

## BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

**Alev Çınar and Thomas Bender, eds., *Urban Imaginaries: Locating the Modern City*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007, 336 pp., \$US 25.00 paper (978-0-8166-4802-3), \$US 75.00 hardcover (978-0-8166-4801-6).**

**M**id-way through this book, Mark LeVine notes “It is now commonplace that there is no such thing as ‘the city’.” What LeVine means is that cities are best thought of as social constructs that exist in the collective imagination of its residents rather than residing in fixed physical spaces or material places. In *Urban Imaginaries: Locating the Modern City*, Alev Çınar and Thomas Bender have assembled an interdisciplinary collection of ten essays whose authors seek to enhance “our understanding of the imagination as constitutive of social reality in general and of urban space in particular” (p. xiii). Originally presented at a conference facilitated by Bilkent University (Turkey), the contributions include five chapters dealing with Middle Eastern cities, together with case studies from Africa, Brazil, France, India and the United States. These are book-ended by introductory pieces by the editors and Anthony King, and a conclusion penned by Bender.

The most cohesive grouping of chapters is to be found in Part III (“The City and the Vision of the Nation”). These four essays plus a fifth, situated inexplicably in the previous section (“Competing Narratives of the City: Contested Inclusions and Exclusions”), address the ways in which the city becomes a screen onto which the nation-building project is projected. I especially liked Çınar’s analytic account of the making of Ankara in the 1920s and 1930s. Declared the capital of Turkey in 1923, this formerly small, insignificant town was designed to be the poster child for President Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s founding ideological vision of “a West-oriented modernism, secularism, and Turkish nationalism that distinguished itself from Ottomanism, Islamism, and other contending national ideologies at the time” (p. 155). To this end, Atatürk established a new city core anchored by Ulus Square and the Victory Monument, the parliament building, the Ankara Palas Hotel, and the Karpıç restaurant, where the emerging urban elite would come in order to be seen exhibiting their secular modern lifestyle. In a similar key, Mark LeVine laments how Tel Aviv, originally a nondescript suburb of Jaffa, was built up into a modern capital city that incorporated the latest urban planning

trends from Europe and America. In the process, Jaffa's once vibrant and expanding public culture was mortally weakened.

In the other three cases, centrally directed national urban planning faltered. Srirupa Roy presents us with the cautionary tale of the steel towns of India, created in the 1950s by the Nehru government as demonstration projects for the new "postcolonial national imaginary." Blindsided by a series of social planning errors, most notably the decision to allocate housing on the basis of caste, the steel cities went from dreamworld to disaster, culminating in the 1964 sectarian riots in Rourkela. In "Amman Is Not A City," Seteney Shami explores why Jordan's capital city lacks an overriding urban narrative and identity. Hobbled by the liability of newness, a population composed of serial waves of refugees from regional conflict, the emigration of the commercial class (most recently to the Gulf States), and a hilly topology that disrupts orderly housing development and transportation routes, Amman has only recently responded to attempts by the national state to proactively shape its cityscapes. Finally, Maha Yahya relates how ambitious post civil war reconstruction plans for Beirut, designed to restore it as the "Switzerland of the East," ran aground on the shoals of a national politics dominated by armed, sectarian militias.

The remainder of the chapters in *Urban Imaginaries* are more scattered in both geography and content. Several stand out. In her delightful historical exposition on the demise of Parisians' contact with the Seine and the waterfront, Margaret Cohen demonstrates how, in the wake of the modernization of the city by Baron Haussmann in the 1850s and 1860s, urban sociability and public life in Paris shifted from the port to the street. In surveying the depiction of urban waterways in the paintings of the Impressionists, Cohen points out that the rustic sometimes trumped the realistic. For example, in the *Baignade à Asnières*, Georges Seurat "depicts young men enjoying leisure bathing precisely where Haussmann's new sewer collectors dumped all the filth of central Paris back into the Seine" (p. 67). Abdou Maliq Simone highlights the curious case of Douala, the commercial capital of Cameroon, which he describes as "sub-Saharan Africa's largest city without a history of being a political and administrative center." Lacking political and civil institutions, local politics and social collaboration is more emergent and dynamic. Simone tells the fascinating story of Douala's 35,000 *bendskins*, motorbike drivers from a marginalized ethnic group from the north, who have built an impressive commercial network across the city. In 2003, they successfully shut down the entire metropolis within hours, despite having no centralized command operation.

In their introduction, Çinar and Bender identify “the key focus common to the individual chapters in this book” as that which examines “the ways in which the collective imagination takes place through a wide range of daily practices of urban dwellers.” This fits some of the essays — Simone’s study of Douala; Deniz Yüksek’s research on the Laleli marketplace in Istanbul — better than others. The chapters on nation building and urban space focus more on official state discourse than that of the everyday inhabitants of the city. In the chapters by Beatriz Jaguaribe on “realist” narratives depicting the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, and by Camilla Fojas on visions of globalization, the border, and urban space in Latino motion pictures about Los Angeles, we only encounter these imagined communities secondhand, filtered through the lens of novelists, photographers, and filmmakers.

By and large, *Urban Imaginaries* is well written and accessible to a broader sociological audience. Several of the authors do, however, have a tendency to drift into impenetrable jargon. For example, Jaguaribe informs readers “Avant-garde experimentation tended to provoke a dramatic rupture between the stone and its stoniness, whereas modern experimentation often dismissed the aesthetics of verisimilitude in order to evoke another realness” (p. 115). LeVine notes that “Following Latour, the processes we are discussing suggest that even a ‘hybrid form of colonial modernity,’ let alone a pure distillation of the two discourses, was never a logical possibility, since modernity is (self-) defined by its refusal of hybridity” (p. 131). Despite these occasional lapses, I would strongly recommend *Urban Imaginaries* to *CJS* readers. It would be a particularly wise choice for adoption in senior undergraduate courses in urban anthropology, and in comparative urban sociology and politics.

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