

## Streetlife: the Untold History of Europe's Twentieth Century

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**Reviewer:**

Joanna Marchant

Leif Jerram has written *Streetlife* to encourage historians to reconsider and reflect upon the manner in which they construct narratives of modern history and the agency they attribute to traditional sources of events. It is a book made possible by the growing body of urban history which has been inspired by the cultural and historical geography theories which recognise space and place as important facets of human life, particularly those which have emphasised the role of the city in the creation of identities.<sup>(1)</sup> Whereas many urban histories have tried to capture the impact of politics and social change on the city <sup>(2)</sup>, Jerram seeks to understand the reverse and the causative influence of these spaces over defining moments in modern history. Whilst other authors have also explored the impact of the city on national and international history <sup>(3)</sup>, Jerram does so far more explicitly by shifting the emphasis away from the how and why of urban development. Instead he argues for a move from grand narrative writing (although there is nothing new in that) towards the everyday, the complex nature of which requires the rejection of deceptively neat theories. <sup>(4)</sup> To accomplish this the places and spaces in which political, social and cultural exchange and change occurs need to be reinserted into the history books. This is a history which is necessarily urban for it was mass migration to the cities which provoked a 'profound revolution' in the perceptions Europeans had of themselves and their world (p. 3). Between the 1890s and 1970s this manifested itself in the everyday to such an extent that Europe's history was predominantly played out in its cities. In seeking this 'where' Jerram has identified five 'stories' which bring a range of spatial perspectives to the transformations experienced in the 20th century.

The first of these, entitled 'Revolution on the streets', draws on examples from Moscow, Paris, Vienna and Berlin amongst others to argue that cities have shaped politics in fundamental ways. From street protests and factory organisations, to the control of places of association such as pubs and even homes, Jerram

demonstrates how the ‘accidents of design and association and habit which evolved in those places gave structure and substance to some of the most important political transformations wrought in the century’ (p. 16). The overriding objective here is to bridge the gap between the political decision process and its impact on the lives of ordinary people.

The narrative brought under scrutiny in the second chapter, ‘No place for a lady’, is the well established idea that female emancipation was driven by the desire for civil rights. At the heart of this is the notion of where a woman’s ‘place’ should be and where they actually wanted to be. Urbanisation radically shock up the traditional systems which a women could expect her life to play out in. Although politically and socially restricted in many ways, life before the city at least had the assurance of a home and a set of stable rights and responsibilities. While the move to a city for many women freed them from domestic life it also constrained, whether in the ability to safely navigate physical spaces or in the restrictions it placed on the capacity to enact family life. Overcrowding, shared dwellings or poor living conditions meant that the creation of a ‘home’ became a priority. The attainment of this was (and is) a ‘key index of female ‘citizenship’’ – not the exercise of political rights, acquisition of knowledge, or a professional job (p. 104).

Next Jerram deals with ‘The cultured metropolis.’ Here the author is explicit in his rejection of culture as narrowly defined by ‘high’ human output and interaction, such as that which can be found in the museum or opera house. Rather Jerram argues for a culture which encompasses activities sometimes confined to the realms of leisure so as to promote understanding of the ways in which people have represented themselves to the world and the world to themselves. Broadening the definition of culture provides a convincing counter-argument to the lament of those who mourn its dumbing down. Popular culture in the 20th century belonged to the city. These were the emerging cultures of football, dancing, music, cinema and television, activities which required a new system of spaces in which to be enacted, spaces which in turn have defined what is consumed and how. The new cultural arenas, whether the football stadium, the night club, or the living room, transformed life within European cities.

The following ‘story’ is that of ‘Sex and the city’, a chapter which sets out to challenge the narrative that the 20th century witnessed progressive sexual liberation. Instead the sexual freedom attainable at the turn of the century was whittled away by the growing determination of the State to control peoples’ bodies. The role of the city in either facilitating or disabling the exploration and fulfilment of desire was a crucial component in the sexual lives of many. Jerram tells this history predominantly from the perspective of gay men. Though a decision made by archival records rather than any agenda of the author, the experience of homosexuals is used to stand for the sexual history of all. One glaring difference however is the level of persecution suffered. As the policing of private lives heightened men who engaged in sex with other men were increasingly required to define themselves as gay. Self-labelling in this way had not been required in the late 19th or early 20th century when sex was considered an act rather than a source of identity. As interference in the lives of homosexuals reached a peak (particularly in 1950s Britain) and the private space of the home became violated a fight began to reclaim spaces in which sexual preference could be freely expressed. The city was a vital place in which this struggle was played out, the outcome of which was the creation of gay ‘scenes’, areas where gay venues were and are still localised.

In the final thematic chapter, ‘Building utopia’, *Streetlife* moves to the subject of planning and its permeation throughout the 20th century’s administrative approaches to its ‘problems’. While arguing that the plan represented the ‘genius’ of the century, particularly as an effective solution to the spread of disease, pollution, noise and loneliness, it was the logic behind planning which enabled the systematic implementation of the Holocaust, the Ukranian famine, the Cultural Revolution and the European Union’s Common Agricultural Police. In all its varieties it affected the ‘shape, material and fabric’ of the city and consequently revolutionised lives (p. 318).

Within these chapters Jerram succeeds in bringing the grand narrative down to street level. The reader is immersed in a series of vivid depictions of the day-to-day experienced by a multitude of individuals and groups. Colour, atmosphere, joy, austerity and hardship is brought to a variety of places from the music hall to the home. Although the title of this book suggests a tale of public space, it is in fact often the interaction

between the public and private which is shown to force change, whether through the desire to move from one to the other, developing policies of control or the transformation and flux between the two. It is this level of complex consideration given to the subject which makes *Streetlife* a highly impressive read. The clever navigation between history writ large and the anecdotal (an absolute necessity for any historian hoping to locate the everyday meaningfully) makes this book not only academically engaging but also an enjoyable read. Jerram's obvious enthusiasm and ability to condense a broad range of topics and lengthy time span without overwhelming the reader is a worthy example for authors with similarly ambitious intentions.

*Streetlife* is an important work for anyone interested in urban history, especially those looking to merge the structural, social and political developments of the city with the great national and international histories traditionally told. Likewise historians of the 20th century wishing to consider new perspectives on a well rehashed subject should consult this work. Jerram has by no means exhausted the topic. He openly admits that his work is not comprehensive (including the major omission of economics) and there is much scope for others to build upon his ideas. Aside from extending the time frame or geographical borders, the themes dealt with warrant far more detailed attention within this context for each has potential to generate a substantial body of fascinating research. Although it would highly questionable to assert the city's agency above political institutions or economic forces, understanding the role of the everyday through the urban environment, a space which acts as the point of interaction between the political and economic situation and much of the populace, presents the opportunity to improve our knowledge of the subtleties of history.

This review is best concluded in the same manner as *Streetlife* – with a word on history's judgement of cities. In his epilogue Jerram encourages the reader to reflect upon the way in which cities are evaluated, both historically and within contemporary society. Frequently our urban centres are portrayed negatively, especially within the media. Often they are characterised as sources of racial tension and alienation and as spaces which undermine community and shared identities. The complicated and sophisticated networks of the city which have brought benefits and improvements to our lives are systematically overlooked. This is a pessimistic state of affairs for our future, for if Jerram is right to attribute historical agency to these places and spaces then not recognising their true significance means mistakes of the past are likely to be repeated. Turn to the spaces of city and both problems and solutions will be located there. Given that many people who read this book will themselves have experience of urban life, it is the author's exploration of how we have arranged our lives in close proximity to so many others and enacted out our struggles through unity or hostility which brings another dimension to *Streetlife*. Consequently this work will not solely be of interest to someone in their capacity as a researcher but also as a city inhabitant.

## Notes

1. *Place, Culture and Identity*, ed. I. S. Black and R. A. Burns (Quebec, 2001); *Composing Urban History and the Constitution of Civic Identities*, ed. J. Czaplicka, B. A. Ruble and L. Crabtree (Washington DC, 2003). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. H. Meller, *European Cities 1890–1930s: History, Culture and the Built Environment*, (Chichester, 2001). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. A. Lees and L. Hollen Lees, *Cities and the Making of Modern Europe, 1750–1914* (Cambridge, 2007). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. The complexity of the everyday has also been sought in *Testimonies of the City: Identity, Community and Change in a Contemporary Urban World*, ed. R. Rodger and J. Herbert (Aldershot, 2007). [Back to \(4\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment.

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