

Anthony M. Orum and Xiangming Chen (2003) *The World of Cities. Places in Comparative and Historical Perspective*. Malden Ma: Blackwell. 180 pp. ISBN: 0631210253

The World of Cities is intended as a textbook for use in courses on urban sociology and urban studies. What distinguishes this from many other textbooks is the explicit emphasis that the authors put on the phenomenon of place.

Emphasizing place in urban sociology and urban studies indicates an interest in the differences between cities rather than their commonalities. In other words, it encourages both a comparative and an historical perspective on the urban question. This is a sound way to introduce urban sociology and urban studies, getting round the notoriously difficult and controversial fundamental questions about what constitutes the urban. Moreover, this does not mean that the authors, Orum and Chen, are uninterested in theory, but that they take a pragmatic view of theories.

The book is divided into five chapters. The first two are devoted to questions of place and theory. Place is important, Orum and Chen begin, because “places ... provide an anchor and meaning to who we are.” If this for some echoes conventional community sociology, place for Orum and Chen has to do with more than that, i.e. with the body located in space and with a sense of time. Moreover, place for them has to do with the public sphere. Thus, the authors’ claim to present a new sociological vision of place seems reasonable. In short, places are important to the well being of people. Cities are to be seen as places, according to Orum and Chen. It is here that peoples’ everyday life is constituted. But cities are places of contest – good places cannot be taken for granted.

There follows an ambitious overview of social theory and the city. Herein Orum and Chen present the Chicago school of urban sociology, the neo-marxist writings of Lefebvre, Castells and Harvey, but also the Molotch view of the city as a growth machine, and Zukin on cities as symbolic economies. They also discuss what they call an historical/institutional approach to the city, Orum himself being one of the contributors, as well as global perspectives upon the city, particularly that of Sassen.

For all these theories or approaches they try to set out, as simply and clearly as possible, the main concepts and ideas and the strengths and weaknesses of each approach. Given their pragmatic use of urban theory, Orum and Chen try to make each of these contributions relevant to urban sociology. Yet they do not succeed entirely evenly. As can be seen in the succeeding chapters, those contributions that take a specific interest in place, for example Zukin’s, are

favoured together with institutional and global approaches, as well as Lefebvre’s work.

In my view, on the whole they accomplish this difficult theoretical overview, making it accessible for the newcomer to the field. Nevertheless have I reservations.

The first is their presentation of Lefebvre, which is a notoriously difficult task – often it is as if he resists even being summarized – yet Orum and Chen make the bearing concepts of his dialectical triad, spatial practices, representations of space and representational spaces quite understandable. In choosing not to discuss the dialectic, however, I think that they miss one important matter: that production of space in Lefebvre’s terms presents as being about place (representations + space) in theirs. Second, in setting out the Chicago school, Orum and Chen explain it conventionally as an ecological approach. Given their interest in place, their task would have benefited from placing the Chicago ethnographic studies at the centre, the importance of which Rolf Lindner has argued so convincingly (see his *Die Entdeckung der Stadtkultur*, Frankfurt/M. 1990 [English translation 1996]).

The following two chapters are devoted to differences between cities. The first is historical, that is about differences between cities over time, how they have changed. The materials here are taken from the US experience, yet I do not see any great problem in this since the authors, are quite explicit that this is about the US case, and so do not have any generalizing ambitions. They single out three phases in the history of the US capitalist city: pre-industrial, industrial and post-industrial. Within this history, they recognize in particular the role of the suburbs, not least their political implications for the possibility of making metropolitan regions into good places for the poor, and the regional split between cities of the North and the Sunbelt. Of course, the role of race and ethnicity in shaping the US city are also discussed, emphasizing the difference between black and other immigrant groups (and waves) for the construction of the city. This is a strong part of the book – the authors even present the debate about the growing racial gap in US cities. The final part of the chapter, on gender and the city, is comparatively meagre, at best to be seen as an obligatory introduction, though relevant aspects are taken up. However, my suspicion is that this relative neglect has to do with the fact that gender questions benefit from being analysed at a lower level than Orum and Chen have chosen for the book: gender segregation

does not operate in space like class, or racial, segregation for example.

Then comes a chapter built around a comparison of how recent global trends affect Chinese and US cities. Here, Orum and Chen effectively demonstrate the relevance of much of the recent discussions on the city in the global context, as the rise of the entrepreneurial city and place politics, how global consumerism marks places in hybrid ways, and how globalization simultaneously deepens segregation within places while producing interconnectivity between (some of) them. The comparative approach here gives the reader a highly nuanced, sometimes even subtle, view. Now, this is not a merit just of the comparative approach, but also due to how Orum and Chen understand how the global and the local meet to (re)produce place. They do not downplay the possibilities of local action, of politics, for the outcome of globalization. At the same time the Chinese example of the cities on the coast opened for foreign capital investment, fully demonstrates the dramatic changes that globalization may bring in a very short time. It all started with politics. Indeed, China seems to be a well-chosen case for understanding globalization of the city.

In the fifth chapter, Orum and Chen end the book by discussing how cities could be made into better places

for people to live, stressing the importance of local action marking place in different ways. In this, they also point out the need to keep business interest and government in balance. Yet, the impression they give, quite correctly I assume, is not of anything like a balanced situation. This makes the presentation here of the so-called New urbanism in the US a little out of place.

Despite the critical remarks above, *The World of Cities* is an attractive textbook, introducing urban studies in general and urban sociology in particular, in an up-to-date manner that covers much of the contemporary debates. It does so in a most accessible way. The book has two particular merits. First, the authors are careful in always demonstrating the importance of the context for different outcomes and paths of development, thus stimulating readers to bring in their own examples. Second, they combine empirical matter and theory into a robust synthesis, thus demonstrating the need for fresh and historical evidence together with old and new theory in understanding and explaining different places.

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