

Urban Transformations in the U.S.A. and Transformations in Urban Cultural Studies

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Abstract:

The essay collection *Urban Transformations in the U.S.A.: Spaces, Communities, Representations* comprises contributions studying transformations in various urban settings and their cultural representations in the US from diverse transnational and interdisciplinary perspectives. The volume features different case studies and combines essays that both thematically and methodologically make for a very valuable and readable contribution to the field of urban studies.

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Urban Transformations in the U.S.A.: Spaces, Communities, Representations is the final product of a large research project conducted by the American Studies departments of the three universities in the Ruhr Valley region. Having been an urban area in the process of transformation since the 19th century itself, this region provides fertile ground for in-depth research on “urban change” (p. 17). The most recent “urban change” taking place in the Ruhr Valley region has been subsumed under the term “Strukturwandel” (structural change), or, as Julia Sattler rightfully remarks in her introduction to the volume, “de-industrialization” (ibid.). This development opens up a direct link to the “Rust Belt” region in the American Midwest where similar developments of “de-industrialization” have occurred, thus providing ample opportunities for transnational comparisons of the two regions. Sattler takes up this opportunity in the second part of her insightful introduction to the volume, reading the de-industrialized landscapes of Philipp Meyer’s novel *American Rust* (2009) as an “alternative space, a post-capitalist and post-industrial space that is not a failure, but an opportunity for new discoveries and new ways of living in the future” (p. 24). This rather optimistic reading of the post-industrial space also resonates “with the Ruhr’s ongoing struggle to deal with the long-term consequences of de-industrialization” (ibid.).

Having established the local background as well as the transnational relevance of the volume, the introduction reiterates the collection’s overarching theme, namely the transformations of urban spaces. These processes are investigated from “transnational and interdisciplinary perspectives” (p. 13). The volume features a diverse set of essays about urban issues in the United States. The collection is complemented by wide-ranging foci and is divided into four major sub-categories: “Models of Urban Transformation,” “Mapping EthnicCity,” “Liminality and the American City” and “Contested Spaces.” The essays of the collection are all organized along the three main concepts named in the subtitle: spaces, communities, and representations. The different articles also cover a vast array of US-American urban spaces, ranging from a larger number of entries concerned with urban centers, from New York City (such as Tazalika M. te Reh’s “Moving Spaces. How the Space of Political Struggle for Black Freedom Moves from the Private to the Public Realm” and Insa Neumann’s “Negotiating Germaneness after World War II. Transformations of German Culture in Postwar New York City”) to Los Angeles (Kathrin Muschalik’s “Ways into and out of the Crisis. Urban Transformations in the L.A. Times’

Reporting on the 1992 Los Angeles ‘Riots’” and Josef Raab’s “Barrio Spaces as Alter-Narratives. Luis J. Rodriguez’s Always Running and the The Republic of East L.A.”) or San Francisco (such as Selma Siew Li Bidlingmaier “Chinatown’s Lived and Mystified Foodscapes, 1880s-1990s”). They also deal with spaces far away from the urban centers, such as Nick Bacon’s “Insignificance at the Interstate. Crossroads Podunks and the Rise of a New Urban Strategy” and Gary Scales’ “Fueling Change. The Gas Station in Urban America,” thereby ensuring that the volume covers a comprehensive variety of urban spaces.

Among the many engaging case studies within the volume, Walter Grünzweig’s contribution “Parasitic Simulacrum. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Richard Florida, and the Urban ‘Creative Class’” stands out. He demonstrates that Florida’s concept of the “creative class,” as describing a subset of people working in the creative industries promising to return capital to the post-industrial city, is not new and original, but in fact can be traced back all the way to Ralph Waldo Emerson’s writings, specifically to a passage in Emerson’s essay “Power” (cf. 91). Florida solely focuses on the commodifying potential of creativity, even ultimately aiming for the “creativization” (p. 84) of urban space. Returning to Emerson, Grünzweig dissects this attempt to view culture and creativity simply as a means to an economic end. With the help of Emerson, Grünzweig also makes a convincing argument that the success of Florida’s term is based to a large degree on such well-known American narratives as meritocracy, optimism and individuality (cf. 82-83). Thus, the author succeeds in historicizing a phenomenon that has so far mostly been conceived as a recent invention, while at the same time bringing out the importance of reading “the urban transformations of the present in a historical perspective” (p. 96).

Following the impressive range of case studies concerning processes of urban transformation, the collection ends with a contribution emphasizing a larger methodological and theoretical framework. Under the sub-category of “Perspectives in Urban American Studies,” Barbara Buchenau’s and Jens-Martin Gurr’s contribution “City Scripts. Urban American Studies and the Conjunction of Textual Strategies and Spatial Processes” makes a compelling case for the expertise of literary studies, namely its “specific competence in the analysis of narratives” and “literature and literary studies as alternative forms of generating knowledge on cities” (p. 401). This applies even as the spatial turn in American Studies and its counterpart, the “turn to narrative and stories in Urban Studies,” have brought the both disciplines closer together (p. 404). Whereas the present volume mainly studies the representation of urban phenomena in “texts, the media and politics,” the authors “propose to reverse those priorities and study the ways in which urban transformations are initiated and shaped by texts” (p. 402).

Its positioning within the local urban space of the Ruhr Valley region combined with an integrated transnational perspective alongside Buchenau’s and Gurr’s innovative foray into the current state of “Urban American Studies” ensures that the collection will be an important contribution to (Global) Urban Studies in general and American Studies more specifically. Furthermore, it opens up new horizons within both fields by fruitfully combining a literary studies focus on narrative with an urban studies perspective. Urban Transformations in the U.S.A. represents a markedly successful attempt at combining a diverse set of case studies on

urban issues coupled with methodological reflections on the future of interdisciplinary urban research. This work makes for engaging and compelling reading for anyone interested in current American urban cultural studies research as well as scholars working at the interspace of narrative and urban theory.