

The Unheavenly City

*The Nature and Future
Of Our Urban Crisis.*

By Edward C. Banfield.

308 pp. Boston: Little, Brown
& Co. \$6.95.

By JEFF GREENFIELD

Edward Banfield has written a book that totally absolves institutions now in power. His largely theoretical tract treats the city and its people as though they existed in a vacuum—as though the increasing conflicts between people and power are irrelevant to an understanding of the city. This blindness is significant because Mr. Banfield has an important voice these days in the Nixon Administration's planning of its urban policies, as a colleague of Daniel Patrick Moynihan and as chairman of the President's task force on the Model Cities Program. He is Henry Lee Shattuck Professor of Urban Government at Harvard and author of a number of books on city politics and government. We may assume that this book is a part of the thinking now going on within the Nixon Administration.

Banfield's essential thesis is that life in the city is much better for most of us than it ever was; that among the poorest of citizens their condition is to be explained by their "class cultures," that class is a function of how well people can provide psychologically for a distant future, and that given the limits of lower-class behavior there isn't much we can do. He also insists that we think entirely too easily in racial terms—and that much of what afflicts urban blacks is a product of their class, not their skin color. He makes indictments of the "conventional wisdom" about schooling, poverty, crime and riots, and concludes with a series of suggestions—all of which Banfield says are politically unacceptable.

Banfield insists that his discussion of blacks is not racist or reactionary; that "facts are facts, however unpleasant, and they have to be faced unblinkingly by anyone who really wants to improve matters in

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the cities." We don't really know how unpleasant Banfield thinks facts are until we look at the underpinnings of his theory—for he has found facts so unpleasant that he has ignored a great many of them and misstated others.

Item: Banfield tells us, reassuringly, that "the most polluted air is nowhere near as dangerous as cigarette smoke." This is as reassuring as being told that jumping out of an airplane is safer than jumping 30,000 feet off a mountain. It is also wrong. Recent studies have shown that New Yorkers breathe in as much dangerous material as a two-pack-a-day smoker.

Item: Banfield argues that the "huge expenditures being made for improvement of mass transit . . . will not, however, make any contributions to the solutions of the serious problems of the city." First, these "huge expenditures" are barely one-sixth of what the Federal Government has spent to build highways in the last 15 years. Second, anyone who rides a subway, or sits in a car for an hour a day, or falls to his knees as the New Haven or Long Island pulls out of the station, knows the real effects of traveling under indecent conditions. It is literally like being punched in the stomach several times a day.

Item: Banfield, letting his emotions slip, writes that black power "community control" advocates have taught black children to "learn . . . nothing while making life as miserable as possible for their white teachers." One of the few happy facts about Ocean-Hill Brownsville—the most explosive community-control confrontation yet—is that the overwhelming majority of teachers in that area were, and are white, and that there was no evidence of any racial hostility toward them. The dispute, unhappy as it was, was ideological and political. The white teachers in that district who supported the local board were not harassed for their color.

Item: Banfield, slipping into the jargon of academic evasion, quotes an item in *Seventeen* magazine urging students to question their elders and those in authority. And he says that "conceivably, the effect of such words on working-and lower-middle-class persons may be to undermine their moral foundations." Ignoring the weaseling, what is the evidence for this remarkable statement? What is it designed to show? Is it simply a kidney punch at those daring to encourage our children to explore the

link between authority and legitimacy?

Item: Banfield does the same in excoriating those who spoke of the root reasons for rioting, and who warned of future riots after Harlem and Watts and Detroit. And he says (note the weaseling again) "it may be that the principal effect of rioting has been on white opinion, that it has checked a growing disposition . . . to accept reforms." Yet Banfield himself says that "there is likely to be more rioting for many years to come and this no matter what is done to prevent it." Presumably this is all right, since ghetto rioters read the Kerner Commission but not Banfield. And as for his "backlash" argument, George Wallace ran astonishingly well in three Democratic primaries in 1964 *before* the first modern riot in Harlem broke out. What accounts for this indisposition to "accept reforms"?

Much of Banfield's arguments are unexceptionable—but also unexceptional. For a highly touted challenge to our conventional wisdom, there is a good deal of rehashing; on the minimum wage, on the failure of our schools, on ghetto pathology, Banfield covers old ground.

The quality that is new is the shortsightedness, the narrowness of vision that prevents him from seeing his subject in human terms. For instance, he recommends — as have many others — that children be encouraged to leave school at 14 and accept jobs. Fine. But is that all? Must they be locked into blue-collar jobs for the rest of their lives? Or can we not, by breaking down long-entrenched institutional barriers, close the gap between jobs and school—perhaps encouraging a youth, as Robert Kennedy suggested four years ago, to start in construction, and then to find other talents he may have—in architecture, in design, in planning.

If we were willing to think of the underemployed as resources instead of burdens, we might find other possibilities opening up. For example, the Medical Corpsmen, who have been saving lives in Vietnam, might be brought directly into our cities as paraprofessionals, and given incentives to study medicine—thus finding a route other than school into the medical profession itself.

For Banfield, these lower-class children are burdens on —burdens we may remove— from our tax rolls and consciences—by letting them work as dishwashers at age 14 instead of age 17. But there is

human beings that institutions can help as well as cripple.

Banfield has nothing to say about city governments that do not trust the poor; about businesses that require an underpaid, unambitious underclass; about policies by credit companies and insurance companies that cheat consumers and make minority business enterprises almost hopeless; about transportation policies set by bankers, lawyers and builders that cripple mass transit; about suburban Congressmen who hold up subways for the District of Columbia until they force through highways that will cut a swath through black middle-class neighborhoods.

He prefers to ignore 50 years of history, when racism pure and simple segregated our armed forces, segregated our schools in the nation's capital, and kept black men out of law schools, medical schools and public service. One cannot hope for as much from a book that describes narcotics crime as an abnormal situation when in New York and other cities it accounts for half of all crime.

But if, like Banfield, we continue to ignore what our institutions have done to our cities—if we permit those "experts" who have the President's ear to spin out their models while another generation of children is crippled by our schools and sent to live in the hidden corners of our city—then what does that tell us about ourselves and about our country? We can try all of Banfield's proposals — earlier exit from school, preventive detention, an end to loose talk about white racism—but we will still let children die or turn to heroin, we will still be terrorized by crime—and our cities will continue to be less than they can be. This must be what Woodrow Wilson meant when he said "God save us from a government of experts." ■

Authors' Queries

I am writing a biography of the American landscape and historical painter Albert Bierstadt (1830-1902), and helping with an exhibition of his works. I would appreciate hearing from anyone owning Bierstadt works or manuscripts whom I have not already contacted.

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In connection with a proposed book on the use of amphetamines in the treatment of school children, I should like to hear from parents, teachers, school administrators,

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school administrators, s
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