

H-Net Reviews

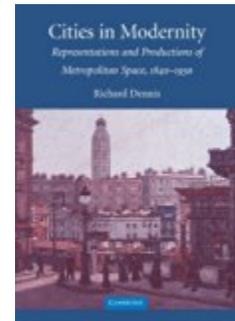
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Richard Dennis. *Cities in Modernity: Representations and Productions of Metropolitan Space, 1840-1930*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. xvii + 436 pp. \$120.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-46470-3; \$44.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-46841-1.

Reviewed by Nicolas Kenny (Simon Fraser University)

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Making Sense of Modernity

“Modernity” is a concept so often invoked in studies of nineteenth- and twentieth-century cities that its meaning sometimes seems to get lost in the shuffle. Indeed, the word conjures notions that are, in the oft-cited words of the poet Charles Baudelaire, transitory, fugitive, and contingent. It evokes transformation, renewal, and innovation as much as it intimates a sense of destruction, rupture, and alienation, such that there seem to be as many modernities as there are scholars contemplating it. Critics, like historian Frederick Cooper, charge that the vexing multiplicity of uses and overuses of the term have stripped it of its analytical potential, generating more confusion than clarity.[1] Not to be deterred, the historical geographer Richard Dennis has taken on the challenge of “mak[ing] sense of the messiness” of modernity, embracing its “contradictions and multiple points of view” (pp. 26, 348). The result, *Cities in Modernity*, is an engaging and erudite book that offers a solid framework within which to ground our understanding not just of the way cities evolved in the period 1840-1930, but, more profoundly, of the way urban dwellers lived and experienced these transformations.

Given its diversity of meanings and uses, modernity does not lend itself well to pithy one-sentence definitions that can only leave out more than they encompass. Nor does Dennis attempt to formulate one, departing instead from Marshall Berman’s classic study, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (1988), in which the emphasis is on the intimate connection be-

tween the self and the environment in the modern city. From the outset, the author lays out his objective of examining “the relationship between the modernisation of environment and society, the introduction of new ways of making sense of a changing world, and the development of new forms of self- and group-consciousness through the experience of modernisation” (p. 1). Dennis’s modernity is an experiential one, in which new ideas, modes of production, and ways of living are significant not in and of themselves, but to the extent that they reshaped identities, power structures, and social relations.

Dennis’s observations are rooted in city space, where increasingly tall buildings, speeding traffic, ever-expanding populations, and concentrations of capital and industrial production supplied the visual, aural, and olfactory certainty that modernity was a fundamentally urban phenomenon. Indeed, alongside his analysis of the discourses and motivations that characterized the modernity of such processes as urban planning and surveying, or the construction of streets, homes, and businesses, Dennis’s meticulous attention to the intricate subtleties of how individuals looked at, felt, and moved through these spaces, and to the way they bumped into one another, laid claim to different areas of the city, or sought their own isolation within it, reinforces his underlying argument that it was through their experiences of the city that urban dwellers made sense of their changing world, and adds texture to his explorations of London, New York

City, and Toronto.

There is, to be sure, a certain asymmetry to the choice of these three cities, which the author supplements with occasional references to other British, North American, and Australian examples. Though the introductory chapter justifies their individual heuristic value, Dennis does not lay out a formal comparative methodology for viewing them together. His intent is to trace broad patterns of urban modernity across the Anglo-Saxon world on which he focuses, and in this sense London and New York are obvious choices. By bringing into the analysis a much smaller city, though one that is in relative terms similarly diverse, in full expansion and self-consciously in pursuit of modern forms of development, the author is able to demonstrate the uniform thrust of the forces at play in the production of metropolitan centers. While he occasionally points to certain differences between cities, Dennis's concern is not with distinguishing between the specific traits of each, but rather with the fundamental resemblances in how they responded to the pressures associated with these developments. Throughout the narrative, however, Toronto generally maintains its true-to-life status as the junior partner in this metropolitan trio. With the exception of the sections on housing in Toronto, on which the author has published extensively, the examples drawn from the Ontarian capital are more of a complement to the book's stronger focus on New York and especially London, than they are catalysts of the argumentation. Discussing how it functioned on the local scale of streets and buildings, Dennis for the most part overlooks the specifically transnational, indeed imperial, dimensions of modernity as an expression of hegemonic power.

What was it about these cities, then, that made them modern? In the first four of his twelve chapters, Dennis examines various types of representations of urban environments, arguing that the modernity of these cities was defined in part by the way they were discussed, mapped, surveyed, written about, and pictured. He opens with the story of the construction of major bridges in each city, explaining how each embodied the "order, ordering, the experience and the performance of cities," providing a link from the outside in, from the past to the future (p. 3). The bridges also serve as the gateway into the author's analysis of modernity in reference to ideas of progress that shaped the public discourse of the day. For urban planners and reformers, modernity implied managing unprecedented growth in relation to understandings of expertise, regulation, and efficiency that were constructed in light of conflicting "chasmic" or "whig-

gish" interpretations of the Victorian city. If the notion of modernity is difficult to pin down in a few words, Dennis astutely shows how urban reformers defined it in terms of what it was not, as they used ideas deemed "ancient" or "traditional," as well as more sombre images of poverty, slums, and disease, in order to set out their respective visions of improved circulation, health, and morality. While critics of the perceived degradation and depravity of the modern environment are given a voice in Dennis's study, he does not veritably engage the distinct question of antimodernism, a concept that is nonetheless central to Berman's dialectical reading of modernity from which he departs.[2]

From these philosophical representations, Dennis moves into cartographic, photographic, literary, and artistic depictions of urban modernity. City maps and surveys, censuses, and government reports were products of the "modernist impulse" to gather data used to elaborate urban plans and business endeavors, and to "empower government and business to exercise influence and control" (p. 79). Engaging in discussion with historian Patrick Joyce, Dennis notes that while such sources undoubtedly constituted "performances of governmentality," they can also be read as more subjective constructions, produced according to the priorities of their authors. (p. 53)

Following Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau, and in his focus on how modernity was lived, Dennis is particularly interested in the way space was "practiced," that is rendered meaningful in the eyes of those who inhabited it, and the remaining two thirds of the book focus on the production of distinct types of spaces deemed particularly representative of the modern city. He begins by exploring problems shaping city streets, the new and conflicting uses made of them, their role as "objects of resistance and sites of contestation," and debates over their public or private nature, as well as more practical considerations posed by traffic management and street lighting (p. 113). Dennis also takes us into modern suburbia, where new social relations and lifestyles took form, and new markets generated new forms of consumerism. The author also brings us into the houses of his modern subjects, and in particular into the "purpose-built flats," which, despite the remonstrations of moralists, provided new ways of living in and experiencing the city, for middle-class families as well as for bachelors, single women, or childless couples who would previously have been housed by relatives. He then returns downtown for successive chapters on office spaces and department stores, integral elements of modern urban

economies. Office buildings and skyscrapers, he argues, were the product of increasing differentiation between places of work and of pleasure, producing segregated business districts in downtown cores, and giving rise to new forms of personal identities and gender relations for those who toiled within them. Geared at women but run by men, places of shopping also symbolize the gendered nature of modern urban space, and, as the author argues, were “about social interaction as much as economic transaction” (p. 296). Dennis concludes with a chapter on networks, in particular sewers, telegraphs and telephones, and intra-urban rail, showing how these functioned in a literal and practical sense, offering new comforts and conveniences, as well as in a symbolic sense, creating new connections between people, but also highlighting the class distinctions and power relations that separated them.

With these themes, Dennis treads on relatively familiar historiographical ground. Indeed, the breadth of his bibliography is impressive, and the reader is occasionally surprised by the frequency with which footnotes lead to secondary material. But the strength of this work lies in the author’s ability to weave diverse materials into a cogent understanding of modernity. Making no unrealistic claim to exhaustiveness, Dennis nonetheless provides a well-rounded and balanced portrait of how modern urban environments functioned. If surveys, sewers, or skyscrapers each represented distinct elements of urban transformation, Dennis delves into the specific biases, constraints, political priorities, land uses, financing strategies, technologies, lifestyles, and cultural values that distinguished these issues as modern phenomena, showing how their intermingling created a distinct set of social and material realities labelled modernity. In highlighting the ebullient nature of modernity, Dennis shows how these elements were themselves evolving throughout the period. Thus, for example, as we learn about the new technologies and investment strategies that differentiated modern suburbs from previous forms of urban expansion, we also see how their social significance changed from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries as their sociological makeup diversified, as patterns of social segregation hardened, and as home ownership began to supersede rental as the most desirable model.

Indeed, the author’s agile grounding of modernity in the construction and experience of physical space represents perhaps the book’s strongest contribution. He looks, for instance, at the widening of streets in relation to new ways of gauging space and time in response

to increased speed and traffic, at the layout of suburban neighborhoods in relation to speculative impulses that participated in the emergence of modern capitalism, at the choice of location for skyscrapers in relation to changing land values, and at the migration of department stores in relation to the movement of existing customers and in pursuit of new ones. Class and gender considerations also loom large, as Dennis assesses these changing spaces in terms of these cities’ social diversity and the changing role of women in the period, showing, for instance, how class shaped the spacing of residential areas, or how department stores were gendered as places of female consumption and employment. With the keen eye of the geographer, Dennis is attentive to the form, layout, and architecture of his cities, eloquently displaying the broader sociocultural underpinnings of these components of modernity.

Dennis’s creative use of sources is especially noteworthy. He elegantly “waltz[es] between documentary and fictional accounts,” gliding smoothly from the written to the visual, the economic to the cultural, the quantitative to the qualitative (p. 294). The author’s critical engagement with his sources is equally strong, and if he argues convincingly for the value of an eclectic corpus, he is nonetheless careful to qualify their nature, their representativity, and their value judgements, contextualizing with reference to an author’s social background or a photographer’s use of angle and perspective. Fiction holds a predominant place in the book, and the characters of authors like George Gissing, John Dos Passos, and Morley Callaghan frequently return to guide us through the spaces of their respective cities, adding color and a dash of intrigue to the narrative. Wanting to “have [his] cake and eat it too” (p. 80), Dennis reads these diverse sources as both accounts of reality and experience, and as expressions of attitudes and values, not hesitating to juxtapose maps depicting the urbanistic impact of London’s Tower Bridge with a discussion of lemonade advertisements evoking the flashy structure.

Behind these new streets, buildings, and technologies were men and women whose ways of life, social relations, and personal identities were drastically transformed by these new realities. Showing how modernity replicated itself in discrete local contexts, Dennis gives a human face to these developments, revealing the hopes and fears, as well as the ambitions and prejudices through which the urban settings where much of the Western world lives today were imagined and brought to life. With its subtle argumentation and rich use of sources, *Cities in Modernity* is sure to be of interest to students

and specialists of urban history, geography, and culture, and will undoubtedly become an essential reference for those interested in the tensions and contradictions that make urban modernity so pervasive an object of inquiry.

Notes

[1]. Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: The-*

ory, Knowledge, History (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 113.

[2]. On this theme of antimodernism, see T. J. Jackson Lears. *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).

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