

BLOK, ANDERS AND IGNACIO FARIAS (eds). *Urban Cosmopolitics: Agencements, Assemblies, Atmospheres*. New York: Routledge. 2016. 266 pp. ISBN 978-1138813410 (paperback).

This volume invokes the notion of cosmopolitics to push forward our understanding of urban processes beyond a popular but already much critiqued assemblage-based urban theorizing. After all, to invoke the term ‘assemblage’ particularly in the urban context, can (at least sometimes) appear to be doing little more than stating the obvious: cities are assembled out of heterogeneous ingredients. Editors Anders Blok and Ignacio Fariás recognize the shortcomings of a superficial assemblage urbanism, and instead draw confidently on mature debates across the social sciences, humanities, and studies of technoscience, about political struggles and how these relate to questions of epistemology, ontology, and coexistence. They develop these points in an excellent jointly written introduction to the topic and an afterword titled, ‘Whose urban cosmos, which urban cosmopolitics? Assessing the route travelled and the one ahead’.

The ten chapters that fall between these chapters are, however, not just hard to describe but uneven. As an assemblage, they are made up—among many, many other things—of accounts by sociologists, anthropologists, geographers, and scholars of architecture and technology, and they offer analyses involving artists, commuters, public toilets, publics, human and nonhuman actors, the work of John Dewey and Jacques Rancière, networks, Madrid, Hamburg, London, Peter Sloterdijk’s philosophy, architects, and, of course, the work

of the volume’s two main theoretical compasses, Bruno Latour and Isabelle Stengers, and their discussions of cosmopolitics. An orientation that slows down analysis, that seeks to affirm the conflicts and compromises of multiple publics and agents, that highlights empirics while also valuing theory, the ‘cosmopolitical proposal’ was originally elaborated by Isabelle Stengers (2005; 2010) and has thrived further under the influence of Bruno Latour in many places. The concept of cosmopolitics generally, and the cosmopolitical proposal specifically, anchor the authors’ contributions yet they are not spelled out in much detail. Thus readers who have not engaged extensively with the original works, and the debates they have inspired, may find the contributions hard-going and simply give up. This would be a shame. The editors’ introduction argues rather persuasively that as places of radical co-presence and conflictual, even violent, politics, cities are crying out for better accounts of how shared urban realities are made, and further, that the cosmopolitical proposal might well help furnish such analysis. Yet, because several of the chapters take the Stengerian-Latourian vocabulary too much for granted, it remains to be seen whether the cosmopolitical proposal and the contributions of this volume will further that radical programme and, perhaps more importantly, reach the politically engaged readership that it might most inspire or provoke.

The chapters are for the most part descriptive, at times indulging in producing (more) accounts (as in the assemblage

urbanism mode of scholarship) of a curiously undifferentiated socio-material world. In style they vary considerably though most seek to challenge, or at least play with, established representational and academic conventions. In unacceptably many places, the texts suffer from inadequate copyediting, which is particularly problematic when authors are operating outside their native tongues yet playing with language to make provocative and potentially crucial points. Even more unfortunately for the authors, this is compounded by sloppiness in the spellings of names and many other errors that slower, more careful publishing could easily have avoided.

These complaints aside, there is much of value in the book. One interesting question it raises is the privileged position of the urban or towns and cities. As Michael Guggenheim notes in his chapter, despite the historically intensifying impact of urbanization on locations everywhere, the critical scholar's analytical and political challenges need not be constrained by some pre-given notion of the urban. Rather, the task should be to account for recent morphological changes in all environments (in cities and elsewhere) and what these mean for creating shared worlds. In an innovative text that is nevertheless suited to classrooms across many disciplines, Guggenheim foregrounds buildings and architects, still relatively rare protagonists in analyses of urban trouble, despite their significant role therein.

In contrast, and a little surprisingly, the other chapters realize the cosmopolitical approach mainly through focussing on the activities of individuals and collectives. One of the most fascinating analyses the everyday calculations made by citizens of Hamburg as they develop new forms of what Alexa Färber and Birke Otto call low-budget urbanity. The volume also includes many analyses of political

and other action that arguably only attentive ethnography can engage robustly enough to generate theoretical insight, as in the chapter by Nicholas d'Avella about urban politics in Buenos Aires or the piece by Adolfo Estalella and Alberto Corsín Jimenez about political assembly in Madrid. Taken on its own terms, each chapter in the book pushes forward some insight about the troubling urban condition, including the often humiliating experience of life today at the urban margins, with Michele Lancione's and Colin McFarlane's chapter on sanitation being another classroom-friendly yet innovative contribution worth mentioning.

The theoretical ambition is to find more adequate tools for understanding the stakes of urban throwntogetherness today, a concept developed by Doreen Massey (2005) to signal the city's pushing together or piling up of otherwise unrelated actors and events. Among sociologists and anthropologists specifically preoccupied with the urban condition, something like throwntogetherness has been familiar and analytically important for decades. Possibly the cosmopolitical proposal, with its attentiveness to what is unknown yet consequential, as well as to the immense task of (and need for) constructing shared or common worlds, may certainly be one part of the jolt that critical urban research needs in order to become relevant again in face of increasingly technology-led urban studies.

Linking cosmopolitics and urban change has intellectual appeal, particularly as part of a Routledge book series called 'Questioning Cities'. Students of cosmopolitical theorizing more generally will find the book interesting since it also offers critical reflections on the vocabularies recently developed to expand the political imagination and inject hope into research. The trenchant critique of urban life and policy offered by cosmopolitical approaches may,

of course, fall on deaf or utterly marginalized ears, but the stultifying and sometimes even blind normativity of urban policy with its programmes to create smart cities (and citizens!) or promote human-centred designs to make everything better, is intellectually, politically and geo-physically hazardous not to say defunct. Interestingly, in the book this discourse only appears in the most fleeting of references, the authors preferring instead to focus on other kinds of infrastructures and other modes of sustainability. In sum, although the overall production of the book leaves much to be desired, the programme it is launching is important to anyone who cares for analysing the environments that human and other beings inhabit.

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