



PROJECT MUSE®

---

New Orleans: The Making of an Urban Landscape (review)

Dean Sinclair

Southeastern Geographer, Volume 44, Number 1, May 2004, pp.  
115-117 (Review)

Published by The University of North Carolina Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sgo.2004.0015>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/169752>

## REVIEWS

---

### **New Orleans: The Making of an Urban Landscape**

Peirce F. Lewis. The Center for American Places, Santa Fe, New Mexico, in Association with the University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville, Virginia, 2003. Second Edition. xix and 200 pp., appendices, bibliography, charts, graphs, index, maps, photographs. \$19.50 paper (ISBN: 1-930-06610-4).

DEAN SINCLAIR

*Northwestern State University*

Dusting off a long out-of-print classic, the Center for American Places has done a tremendous service to the disciplines of geography and urban studies in presenting this second edition of Lewis's *New Orleans*. This second edition is a hybrid of the original 1976 text with slight modifications, presented as "Book One," and brand new text, incorporated as "Book Two." In some instances this might seem forced or contrived, but in the case of *New Orleans* it works. The original text, which stands as a model for "doing" urban geography, remains largely intact, and the new text presents the changes in the geography of New Orleans in such clear language that it stands as emblematic of the alterations that have occurred in the North American landscape since 1976.

Most Americans, indeed many people around the world, have some image of New Orleans. It is a city that lingers long in one's imagination, and for any that have visited the city this book will conjure those images. The book reminded me of my first visit in 1970 (as a thirteen year old) to the city, traveling from my suburban home in South Carolina to visit family in Louisiana.

We traveled through several cities, including Atlanta, Birmingham, Montgomery, and Mobile. No other city on the route captured my imagination like New Orleans, particularly on walks through the French Quarter, which is like no other urban district in North America, with its strip clubs, hawkers, hustlers, and "Hurricanes." No other North American river fires the imagination like the Mississippi. Lewis does a wonderful job capturing the sights, sounds, and even the smells of the Quarter, as well as less visited parts of New Orleans.

Book One, entitled "The Shaping of New Orleans, from Its Beginnings to 1975," opens with some vignettes and summary statements concerning the city as well as Louisiana, and then proceeds to the heart of the matter, the city's geography. Lewis does a good job in Chapter Two laying out the physical facts associated with the city, utilizing those time-tested geographic concepts of "site" and "situation." Lewis evinces the feel of a city at the difficult juncture of North America's largest river and the Gulf of Mexico, focusing on its precarious position in terms of

flooding, the challenges of maintaining the river channel, and its vulnerability to hurricanes. Lewis's relatively brief and accessible discussion of the structure of the river, with its natural levees, backswamps, and shifting delta, is illustrative of the author's ability to take complex geographic ideas and make them interesting and enlightening.

The bulk of Book One, however, is taken up by a discussion of the city's development over time, presented as "stages of metropolitan growth." Lewis divides the city's history prior to 1975 into four stages, "The European City," "America's Western Capital," "The Maturing City," and "A New and Uncertain City." It is in this chapter that Lewis chronicles the historical forces at work in shaping modern New Orleans, discussing the work of the French in locating the city, the Spanish in building much of the city, the Americans in draining the city, and the white and African American populations in struggling for position in the spatially constricted city. Using this model, Lewis is able to place events, such as the Louisiana Purchase, draining the backswamp, changes in residential architectural styles, efforts to save the Vieux Carré from the infamous Riverfront Expressway, the construction of the Superdome, and the many changes to the city's port facilities, in a richer context. Lewis also draws on classic models of urban structure such as concentric rings and multiple nuclei to explain changes to the geography of metropolitan New Orleans.

Book Two, entitled "The City Transformed, 1975–2002," is a brief recounting of the forces that have swept over New Orleans since the original publication. The chapters are shorter and less detailed, yet they are complete enough to give the

reader a sense of the conflicts involved in the changes that have occurred since the mid-1970s. The opening chapter of Book Two focuses on the fascinating and groundbreaking efforts by certain residents of New Orleans to reclaim the river. The World's Fair of 1984, construction of the "Moonwalk," and the expansion of the convention center are discussed, as is the transformation of the port to accommodate the explosion of container traffic. After setting up a rosy scenario of a city on the brink of takeoff in the early 1980s, Lewis chronicles the collapse of oil prices and thus the collapse of the New Orleans—as well as the Louisiana—economy, a collapse from which the state has still not fully recovered. The author in this and subsequent chapters captures the changes in the fortunes of the city, in particular the city's changing demographics, the burgeoning yet shaky tourist economy, the growing strains of racial strife, as well as the ongoing challenges of the city's relationship to its environment.

This work represents a wonderful conjunction of cultural, historical, and urban geography. It is richly illustrated with maps and photographs, both new and from the first edition. Lewis's study of New Orleans serves as a model of how to do urban geography, with its evocation of place as well as its use of theory to inform the discussion. Since its first edition, there has been a relative dearth of concise geographical works focused on a single city that are both academic and accessible to the average reader, though this new edition may revitalize this approach. Despite the fact that New Orleans has been surpassed by other southern cities in the urban hierarchy, such as Atlanta, Miami, and Dallas, the Crescent City retains its hold

on our imagination. Though there are issues that Lewis could have expanded upon in the new text, such as the recent decline of the downtown shopping district and the

ongoing crisis with law enforcement in the city, this is a memorable book, one that feels like an old friend turning up after too many years gone.

**Trouble in Paradise:  
Globalization and Environmental Crises in Latin America**

J. Timmons Roberts and Nikki D. Thanos, with a foreword by David Helvarg.  
Routledge, New York and London, 2003. xvii and 285 pp., bibliography, index,  
illustrations, maps. \$18.95 paper (ISBN: 0-415-92980-6).

AVRUM J. SHRIAR

*Virginia Commonwealth University*

Roberts and Thanos place Latin America's environmental crises in their historical context and explore their links to, and implications for, current political, social, and economic realities in the region. The outcome is political ecology at its best, in which a compelling case is made for the notion that oppression, economic desperation, and lack of "democratic space" have long been at the root of most of Latin America's environmental crises. The book does not pretend to seek full objectivity; rather, the authors argue for a particular position on most issues and, at least to this reviewer, few if any of their stances are unwarranted. However, they also present opposing positions and evidence in a balanced way.

The authors bring forth several provocative, overarching themes that are relevant to the myriad issues they explore. For example, they effectively highlight the contradictions of First World demands for better environmental stewardship in Latin America (and elsewhere in the Third World), while simultaneously exerting tremendous pressure on the region's environment, for example, by forcing countries

to address their debt problems through rapid exploitation of natural resources and spending cuts that hamper their environmental management capabilities. They also point out that the environmental crises that have received most attention in recent decades are those of primary importance to First World institutions and stakeholders (e.g., deforestation), rather than those that plague and thus concern most Latin Americans (e.g., urban pollution). Hence, the unequal power relationship between First and Third World institutions manifests itself even with something as seemingly virtuous as the quest for environmental progress. Moreover, globalization is a pervasive theme in the book, not only in terms of its multifaceted dimensions and impacts, but also with regard to the movements and struggles that have emerged to resist these impacts.

*Trouble in Paradise* contains seven chapters. Chapter One provides an insightful overview of some common features and contradictions of Latin America's environmental problems and struggles. It makes clear the importance of understanding globalization, its historical background,