



BOOK REVIEW

Linda Peake and Martina Rieker (eds.), *Rethinking Feminist Interventions Into the Urban* (London: Routledge, 2013).

Although the title obscures it, this book uses a feminist lens to view cities in the global north and global south. Its purpose is to challenge the current separation of urban studies into those that privilege the modernism of global north cities, making them sites of critical theory, and studies of the global south that treat cities as objects in need of development due to the passive nature of their impoverished populations. This post-colonial “geographical imaginary” inhibits communication among urban scholars from around the world. The editors argue that feminist urban studies have been influenced by the same geopolitical bifurcation. Their goal is to question how scholars produce and analyze feminist knowledge about the urban, and about women, in an international context.

The editors ask the reader to consider the following example. Urban activists and theorists wish to understand how people negotiate the spatially segregated and exclusionary neoliberal city that rewards market behavior at the expense of community life. The economic restructuring perspective that they deploy, though, is typically associated with the ebb and flow of jobs available to men: manufacturing, mining, and construction versus information technology and finance, for example. Although women also play a role in this global transformation, their productive and reproductive activities, many of which support the paid economy, are typically ignored. Yet the international “care economy” is forcing both educated and uneducated women to cross national boundaries to earn incomes as nannies or health care workers. Activities once carried out locally now may be strung transnationally between two or more places. For Peake and Rieker, these developments demand new ways of theorizing the urban. Women are important participants in relations of power that produce centers and margins in urban imaginaries. These are the “feminist interventions” of the title.

Ten chapters illustrate how theories of gender relations, in concert with practices and policies that affect women’s everyday lives, play out in cities. Two of the chapters are about the flow of migrant domestic workers from the global south to the north. Geraldine Pratt’s extensive research into the plight of Filipino domestic workers living in Canada reveals common themes with the “victims-of-globalization narrative”: deskilled and underpaid work, grief over children left in the Philippines, and struggles to maintain family ties. Pratt sees the recent doubling of immigrants (from 5,000 to 10,000 a year) as evidence that “Filipino migrants are being systemically produced as marginalised in Canada to the benefit of relatively wealthy Canadians, through the twinned neo-liberal policies of labour export and import of the Philippine and Canadian governments respectively” (p. 112).

This perfidy of neoliberalism lies at the heart of these feminist analyses of the city. For Leslie Kern and Beverley Mullings, it contributes to urban violence in Kingston, Jamaica; for Dina Vaiou, neoliberal policies in Athens, Greece, have harmed women; for Gerda Wekerle, in Toronto these policies jeopardize women’s opportunities for democratic participation. The issue is important because the city has displaced the nation as the site of citizenship and policy formation. Also recognized is that cities have been the crucibles for social justice movements, including feminism. Peake and Rieker propose, in fact, that the crisis in contemporary feminism, especially in the global south, is a product of cooptation by neoliberal governance. The “NGO-isation” of the women’s movement into funded projects directed by experts has crushed any feminist grassroots spirit.

Two chapters point out that violence against women is a universal threat to their rights regardless of discrepant geographies. Polly Wilding and Ruth Pearson’s chapter on Rio de Janeiro’s favelas makes

the provocative claim that women are as complicit in violent acts as men. Some may belong to “girl gangs,” but more often they carry drugs, deliver weapons, or act as informants for their husbands and boyfriends. Women associated with gangs are also regularly beaten as a demonstration of men’s power. Gang violence in the streets feeds off of, and influences, domestic violence.

Only two chapters identify anything even vaguely positive about feminism and globalization. Tsung-Yi Michelle Huang reports on successful businesswomen in the Pearl River Delta region of China, and how their accomplishments promote the country’s developmental agenda. For the global north, Wekerle documents feminist influences on Toronto’s regional plan through the Network of Women in Regional Development. Network activists linked quality of life concerns (like daycare and safe public transit) with issues of sustainability and ecological justice at the regional scale. Their campaign resulted in provincial legislation that limited sprawl and protected the regional environment, at least parts of it.

Werkele’s chapter is ideal for graduate students who need to read about success, but whether this volume is appropriate for undergraduate students is another matter. The abstract language in the introduction may discourage some undergraduates from reading further. For example: “We suggest that it is in the interstices of neo-liberal urban life-worlds, as the sources of alternative knowledge production of space, community, labour, subjectivity and agency, that feminist analyses need to be engaged” (p. 17). Academics can interpret this, but not necessarily 19-year-olds. Finally, it suffers, like most edited volumes, from an uneven mix of theoretical and policy chapters; faculty might find it more useful to select one or more chapters, say on the theme of violence or domestic migrants, to supplement other readings. That said, this is one of those books that addresses an issue of importance beyond academia, an issue that deserves a wide audience.

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