

ture, not race, shapes human customs and institutions. This view was popularized by Boas's student Ruth Benedict (1887–1948), in her 1934 book *Patterns of Culture*—a paperback bestseller in 1946. She attempted to illustrate what came to be known as “cultural relativism” (though she called it “cultural relativity”).

Against the backdrop of the crimes of Hitler and Stalin, Benedict's book (and especially a sentence in it about “equally valid patterns of life”) stirred intense debate about cultural relativism's implications for moral judgment. Wrong believes that Benedict did not mean to imply that any and all patterns of life are equally valid morally. “The original cultural relativism of Boas and his students did not entail the eschewal of any and all moral judgment,” he says. Their cultural relativism meant that the culture in which individuals had been reared since infancy invariably shaped or determined their

actions. But just because the actions of cannibals, headhunters, and other *individuals* should be viewed in the context of their cultures, that did not preclude “a comparative evaluation of different *cultures* and the conclusion that some were more desirable than others.” Making such evaluations was not the work of scientists *qua* scientists, however, since moral judgments were then regarded as outside the fact-oriented realm of science.

Today's multiculturalists, in contrast, go so far as to call into question even factual knowledge, Wrong points out. They “are usually epistemological as well as cultural or moral relativists.” But he does not believe that the current multiculturalist vogue will last long. “The very stress on supposedly irreducible cultural differences may express an uneasy awareness that they are not very great and that . . . they are likely to diminish,” thanks to intermarriage and integration into the larger American society.

Reinventing Cities

“Shrinking Cities” by Witold Rybczynski and Peter Linneman, in *Wharton Real Estate Review* (Fall 1997), Wharton Real Estate Center, Univ. of Pennsylvania, 313 Lauder-Fischer Hall, Third Floor, 256 S. 37th St., Philadelphia, Pa. 19104-6330.

America's aging big cities need to accept the fact that they are shrinking, and set about planning to make smaller better. So contend Rybczynski and Linneman, professors of real estate and urbanism, and of real estate, finance and public policy, respectively, at the University of Pennsylvania.

The usual response of urban areas faced with a declining (and increasingly poor) population, the authors say, has been to raise taxes, thus making the city even less attractive. Another oft-proposed solution—regional government—is politically impractical, even leaving aside probable constitutional difficulties.

Mayors and urban planners should emulate Venice, Vienna, and Glasgow, Rybczynski and Linneman maintain. Though their populations peaked long ago (in the 17th century, in the case of Venice), they are still good places to live. “A city that has irretrievably lost large amounts of its population,” say the authors, “needs to examine ways to redesign itself to become more compact, and perhaps even smaller in area.”

Many cities have strong outlying parts, and some have strong centers, they note.

“Between these areas lies a complex web of decrepit housing stock, abandoned industry, and strong neighborhoods.” What can be done? In some cases, they suggest, empty tracts could be turned into parks and recreation areas. New York City, owner of 20,000 vacant lots, is considering asking private corporations to pay for converting empty land into parks and playgrounds, in return for the right to use the space for advertising. Some vacant land may have commercial possibilities. In downtown Chicago, a developer recently built a golf course on 30 vacant acres near the convention center. Or perhaps large tracts could be consolidated and sold to the U.S. Department of the Interior for the creation of urban greenbelts. Another, more drastic idea: selling large tracts (of, say, 100-plus acres) to private developers to create independent “suburban” municipalities, with their own schools and governments.

Rybczynski and Linneman concede that significant reforms will provoke massive resistance. But for New York and other “shrinking cities,” they believe, there is no realistic alternative.