the reason why Thoreau, while deeply interested in Indian cultures and sympathetic to the tragic plight of American natives, could nonetheless accept this plight as inevitable. Schneider skillfully demonstrates how, and to what extent, Thoreau the nonconformist-abolitionist was able to accommodate the law of succession in his mature works, starting with *Walden*, through his reform papers and the travel narratives, to the seminal essay "Walking," which actually endorses the idea of Manifest Destiny. Paradoxically, quips Schneider, "One could be an abolitionist without believing in racial equality" (29). On balance, Schneider does recognize Thoreau's tendency to be less prejudiced and more appreciative of individual "others": personal contact would often correct the generic view propagated by science.

Another ambiguity highlighted by Schneider is Thoreau's love of nature and his simultaneous belief in American expansionism. Much as he loved the wilderness, he also came to fear it (the famous Ktaadn and the less famous Cape Cod narratives) and was far from elevating it over civilized life. In point of fact, Thoreau believed the function of wilderness was to refresh us before we were ready to return to our civilizing tasks. Otherwise, why leave Walden? Likewise, his condemnation of environmental destruction

did not prevent him from praising the settler and the logger as pioneers of civilization; neither did it stop him from expressing disappointment in the Pilgrim Fathers for their lack of adventurousness in geographical exploration, especially in comparison with the French founders of Port Royal.

Naturally, the law of succession applies to the spiritual realm as well. Far from preaching simplicity as an end in itself or praising manual labor for its allegedly intrinsic value, Thoreau saw both as means of achieving the freedom a philosopher needed to develop spiritual complexity. More than anything else, Thoreau believed that civilization was advanced by philosophers, that is, “awakened” individuals who have reached, through the flowing vest of appearances, the very heart of reality. Thus, it was the philosopher, not a “mere John or Jonathan,” that pointed the way to the splendid American future. At times, however, I felt that Schneider’s use of transcendentalist thought was too slight to counterbalance the book’s naturalist/sociological framework. Still, this is a minor point and it in no way detracts from the worth of Schneider’s excellent and highly readable research.

I believe *Civilizing Thoreau* has the potential to reconfigure the field of Thoreau studies for years to come.

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**Jon C. Teaford, *The 20<sup>th</sup> Century American City: Problems, Promises, and Reality*. Revised Edition. Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016. 240 pages. ISBN: 978-1-4214-2038-7.**

*The 20<sup>th</sup> Century American City, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition* is an updated version of a 1986 text in the field of Urban Studies. Teaford’s original text traced the history of U.S. cities decade by decade from the 1900s to the 1980s. The second edition, from 1993, added a new chapter on U.S. cities from 1980 to 1990. This new edition, published in 2016, expands that last chapter and adds a new chapter looking at the same cities during the 2000s.

In the introduction, Teaford lays out an argument that throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, U.S. cities grew quickly, developed problems and, despite the best intentions of urban designers, never really solved them. Rather, according to Teaford, U.S. metropolises have little cohesive design and have evolved in a relatively haphazard way. The book proceeds as a historical overview of U.S. cities, providing an outline of each decade with some more extend-