



Navigating ethnicity: Segregation, placemaking and difference

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BOOK REVIEW

Navigating ethnicity: Segregation, placemaking and difference, by David H. Kaplan, New York, Rowman & Littlefield, 2018

In this “age of migration” and of “digital diasporas,” diverse immigrant populations have played an increasingly important role in shaping the social, cultural, economic, and political landscapes of cities across the world. Paralleling this increase in movement from one place to the other and the imprint that immigrants leave in cities, it is important to consider that in a time of economic uncertainties, political turmoil, and ethnic and racial tensions, migrant groups are communities in transition whose geographies are being reworked.

Navigating Ethnicity focuses on ethnicity around the world. Although the word *ethnicity* didn’t appear in the *Oxford English Dictionary* until the early 1930s, Kaplan argues that it defines today’s world more than any other term.

Run down the list of the hot-button issues that distress the world today, and these issues—whether they be deemed “racial,” or “national,” or “religious” are in fact ethnic issues. ... Ethnicity is not distributed randomly, but instead defines regions at all geographical scales. (pp. 1–2)

His timely study makes a strong contribution to scholarship on the “geography of ethnicity” in North America and around the world. Kaplan argues that ethnicity is geographical and territorial in nature, the territory being: “a surrogate for how the ethnic group is perceived—and even how it perceives itself. ... Yet boundaries between groups can be quite permeable, and this too is a feature of ethnic geography” (p. 16). The book’s goal is to unravel the causes and consequences of ethnic concentration and segregation. Two of the key questions guiding it are how ethnic groups emerge and how the boundaries that separate sociocultural communities are formed. In answering these questions, Kaplan provides an invaluable perspective on the increasingly important role that ethnicity plays in everyday geographies as well as on the complex forces shaping ethnicity over time and across space in different parts of the world.

This book is informed by an analytical framework focused on “how location, context, and place are shaped by ethnic identities, and how ethnicity helps influence the character and form of modern cities” (pp. 18–19). Kaplan offers an impressive in-depth analysis of important global concepts such as ethnicity, segregation, placemaking, ethnic spaces, multiculturalism, ethnic culture regions, diasporas, and transnationalism. His book examines ethnicity from several new and—to my mind—unique angles. The first relates to processes: What are the factors that create greater ethnic awareness and what are the consequences and manifestations of ethnic concentration? The second is ethnicity’s spatial aspect, which Kaplan examines systematically, considering the role that space plays in ethnic identification and action. Third, the book considers how ethnicity is shaped by its context and how it plays out across the world and over time. Kaplan’s ambitious approach considers ethnicity as a universal phenomenon.

In Chapter 1 (“Something About Ethnicity”), Kaplan begins by looking at the history and definitions of ethnicity versus other terms used to describe group difference. He considers how various societies deploy the idea of ethnicity and grapple with multiculturalism and examines “some of the basic tensions involved in a discussion of ethnic groups and ethnic group relations” (p. 2). In Chapter 2 (“Diversity in Urban History”), Kaplan provides a sense of the various ways in which ethnic groups interact and how ethnicity has transformed global cities. Chapter 3 (“Contextualizing Ethnicity”) explores how ethnic groups have been incorporated into different societies and the spatial expressions of this incorporation.

In Chapter 4 (“Fashioning Spatial Concentration”), Kaplan attempts to sort out the factors involved in ethnic clustering and segregation. Important themes include “social distance and spatial distance,” whether ethnic clustering is imposed or voluntary, and whether segregation is chosen or is a “constraining choice” of where to live. In Chapter 5 (“Measuring and Modelling Spatial Segregation”), on the other hand, the author looks at the causes and consequences of group concentration and spatial segregation. Chapter 6 (“Ethnic and Culture Regions and Placemaking”) looks at the unique ways in which ethnic groups “make” the spaces that they occupy by imprinting their culture into the landscape and imbuing a neighborhood with their identity.

Chapter 7 (“Ethnic Spaces Created From Exploitation and Conflict”) looks at ethnic spaces created from exploitation and conflict. Here Kaplan notes:

Whether ethnics cluster as a result of societal constraints—including ghettoization, discrimination, or some other factor that forces members of the group to live in particular places—or whether they stay together in order to achieve some benefit, will determine the level of control these groups have over the consequences. (p. 129)

Over two chapters—Chapter 8 (“Positive Consequences of Concentration”) and Chapter 9 (“Negative Consequences of Concentration”)—Kaplan discusses the positive and negative consequences of ethnic and racial concentration. Many of the negative aspects arise from a kind of historical segregation in which a dominant group spatially marginalizes a minority population and excludes them from various spaces, resulting in deprivation, poverty, and other social ills. Here, Kaplan reminds us that “while, it might seem that there is a clear line between the positive and negative impacts of clustering, often lines are blurred. ... It is also important to keep in mind that segregation and its outcomes are part of a dynamic process and a recursive process” (p. 156). Most states and nations in the world today are contending with the coexistence of different cultural groups.

Chapter 10 (“Multiculturalism and the Spatial Configuration of Ethnic Groups in the City”) seeks to furnish a better understanding of what multiculturalism means and how it operates in the everyday life of ethnic groups. Movement over distance has been a key factor in creating ethnicity. Chapter 11 (“Distances and Diasporas”) explores what a diaspora is, how diasporas operate, how they influence the nature of ethnicity, and the ways in which ethnics establish themselves in the landscape. Chapter 12 (“Transnationalism and Hybridity”) discusses transnationalism, hybridity, and diasporas, with Kaplan noting that many people in the world today straddle two or sometimes even more national identities. He concludes the chapter by raising the question of whether hybridity will become a more common response to intensified transnationalism and complex social structures resulting from accelerated mobility, technology, and communication.

In Chapter 13 (“Envisioning the Future”), Kaplan discusses the future of ethnicity and of ethnic geography. The book ends optimistically, with Kaplan pointing to the many signs of improvement in ethnic relations over the last century. “Increasing flows of social connection, political support, economic investment, and cultural comfort—all harnessed to ever-more sophisticated technologies—will affect ethnicity in every possible way, and globalize the experience of many individual ethnic groups” (p. 207). Kaplan believes that though ethnicity may become less spatially concentrated, it will ultimately thrive and play a major role in the cities of the future.

David Kaplan has put together a rich, well-organized manuscript. Having published extensively in the areas of urban and social/cultural geography, he brings in-depth knowledge to the challenges facing immigrants as well as their ethnic imprint on our increasingly culturally diverse cities. This manuscript fills major gaps in the literature and adds another layer of understanding to the deep but complex forces (demographic, social, cultural, economic, and political) shaping global multicultural cities.

Not only does Kaplan achieve his primary objectives and clearly answer his research questions but he does so in a remarkable way, delivering an innovative, well-organized book of interest to academics and non-academics alike. The chapters are full of useful information and are highly readable. I hope that Kaplan's timely, well-written book will encourage further comparative research on ethnic groups around the world.

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