Deborah Stevenson's *Cities and Urban Cultures* is a comprehensive examination of various interdisciplinary approaches to studying urban spaces and cultures undertaken in the social sciences and humanities since the nineteenth century. Overtly situated within a post 9-11 context, the book presents an extensive overview of the shifts and progressions that have taken place in theoretical approaches to the city as it is perceived by its inhabitants as well as by media audiences. Stevenson deftly weaves theorists of various periods and disciplines together to achieve an understanding of how urban life has impacted and influenced our cultural production and how this in turn has affected the ways in which we experience the city. At the core of the text is the understanding of the real and imagined relationship between the idea of the city itself and the experience of “modernity.”

Stevenson begins her exploration of academic approaches to the city and metropolitan life by pointing out the rural/urban dichotomy that underpinned early academic attention to the emergence of the post-industrial city. The distinction made between *gemeinschaft* (community) and *gesellschaft* (association) as one that was believed to determine the nature of relationships in rural and urban areas is problematized throughout her text. The use of these two terms to identify certain kinds of relationships and how they function in both rural and urban settings is one of the means by which Stevenson makes meaningful connections between earlier theoretical stages and the present. From her introduction to the rural/urban binary the author moves on to explore in detail some of the theoretical approaches to studying the urban that were influential in nineteenth and twentieth century sociology. Georg Simmel’s work on the metropolis and its potential for both rationality and liberation is discussed at length, as are the methodological innovations of the Chicago School that emerged in the early twentieth century. In addition to her in-depth exploration of these two theoretical modes, the author also introduces a number of other viewpoints that were influential to urban studies in general at this time. The result is a diverse and varied introduction into how the city was seen through the eyes of nineteenth and early-twentieth century academics.

Chapter three introduces other theoretical perspectives of the early twentieth century that were concerned with power and urban division and neatly demonstrates the importance of theorists such as Karl Marx, who introduced urban political economy and Max Weber, whose theories founded the urban managerial viewpoint. Both of these theorists had wide influence over the structuralists and their work directly challenged the quantitative methods of the Chicago School. Stevenson shows how these theories and other theoretical work that sprang from them influenced a wide array of approaches to the study of city life, including feminist theory that recognizes the rural/urban binary as homologous to the public/private and masculine/feminine dichotomies that assist in the maintenance of gender-based hegemony. Stevenson shows how structuralist approaches to the city began to encourage consideration of identity, difference, and the value in research at the micro level.

From urban structuralism to the semiotic perspectives of poststructuralism, Stevenson demonstrates the increased attention given to the metropolis as a text in itself with the work of Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida. Of interest here is the importance of theories that are not specifically concerned with the city but with culture and meaning in general. It is clear the value that Stevenson places on interdisciplinary work contributes to our understanding of cities; indeed a clear goal of *Cities and Urban Cultures* is the interconnection and integration of such diverse perspectives. In examining the semiotic methodology of Barthes and others, Stevenson illustrates the importance of the construction and negotiation of meaning in relation to the urban landscape. Also in this chapter, Stevenson introduces the work of Walter Benjamin and his concept (taken from
Baudelaire) of the nineteenth century flâneur. The author demonstrates the significance of
this theoretical concept and the work that surrounded it in influencing cultural studies
approaches to urban experience. Notions of mapping, of the city as experienced through
both personal memory and media, of tactical approaches to living in the city, and of
boundary making and marking establish a number of directions that theoretical work on
cities has taken since the advent of poststructuralism.

Chapters five and six illustrate a number of examples of the application of urban
theory to the practice of city (re)construction, maintenance, renewal, and reimagining. The
“City Beautiful” movement, inspired by the nineteenth century reconstruction of Paris, is
explored in detail. Stevenson uses this example to further illustrate claims that she has
already invoked regarding the operations of power at work in the organizing, planning,
and construction of city spaces and the social implications of such power dynamics.
Throughout the book Stevenson clearly demonstrates the impossibility of envisioning the
city as neutral, either in its lived-ness or in its figuration through media. The “City Beauti-
ful” movement in particular is shown here to be expressive of political, gender, economic,
and military power. Furthermore, Stevenson shows how the modernist architecture that was
favoured by the movement and that promoted function before form sowed the seeds for the
postmodern architecture that followed it.

Postmodern architecture, according to Stevenson, emphasizes the local and the contin-
gent. While the postmodern seeks relevance, what it most often achieves is pastiche, the
nostalgic and depthless imitation of an imagined history. Stevenson depicts the implemen-
tation of postmodern architectural and cultural planning theories in post-1980s renewal and
reimagining projects undertaken by a number of cities throughout the western world. Here
she explores the influence of globalization (a theme hinted at throughout the text and
addressed directly in a number of contexts) and the importance of consumer culture for the
planning and marketing of cities to potential tourist-consumers worldwide.

The commodification of the city is a theme that carries through to the seventh chapter
of Cities and Urban Cultures. Here Stevenson discusses the celebration and denigration
of cities and urban life in popular culture and the expressive arts. She shows how cultural texts
“define the symbolic parameters” of the city as we perceive it. Significant here is
Stevenson’s continuing attention to the rural/urban discursive formation as she illustrates
its continuing operation within representations of both city and rural life, as well as in cul-
tural figurations of the suburban as it takes on characteristics of each in various forms.
From this, Stevenson goes on to address the theories and discourses that surround contem-
porary notions of “cyberspace” and the recourse there to the concept of gemeinschaft as it is
applied to the virtual life of individuals in such idealized spaces. She shows how this per-
spective signifies a re-emergence of the utopian ideals of early urban theory in tandem with
an anti-urbanism that sees city life as fundamentally in opposition to possibilities for com-
munity formation, as a lifestyle associated with alienation and isolation. She notes that
there is a lack of theoretical rigour in many approaches to cyberspace that tend to idealize
its revolutionary potential in that they often ignore the “real” social and structural contexts
within which such virtual communities are produced.

Cities and Urban Cultures presents an accessible, comprehensive and detailed over-
view of academic observation and theorization of “the city” since the Industrial Revolution.
While the book covers a tremendous amount of ground, this exhaustiveness tends to limit
the depth with which these issues are attended to and leaves little room for extensive criti-
cism. As an introductory text or reference book however, Stevenson’s text beautifully inte-
grates a multitude of theoretical and practical approaches to the study of urban life and its
representation, making it an ideal foundational text for students wishing to familiarize
themselves with the basic features of this area of study. The glossary of terms as well as
suggestions for further reading at the conclusion of each chapter and other organizational features further emphasize this book’s appropriateness for such readers.

While *Cities and Urban Cultures* may be criticized for its western-exclusive focus, this and other potentially problematic features are directly addressed by Stevenson as she acknowledges the difficulty of treating both “Western” and “Eastern” cities within the constraints of her book. In addition, Stevenson addresses other idiosyncratic features of her text and acknowledges her own subjectivity as a guiding force in its construction. Throughout the text, Stevenson flags pre- and anteceding chapters to highlight the connections that can be made thematically throughout the text (again acknowledging the arbitrary nature of her own structural decisions). This form of transparency leads to a sense of Stevenson’s own understanding of poststructuralist theory and its importance for her own approach to academic inquiry and assertion, simultaneously increasing the text’s value as a reference guide.

The events of September 11, 2001 in New York City are referred to as motivational for the book’s production as Stevenson positions New York as the ultimate modern city and the destruction of the twin towers as symbolic of the characteristic ambivalence towards the image of cities as signifiers of modernity. This framing device however, seems somewhat gratuitous and while 9-11 may have been inspirational for Stevenson, its importance to the text overall seems somewhat overstated as the event itself is addressed only infrequently and sporadically in connection with the many themes of her book. Despite this, as an introduction to the academic pursuit of understanding ‘the city’ and its significance for our conceptions of the modern and the postmodern, *Cities and Urban Cultures* is at once informed, thorough, and extraordinarily lucid.

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