Steege on Ladd, *The Streets of Europe: The Sights, Sounds, and Smells that Shaped Its Great Cities*

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Denaturalizing the Modern City

It is from the perspective of twenty-first-century hopes and fears that Brian Ladd begins and ends his eminently readable account of pre-1900 London, Paris, Berlin, and Vienna. At the outset, he declares a twenty-first-century triumph of the city. For the first time in history, he notes, the world’s urban inhabitants outnumber those not living in cities. But his final paragraph emphasizes the degree to which these cities seem nonetheless to be missing something, “the stimulation and serendipity of the crowd” (p. 257). That proves a rather complicated diagnosis. As Ladd repeatedly underscores, urban crowds in different times and places are not historically equivalent, and he works to unpack how city inhabitants’ multisensory experiences of evolving cities shaped what those cities came to signify. The history he lays out for his reader is one in which, for the most part, those crowds in city streets remained a “problem to be solved” (p. 198). European city leaders’ success in solving that problem, in cleaning up the streets, meant that by the twentieth century, they had too often also cleared them of the people that gave them life and energy.

This book does not aspire to comprehensiveness. Even the absence of a bibliography reflects, for Ladd, the modesty of his endeavor: he does not intend to “exhaust the topic” and offers up “generalizations that can certainly be questioned by specialists” (p. 5). Rather than a weakness, that approach underscores the value of this book as a provoker of questions about aspects of European urban life that generally go without saying.

Ladd considers the “daily spectacle of the street” (p. 27) as a means to think through the implicit tension of the exotic and the familiar that people encountered in the city. Whether it was the ruling classes who feared the (potentially) revolutionary crowd, the visitor who delighted in the mix of costumes and languages that thronged the imperial capitals, or the passerby caught by the lure of a shopkeeper’s display, Europeans who experienced city streets had constantly to reassess the significance of what they encountered.

Identifying streets as the “quintessential sites of public life” (p. 13), Ladd focuses on that life, on the street as an *experience* and not just a space. He wrestles with city planners’ efforts to transform “urban form” into an “instrument of urban order” (p. 222), to relegate the street to an artery of transportation, with the leftover “public spaces” a reimagined venue for human interactions that, in
the name of efficiency, cleanliness, and morality, were extracted from the street. By getting rid of raucous sellers of goods, human and animal filth, and rendering prostitutes “invisible,” authorities sought to claim these spaces for a respectable public. But “public space for all turned out to be space for no one” (p. 238). The paradox of the twentieth-century city: it produced “streets that were clean, safe—and empty” (p. 241).

Ladd explains his decision to end his account around 1900 with the automobile, which helped to usher in a dramatic restructuring of Europe’s city streets. But he also emphasizes how Europeans’ desire to escape from as well as to clear the city streets preceded the car. This desire informs an implicit tension that drives the book’s thematic chapters, each of which focuses on competing interpretations of urban experiences and the challenges they presented: hawker and beggar (“The Street Economy”), stroller and lingerer (“Social Life on the Street”), beauty and dirt (“The Sanitary City”), and circulation and congestion (“The Acceleration of the Street”). In these chapters, the street functions as a means to an end, an opportunity to think about the crafting and ordering of Europe’s “great cities,” which is more explicitly the focus of his final chapter, “Control and Design.”

The book also includes maps of the four cities that anchor Ladd’s account, but they function less as guides to the historical streets of London, Paris, Berlin, and Vienna than as a preliminary means to visually imagine cities as a collection of streets. Each map appears in a different scale, and although the streets are labeled (and those names variously legible), the white lines of the streets leading between the buildings, fields, and squares of the four cities offer up a web that constitutes these urban settings. The sixty black-and-white illustrations—a mix of photographs, prints, and other illustrations—offer glimpses into the city streets Ladd describes: the reader thus gets Gustave Caillebotte’s Paris (his 1875 Young Man at His Window) and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner’s Potsdamer Platz in Berlin, but also a photograph of a Paris street urinal and a cartoon in which a clergyman mistakes a London woman waiting for a bus for a “social evil” (p. 126). The fact that Vienna garners only three illustrations hints at the city’s slightly subordinate status among the four cities in the title.

In its account of these cities comprised by their streets, Ladd’s book is driven by the question, What makes a successful street? For Ladd, this question is really one about the quality, not just the presence of street space (p. 255). But the measure of that quality is also dependent on the historical context in which people experience those streets.

In reflecting on the ways that city leaders and city inhabitants have wrestled with how to manage urban life, Ladd notes that streets are rarely democratic or orderly, but they facilitate encounters and inclusion. So, in that regard, paying attention to these messy historical negotiations offers a way to reimagine the sorts of politics that might be found in twenty-first-century streets. It is in posing these questions that Ladd’s effort to consider the implications of “how and why streets have mattered” (p. 4) proves quite successful.


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