

Key Concepts in Urban Geography. Edited by Alan Latham, Derek McCormack, Kim McNamara and Donald McNeill. Sage, 2009, 240 pages, ISBN: 978-1-4129-3041-3. £19.99

The straight-forward title of this book seems to reveal its purpose and content: *Key concepts in urban geography* presents twenty important concepts that are relevant in recent analyses in the field of urban geography – if only there wasn't the problem of what 'concept', 'urban' and 'geography' might mean. Being (at least partly) aware of this difficulty, the authors set out to discuss the 'city' and the 'urban' respectively, as well as 'urban geography' as a sub-discipline. Before presenting the concepts themselves they trace various past attempts to define the city, mentioning the search for key characteristics and descriptions of the city as site. Instead of claiming to deliver an appropriate final definition, they note the problem that urban studies usually comprise place-bound case studies which are supposed to reveal general knowledge on the city. This has the effect, the introduction states, that urban processes tend to be homogenised. The book therefore aims at differentiating concepts that may help hone in on differences and ambiguities inherent to urban life. In doing so the authors simultaneously avoid two traps: simplifying the urban or ignoring the impossibility of a definition, as well as the multi-disciplinary character of urban geography as a sub-discipline.

Having discussed the two basic terms (city, urban), the authors continue with the history of urban geography as a sub-discipline. The authors locate a break from idiographic to more quantitative approaches around 1960, describe the differentiation into Marxist, feminist and humanistic perspectives in the 1970s and mention recent poststructuralist and cultural changes; the development of the individual sub-discipline, however, does not seem to differ from general changes in geography or even from social sciences in the broader sense. Even though this description may be correct in principle, the city-related influences of 'spatial turns' in other disciplines, of intensifying and extensifying urbanisation and of recent discussions about phenomena like mega-cities and shrinking cities finds no mention. Instead the introduction turns very quickly to

the discussion of the concepts – an admissible choice given the book's goal of presenting key concepts of urban geography, rather than its history. More important, the selection of concepts does mirror the basic and new themes prevalent in contemporary urban studies.

The twenty concepts are clustered into “five overarching areas of concern” (p. 7): 1. location and movement, 2. constructions, 3. envisioning and experience, 4. social and political organisation and 5. sites and practices. Within these areas, anywhere from three to five concepts basically accumulate from the most basic / traditional to the most recent. In the case of ‘location and movement’, for example, these are ‘centrality’, ‘mobility’, ‘global cities’ and ‘transnational urbanism’. Throughout the book, each of the concepts is given eight to nine pages, including a summary of key points and recommendations for further reading. In every case the roots of the concept, its development and different schools of thought are described and concrete examples of application are mentioned. The authors strive to present a range of possible interpretations and do not privilege one perspective over another. Thus the concepts themselves are deliberately presented not as static, but as dynamic and heterogeneous, open for various methods and theories. However, even though the presentations include a critical perspective, most of the applications consider the urban very much as locality, to the extent that relations to other spatial scales as well as to general societal questions are rarely acknowledged.

Whereas the variety within the individual concept-outlines is a strength of the book, the incoherence between the outlines leaves important questions open. The authors ask “what makes a city a city” (p. 1), but unfortunately the question ‘what makes a concept a concept’ is missing. Does a concept like ‘diagrams’ play the same role in an analysis as ‘virtuality’ or ‘surveillance’? What is the difference between term, concept, perspective and research object? What is the relationship between concept and theory? Why do urban geographers need concepts, and what purpose do they serve? Is it a means to concretise a research problem, an explanatory instrument, a guide for

critique? Such issues are not regarded, although they presumably should be of principle interest to potential readers.

Against this backdrop, the quality of the specific conceptualisations differs from one to the next. Some concepts – such as ‘centrality’ or ‘urban politics’ – are summaries of traditional and recent debates in a field of research rather than true conceptualisations that answer the question ‘What should be considered when using this concept to understand, explain and/or criticise a specific aspect of the urban?’ On the other hand, in the case of ‘materiality’ or even more explicitly in the case of ‘body’, the authors reflect on the difference between research aspects in the field and the meaning of the term as concept. When using ‘body’ as concept, they write it is important to broach experience and the affective moment of space; consequently, such a statement raises the question of how this produces space as well as how space is produced to affect the body. Or as to ‘materiality’ the authors found it relevant to clarify the relations between ontology as materialisation, immaterial processes, agency and power – and how this distinguishes the concept of materiality (as process) from objects as such (as effects of that process). Compared to those examples, ‘centrality’ is presented as research object, a given fact that has been studied with changing concepts and aims. It is no longer an urban characteristic to be modelled, but rather one produced by social processes and understood only in terms of a specific issue’s centrality with the question “central to what?” (p. 20). All concepts considered, some of them serve as viable explanatory tools, whereas others are merely summaries of term history and their current relevance.

Differences among the conceptualisations aside, reading the book as a whole begs the question: What is so specifically urban (let alone urban geographic) about the twenty concepts? Admittedly, this is always a difficult question. And if this challenge were to be regarded from another perspective, the book provides a reasonable answer: Given that the concepts are typical ones in the urban field, it is legitimate to invert the question and to discuss the meaning of the concepts in the specific sub-discipline of urban (geographic) studies. In introduction to this question, the book gives a broad and fundamental insight,

an approach that is worth being considered by researchers who want either to review recent aspects of urban geography or to find an entry-point into one of the specific concepts.

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