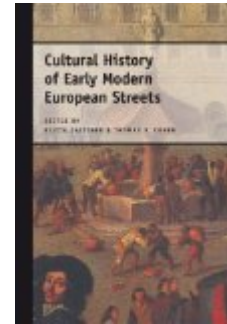


Riitta Laitinen, Thomas V. Cohen, eds. *Cultural History of Early Modern European Streets*. Leiden: Brill, 2009. 176 pp. \$158.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-04-17251-7.

Reviewed by Christopher R. Friedrichs (University of British Columbia)

Published on H-Urban (January, 2010)

Commissioned by Alexander Vari



## Streets and Street Life in Early Modern Europe

Urban history is an endlessly rich and varied field of study. Yet in the last analysis, almost all treatments of urban history fall into one of two fundamental categories. One approach—the classic urbanist perspective—emphasizes the history of cities as physical places, focusing on the creation, function, and transformation of buildings, streets, walls, gates, and other types of infrastructure. The other approach—broadly speaking, the social history perspective—sees the city primarily as a densely populated and ever-changing site of human actions, ambitions, and conflicts. These two approaches are not mutually exclusive, and some of the most fruitful work embodies the interaction and intersection between these two models of urban history. But ultimately the history of cities is almost always viewed from one or the other of these two perspectives.

The present volume is no exception. Based on a cluster of papers presented at the Stockholm conference of the European Association of Urban History in 2006, the six chapters of this book are united by a common theme: the history of streets in cities of early modern Europe. Each chapter deals with streets or street life in a single city or, in one case, two cities, but there is always an attempt to link the case-study data to some larger issues in urban history. The authors have scrupulously incorporated references to each other's work in their chapters so as to help the reader identify some common themes and connections. The material presented is consistently informative and the analyses are generally insightful. But ultimately none of the essays can quite transcend the di-

vide between the two basic types of urban history.

Two chapters deal essentially with cities as places which became objects of urban planning in the early modern era. Riitta Laitinen and Dag Lindström discuss two Swedish cities in the seventeenth century: Stockholm, the royal capital, and Åbo, then a major Swedish port but now known as Turku in Finland. In Stockholm a serious fire in 1625 created the opportunity to rebuild part of the capital on more impressive lines, with a grand new thoroughfare cutting through the heart of the old city. In Åbo the medieval core remained intact but new districts were constructed on the grid pattern that had become popular in the Renaissance. But the authorities were not only concerned to make streets physically more elegant: they also tried—with limited success—to render streets more culturally refined by prohibiting noisy or disruptive forms of social activity. Maria Helena Barreiros describes the physical transformation of Lisbon following the devastating earthquake of 1755. Much of the Portuguese capital was destroyed by this spectacular disaster, but the authorities moved quickly to ensure that the inner city would be rebuilt on grander lines in accordance with the cultural values of late absolutism. The result was a series of elegant streets with uniform facades, pleasing to the eye but far less conducive than their predecessors to the helter-skelter of traditional street life.

The remaining four chapters look at street life in early modern cities essentially from the perspective of social or cultural history. Three of these authors share a com-

mon objective in that they critique, in creatively different ways, a traditional model of early modern urban life which suggests a sharp distinction between the “public” life that took place in streets and open places and the “private” sphere of indoor domestic life.

Emese Bálint’s study of Kolozsvár (Cluj) in sixteenth-century Transylvania must be welcomed, among other reasons, for drawing attention to the rich resources for urban history in a region often ignored by mainstream historians of Europe. The specific focus of Bálint’s chapter is the way in which the suppression of crime and violence depended on the willingness of inhabitants to summon intervention by authorities when they heard shouts for help or sounds of violence. The categories of “indoors” and “outdoors” had no bearing on the willingness of townspeople to raise the hue and cry—what mattered was not where the sounds came from, but rather the neighbors’ social relationship to the malefactors who were creating disturbances.

Two chapters deal with Italian cities. Elizabeth S. Cohen’s lively essay examines the visibility and activities of women on the streets of Rome around the year 1600. Cohen rejects the oft-repeated notion that respectable Italian women were sequestered in the homes of their fathers or husbands, leaving the streets only to men and lower-class women and prostitutes—a theory she describes as “a kind of Mediterranean ‘orientalism’” (p. 98). While it is true that the secluded woman was a cultural ideal (at least for men), in actual fact the streets of Rome were full of women of middle or high status on their way to or from church or engaged in a broad range of economic or social activities. Alexander Cowan’s exceptionally original chapter examines the social role of gossip in the streets of seventeenth-century Venice. While everybody’s vision of Venice is linked to canals, Cowan reminds us that the city also had innumerable streets and open *campi*. Here Venetians ceaselessly interacted with and observed each other—and in Cowan’s view, “street life” also extended upwards to the balconies and windows from which people spied on their neighbors. The “gossip” which Cowan

describes was not idle chatter. When a member of the Venetian Senate wanted to marry a woman of lower social rank, the authorities would interrogate neighbors to determine whether the woman was respectable enough for this form of social mobility. Cowan’s study of the interrogation records shows how much neighbors normally knew about each other. But social knowledge was strictly limited to the immediate neighborhood. Few readers of this book will forget the remarkable case of Camilla Colonna, a widow who was a paragon of respectability to her neighbors in the Campo San Barnabà on one side of the Grand Canal but switched to a very different lifestyle whenever she crossed over to a neighborhood on the other side of the canal.

The final chapter of this collection also focuses on the experience of women, but it is concerned less with what women did than with how they were perceived. Anu Korhonen applies the methodology of feminist theory to analyzing the concept of female beauty in the busy streets of early modern London. The question Korhonen poses seems innocuous enough: “What happened when men looked at pretty women in the streets?” (p. 143). Yet the answer she provides is complex and unsettling. This was a topic that seems to have attracted the attention of numerous male authors and pamphleteers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They knew it was wrong to gaze lustfully at women—but they proceeded to blame the women themselves for being beautiful and thus inciting men to have improper thoughts. Misogyny will always find a way.

Each of these chapters contributes something to our knowledge of streets and street life in early modern Europe. We are still a long way from an understanding of the role of streets in early modern cities that will combine the urbanist and social perspectives into a unified whole. Perhaps some future historian will undertake that task. When he or she does, this collection of essays—and other studies which essays like these are likely to inspire—will be among the indispensable building blocks of that future work.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban>

**Citation:** Christopher R. Friedrichs. Review of Laitinen, Riitta; Cohen, Thomas V., eds., *Cultural History of Early Modern European Streets*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. January, 2010.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=25121>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.