



## **The Question of Space as a Challenge to Urban Studies**

***The Cambridge Urban History of Britain. Volume II: 1540–1840. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000.***

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The point of view in the following is one of a scholar who is a cultural historian, with her first area of expertise in English Reformation history and the second in early modern women's experiences of their environment.

The task presented to the speakers at the workshop was not an easy one, since each volume of the three part *Cambridge Urban History of Britain* is a huge accomplishment to read. However, the task of trying to form an overall picture of one of the volumes was very gratifying and I personally learned much from it. *Part II*, which concentrates on the early modern period, promises to look at the transformation of the cultural and physical landscape of towns while paying particular attention to the experiences of urban life. These promises anticipate a cultural historical point of view and are thus very pleasing. In general, my high expectations were answered very well.

In the following I discuss three issues that I was especially paying attention to as I was reading the volume. The questions arise from my own thematic interests mentioned above. The first and perhaps the least important is:

- How is gender represented in the collection?

The second is of greater importance but covers only a part of the book:

- How is Reformation seen as a constructor of space?

The last and the most important question, covering the whole volume, is:

- How do the articles problematize space?

First, let me point out two issues about the representation of gender in the collection. I have no wish to be tediously boring and infinitely

entangled with the subject of the division of labor according to the author's sex, but I must call to attention the fact that among the contributors there are 20 men and five women plus seven authors of whom only initials are mentioned. This, I believe, further enhances the notion that urban studies still in these days is quite a manly field. In a positive sense the book could act as a beacon to say that there is plenty of research space for women in this field since women as well as men excel in scholarship in this volume.

My second point regarding gender is far more important. It is the content of the text itself: how are men and women presented in the scholarly output of the volume? How are they discussed in the chapters? Peter Clark anticipates the sharpest edge of my critical dagger by noting in his introduction (pp. 23–4) that: “Lastly, the collectivity of contributors to this volume took an early strategic decision not to devote separate chapters or sections to different social groups, for instance women, the young or the poor. Instead of segregating them in that way, we have sought to incorporate them in the main thoroughfare of our narrative, though recognizing that this may make them less visible in the large urban throng.”

I warmly agree with everything Clark says here. First, it is the only right solution not to make women a separate chapter in the past. As noted in the text, in some cities the majority of people were women, and it would be unjust to marginalize the majority into a separate chapter which would end up being read only by female historians. The feminist action – if I may say so – taken in this volume was the right one.

But what is said to follow from this decision, namely that women and other social groups can disappear from our view is, unfortunately, to some extent true. This seems to apply especially to chapters by male authors. I find this quite understandable since our historical tradition excludes women. It is illustrative of this problem in general that in the thorough index of this volume there is an entry for *women* but no entry for men. This is symptomatic of the fact that we still tend to think that men are people and women an exception. I hope that when we preach against this distorted preconception for the next hundred years, things will change.

Then, let us move to my second question about the Reformation and space. In 1981 Natalie Zemon Davis published an important article in *Past and Present* in which she discussed the change in attitudes towards space in Reformation Lyon. I believe that this was the first scholarly attempt to even think about this aspect. This happened more than twenty years ago, but little has been done on the theme ever since.

I am sure that there is no harm done to this volume or Vanessa Harding's contribution that she does not discuss spatial changes caused by the Reformation. I can sympathize with this decision because the whole issue is yet quite a foreign territory. Harding however notes the well-known fact that monasteries laid in ruins soon after their dissolution in 1536–40. Perhaps we should ask what it meant to the perception of religion and the perception of space to see these ruins? Did it not change the cityscape a great deal to see these religious institutions destroyed as buildings and as places of devotion as well? Perhaps someone will answer these questions one day or perhaps it will be too difficult to find people commenting on these things in other than antiquarian tones.

Next, we will swiftly move from the Reformation and religious houses to my third question, which actually continues the discussion on the perceptions of the environment. Let us ask how the articles problematize space. As said above, they do pay much attention to this question. Space is a relatively new concept in history studies and as all concepts, it too seems to be very difficult to work with. For instance, I have tackled the seemingly simple question of how to study space without drawing conclusions already drawn. Can anything new and fresh be said of space? An example: what new could be said about women's role in Vauxhall or other similar parks? Or: can something new be said about women's conceptions of the health resort Bath? Will the concept of space bring something new to our attention? Will it open up new vistas to the past? These questions will, at least for now, remain at least partially unanswered. If someone ever finds a way to analyze space and to combine the human city and the constructed city and aspects of country living to the study as well, I believe we would be fascinated by the outcome.

Regardless of these fundamental doubts I sometimes have, I remain very hopeful, because the study of space is very topical. International conferences on various aspects of space have been organized and there has been some very interesting work done on this subject for example in England: the collection *Londinopolis* edited by Paul Griffiths and Mark Jenner is a good example. It includes several articles which successfully discuss city space.

I was planning to criticize this book for not problematizing space, but the editor of the volume Peter Clark – again – made it quite difficult since he notes in his Introduction (page 24) that: “Among many topics begging for attention are life on the street, with all its bustle, noise, sights and smells, a subject vital to the sensation of urbanness, and the social and cultural patterns of elite membership and networking, which encompassed and individualized every urban community. There is more to be said too in the area of semiotics and the languages of the city (languages of urban stigma, or urban territory, of urban categorization), as well as on visual images and the senses, perceptions of space, forms of local identity and cultural agencies.” All the questions Clark lists above are extremely important to study in the future, and I am sure they will be given due attention.

In this volume the issues of visual images, senses or perceptions of space are not discussed at length. I am sure there is hope, though. When reading the book I realized something simple but something very important, something that I myself perhaps could work on in theoretical terms in my own work. I suddenly realized that there are three kinds of urban historians. First, there are those who study the urban environment from the old Erasmian standpoint: that people are the city. Among the contributions which approach urban history from this vantage point are Michael Reed's two articles and Peter Clark's and R.A. Houston's excellent cultural historical overview on cultural life in cities. The second group of scholars is formed by those who study the city as a physical entity. Curiously, that city is virtually void of people. The third group is formed by the authors who represent the more traditional social history which studies people as masses and as figures. Their important goals lie elsewhere than mine, so I will not discuss them here.

Let us return to the first two. First: scholars who see people, and second: scholars who see the infrastructure. I suggest (and I find this very important) that if we put together these two approaches we could

at least try to reach the conceptions of space. When we read the past, can we see people moving for example to an Assembly hall with a purpose, and perhaps see what they thought of the short carriage ride and the views seen from the windows? And can we interpret what people thought of Assembly halls? Can we thus perhaps find a way not to trivialize the experience but perhaps even discover new ways of seeing what was done in Assembly halls and why? How did the surroundings, the environment affect people? Did it change lives? Or what did a park mean to a woman who went there for a walk? What did she see? Did she perceive the park, or was it only the people that counted, or was she perhaps completely concentrating on her exercise? Did she listen to birds singing or were they completely indifferent to her? I find these questions not only interesting but also challenging since they may open new vistas to history studies.

The volume also discusses baths and health resorts and it is noted that it was only after the beginning of the nineteenth century that people started to recognize the nature and environment in these resorts. This is what we are taught to believe and I accept that it indeed was Romanticism that created the modern sense of nature. But this should not be taken to imply that people of the premodern age had no sense of nature or environment. The sense was different but it existed, and finding it in the early modern and even earlier periods remains a challenge for future historians.

*Cambridge Urban History of Britain* is an important source for scholars and students and will be appreciated for years to come by all of us who study English or British history. I wish to leave Part II with one final remark, which is a general comment on urban studies. When studying urban areas, are we at the same time actually creating a universe where towns are completely separate from the countryside? Without undermining the importance of either, I think we should always keep in mind that regardless of their obvious differences the early modern town and the early modern countryside were inextricably linked.

**The review is written by Marjo Kaartinen, PhD, who is currently Assistant Professor of Cultural History at the University of Turku, Finland.**

See also Jari Ojala's review on volume III of *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain* in the previous issue of *Ennen & Nyt*

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