

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Kimberly DeFazio, *The City of the Senses: Urban Culture and Urban Space*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, 190 pp. \$85.00 hardcover (978-0-230-11159-2)

The “material turn” in the social sciences and humanities is a prominent theme in Kimberly DeFazio’s book *The City of the Senses: Urban Culture and Urban Space*, but unlike much contemporary materialism, it represents more of a “return” than a “turn” to the material. In contrast to urban and cultural theory that treats culture as itself material, DeFazio presents a Marxist reading of materialism as the historical social relations of production, and thus positions the economic structure as the material source of the cultural. It is from this perspective that *The City of the Senses* addresses the global city and its sensory effects. And it is, as DeFazio herself notes, a marked departure from contemporary scholarship on the urban and the senses, which tends to consider analyses based on the social relations of production as too reductionist. Across the introduction and 5 subsequent chapters, Defazio uses examples from literature, popular culture, and social theory to critique the discontinuous logic of postindustrial theories, the poststructuralist turn within visual studies, and materialist and aesthetic analyses that fail to connect up to relations of production. In contrast to these representations of the city that divorce culture from its material base and thus limit their scope to “the surface appearances of [urban] phenomena” (p. 4), Defazio consistently retheorizes urban phenomena by foregrounding the conditions of production of urban life.

For DeFazio, both the city and the senses must be understood in relation to material relations of production: “The city ... is first and foremost a manifestation of the material relations of labor, and the culture of the city and the urban space *develop out of this material history*” (p. 3, original emphasis). DeFazio speaks in opposition to theorists she believes have become distracted by the sensory intensity of cities and who fail to connect perception to underlying material relations of production. This can be seen, for example, in analyses that take (perceived) changes in the (cultural) realm of technology as evidence of the contemporary city as “discontinuous” from the “modern” — or class-based — city. DeFazio reminds readers that all technologies, even cyber-technologies, are the product of human labour and used primarily to increase profits: “[t]he

materiality of technology is not in its object body but in the labor relations in which it is installed” (p. 25). Similarly critiqued are scholars who study the sensory realm, such as affect or aesthetics, without connecting it back to the material base. In bold measure she confronts leading cultural and urban theorists, including Edward Soja, Saskia Sassen, Gyan Prakash, David Harvey, and Hardt and Negri. These and other theorists’ works, DeFazio suggests, obscure the exploitative effects of what continues to be — despite appearances — a binary relation between those who own the means of production and those who must sell their labour power.

For DeFazio, sensory perception is a form of “false consciousness” since the role of the senses “is to present the deeply unfair and unequal relations of capitalism as fair and equal” (p. 105). What one “senses” in capitalism are the products of capitalism, not the largely invisible relations of production. Yet, while DeFazio claims that the senses do not accurately perceive reality, she does not endorse a poststructuralist view that no essential meaning exists. Through a Marxist reading of perception, the senses are neither direct experiences of the material world nor free-floating forms of meaning. Instead, perceiving the material “means grasping the very ‘visible’ aspects of concrete culture in relation to the ‘invisible’ structures that shape people’s lives” (p. 87). While cultural forms do reflect — in complexly mediated ways — their historical relations, understanding the link between cultural and material spheres requires both sensory perception and theoretical analysis.

The City of the Senses offers interdisciplinary scholarship that could appeal to students at the graduate level and scholars of urban and cultural sociology and to those with particular interests in the senses, aesthetics, and materialism. With its commitment to a base and superstructure binary, this book could be a good fit for critical social theorists who value traditional Marxist analyses. Scholars contemplating the link between social theory and social action may also be interested in DeFazio’s arguments concerning the ineffectiveness of poststructuralist orientations for developing plans for social action. DeFazio argues that the neglect or rejection of Marx’s traditional model of class in cultural urban studies thwarts the potential for political and social action. To become a material force for social change requires a return to labour and class, towards “the collective struggle to eliminate the relations that produce experiences of inequality in the first place” (p. 8). Similarly, scholars interested in developing a Marxist reading of the material will also appreciate the explicit manner in which DeFazio links the material back to the relations of capitalism.

A shortcoming of this volume is its limited consideration of the senses beyond the visual. While many theorists of the senses have responded to charges of “ocularcentrism” with serious and informative analyses of the sounds, tastes, smells and embodied feel of the city, *The City of the Senses* attends primarily to the visual. What is perhaps more problematic than the neglect of other senses, though, is the implicit privileging of sight in her analyses. DeFazio refers to the connection between the senses and the material in terms of the divide between the “appearance” of capitalism and its material relations, and her concern is for how one might “see” the exploitative relations of capitalism” (p. 105) more clearly. Social awareness and action in this regard become synonymous with sight.

Another aspect of this book that some scholars may find problematic is in the rearticulation of binary class relations, especially after decades of feminist and critical race scholarship, in which inequalities, while certainly *connected*, are not *determined* by economic relations. Indeed, issues of gender, race, and other axes of inequality are not explicit topics in the book, perhaps subsumed under economic inequality. As many cultural, urban, and other theorists demonstrate, studying these and other complexities, porosities, multiplicities, and discontinuities of today’s capitalist relations are nuances that many are unwilling to reduce to a dichotomous divide.

In spite of these limitations, DeFazio’s *City of the Senses* is a welcome contribution to the range of debates in urban theory.

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