

Cities in Modernity: Representations and Productions of Metropolitan Space, 1840-1930

Review Number:

768

Publish date:

Tuesday, 30 June, 2009

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ISBN:

9780521464703

Date of Publication:

2008

Price:

£60.00

Pages:

438pp.

Publisher:

Cambridge University Press

Place of Publication:

Cambridge

Reviewer:

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Richard Dennis' engaging book is about building bridges, both literal and metaphorical. It begins with a study of the construction of the Brooklyn Bridge in New York, Tower Bridge in London and the Bloor Street Viaduct in Toronto, using them as a means of highlighting the eclectic methodologies and theoretical approaches to be applied throughout the work. It is his stated aim 'to build bridges connecting cultural and economic interpretations of urbanisation, and between qualitative and quantitative modes of analysis, abstract theory and ... empirical studies of 19th- and early 20th-century cities' (p.3). As such, this is a bold attempt to bridge disciplinary approaches to the modernising city. The overall success of this ambitious project indicates how Dennis has developed far beyond his earlier work.⁽¹⁾ Not only has his field of historical geography vastly expanded to include North American cities such as New York, Chicago and Toronto, but he also embraces, and proves highly adept at exploring the cultural and social histories of these cities, their places and spaces.

Dennis starts by questioning exactly what it was about urban development and the experience of urbanisation from the mid 19th to the first third of the 20th century that made it 'modern'. His answers lies in an examination of the relationship between modernising environments and societies in a period that built upon earlier trends and developments to embody a marked shift towards modernity. The central purpose of this richly-textured study is to explore both 'new modes of representing city life, by social commentators ... novelists, artists and social scientists' and also 'the planning, construction and use of new type of space within cities: new streets and public spaces ... new forms of residence ... new types of workplace ... new spaces of consumption and recreation... and new forms of connections between these segregated, specialised

spaces' (p.1). As such, this book is representative of the 'spatial turn' that has been adopted amongst urban historians, a growing appreciation that urban space was not merely a stage upon which historical developments were played out, but an active agent in shaping those developments, be they social, cultural or economic.(2)

Dennis' introduction deftly leads us through some of the key theoretical views on both modernity and urban space, setting up the seemingly contradictory modernity of Marshall Berman's 'second phase', a period from the 1790s when people simultaneously felt themselves to be 'living in a revolutionary age' while at the same time remembering 'worlds that are not modern at all'.(3) He then progresses onto spatial theorists whose conceptualisations of urban space he subsequently uses as his means of analysing the modern city. The earlier section of the book is underpinned by Henri Lefebvre's ideas about 'representations of space', the elite discourses of urban planners and reformers who indicated how space *should* be organised, and links them to 'representational spaces', spaces 'of the imagination ... of subversion and appropriation' (p. 2).(4) At the same time he employs Michel de Certeau's dual approaches to the city, the panoptic view from above and the synoptic view from the street.(5) From above the city appears ordered, and this is examined through a focus on social reformers, cartographers, and planners who sought to foster a greater sense of control and rationality over spatial practices in this period. Yet he also undertakes a study of the modern city from street-level; devoid of the ordered abstraction that comes with remote viewing, the modernising city was an experience of chaos, randomness, energy and liberation. Early chapters explore the ways in which contemporary novelists and artists' reflections on representational spaces could conflict with the orderly views 'from above'. While he views Dickens as a (predominantly) panoptic novelist in his approach to the 19th-century city, he locates later writers such as Dos Passos as a key example of synoptic perspectives in the 1920s. As such Dennis approach is structured around De Certeau's distinction between 'places' which we map, and 'spaces' which are actualised through the movement of pedestrians.

Using these differing conceptualisations his chapters reflect 'the contradictions and multiple points of view that characterise modernity', highlighting 'the kaleidoscopic, contingent nature of modern urbanism' (p. 348). To achieve this effect Dennis undertakes a dazzlingly detailed autopsy of the modern(ising) city, as a concept, a physical locality and process, and as a daily experience. The first part of the book focuses on representations of the modern city. Dennis nicely highlights the tension between our often conflicting conceptualisations of the 'modern' and the 'Victorian' city before examining a variety of metaphors that contemporaries used to make sense of their changing urban environment: the city as a body, as a monster, as Babylon. He then explores a variety of developing methods of measuring, mapping, surveying and recording urban environments and populations, efforts that he reads as both 'performances of governmentality' and 'representations of the spaces and peoples that were being surveyed' (p.53). Dennis argues that these Foucauldian approaches, with their 'panoptic and regulatory tendencies' (p.79) are present in 19th-century novels and paintings, their emphasis being on how space worked and how it was used.

The second part of the book examines the production of new kinds of space, taking us on a tour of multiple overlapping sites of urban modernity. These include a focus on the changing metropolitan streets, questioning who or what they were for, considering the way they were 'practised places', sites with numerous different functions and meanings for different groups. There is also an examination of 'home' as represented by suburbia, block or tenement dwelling, and apartment or mansion flat habitation. Set against this 'private' space is an examination of the changing workplace, particularly the emergence of the office block and, from the 1880s, the skyscraper. Continuing in the 'public' realm there is a skilful analysis of the rise of the department store as a locale for both consumption and culture (and the consumption of culture). Given the previous emphasis on male urban planners and architects, and the predominantly male gaze of social investigators, novelists and artists, the latter chapters of the book incorporate considerable reflection upon female agency and experience in the modernising city. (Given its ambitious breadth, Dennis admits that he is not able to give space to a consideration of the urban experience of other subaltern groups such as the young, elderly, poor and 'alien'). The book concludes with a consideration of the increasingly networked nature of the modern city, be it via sewers, telegraph, telephone or intra-city rail systems, Dennis using this idea of interconnectedness to pull his various themes and conclusions together. In short, indicative of the

thoroughness with which he dissects the modernising city, its practices and meanings, Dennis engages with both 'private' and 'public' spaces, though these are by no means firmly bounded divides in a study that generally remains faithful to the complex and frequently contradictory nature of modernity.

The study is based upon three principal cities - London, New York and Toronto - although there is something of a pecking order amongst them. While London has a strong presence throughout, New York, Chicago and Toronto are included or omitted as suits the flow of the argument. The book's emphasis is mainly on a top down analysis, a consideration of urban modernity from the perspective of the contemporary middle classes. Dennis initially demonstrates a clear appreciation of how potentially unrepresentative novelists and artists could be in their insights into the experience of urban modernisation. Yet the point was sometimes sacrificed in the second half of the book when, in his effort to juxtapose seemingly mismatched sources as a way of building interdisciplinary bridges, accounts of fictional characters such as Mrs Dalloway were blended uncritically with factual information to illustrate aspects of urban geographical models such as CBDs (central business districts).

If this makes one a little wary of openly accepting Dennis' efforts to synthesise quantitative and qualitative approaches it nevertheless indicates that this is a diverse and comprehensive compendium of material on, and approaches to 19th- and early 20th-century western cities. In terms of the city as a physical place Dennis' analysis shifts effortlessly from the heights of Chicago's early skyscrapers to the sewers beneath Buckingham Palace. In terms of academic disciplines it smoothly navigates between architectural, financial, social and cultural histories, synthesizing perspectives drawn from geography, sociology and cultural studies. Ideas and arguments are supported throughout by an abundance of primary material drawn from maps, paintings, photographs, illustrations, advertisements, and statistical charts. While many of the selected novelists and artists may be familiar to urban cultural historians, it is far rarer to find them so skilfully enmeshed alongside maps that show the development of streets or data on the characteristic residents of London flats and New York apartments at the turn of the 20th century.⁽⁶⁾ Dennis' principal achievement lies in his impressive erudition and skilled handling of such a breadth of material and theory. Concise chapter conclusions illustrate how their focus leads forward to subsequent investigations or gives renewed emphasis to aspects of the city explored in previous chapters. It is this controlled shifting back and forth, the multi-layering of meanings given to urban sites and practices, that helps enhance Dennis' masterful survey. Through his convincing juggling of urban cultural discourses and detailed quantitative analysis he clearly demonstrates that it was not just the place itself, the changing physical features or processes of the city that embodied modernity, but also the spatial practices that occurred within such a transforming environment.

Dennis' overarching point is that his various cities 'had more in common with one another than they had different from one another' (p. 349), that all had 'broadly similar responses to the ambiguities of modernity, irrespective of local variation' (p. 25). While amply supported throughout the book this rather reductionist perspective jars in a work that otherwise shows itself to be highly attuned to the ambiguities and apparent paradoxes that were generated out of the experience of urban modernisation. In part this position seems to arise from valid criticisms of previous approaches to the modern city. The book rightly takes issue with Berman for imposing 'a teleological framework in which different cities stood for different phases in a unified whole' (p.348). At the same time its fluid use of London, New York, Chicago, Canberra, Toronto and Montreal allows it to avoid Asa Brigg's approach whereby a different city represented the archetypal experience of a particular decade in the 19th century.⁽⁷⁾ Yet this artificially-imposed schema is replaced with the implicit suggestion that all followed a similar path that resulted in a homogenous experience of urban modernity, or at least similar responses to that experience. At the very least, such an argument diminishes the potential value of drawing upon Toronto to compare with more familiar cities such as London and New York. While Dennis might be right to emphasise the importance of general similarities over specifics such as 'different histories of immigration, different urban politics, or different modes of providing public services' (p.25) the significance of broader factors are downplayed. Developments in mid-late 19th century London and New York frequently seem interchangeable and even though Toronto lagged a generation behind in these experiences, the chronological, typographical and cultural diversities are largely hammered out in favour of their relative commonalities. In terms of representations of urban spaces there

perhaps needed to be greater consideration of the way in which those who produced those representations were working within set narratives and with fairly formulaic tropes, a language of description and a way of thinking about the modernising city that shuttled back and forth across the Atlantic, encouraging conforming perceptions that obscured differing realities. The later focus on the production of urban space was undoubtedly more successful in teasing out contrasts. The chapters on the development of ‘flats’ in London and ‘apartments’ in New York drew interesting comparisons between modernising British and North American cities. Nor is Dennis completely unaware of this issue. Recognising that he has ‘implied the fundamental similarities between these cities’ he does stress that ‘at different times, the current of influence flows more strongly in one direction than the other – from Britain to America in the 19th century, from America to Britain in the 1900s and especially the 1920s’ (p.320). He also nicely notes how ‘Toronto shifts from being a British city on North American soil to an American city in the British Empire’ (p.320). Such observations suggest inherent differences between urbanisation in Britain, the United States and Canada. These differences could have been teased out further to add nuances to his overall thesis of similarity. Having comprehensively illustrated the contradictions and tensions within the modernising city in general, it would have arguably made the study even richer if there had been a more rigorous use of a contrastive paradigm.

Yet overall, the scope and ambition of the book must to be applauded. Dennis clearly demonstrates how the nature of the modernising city, like concepts of modernity itself, embodied ‘contradictory impulses ... paradoxes of order and diversity’ (p.349). As he notes, ‘The challenge of working with the concept of modernity is that it forces us to make sense of the messiness’ (p.26) and he admirably accepts that that messiness cannot (and should not) be neatly tidied up. His densely textured interpretation of what made cities in this period ‘modern’ illustrates the diverse way in which increasingly planned and engineered environments seemed to encourage greater transgressions and the formation of unintended individual and collective identities. At the same time there are valuable insights and reminders for the cultural historian throughout the book, not least with regard to our more favoured sources of contemporary art and literature. Dennis astutely remarks that ‘cities of the imagination became more real than real cities. Victorian London is Dickens’ London or Dore’s London; we are surprised, and sceptical of our data, if the evidence of archival research contradicts what we have imagined through reading Dickens’ novels or viewing Dore’s illustrations’ (p.86–7). Such an observation shows the benefits of inter-disciplinary studies of this quality; it requires a (historical) geographer to remind cultural historians to be mindful of their own approaches, practices and sources, which can never be a bad thing.

If this book is intended as a bridge to other cities beyond our over familiar focus on 19th-century London, and, more importantly, as a bridge to understanding how other scholars approach the issues of urbanisation and modernity, then it is a solidly constructed edifice. Through his thorough and thought-provoking analysis, Dennis invited historians of the 19th- and early 20th-century city to appreciate how historical geographers work (and vice versa), and in doing so provides an extremely good example of the potential inherent in genuinely inter-disciplinary approaches. Dennis’ important book is a bridge that allows urban scholars segregated by academic disciplines to journey to new destinations. All those interested in the modernising city would do well to cross it and see the views from the other side.

Notes

1. Richard Dennis, *English Industrial Cities of the Nineteenth Century: a Social Geography* (Cambridge, 1984). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. See for example, Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century London* (New Haven, 2005). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air: the Experience of Modernity* (London, 1988), p. 17. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (translator D. Nicholson-Smith) (Oxford, 1991). [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, 2002). [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. See for example David Frisby, *Cityscapes of Modernity* (Cambridge, 2001) and Alan Robinson, *Imagining London 1770–1900*

(Basingstoke, 2004).[Back to \(6\)](#)

7. Asa Briggs, *Victorian Cities* (Harmondsworth, 1968).[Back to \(6\)](#)

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