

Book Review

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Urban Geography. A critical introduction. Andrew E. G. Jonas, Eugene McCann, Mary Thomas. 2015. Chichester: Wiley Blackwell. 384 pages. £68.50. ISBN: 978-1-4051-8979-8.

Most critical geographers in charge of an introductory urban geography course know the dilemma only too well: should one use a textbook that is far from satisfactory, or rely on articles and book chapters that are most likely too advanced for the students. With the publication of the *Critical Introduction to Urban Geography* - 11th in the growing series of much needed critical introductions to a number of geography sub-fields - this dilemma might be, if not solved, at least significantly reduced.

The textbook, which approaches cities explicitly as “socio-spatial processes” (p. xvii) saturated with the production, maintenance and contestation of manifold inequalities and difference, is comprised of 14 chapters, including two introductory chapters and an epilogue. The decision to provide two introductory chapters, while rather unconventional, is most welcome, as the two chapters address different introductory areas. Namely the first chapter, titled *Approaching the City* provides an excellent overview of what it means to approach the city as a geographer. At the same time it provides a brief and well-contextualized historical overview of the contributions of the Chicago school, as well as the impacts of the quantitative revolution on urban geography, highlighting their legacies for the present. The second introductory chapter, titled *Cities for Whom? The contours and commitments of critical urban geography*, elaborates authors’ approach to critical urban geography. In a parallel to the first chapter it is organized in a roughly historically chronological fashion; starting from the coinage of the term gentrification and the concept of rent gap, then moving on to discussions of neoliberalisation of urban governance and the emergence of the idea of the right to the city, in order to conclude with a brief overview of ordinary urbanism.

Following these introductions, the book offers 11 substantive chapters that focus on the following: production, economy and city; a world of cities; labour; social reproduction; urban planning and the state; urban experience; marketing and city image; nature and environment; urban arts; alternative spaces and politics; and finally, urban crises. The content tends to engage with the longstanding themes within these sub-fields, while including also a few pages on the new, or renewed themes in urban geography, such as emotions and affect, shrinking cities, urban metabolism or urban aspects of mass incarceration. While the chapters work well in the sequence they appear in the book, they could indeed be also used, as the authors originally intended, selectively, based on specific teaching preferences and needs. It is likewise commendable that the authors have found a great balance of writing in a clear style that is accessible to students without having to compromise on the complexity of explanation. The style is engaging, whereby a feeling emerges that the authors are in conversation with the student, seen as a partner in the exploration of major themes of contemporary critical urban geography.

The chapters have been laid out in a visually appealing fashion, including - on each chapter's first page - a short table of contents that eases the orientation and prepares the reader for what follows. The authors have also made well-placed use of graphical elements, such as photographs, diagrams and graphs, while also including two other elements that break up what could otherwise be a monotonous layout. The first one, standing against the general text as a small shaded box, contains a short description of a key concept elaborated within the given pages, such as rent gap, right to the city, or hegemony. The second one, by now quite a staple feature in most textbooks, is a more substantive case study box. Between two and four case study boxes are presented in each chapter, exemplifying developments discussed in the text. They range from anti-globalization urban protest in Seattle, through urban care work transformed through immigrant labour recruitment from the Philippines and other countries, to the gendered aspects of planning and construction of toilets in Mumbai. The usual final element

of any textbook chapter, namely suggestions for further reading, is enhanced by authors' contextualization and/or brief description of books or articles they have chosen to recommend.

As the first critical introduction to urban geography the textbook is a laudable achievement. At the same time, there remain several areas for improvement. First of all, there are specific issues, such as a reifying use of the problematic term of ethnobanking, lack of clarity over the selection of a low-resolution photograph 13.11 that also misses an explanatory caption, or the severe academic laxity in the interpretation of (an otherwise never cited) source because of the ideological primacy of a particular political position (e.g. p. 296). But setting these issues aside, my more general critique is that the textbook remains confined to a conventional treatment of critical geography. Thus the introductory chapter frames the 'critical-ness' of critical geography in Marxist terms, rather than weaving through – on an equal footing - different critical traditions, including those of feminist or queer geography. And while I appreciate the inclusion of a few pages of postcolonial urban theory at the end of this chapter, it ends up reading as mostly tacked on because its critiques of universal aspirations (or at least usage) of conceptualizations like neoliberalism, rent gap or gentrification are not actually incorporated into the chapter – or the book. In fact, the hegemony of concepts of rent gap and gentrification is performed further by the authors' choice to position them within the introductory chapter, when in fact they thematically belong more to the following chapter, which deals specifically with questions of production and urban economy. Instead, authors could have positioned "public geographies" or question of "hegemony" much more strongly as the primary framing devices in this chapter as they lend themselves more to become a common ground through which postcolonial and feminist strands could revolutionize the more mainstream critical geography. It is of course always a matter of difficult decisions what one chooses to foreground. Such a decision should, however, be reflected in the book's title. And here it remains troubling that the textbook's title is

very universal-sounding, which, I suspect, might be more a publisher's fault rather than the authors.'

In any case, and despite these shortcomings, I am sure that the textbook will become a staple resource for teaching critical urban geography thanks to its very accessible, engaging and on the whole highly representative overview of the main strands of urban critical geographers' work in the global North. It is indeed a great step for the production of future critical geographers who will hopefully one day contribute to democratizing and de-colonizing the field further.

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