

Fires, Cities, and the "Let it Burn" Policy: Towards a New Theory of Urban Development

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Editor's Note: The publication of this piece on urban fires represents a departure from the traditional themes of the Journal. Nonetheless, we are fortunate to be able to make available – perhaps for the first time to English-language readers – an example of the Prussian school of urban ecological theory. During his one-year guest editorship at the South Dakota Journal of Epistemology, Dr. Nadolski was a frequent visitor to the neighboring state of Wyoming and observed that state's dramatic fire season in 1988. This provided Dr. Nadolski with the unique opportunity to integrate these North American experiences with his own research on the historical role of urban fires.

Last summer's fires in Yellowstone National Park and other public lands -- and the federal government's response to these disasters -- have led to a renewed public debate in the United States on forest-fire-fighting policies. At stake are the new "let it burn" policies, which allow forest fires of natural origin to burn in a controlled situation. Though the U.S. Park Service was severely criticized during the 1988 fire season for apparent neglect of its forest resources, the Service continues to maintain its case for burning, citing the positive long-term effect of fires.

While this discussion has focused on the regenerative force of fires in our forests, it is perhaps time to examine the broader role that fires have played in society. Many of the ecological processes of rebirth and renewal found in forests can also be found in our modern cities. Though some authors have indeed incorporated selected elements of ecological models into their urban theories (such as carrying capacities, adaptation, and survival of the fittest), the intricate role of urban fires has been conspicuously overlooked.

Fire: A Natural Urban Force

Fire is a natural force that has been operating in urban ecosystems for at least the last 6,000 years. In the early 1900s, the advent of modern fire-fighting technology effectively stopped city-wide fires for nearly a century. Recently, however, disturbing patterns of urban development have pointed out the shortsightedness of this modern fire-fighting approach. The deprivation of fires in large cities has often led to

antiquated, inefficient, and overly homogeneous forms of land use and urban development.

Fire is certainly not the only urban force which leads to rebirth and renewal. Earthquakes can also accelerate the cyclical development of cities, but are too infrequent and unpredictable to be effectively used in the urban ecological system. War has also been an important shaper of the urban landscape over the years. Yet American cities did not benefit from the major World War Two bombing which enabled Europe and Japan to reshape their land use patterns and architectural stock. And post-war American urban renewal has proved to be an inadequate *ersatz* for the absence of wartime destruction. As a result, fire remains the irreplaceable element in the long-term ecological development of the urban environment.

The Proposed "Let it Burn" Policy:

The government should implement a policy which allows some naturally-caused fires to burn themselves out, thereby acknowledging the natural role of fire in sustaining the development and renewal of a city. All urban fires, whether man-caused or natural, should be managed according to criteria as developed in a city's fire management plan. This approach does not mean a simple neglect of the fires; rather, natural fires are to be continuously monitored and tactics to be planned daily.

The Fire Management Plan:

The urban fire management plan, which will require approval by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Department of the Interior, and the U.S. Forest Service, has four basic goals:

1. To permit as many naturally-caused fires as possible to burn under natural conditions.
2. To prevent wildfire from destroying human life, vegetation, historic and cultural sites, special natural features, government offices, or endangered businesses.
3. To suppress wildfire in as safe, cost-effective, and environmentally sensitive a manner as possible.
4. To resort to prescribed burning when and where necessary to reduce dangerous accumulations of hazardous fuels (primarily condominiums, trendy boutiques, and abandoned warehouses).

During the past several years, research on urban fires has provided important information which supports this policy. We have discovered, for example, that tens of thousands of spontaneous fires fizzle out and burn no significant acreage at all. We have learned that of the hundreds

or thousands of ignitions (electrical shorts, smoldering cigarettes, etc.) that strike buildings, only a small percentage produced fires. And these fires burned only an average of 1.4 buildings before dying a natural death; eighty percent of the fire starts go out by themselves, burning less than one building.

Rebirth and Renewal

There is a positive and pragmatic side to the fires we see today. While many people only see destruction and devastation, these fires are in fact a rebirth, a renewal, of the urban system. They represent the end of one important local economic cycle but assure the beginning of the next.

The urban landscape we see today was created by numerous fires over the past 200-300 years and provides a varied habitat for the rich diversity of economic activity that abounds in the city. Entrepreneurs, artists, and architects will greatly benefit from the results of these fires. Small businesses, generally thought to be in decline, such as hardware stores and small cafes, will go through something of a population boom.

The growth of the new urban community begins immediately following the burn. Some scavengers begin to use the new resources provided by freshly downed buildings. New foundations of many building types begin to spring up. By the fourth construction season, the urban landscape is essentially a mosaic of small businesses, new housing, and small industrial workshops. Foundations of future neighborhoods (residential, commercial, manufacturing) become established. Urban growth is lush because of increased space and investment. In fact, many urban uses actually need fire to enhance their survival in the metropolitan community.

We thus see the crucial role that fires play in the historical development of the urban landscape. The twentieth-century policy of complete urban fire suppression has turned out to be myopic and naively positivistic -- leading to inefficient and overly homogeneous patterns of urban development. This existing policy has its roots in the denial of the beneficial, regenerative force of fires. In the noble tradition of an "urban Prometheus," this creative-destructive force must be recaptured from the forest and transferred back to the city. In the end, the emergence of a new urban ecological theory will necessarily lead to a fundamental revision of existing urban fire policy.

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