



## **Crafting an Engaged Urban Anthropology**

### **Review by Samir Shalabi**

*The Routledge Handbook of Anthropology and the City*. London & New York:  
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There has been a growing recognition within anthropology over the past two decades about the need to more seriously engage with topics and issues that are of more direct relevance to the everyday realities of the general public. By producing knowledge that is useful for solving real-world social problems and making research more accessible to non-academic audiences, anthropology, according to these appeals, can play a greater role in influencing matters of societal concern. In parallel, as more and more regions around the world are witnessing accelerating rates of urban growth, we have also seen a garnering of scholarly interest to link anthropology with challenges related to city life.

Reflecting these intersecting trends, the authors of *The Routledge Handbook of Anthropology and the City* pursue what editor Seta Low describes in the book's introductory chapter as an "engaged urban anthropology." That is, an anthropological practice that strives to create useful knowledge of broad public appeal by grappling with pressing urban issues of the day combined with a political commitment to a value system of social justice. Through rich ethnographic case studies from around the world, the volume offers a comprehensive overview of contemporary urban problems and provides creative solutions for grappling with them.

Although urban anthropology has for long engaged with and sought to remedy urban social problems like the lack of housing, poverty, racial segregation, homelessness and forced displacement, the book reflects a new generation of anthropological

research on the city that deals with topics that tangibly mark the present urban condition, including neoliberalism, globalization, ecological crises and intensified socioeconomic and racial disparities. Reflecting this contemporary locus, the anthology's 33 ethnographically informed chapters are divided into eight thematic sections that include precarity, displacement and mobility, security and insecurity, environment and sustainability, citizenship, rights and social justice, built environment and spatial governance, financialization and privatization, and heritage preservation and cultural expression. All chapters echo what Low describes as a need for urban anthropologists "to be more outspoken about their social values and judgments, more pointed in their claims and more militant in their ethnographic practice" (p. 4).

In part one, four chapters explore the issue of precarity, broadly understood as a state of uncertainty, marginality, vulnerability, exclusion and poverty arising from neoliberal economic policies and forms of governance that render people's lives invisible to society's social and political institutions. The texts are especially concerned with how people respond to and resist different forms of urban exclusion. A good example is the contribution by AbdouMaliq Simone that looks at the different ways in which youth living under conditions of intensified uncertainty in Hyderabad and Jakarta navigate public space and act on the city. Reacting to their exclusion from political normalcy and capital accumulation, Simone shows with ethnographic depth and theoretical precision how young people employ multiple modalities of practice to counteract their marginality.

An effect of living in precarity is not seldom that people become compelled to move away from the places where they live. Part two of the book is dedicated to the intersecting dynamics of displacement and mobility where the chapters deal with topics such as connectivity over urban boundaries in post-apartheid Cape Town, the intersection of affect and race among Andean Peruvian and Puerto Rican migrants in the US, and the relationship between automobility and civic culture in Beirut. Particularly interesting is the chapter by Claudio Sopranzetti who investigates the role of motorcycle taxi drivers embroiled in political protests in Bangkok as mediators of circulation in the reproduction of city life. Challenging traditional urban ethnography's focus on bounded locales and fixed spatial scales, he demonstrates how

urban circulation cuts across these scales and whose operators – the motorcycle drivers – play a central role in allowing (or preventing) the flow of people, commodities and capital. His ethnography shows how these drivers were able to disrupt urban circulation during the protests and challenge the power of the state, indicating the importance of mobility and circulation for the (dis)functioning of cities.

From precarity and displacement and mobility the anthology goes on in part three to explore security and insecurity, topics that have attracted growing interest in the social sciences in general and urban anthropology in particular in recent years. Two of the chapters deal with security and insecurity from the perspective of technology and infrastructure. While one of them, penned by Carolina Frossard and Rivke Jaffe, examines technological security devices in Jamaica as “boundary objects” that both connect and blur relations between the state and the private sector in their efforts to create safe urban environments, the other chapter, by Mark Maguire and Réka Pétercsák, explores how an airport on the British Isles is perceived, conceived and lived by its security personnel, showing how counterterrorist policing practices are dependent on tacit knowledge and situational awareness rather than technological fixes to achieve policing objectives. The two remaining chapters in this section, by Thomas Hylland Eriksen and Anouk de Koning respectively, conceptualize (in)security in terms of senses of belonging, focusing on the everyday struggles of immigrant communities in towns in the Netherlands and Norway.

With the rise of the Anthropocene and concerns around the world about environmental degradation and its effects, urban anthropology is particularly equipped to study how the urbanizing world are affecting and being affected by these forces. The authors in part four concentrate on the double-sidedness of urban sustainability. That is, how it on one side can create positive change while at the same time running the risk of enhancing social and environmental inequalities by excluding some from the benefits of sustainable urban solutions. Melissa Checker’s contribution, perhaps the most illuminating, investigates how sustainability initiatives in poor neighborhoods in New York City coincided with high-end real estate redevelopments which led to low-income communities and people of color being displaced from their homes. She argues that this type of “environmental gentrification” demonstrates how grassroots and state efforts for sustainability can produce contradictory outcomes and

that sustainability can in fact act as a “legitimizing discourse that promised a more eco-friendly lifestyle and a more resilient future, but produced an uneven urban landscape” (p. 210).

These topics raise important questions about social justice and urban citizenship and how local communities can claim their right to the city, which is the focus of part five. Through ethnographies from North and South America and Asia we learn about how American citizenship is racialized and manifested in urban environments, how the Lefebvrian notion of the “right to the city” is explored in connection to housing movements in Santiago, how a local community organization in Salvador struggles to achieve participation in the politics of urban development in their neighborhood, and how residents under threat of displacement in Ho Chi Minh City define their own notions of social justice by using capitalist understandings of the market, which challenged what the researcher described as his own preconceived Marxist conceptualizations.

The explorations into the right to the city smoothly transition the reader into the next two parts of the book, which examines the topics of built environment and spatial governance, and financialization and privatization, respectively. In the first one, the authors examine how the built environment can function as a driver of change, a site for the creation (or destruction) of symbolic meaning, and a mechanism for the powerful to order and control people’s lives through the purposeful partitioning of space to the benefit of certain groups in favor of others. The long-standing urban anthropological interest in the sociality of money is expressed in the next part of the book where processes of financialization and privatization are studied in relation to urban neoliberal (re)development and its variegated impacts on everyday life.

The volume’s eight and final section takes up the pertinent questions of heritage preservation and the rise of new cultural expressions in cities, which actively challenge the profit-driven urban logic of elites, financial institutions and greedy corporations. The anthology thus closes in a rather positive vein where the reader gets to learn about how ordinary people defy and resist the privatization, commodification and ‘redevelopment’ of cities with the not uncommon result of forced population resettlements and displacements. The chapter by Aseel Sawalha is a pertinent example

in which the author explores how the rise of the art scene in East Beirut has influenced its urban landscape and how residents experience the city. Through the development of art galleries and cafés, Sawalha reveals that women, as key agents of change, drove the increased public interest not only in art but also in the preservation of historic buildings in a derelict neighborhood, which, importantly, did *not* result in the displacement of local residents, as perhaps would be expected by mainstream gentrification theory. These mostly middle-and upper-class women also managed to increase the general presence of women in public spaces since most of the gallery owners, staff and customers of arts and crafts turned out to be women.

This over 500-page brick of a book provides deeply insightful and accessible reading to academic and non-academic publics alike. Although editor Setha Low manages the not so easy task of bringing together rich ethnographies from regions around the world, the volume is still heavy on research centered on North America and Europe. With the exception of Asia, which indeed is well represented, ethnographies from the Middle East and Africa are sparse. Non-western scholars are also under-represented. Nevertheless, the book's central aim is achieved; to push for a more politically engaged urban anthropology that seeks to be useful to the communities with which anthropologists work. All in all, the anthology is an invaluable resource for anyone concerned with the challenges faced by the cities of today and the future.

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