IN SWEDEN, as in several other European countries, the appointment to a university professorship is a rather complicated affair. As a rule, application must be made for a full professorship. The first step on the part of the university is to engage experts to whom is entrusted the task of studying and appraising the qualifications of the applicants. The results of such investigations invariably are made public. If the applicants wish, they may send to the university their reactions to the conclusions reached by the experts. It is not unusual for applicants who feel that they have not been treated fairly by the experts to take advantage of this opportunity. The university authorities next take their stand, and finally the government—that is the minister of education—makes the appointment.

Thus each appointment to a university professorship creates a considerable file which is buried in the archives of the ministry of education and soon forgotten. There are, in fact, among these documents many that deserve to be consigned to oblivion, particularly some of the petitions of dissatisfied applicants. In their attempts to emphasize their own merits, they often lose completely all sense of proportion and dignity. Their papers sometimes show “Academic Man” at his worst. It is, however, possible to find items of general interest in the appointment files.

The scholars whose duty it is to judge the qualifications of the applicants naturally cannot do so without relying, consciously or unconsciously, on some general standards of evaluation. From the point of view of a historian, their conclusions have special interest because they afford ample evidence that political history once dominated the curriculum in Swedish universities. As late as the middle 1920s, the academic experts obviously considered political history the “central” field of historical research and training.

More recently, however, the attitude of academic historians has changed. There are several reasons for the change. One is the

**ORGANIZING**

Research in Urban History

**FOLKE LINDBERG**
A street in old Stockholm

advances of economic history to a position as a more or less independent historical discipline in all Swedish universities. Another reason for the change in attitude is the increased activity in the field of municipal history.

I should like to review briefly what is being done in this field. I should note that what I am going to say about methodology applies on the whole to all Scandinavian countries, although I have the impression that interest in urban history is somewhat greater in Sweden than in neighboring countries.

SEVERAL Swedish cities have long and interesting histories; their origins can be traced back to the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries. Nevertheless, it was not until recently that Swedish historians began to devote themselves to the study of municipal development. Local monographs, including some city histories, were published earlier, but most of them were written by amateurs. Everything outside the political sphere formerly seems to have been considered unworthy of attention by professional historians. An early and rather isolated attempt to deal with problems of urban history in a scientific way was made in the 1860s, when a radical municipal reform was instituted. The lively debate revolving about this reform drew attention to the historical aspects of the issue.

On the whole, however, professional historians remained indifferent to the subject. It was not until the years immediately after the First World War that urban history, after having been so long neglected, finally drew such lively interest that it became almost fashionable. And this was not merely a temporary phenomenon. During the past three decades a rather impressive number of books and articles dealing with Swedish urban history including some very substantial city histories, have been published. When once the movement started, city boards all over the nation unexpectedly seemed to feel that histories of their own cities must be written and published in volumes as big, beautiful, and richly illustrated as those already in print. A kind of noble competition among Swedish cities began and the race is still in progress — very much to the benefit of historical research. As a result ample funds that otherwise never would have been placed at the disposal of the historical sciences have been made available to historians.

Although many scholars have been engaged in this work, the original impulse did not come from academic circles. It came from the cities themselves. It is a significant fact that the Swedish Institute of Urban History was established in 1919 by the Municipal Association, not by a university. The awakening of interest in municipal history has an obvious political background. In 1918 the Swedish Parliament instituted a municipal reform that, with other innovations, marked the final victory of democracy in Sweden's political life. It extended general suffrage to local elections. At the
same time the administration of the city of Stockholm was thoroughly reorganized. Thus practical administrative questions drew attention to urban history, just as in the United States problems created by the rapid growth of cities gave the impulse to vigorous research in the field of urban sociology.

It should be added, however, that increased interest in local history was not confined to the cities alone. It was a general phenomenon that embraced the rural population as well. In Sweden we refer to it as a folk movement (hembygdsrörelsen). It led to the cropping up of a great number of new local historical societies, local museums, local periodicals, and other publications largely historical in character. This interest also manifested itself in a flood of historical monographs, which usually have been published in connection with an anniversary of some kind by an industrial or commercial company, a bank, a labor local, a co-operative, or some other group of a similar nature.

Thanks to the many recent contributions to urban history, we know much more now than we did some decades ago about the origin and early growth of Swedish cities, their administrative development, their role in the economic, political, and cultural life of the country, demographic changes in the urban population, and the like. But the interest of historians has been concentrated almost exclusively on early history. Urban development during the last century thus far has been very much neglected. This, of course, is deplorable—the period about which we know least is that of rapid urbanization which is most important in the development of cities.

It is, however, easy to understand why so little has been done on this recent period. To begin with, the bulk of the written source material is quite overwhelming. The historian who writes the history of a middle-sized city during the seventeenth century is able to examine all available material, to have a look at practically every document that might have interest for his topic. If he extends his research to later periods in the history of the city, he soon realizes the necessity for a new methodological approach. The increased quantity of source material is only one difficulty; another is the extreme complexity of the phenomena that the historian of modern cities is obliged to analyze. The task also requires specialized
knowledge of many fields of human activity—knowledge which a scholar with general historical training cannot be expected to possess.

IT SEEMS advisable first of all to consider seriously the whole situation, to fix the aims, and to try to determine how research relating to modern urban history should be organized. For example, is it really practical to treat urban history as a separate branch of history? Why not leave it to economic historians to describe and analyze economic activity in cities, as part of the general study of these developments? Why not let political scientists take over the study of municipal reforms, administrative developments, party struggles, and so on as one phase of the domestic political history of the country? The answer must be that cities have their individual lives; that they are organisms and must be studied as such. If we give up the attempt to study cities as separate units, we shall never be able to acquire a full understanding of one of the most important factors in the development of modern society.

In Sweden, emphasis has been placed on the study of individual cities. What we now need most are comparative and comprehensive studies designed to shed light on the general features of urban development. Both general and local studies, however, are indispensable. Much of the research work needed always must be centered on geographically limited areas—single cities or groups of cities. Otherwise it would be impossible to get the sharp focus we need. A narrowing down of the area of study also facilitates a more varied treatment of the many manifestations of city life. I believe that a synthesis is particularly rewarding if it is applied to research concentrated on a relatively limited region.

Perhaps I can make my point clearer by giving a concrete sample from my own experience. I am interested in the study of the disintegration of the burgher class in Swedish cities—an important but slow change that took place during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The task is to follow and explain the steps in the process that finally deprived the burghers of their position as the privileged governing elite class in the city population. It is necessary to study how the barriers between this class and other social groups were broken down piece by piece, and how new social stratifications replaced the old. Most important in such a case is, of course, a consideration of economic factors and of the various legal and political aspects of the problem.

But what happened during the sessions in the city hall was only part of the process that brought about the change. In order to understand and explain it, we must also walk the streets of the city, and see at first hand the many different ways in which it affected the life of the people. We see it reflected in the way they built and furnished their houses, in their architectural taste, in their dress.

The history of both art and literature reveals something in this connection. The change sometimes found expression in fiction. In studying how people spent their leisure time, there is an opportunity to observe also how traditional social barriers slowly disappeared to be replaced, of course, by new ones. In making these excursions into different fields, one is always confronted with the same phenomenon, the same social change.

BUT HOW FULFILL in practice the requirements of this many-sided approach? There is in my opinion only one method—to employ teamwork in organizing such a study.

And by teamwork I do not mean merely a division of labor among several scholars. In most cases, when the task of writing a city history is entrusted to more than one author, an editor or a board of editors make a plan and assign to each of the collaborators the writing of part of the book. Thereupon each author starts collecting material.
and preparing his part of the manuscript without much contact with the others. This method of handling material is not likely to produce satisfactory results. Necessary to the creative process are regular meetings of the authors in order that they may discuss their problems and report their progress. And it is also important that members of the team should represent as many kinds of training and contribute as many types of knowledge as possible. What I have in mind is close collaboration of the laboratory type. I think we have something to learn from scientists in this respect. The members of the team must be aware that they are studying the same subjects from different angles.

Although general historical training is indispensable for such a group of scholars, by itself it is not enough. What other disciplines should be represented depends naturally on the character of the task. I believe that for urban research, the collaboration of experts in economic history, political science, geography, and sociology is most necessary.

In Sweden we have had very little experience with such teamwork. The method, however, has been tried. A recently published two-volume work entitled Svensk Stad ("Swedish City") is the fruit of a close collaboration like that I have tried to describe. This work attempts to give a synthesis of Swedish urban development in the nineteenth century. While it places emphasis primarily on such subjects as town planning, housing, and styles and fashions, it also pays lively attention to the economic and social forces that lie at the roots of these developments. This pioneer experiment is interesting, but not entirely satisfactory. The more general parts of the book, those intended to give the social and economic framework, suffer from such weaknesses as oversimplification and rash generalization.

A study of the authors’ qualifications reveals that as a group they lack the well-rounded character that is highly desirable for the production of such a work.

It is not very difficult to discover the reasons why thus far teamwork has been tried only in isolated cases. The fact that what is done as a member of a research team is a more or less anonymous achievement no doubt makes many people reluctant to engage in it. The idea certainly also will meet other objections. It will be pointed out that history is not only a science, but an art; that the final product of a collective effort is bound to be somewhat impersonal and heterogeneous, and to lack unity of conception which more than anything else gives a work of historical synthesis its value.

Personally, I believe these objections will lose their validity when people realize the necessity of collaboration. There will always be plenty of opportunities for individual scholars to write and publish.

I can think of still another objection — sociologists, economists, and geographers are not historians. Is it not overly optimistic to expect them to show interest in historical research? The answer to this, of course, is that many representatives of these disciplines are accustomed to producing historical studies. As soon as a sociologist or a geographer extends his interest from a study of existing conditions to a study of change, he inevitably becomes a historian. Historical sociology, as well as historical geography, are specialties with long traditions behind them.

If it is true that to cope with historical problems is by no means a new and unfamiliar occupation for sociologists and geographers, there might be reasons to fear that they are concerned with historical phenomena quite different from those of interest to the scholar with general historical training. In other words, when the little group of experts assembles and starts discussing the common task, will its members find that they are looking for things so different that fruitful collaboration is impossible?

1 Gregor Paulsson and others, Svensk Stad: Liv och stil i svenskska staden under 1800-talet (Stockholm, 1950).
Numerous attempts have been made to define the aims of sociology as distinguished from the aims of history. Some scholars draw a very sharp line between the spheres of interest of the two disciplines. The following statement of E. M. Hulme is typical: “The difference in point of view and method between history and the other social studies is definite and important. All the other social studies are comparative. Their interest is in law or in type. Their method is abstraction and generalization. History is interested in the individual, whether it be an individual nation, or church or sect, or revolution, or person; and its method is to tell the story of that individual. Sociology is, for instance, interested in divorce as a social institution. . . . History, however, is interested chiefly in particular divorces. . . . It is interested, for instance, in the divorce of Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon.”

In my opinion, this is very much beside the point. It is true that most modern historians have no illusions about the possibility that their science might discover laws regulating the destinies of peoples and civilizations. But history is not interested solely in individual cases; history also deals with trends and tendencies, with social changes. It is and must be comparative. And I imagine that when we leave the high level of speculation and go down to the level of everyday work, we shall find that the sociologist is not regularly preoccupied with general laws.

There are, of course, differences in methods of approach and variations in aims. In the field of urban study, for example, it may be said that the sociologist is interested in “human behavior in the urban environment,” while the general historian is likely to put greater emphasis on the community itself. But he certainly is not, and cannot be, interested in the community as a completely isolated, individual phenomenon. It could be said, perhaps, in the sociologist’s terminology, that he is interested in the pattern of the behavior of cities. The difference in emphasis, however, so far as I can see, is not great enough to constitute a real obstacle to fruitful collaboration by sociologists and historians.

The extent to which the history of modern urban development can profit from results already won for other social sciences should not be overlooked in this connection. Books like Robert and Helen Lynd’s Middletown (1929) will, of course, be most helpful to future historians of cities and urban life; they will build largely upon the results of field work, collecting source material that otherwise would never have been available to historians.

In connection with an effort to analyze the whole urban pattern of the country, many Swedish geographers have studied the commercial hinterlands of individual cities. The numerous dissertations and articles devoted to this problem naturally will be very useful to those who intend to describe modern urban development.

Work of this kind is done in geographical institutions attached to the Swedish universities, but similar investigations are also sponsored for practical administrative purposes by the cities themselves, as part of their programs of town planning. All over the country geographers and sociologists are engaged in working out master plans for individual cities, as well as regional plans. The impulse for this activity came from the Town Planning Act of 1947; it embraces almost every Swedish city of any importance.

The act has inspired numerous reports, all based upon preliminary studies that comprise maps, charts, statistics, and so on. These materials will provide future histori-
MINNEAPOLIS
offers a rich field
for writers
of urban history

PHOTOGRAPH BY G. R. HAY

ans with a wealth of information about such matters as vital statistics, the occupational structure of the population, industry and trade, traffic problems, and land values. It is important that this material be preserved and made available to those engaged in research.

The main point in the program of so-called "new history," as formulated, for example, in 1912 by James Harvey Robinson, was the criticism of the conventional narrow conception of history as "past politics" and the demand for a broadening of the interests of historians. This, of course, was originally a demand for historical synthesis. The underlying idea was that an extension of attention to economic, social, and cultural aspects of history would promote an understanding of interrelationships. Thus would be explained the impact of economic factors on politics, the impact of political factors on economic life, the reflection of social and economic change in literature and art, and so forth.

Looking back upon the historical production of recent decades, it is easy to see that the new ideas have influenced historical writing all over the world, since far more emphasis has been placed upon nonpolitical developments than earlier. But so far as I can see, the demand for historical synthesis really deserving of the name is not evident to the same degree. It is obvious that historians have become aware of the need for some kind of synthesis. Some of the modern national or world histories issued in many volumes reveal an ambition to cover as many fields of human activity as possible; the title of one of the leading French historical journals — Revue de synthèse historique — reflects this tendency.

Wide coverage, however, is not identical with synthesis. There is, it seems, a need for synthesis in many other fields of research. I have dealt with urban history, for the simple reason that this is my main field of interest. There are, of course, other topics well suited to collaboration in historical synthesis. I believe, however, that the opportunities afforded by the intensified study of a restricted geographical area are particularly great.

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1 See Robinson, The New History: Essays Illustrating the Modern Historical Outlook (New York, 1912).