

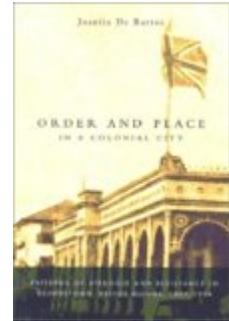
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Juanita De Barros. *Order and Place in a Colonial City: Patterns of Struggle and Resistance in Georgetown, British Guiana, 1889-1924*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002. xii + 251pp. \$75 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7735-2455-2.

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## Discourses of Space and Place in Georgetown

Juanita De Barros's book focuses on a marginal place in the Caribbean during an under-researched period of time, a combination which makes it ideally placed to assess many of the historical and contemporary themes that affect the region. Although geographically in South America, British Guiana (now Guyana) shared and continues to share most of its cultural, social, political, and economic ties with the islands of the former British West Indian territories. The text is a detailed and interesting account of the urban history of Georgetown, and ought to be of interest to historians, sociologists, geographers, and researchers interested in the Caribbean more generally.

*Order and Place in a Colonial City* sets out to examine competing visions of public space in Georgetown during the period demarcated by the urban riots of 1889 and 1924. It achieves this by addressing the linkages between moral and sanitary discourses, analyzing the spaces of the city's streets and markets, and examining social struggle at particular key instances in the city's history. De Barros's stated objective is to place Georgetown within a "wider regional context while also attempting to fill several gaps in the historical literature not only of British Guiana but also of the post-slavery Anglophone Caribbean" in order to expand "our understanding of the kinds of cultural struggles in which freed peoples engaged in their efforts to establish a new, post-slavery dispensation in the British West Indies" (p. 13). The book is extremely thoroughly researched, with 50 pages

of notes relating to 170 pages of text, covering an incredible depth and breadth of sources from relevant archives and libraries.

The book begins with an introduction that sets out some of the theoretical ground informing the study, ranging from the debates between cultural pluralism and creolization in the Caribbean to concepts of hegemony, space, and place. This is a rather superficial literature review, doing little more than making mention of a couple of key thinkers on a variety of topics: J. S. Furnivall and M. G. Smith on pluralism; Edward Kamau Brathwaite and Nigel Bolland on creolization; Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton on hegemony; Jurgen Habermas on space; and David Harvey on place. All of these insights are valuable, yet their inclusion in the introduction rather than in the main text can be seen as isolating theory from the real world insights gained from historical sources.

Chapter 2 refers to Georgetown as "The Garden City of the West Indies," and provides a geographic and demographic overview of British Guiana in general and the city in particular. As in the rest of the book, Census data from 1891, 1911, 1921, and 1931 are included in all of the tables, which is slightly peculiar given the book's stated period of 1889-1924. Although the use of dates based on popular uprisings is obviously preferable to the use of dates based on colonially imposed legislative or political changes, one wonders whether these riots were genuinely epoch-defining, and whether a slightly broader (or

at least less rigidly defined) timescale might have been more appropriate. The chapter contains fifteen tables of demographic information, ranging from the ward-by-ward distribution of Georgetown's population to the nationality of non-commissioned officers and men in the British Guiana police force.

Chapter 3 contrasts the "Garden City" with the "Cesspool City," and explores the ways in which moral and sanitary discourses were linked through representations of the city's inhabitants as being dirty and disease-ridden. The chapter does an excellent job of teasing out the subtle power relations existing between groups often lumped together as the "urban poor," and identifies the ways in which the interests of the economic elites (landlords) and the political elites (city councilors) were aligned. Rather than expanding on this political economic analysis, however, De Barros opts instead to stress the importance of networks, personal connections, and kinship links in the unequal distribution of environmental costs and benefits.

This theme is continued in chapter 4, which specifically addresses the ways in which local elites "conflated culture, poverty, mortality rates, and sanitation," and the implications of this for issues of reputation and respect (p. 77). The chapter also introduces the role of gender into the analysis, exploring the ways in which Afro-Guianese and Indo-Guianese women were constructed as being "out of place" (p. 79). A large section of the chapter describes the so-called centipede gangs which make frequent appearances throughout the remainder of the book. The very use of the term "centipede" is shown to be a discursive strategy dehumanizing the gangs and their stick-wielding members, who were seen as being a major threat to public order in the city.

Chapters 5 and 6 look at different aspects of petty trading in Georgetown's economy. In chapter 5, the city's markets are shown to be one of the central domains of the struggle to control public space, serving not only economic objectives, but also functioning as key social and festive locations. Chapter 6 looks at one very specific variety of petty trading, the case of the milk industry, and illustrates how this operated as a particular locus of struggle and conflict over issues of race, purity, and filth. This chapter contains a wide variety of specific examples of prosecutions for the adulteration of milk, as well as a couple of witty illustrations from contemporary newspapers including a particularly humorous drawing of a cow explaining that she could not be responsible for fish found in her milk, as she had not swallowed any whilst

drinking from the river.

Many of the main issues promised in the book's title are addressed in Chapter 7, "Riot and Struggle to Control the Street." In contrast to Walter Rodney's Marxist analysis of rioting in British Guiana, De Barros posits a more cultural account of the urban riots of 1889, 1905, and 1924, although the discussion could have been aided by a more explicit outline of the causes and chronology of each of these. The importance of colonial discourses of fear and hatred is explored as a potent force facilitating the violent repression of riots, yet these riots are also seen as encompassing a variety of rituals which turned them into carnivalesque occasions facilitating the exchange of cultural practices between the Indo-Guianese and the Afro-Guianese populations.

The final chapter is a brief (4-page) conclusion, which functions more as an epilogue linking the events in the book with subsequent occurrences in the history of British Guiana/Guyana. Unfortunately, this does little to tie the disparate strands of the book together, and fails to re-integrate the historical findings with the theory presented in the introduction.

This is perhaps the most disappointing aspect of the book: there is a great deal of potential for linking the historical data with theoretical understandings of urban life and colonial society, yet this is not always realized. The discussions of the linkages between sanitary and moral discourses could certainly have been enhanced through a well-judged application of theoretical insights from environmental history and political ecology, including David Harvey's *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* (1996), which is cited briefly in the introduction. More generally, Anthony King's work on colonial urban planning illustrates the importance of sanitary discourses "adapted and exported from Victorian Britain" in facilitating the exercise of control over colonial populations.[1]

*Order and Place in a Colonial City* is beautifully bound and presented. It is well written, if not in an especially engaging style, but the author has a keen eye for vivid quotations, such as the indignity of the "rain gauge [being] used as a urinal" during a party at the Promenade Gardens (p. 73). The maps and photographs are interesting and illuminating, and generally add to the discussion. However, the index is disappointingly brief (less than three pages) and what is included in this is erratic.

The book's concern with issues of space and place is profoundly geographical. Historians and geographers

in the Caribbean have much to learn from each other, and De Barros integrates some key geographical insights into her work. The book complements work such as that of (geographer) Colin Clarke on Kingston, Jamaica, and San Fernando, Trinidad; and is worthy of analysis alongside (historian) James Robertson's recent work on Spanish Town, Jamaica, *Gone is the Ancient Glory* (2005).[1] It makes reference to a wide variety of literature about the Anglophone Caribbean, and has a great deal of relevance to the understanding of contemporary Caribbean

and post-colonial cities and societies.

#### Note

[1]. See Anthony King, *Urbanism, Colonialism and the World Economy* (London: Routledge, 1990); Colin Clarke, *Kingston, Jamaica: Urban Development and Social Change* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975); Colin Clarke, *East Indians in a West Indian Town: San Fernando, Trinidad, 1930-1970* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1986).

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