2010

"Cities and Gender. By Helen Jarvis
with Paula Kantor and Jonathan
Clarke."

Winifred S Curran

Book review: Cities and Gender

By Helen Jarvis with Paula Kantor and Jonathan Clarke

London and New York: Routledge, 2009

Though we do not learn the title of it until the last chapter of this text, the piece of art chosen for the cover of *Cities and Gender* communicates much about the tenor of the content within. The image chosen is from a performance piece called *Journey with Restraints*, in which the artist walked through the streets of Liverpool struggling under the weight of lead wings. This speaks to how the authors view the urban, a view that is generally limiting and restrictive. In one of my classes in which I cover issues of planning and gender, I often write two statements on the board at the start of class. The first is “All cities are sexist.” The second is “A woman’s place is in the city.” We then discuss how both these things could be true. There is none of that second hopeful view of the work cities can do to improve gender relations in this book. While the authors mention some more positive developments throughout the book, like the progressive planning network EuroFEM, these are simply listed, never gone into in depth or used as examples that might be replicated elsewhere. Instead, the book is more a litany of all that is wrong with gender relations everywhere, not always confined to the urban.

The stated goals of the book are “to promote an explicitly gendered urban theory; to expose persistent inequalities in the everyday lived realities of women and men in both the global north and the global south, through the analytic lens of gender; and to influence the tone and substance of classroom debate as well as practitioner and civic engagement” (p. 283). While it is certainly daunting to comprehensively cover cities and gender in one textbook, the authors

further complicate their task by adding development theory to the mix. As such, this is a book trying to do too much, and it became rather sprawling as a result. In attempting to cover everything, to make connections between everything all the time, the book and individual chapters lose focus. Topics could just as easily be in one chapter as another because the topics covered in each are so wide ranging. As an example, chapter 6, “Migration, movement and mobility” starts with an explanation of push and pull factors in migration, includes a case study on “Gender, generation, mobility, and care” on household travel patterns to two schools in Newcastle, UK, moves on to an extended section on driving and car ownership, with more space dedicated to this issue than to the entire history of urbanization in chapter 2, including a box highlighting “automobility” and a case study on “The hypermobile cosmocrat,” then a section on residential mobility that questions the very notion of household and family, but does not at all address the issues of gentrification and displacement, including a case study on families “Living together apart”, onto a section on “Globalisation, automobility and development” with a case study on “Gendered work in and around Masay, Nicaragua” and a case study on “Young women’s experience of harassment on city buses in India,” then sections on “Household perspectives on migration and separation” and “Transnational migration” with a case study on “Modern slavery.” The chapter concludes with a learning activity to trace out mobility options for your community based on access to public transportation, an activity that to my mind would fit much better in the previous chapter on “Infrastructures of daily life” and that seems hardly to match up to the emotional intensity of the modern day sex trade that students would have just read about in the concluding case study. One could just as easily argue that this interweaving of themes in every chapter is a good thing rather than a bad one, but given the introductory nature of the text, I would consider it problematic for most undergraduate students.

That leads us to the question of the target audience for this book. There is certainly a level of sophistication in the gender theory presented here, but then there are definition boxes dedicated to some of the simplest concepts while far more complex ideas are mentioned without comment or are defined inadequately. So, for example, chapter 7 includes an entire box defining “identity” (p. 188) while neoliberalism is defined simply as “the end of the Cold War and the diffusion of democratic and consumer values” (p. 101) despite the fact that it is referenced as much more than this and as central to the modern city later in the book. For many of the terms that are defined explicitly in the text the authors simply reference other textbooks rather than developing their own or other more advanced understandings of the terms. The book goes into far more detail on gender theory than on urban theory, throughout assuming a level of understanding of urban history that will not be gleaned from this book. The history of urbanization is given in just over a page. Suburbanization gets almost three pages of treatment. The three pages on gentrification do not mention any of the work on women and gentrification, though some of the work on sexuality and gentrification is cited. New urbanism is mentioned but never defined or fully discussed. Additionally, I found most of the case studies to be too brief and overly edited and thus not especially effective in giving students a real feel for the issues at hand. Similarly, I found most of the exercises that end each chapter, such as the suggestion at the end of chapter 3 that students look to *Sex and the City* to analyze how the media represents contemporary gender relations, to be fairly commonplace. I was hoping for some fresher pedagogical tools that might do more to disrupt students’ preconceived notions of gender and the city.

Like the authors, I will conclude by saying that I do not mean to be all negative. The effort of the authors to include the experience of cities in the global south is laudable (if not

always entirely successful. Some of the examples seem tacked on to the end of chapters). The inclusion of concepts such as vulnerability usually reserved for ecology is important and useful. Indeed, the very attempt to do as much as these authors attempt to do is important and necessary. Perhaps my hopes were thusly too high.

Winifred Curran

DePaul University