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Aldrich review of Urban Confrontations in Literature and Social Science.pdf

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Urban Confrontations in Literature and Social Science, 1848-2001: European Contexts, American Evolutions. By Edward Ahearn. Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2010. 236 pp $149.

Since recorded history, humanity has built cities and pushed their frontiers horizontally and vertically, fighting itself and nature in the process. From Biblical stories of the Tower of Babel, through lawless Wild West towns, to speculative fiction about outer space habitats from authors like Neal Stephenson, we continually seek to congregate and interact but also to struggle. Cities of the early 21st century - especially coastal metropolises like Bangladesh, Mumbai, and Tokyo - will be the battleground for our attempts to adapt to global warming. This innovative and ambitious book shows how our writing on urban spaces - both fictional accounts and systemized inquiry - can "make strange" our assumptions and bring out "vital versions of contemporary human experience" (10). By bringing together literature and social science, Ahearn makes real cross-disciplinary connections and shows all of us a way forward in the field of urban studies.

Cities provide liminal spaces for creative encounters, exposing us to new ideas and approaches. They also bring pathologies: choking population density, inequitable housing conditions, illegal immigration, racial discrimination and conflict, poor governance, and violence (3, 29, 165). Popular literature, such as Charles Baudelaire's "The Bad Glazier" embodies the "tense urban psychology and misdirected violence" (2) present not just in the foul back alleys of 19th century Paris but also in more recent events such as the riots that broke out in South Central Los Angeles following the trial of police officers accused of beating Rodney King. Social science recognizes these social ills and seeks their causes not only in individual choices but also in societal frameworks, institutional path dependence, and theories of norms and shared behaviors. However, attempts in social science to infer causal pathways may not always resonate effectively with the lived experiences embodied in fiction. Indeed, as one of my editors pointed out, we social scientists have a way of draining the interest from critical events. Further, most social science classes stick within their lane, reading relevant literature written by colleagues and assigning in their classes articles and books safely within the recognized field. Similarly, literature and language courses rarely integrate social science in a serious way. This book accelerates urban studies by selecting and pairing works from both disciplines. *Urban Confrontations* explodes standard ways of tackling urban problems by wrapping deep readings of literature with references to social science.

By contrasting Bertolt Brecht's work *In the Jungle of Cities* with Kathryn Neckerman's research on poverty and physically exhausting labor we gain a better understanding of the experiences of Brecht's characters Shlink and George Garga and our society's class structure more broadly. Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener* rubs against James Q. Wilson's *Thinking about Crime* and Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* to show how personal agency can collide with institutional frameworks. Sandra Cisnero's *The House on Mango Street* and DeLeon's *Left Coast City* tell similar stories of immigration, economics, and struggle but in radically different languages. Richard Wright's *Native Son* tells the gripping and tragic tale of one black man "seized with a violent urge to destruction" (84); imposed on William J. Wilson's *The Truly Disadvantaged* both show us the societal and political factors creating racism, classism, and division in America. Throughout this text, Ahearn has masterfully selected novels, prose, and social science which together drive home their shared messages to broader audiences.

The book, like any ambitious work, has weaknesses. While the author takes the social science literature on urban issues seriously, he often summarizes dense sociology and political science texts in a sentence or two while putting most attention on explicating the lines and hidden messages of novels and short stories. In the same way that the critical perspectives he raises throughout the book (feminist, post colonialist, etc.) show off nuances of the novels and prose, I would have liked to see more details paid to the sociology, anthropology, and political science concepts he raised throughout the book. His reference to sociology as a quasi-science (18) may raise the hackles of some social scientists who do see their hypothesis testing, large-N regression, and social network analysis as more akin to physics than poetry.

Sometimes the urban policy described in a text - such as the New York slum clearance of power broker Robert Moses - is treated as social science itself (rather than biography). I also wanted to see more engagement with the recent social science investigations that analyze qualitative and quantitative data filtered through experiential knowledge. Some stories of urban life follow this approach - such as *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City* by Alice Goffman (2014) and Sudhir Venkatesh's *Gang Leader for a Day* (2002) – and embody attempts to draw conclusions about cause and effect while making real the human experiences undergirding those arguments. My work Building Resilience (2012) Perhaps social science is learning, albeit slowly, from literature.

An electronic version of the book - the print is far too expensive - would serve well in an advanced undergraduate or graduate seminar on cities but would likely be too dense for introductory level courses. Untranslated selections in French presuppose a working knowledge of the language while references to critical theory may tax those without a background in the field. Despite any issues, the book serves as a successful bridge between two worlds that engage only infrequently. Other areas of controversy - from nuclear energy to economic decision making to the bailouts of US banks in the 21st century - would benefit from this sort of sustained, multi-perspective attention. I look forward to seeing Ahearn's work set a new standard for interdisciplinary engagement in critical policy fields.

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