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Imagination, Rights and Culture: Three Approaches to the Urban

A Review of

Mitchell, Don. 2003. *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space*. New York: The Guilford Press.

Blum, Alan. 2003. *The Imaginative Structure of the City*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Moore, Paul and Meredith Risk, eds. 2001. *Culture of Cities: Under Construction*. Oakville, ON: Mosaic Press.

Spanning a number of universities across four cities the "The Culture of Cities: Montreal, Toronto, Berlin, Dublin" is a project that seeks to investigate how cities transform and distinguish themselves. Researchers aim to determine what may be common problems facing cities today and, at the same time, compare and contrast how these issues are differentiated across various urban spaces. The specific areas of research of this ongoing, collaborative, international and interdisciplinary project, according to the official website, are: the circulation of artefacts; locality, public space and street life; citizenship; building and rebuilding; and arts and communities. The publications from Moore, Risk and Blum are two of several resulting written products. To achieve the research goals, Moore and Risk (2001) have compiled and edited a series of urban narratives. Each composed by a different author, the pieces offer readers a glimpse into one of the cities under observation. Together, this collection of essays functions as a multifaceted prism of reflections upon and about four cities at the end of the 20th century. Project director Alan Blum (2003) has written a much thicker scholarly treatise on urban phenomena than its student predecessor from Risk and Moore, and is more ambitious in his quest for a new and all encompassing theoretical approach to the western, capitalist, democratic city.

In creating a much broader theory of the city, Blum weaves together ideas from mass communication, ancient European philosophy and current discussions in urban political economics. Particular emphasis is on breaking the traditional moulds of analyzing the city as a culmination of its physical landscape and its residents. His aim is "to show how the symbolic order of the city and its range of imaginative permutations operate as vital distinctions in the everyday life of modern civilization" (2003: 294). He explores urban phenomena in terms of the city as a sign, the city as a common situation, urban time and space, cosmopolitanism, city nights, city scenes, materialism in the city, the impermanence of the city and excitement in the city.

Diverging from the Culture of Cities project, Don Mitchell, in *The Right to the City*, from the Maxwell School at Syracuse University and founder of the People's Geography Project, concentrates on one particular problem among many American cities: public space and the geography of legalities and the corresponding politics therein that render the city a space of systematic marginalization and exclusion. This book should be a prerequisite for academics interested in contested urban spaces. Who might best profit from this reading however, are his opponents who might be hard pressed for a defence against Mitchell's thorough and convincing arguments. Merciless and forthright, Mitchell withholds no punches from advocates and benefactors of urban spaces that are designed to be—above all else—orderly, pleasant and aesthetically charming and consequently exclusionary, racist, homophobic and misogynist. Such spaces, Mitchell argues, work towards the welfare of only particular segments of the population: the privileged.

Seeing and Not Seeing the Urban Scenes

One might argue that *Culture of Cities* and *The Right to the City* give the reader a peek into the metropolis in terms of what Blum refers to as city "scenes." Blum discusses this theoretical concept in several senses (2003: 165-7): the city as a theatre or dramaturgy; the scene as reference to a particular social movement or happening; and the act and implications of seeing and being seen. As Blum concludes, scenes are "work[s] in progress where being with or among others is a constantly evolving open question that brings to view the intimacy of social life as an unending problem to solve" (188). The anthology of essays edited by Moore and Risk presents the eclectic, ever changing, aggregation of actors, acts and plays, otherwise called the city, as a collection of carefully selected scenes. In contrast, Mitchell's text sheds light on the particular urban scenes that his puritan opponents would prefer to pull the curtain on, and exposes the politics therein of seeing and being seen.

If there was one word to describe the collection of works from Moore and Risk it would be "diverse." The stories, essays and articles in this compilation are so divergent from one another, that the reader might best approach the book by skipping the Table of Contents and allowing herself to be delightfully surprised by the twenty-six short chapters that follow. The compositions vary from the comical to the serious and from the opinionated to the analytical. Themes range through Pride Day celebrations in Toronto and Montreal, conditions of sex trade workers in Montreal, cinematic creations of urban identity, urban history conveyed through contemporary and classical literature, journalism styles in Toronto, symbolic stray

horses in Dublin, port city development in Dublin, cottaging in cottage country and, my personal favourite, the literary promise of decay in a suburban graveyard. Prospective readers should be warned that the chapters in this volume do not necessarily follow each other logically. Occasionally, too, one might notice some rather weak debates or the odd attempt to pass a dogmatic conviction as a substantiated argument. There were even some flat-out unfinished sentences. However, as suggested in the foreward, this anthology is best seen as a series of "first speeches" and that these "works under construction" illuminate new possible directions of research interest, new questions into urban phenomenon. Their raw and unpolished form mirrors the unexplored terrain that is the subject of their new creative approaches.

Mitchell takes the reader on a journey through various legal cases that portray the complexities inherent in the politics of urban space. He describes what he refers to as the "geography of law" from which the reader can visualize the borders and boundaries that divide residents into social classes. Through his case examples, he shows how these classes are reinforced by specific strategies of exclusion: the prohibition of the irrational and irregular; the removal of the disorderly for the good of business and as a necessary component for the accumulation of capital; and the "annihilation of space" through law. Mitchell's scenes unveil the never-ending attempts to erase the unruly or irrational and replace them with the orderly and acceptable. This legal geographic pictorial, too, further exposes the politics inherent in Blum's theoretical construct of the stage as a place of viewing and being viewed. Spotlighted are some of the actors (Pro-Choice advocates, homeless, non-conformers, anarchists and communists) who constantly struggle to find and keep places to raise their voice and be heard, and to stage their everyday life and be noticed—places that, as Heidegger said, "[give] us room and [allow] us to do something … the seat that gives us room to experience how matters stand" (qtd. in Blum 2003: 178). Framing Mitchell's arguments within Blum's theoretical construct, illuminates the struggle to be viewed and the similar pursuit of oppressors not to view.

In a post-9/11 age of diminishing civil rights and tightened borders, Mitchell reminds us that the fight for equal access to public space is not only pertinent now, but has always, in fact, been the case. Just as it was necessary, he argues, in 1866 for workers (the excluded citizens of the 19th century) to go to Hyde Park to demand the right to participate in the greater democracy (i.e., vote), it remains so today, and will likely remain so into the future, necessary to remember "to go again to Hyde Park." In the vein of literary critique against Habermas's ideal of public space, in which equal access and participation is granted to all citizens, Mitchell argues that excluded residents must actively fight, as a necessary step toward equal democratic participation—to demand access. Because the right to simply act and be in public space is not something that is distributed equally across the population, and because this right is not something that all citizens are able to exercise, social struggles are necessary to fight for these rights. Social struggles require place. And further, as the right to social struggle is also the right to participate in democracy, the right to *act* and *be* in public space is also the right to participate in democracy. Finally, in a world of diminishing public space, the first thing to be sacrificed is democracy itself.

The Collective Metropole, the Insular Cosmopole and Fragmented International

For Blum, the city is a hub of collective activity and experience. In contrast to the collection of essays in *Culture of Cities* that expose specific social and political milieus within the city, Blum's approach forces the reader to transcend individual phenomena, internal political or social movements, and consider the urban as a whole. The city is "a mobile phenomenon that both constrains and fertilizes a dense and richly layered landscape of interpretation and action concerning the meaning and value of collective practices" (Blum 2003: 294). Mixing century-old European philosophical thought, the early 20th century Chicago School of the urban and current literature in political social economy, Blum spins a comprehensive macro-analytical web in which to capture and view the city. Still, the ultimate vision of the city as a product of collective creation and realization overlooks observable and measurable disparities within the whole. Also, and more perplexing, Blum's discussion of the common situation seems to create contradictions with his own arguments concerning cosmopolitanism.

The most obvious methodological problem of turning the scientific focus on the city level is the neglect of the multitude of internal social units (e.g., behaviours, social groups, movements and respective problems of relative power and the intra- and interurban structures that reinforce them) that influence one another and define the city. For Blum the notion of culture as a "common situation" that is fundamentally ambiguous renders culture indefinable. He argues that the very act of naming a problem, not to mention the multitude of problems that result as solutions are sought and discarded through collective discourse, creates social fissures, destabilizes and redefines the collective situation and, further, that this is a never-ending process. The collective can never be isolated and definitively detected because there is never a "resting point." This is a useful concept for breaking down rigid notions of culture and multiculture that require notions of categorization that are by definition essentially racist, and is in accord with growing literature on the idea that "culture" does not exist (see earlier publications by Don Mitchell). It cannot, however, account for measurable social polarities within the city, a measurement that in Blum's view necessitates the pre-construction of an ultimately irresolute and ambiguous "other."

Social stratification, exclusion, and marginalization, are not new topics in academia and Mitchell would not be alone in isolating an "other" in order to identify social disparities that result in the dismissal of particular social groups or "cultures." By focusing on the phenomenon of marginalization through legislation, his examples—whether they are who can vote, who can protest where for or against abortion, who can speak where on university (state) property, or who can sleep or simply "be" when and where—show how the efforts of particular social movements create or eliminate open and inclusive urban spaces and, further, how these efforts then lead to the legal enforcement of exclusion of particular segments of urban society.

Curiously, Mitchell's case studies of the marginalized and excluded—presupposing the formation of an "other"—resonate with Blum's chapter on cosmopolitanism, which discusses the general struggles towards a metropolitan vitality, encapsulated in such issues as diversity, migration and diasporas, as well as in the tensions

between the old and the new, the familiar and the foreign, the traditional and the modern and the internal and the external. For Blum, the explicit relationship between the extremes should be the object of attention. How open or closed is the society in question? Where and how is this border between insiders and outsiders drawn? What is the relationship of the internal to the external? These are some of the important questions for Blum and here, too, Blum and Mitchell would likely agree that these important social justice questions are best addressed by examining the local struggles that confront them. What is curious, however, is that suddenly here we have the requisite construction of the "other" that was so detrimental to the understanding of the city as a nexus of the collective. However, Blum does not construct the "other" within the city as Mitchell does. Instead the "other" is constructed between cities, across regions and over internationalities. This is observable in examinations of the implications of emerging yuppie Italian cafés in formerly traditional Dublin, or the implications of open and closed borders to immigrants. Therefore, Blum's discussion of the cosmopolitan, accentuated by Mitchell's discussion of the marginalized, reveals inconsistencies within Blum's analysis of the common situation. The ambiguous collective arising from the common urban situation is applicable to metropolitan situations, despite the problematic of observable internal disparities, but not to the international and global.

Urban Nights

Another point of departure between Blum and Mitchell might be earmarked by Blum's discussion of the metropolitan night. Blum indicates that achievements in civilization are typically measured by a city's architecture, monuments and advances in science and technology. Blum extends this measure of achievement to a city's capability of staying awake around the clock. Nighttime and the possibility to consume around the clock, Blum argues, become an observable indicator of a city's success at circulating capital. Applying Blum's concept, one might draw a new global hierarchy of cities according to the possibility of 3 a.m. consumption. This map may even neatly overlay previous political economic city hierarchies that have been drawn according to movement of information and finance. The concept becomes problematic, however, when one begins to think of the sleepless city as a sweeping indicator of "an achievement of objective value for a city" (2003: 162). First, mass consumption is not a characteristic of some "great" cities. Second, there are other aspects of sleeplessness that include forms of social activity outside of consumption. And third, as Mitchell clearly shows, public space does not necessarily close down for the night. In many cities, it remains open throughout the night. Homeless persons, for example, are always in public.

The Problematic Paradigmatic City

These three texts on the city add to the mountain of literature in urban studies, a field of research that in the last decade has focused largely on such themes as globalization, migration and flexibilization, postmodernism and concurring problems of environmental and social injustice. In this field, attention is typically given primarily to metropoles and specifically to cities that are integrated into the global

flows of capital. Literature, however, from former Eastern socialist cities (Baumert 2004; Häusserman 1996; Vasselinov 2004) and from increasing interest in Far Eastern modes of regulation (Hill: 2004) suggest that observers of *the* city might hem their broad conclusive stitches and more humbly approach the fabric of the city within more clearly defined parameters. Some even claim that Western literature, and the experts it informs, have already led to the economic imperialism and exploitation of eastern European "edge" countries (e.g., former GDR, Poland, Czech Republic). As Baumert (2004) argues, for example, as the west moved in after the wall fell a great opportunity was missed to combine the positive merits of both East and West.

As Beauregard reminds us:

> paradigmatic claims also encourage an exclusive urban theory—a "discursive hierarchy" (Gottdeiner 2002: 160)—that eliminates a multitude of cities from theoretical gaze. By holding one city up as a model, by suggesting a universal narrative, comparative analysis is reduced to a perfunctory and unenlightening assessment of how "others" compare to the paradigmatic city. Individual cities are contrasted to the paradigm rather than, relationally, to each other…. The goal is simply to understand how [other cities] are like or unlike the ur-city. Only deviations form the paradigmatic norm are recognized as significant. (2003: 185)

To dodge the hazards of universalism, it may also be best remembered that the focus of the three books under review is the Western European and North American capitalist democratic city. This is evident in Moore and Risk's list of urban stories that explicitly focus on one of four cities. That these are the parameters of Mitchell's and Blum's studies is somewhat less apparent. Blum's discussion of Nighttime reveals limitations. What is the "objective value" and "achievement" of Cairo, a megalopolis in which late-night consumption is permitted to tourists and resident men? Moreover, socialist cities are not noted for their high levels of market activity but for minimal (or absent) market-oriented urban development and their residents are not segregated according to economic status. Blum's claim, then, that "the capital of the civilized world makes observable and theatrical the brilliance of capitalism, its shine and sheen" (2003: 230), is not entirely correct. The shine or sheen represented by the TV-tower, Alexander Platz and the modernist high-rise apartments that adorn the Karl-Marx Allee in the former East Berlin, are not monuments to capitalist success, but to the political success of the German Democratic Republic. Here, monumental structures were designed to mirror socialist achievements in architecture (or technological progress). The uniform and well-equipped homes reflected the equal distribution of a superior standard of living among its citizens. Similarly, the absence of homelessness and the general taboo, if not complete outlawing, of protest and political resistance in non-capitalist and/or non-democratic urban centres renders also rather weak much of Mitchell's discussion about how space is created and destroyed through social movements and the court systems.

Positioning these books within the broader literature on urban cities, *The Right to the City*, *Culture of Cities* and *The Imaginative Structure of the City* address, specifically, aspects of cities within the wider category of the capitalist democracies of the north west. Their conclusions may not necessarily be mapped onto just any

city around the globe. Notwithstanding the vast variance within this broad category, observation of cities that sit lower on traditional models of city hierarchies—metropoles or megapoles of the southern or eastern hemispheres—quickly reveals limitations in North American and West European texts that attempt to construct the paradigmatic understanding of *the* city. This presents a problem for would-be observers of the traditionally unobserved because popular models of *the* city cannot be applied. Doing so would be the equivalent of, as Beauregard puts it, "accepting delivery of a Trojan Horse." It also presents a warning-flag for researchers of the fashionably researched to closely examine the meanings of phenomena viewed and construct carefully the parameters of conclusive evidence.

Conclusion

Turbulent and flowing, rhythmic and arrhythmic, permanent and impermanent taken in its whole, the city seems impossible to dissect. Within the wider project of the Culture of Cities: Toronto, Montreal, Dublin and Berlin, the collection of Moore and Risk brings into view a multitude of new questions concerning the city. The stories and essays merely scratch the surface of each question, but open up a plethora of subjects for further consideration and discussion. Blum's goal is to address this urban mass without the reductionist objectives of now popular social or political economic approaches. He offers critical tools with which to analyze the city, tools that are useful in addressing current urban problems such as xenophobia and racism and the social-political economic order. I highlighted only a few of them and implemented a couple—scenes and cosmopolitanism—to analyze the other texts. Adding to the growing literature on contested spaces within urban metropolises, Mitchell's scalpel slices an incision along the lines of legalities, and argues that social justice is achieved primarily through social and political action as a necessary component of participatory democracy. All three of these approaches examine an urban puzzle, draw the reader's attention to new and important ways of understanding cities and, within their parameters, contribute to the interdisciplinary field of urban studies.

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