H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Matthew Taunton. *Fictions of the City: Class, Culture and Mass Housing in London and Paris.* Language, Discourse, Society Series. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. 240 pp. $85.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-230-57976-7.

Reviewed by Alexia Yates

Published on H-Urban (February, 2013)

Commissioned by Alexander Vari (Marywood University)

Many chroniclers and theorists of the modern metropolis have placed the tensions between the fixed and the circulating, between mobile capital and immobile built environments, at the heart of urbanization.[1] Historical analysis of the urban experience, pursuing the footprints of the "annihilation of space by time," has tended to focus overwhelmingly on the spaces and implications of the circulating--teeming crowds and heaving department stores, transient newspapers and fleeting physiognomies, disposable fashion and expendable spectacle. Matthew Taunton's *Fictions of the City* instead approaches the material and discursive construction of spaces of fixity in the modern metropolis, exploring the ways that urban housing communicates (or fails to communicate) with the spaces of circulation that define the city's political, economic, and social life. Indeed, drawing on the work of literary scholars Franco Moretti and Sharon Marcus, Taunton points to the interiorization of social being and to the devaluation of the street as the definitive (if politically ambiguous) accomplishment of the modern city. Thus the importance of dwelling is such, he argues, that we must question the dominance of the flâneur as our lens on the subjective experience of the urban.

Fictions of the City finds an alternative entry point to this subjective experience in fictional works that address the phenomenon of mass housing. A key function of fictional narrative in the nineteenth century, the author argues, was to "attempt to make sense of the complexity of modern urban life," a characteristic it shares with more conventional texts on urban planning (p. 1). While the contention that fiction provides a valuable window on historical phenomena is hardly original, the focus on mass housing as a particular urban artifact is rather more so, and Taunton guides the reader expertly and elegantly from mid-nineteenth-century Paris to turn-of-the-twenty-first century London (and even, thanks to H. G. Wells, to turn-of-the-twenty-second-century urban England). In four different chapters, we are introduced to a succession of works treating four different types of mass housing, each reflecting and

reproducing particular geographies of class in different historical moments: the Haussmannian *immeuble* or apartment building, which filled the building lots opened by the renovation of Paris in the mid-nineteenth century; the suburban villa or cottage, which characterized the market-driven suburban expansion of London in the interwar period; the *grands ensembles* that provided housing for the masses in the Parisian suburbs of the post-World War Two era; and the council estates that mushroomed in and around London in the same period.

Each chapter first addresses the political and economic environments that helped shape the material form and geographic patterns of mass housing in the particular instance under evaluation, before moving to a discussion of fictional works that engage with and illuminate these trends. The first chapter begins at the beginning, Paris of the Second Empire (1852-70), birthplace of the flâneur. But before we can don our hats and canes and wander off "botanizing on the asphalt," Taunton suggests that we free ourselves from the boulevards and instead direct our attention to the residential buildings that line their sidewalks.[2] These buildings are presented as products of both the state-led urban renovations of the mid-nineteenth century as well as of long-standing patterns of urban growth and cultural attitudes toward land ownership, all of which combined to promote a well-developed middle-class rental market within the capital city's administrative boundaries, and a rejection of small proprietorship and working-class tenancy to the urban periphery. Following the Haussmannian apartment building through selective narrative representations that span more than a century (from Emile Zola's 1877 novel *L'Assommoir* to Jean-Pierre Jeunet and Marc Caro's 1991 film *Delicatessen*), Taunton focuses closely on conflicting visions of its capacity for sustaining forms of collective life. He rejects Walter Benjamin's suggestion that the interior functioned as a hermetically sealed space, instead ferreting out moments in writing and film that reassert the capacity for a malleable experience and adaptation of the *immeuble*, one that connects residents to each other as well as to the urban and global context.

The argument about the centralizing nature of Parisian urbanism and the particular class geography of that city--about which more will be said below--stands in contrast to the politics and practices explored in the case of London. The second chapter moves to the pre-World War One and interwar British capital, where, in contrast to the Parisian apartment building, the typical urban house is the suburban villa or cottage, detached or semidetached and stretching for miles along well-developed transport networks. If Paris kept its bourgeoisie in the tight embrace of its tax walls and fortifications, the London suburbs became an aspirational space for the middle classes, drawn by a longstanding attachment to property ownership, abundant entrepreneurial development, and a political and aesthetic romanticism that lodged freedom and emotional fulfillment in the countryside rather than the city. Taunton gives a skillful and illuminating overview of both the material and discursive landscape of the suburbs, placing the works of Wells and George Orwell in dialogue with the changing urban form and the works of contemporary urbanists. More than simply highlighting divergent perspectives on the social and political import of urban density, the particular concern (and most interesting contribution) of this chapter is to demonstrate the role that housing patterns and suburbanization play in class formation. Orwell's *Coming Up for Air* (1939) and C. F. G. Masterman's *The Condition of England* (1909) are combined to suggest the ways that the democratization of home ownership contributed to the expansion, rather than the predicted dwindling, of Karl Marx's petit bourgeoisie.

This exploration of the politics of place is continued in the book's third chapter, where England's conservative, property-owning, market-driven suburbs are contrasted with France's radi-

cal, tenant-occupied, state-developed urban peripheries. Returning to Paris, the book explores the visions of urban life at work in the construction of the large-scale public housing projects (the ***grands ensembles***) and the ***villes nouvelles***, or new towns, which constituted official response to the housing crisis following the Second World War. The severity of the housing problem, combined with several decades of modernist thought on urban development and dwelling, produced a "completely unprecedented form of housing" whose scale and social world fascinated residents, novelists, and filmmakers (p. 107). The author provides a thoughtful discussion of the ways that ***grands ensembles*** and ***villes nouvelles*** intended to replicate and extend the urban experience. Lacking physical integration with the central city, however, they failed to expand the sites and means of political empowerment that are necessary to civic life. While Taunton explicitly rejects the simple architectural determinism that so often characterizes work on the ***banlieues***, his selection and interpretation of fictional accounts of life in these agglomerations nevertheless focus on experiences of alienation and isolation that unwind (seemingly inevitably) to the violence and despair of Mathieu Kassovitz's 1995 film ***La Haine***, an analysis of which closes the chapter. The author misses an opportunity to take seriously the sincere optimism that marked both the design and experiences of the ***grands ensembles*** and their initial residents; many of the quotations that Taunton provides from his exploration of Christiane Rochefort's 1961 novel ***Les Petits enfants du siècle*** remain open to a more complex and positive interpretation that would better capture the multifaceted nature of contemporary experience.

The book's final chapter returns to London, where a post-World War Two housing crisis also led to state intervention in the provision of housing. In contrast to the French experience, Taunton contends, in which a nation dispirited and divided by wartime occupation embraced a paternalistic housing policy marked by socio-spatial segregation, a united and victorious Britain took up social housing on a mixed-class model as a central duty of the state for its citizens. Focusing particularly on the contrasting experiences of British social housing depicted in Ken Loach's semidocumentary ***Cathy Come Home*** (1966) and Gary Oldman's film ***Nil by Mouth*** (1997), Taunton traces the impact of housing policy on class politics and identity. The worthy working-class life skewered on the systematic failings of the welfare state chronicled by Loach gives way to the brutal existence of Oldman's permanent underclass of estate dwellers, stigmatized by the architectural brutalism and Margaret Thatcher-era privatization that indelibly polarize renters and owners in neoliberal Britain. Yet these estates enjoy better physical connections to the city than their French counterparts. This ambiguity between connection and isolation is demonstrated by Taunton's contrast of ***Nil by Mouth*** to Michael Winterbottom's 1999 film ***Wonderland***, which foregrounds the potential for connection between estate housing complexes and the collective life of the city.

Much of this work covers familiar ground, both in its interpretive thrust and the works chosen for discussion, but it does so in a highly readable manner, combining sites and methods of analysis that are not typically joined in urban studies. The conceptual move from masses on the street to masses in housing is a welcome and enriching one, and particularly relevant, as the author notes, to our current urban environments. (Whether in suburban communities lacking sidewalks or slum agglomerations defined by precarious housing, the political economy of dwelling is central to contemporary urban policy.) In its effort to provide a balanced synthesis and coherent comparative narrative, however, the work relies on some oversimplifications that detract from its persuasiveness. It is embedded in conventional distinctions between a state-centered France and an entrepreneurial England, extended here even to conceptions of property rights, which simply does not withstand scrutiny. The discussion of the

"banishment" of the French urban poor to the periphery perpetuates outdated understandings of Haussmannization and Parisian urban growth more generally, understandings that depend on a perception of the Paris periphery as a wasteland, a view long-since challenged in both English and French literature.[3] While the literary and filmic works under review will be well known to many readers, the author could have provided more and consistent information about them with regard to general plot outlines and, in some cases, even dates of publication or release. This would have particularly increased the book's utility for undergraduate audiences, for which it is in fact very well suited, especially as an example of a lucid and exceptionally jargon-free contribution to literary studies.

Notes

[1]. Notably, David Harvey, ***The Limits to Capital*** (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982); David Harvey, ***The Urban Experience*** (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989); and Henri Lefebvre, ***Urban Revolution***, trans. Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

[2]. Walter Benjamin, ***Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*** (London: Verso Books, 1983), 36.

[3]. Nicholas Green, ***Spectacle of Nature: Landscape and Bourgeois Culture in Nineteenth-Century France*** (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990); Roger V. Gould, ***Insurgent Identities: Class, Community, and Protest in Paris from 1848 to the Commune*** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Alain Faure, ed., ***Les Premiers banlieusards: Aux origines des banlieues de Paris (1860-1940)*** (Paris: Créaphis, 1991); Annie Fourcaut, ***La Banlieue en morceaux: La crise des lotissements défectueux en France dans l'entre-deux-guerres*** (Grâne: Créaphis, 2000); and Sabine Barles, "Une approche métabolique de la ville, Paris XIXe-XXe siècles," in ***Paris, alchimies d'une métropole***, ed. Thierry Baudouin, François Laisney, and Annie Térade (Paris : Editions Recherches, 2008), 251-268.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban

Citation: Alexia Yates. Review of Taunton, Matthew. *Fictions of the City: Class, Culture and Mass Housing in London and Paris.* H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. February, 2013.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=36422