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Blum, Alan 2003, *The Imaginative Structure of the City*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press. Pp. 368. ISBN 0-7735-2539-4. US\$34.95 cloth.

The idea that the city is nothing but a sign rules the representation of the city ... a widespread question today asks if the idea of the city has any weight, that is, whether it is capable of serving as a focus of loyalty, sovereignty, and solidarity ... The city is rejected on the grounds that it participates in the fate of any category to remain indeterminate, and like any such distinction, can only be sustained through stipulation in ways that are philosophically untenable (p. 24-5).

The above passage captures the central problematic addressed by this book. If 'the city' is not 'real', if it really is nothing other than a sign representing collections of things and processes, what is the meaning of its pervasiveness as a distinctive category of collective human sociality and desire? This beginning premise provokes Blum to offer a fresh – and challenging – perspective on how the representation of the city enters into everyday practices.

To those readers who consider themselves 'inside' the discourse on contemporary cities, this book may appear as an 'outsider' contribution. Blum's contact with the 'urban' literature was initiated when asked to chair an urban sociology appointment committee, and enhanced by a subsequent application for a major collaborative research grant. This eventually resulted in the 'Culture of Cities Project', to which this book makes a clear and major contribution. While he could have perhaps exploited his 'outsider' status and taken a distinct or polemical 'position' on cities-related writing, Blum has instead assembled an innovative exposition of the voices of various writers on cities and collective culture. Expressed in what might be described as a swirling, thematic montage, Blum orchestrates a dialogue between voices ranging from Plato, Socrates, Rousseau, Bataille, Weber, and Goffman to Simmel, Park, Debord, Harvey, Sassen, and Zukin. These voices are arranged so that they are relationally unfolded, rather than juxtaposed, along a range of themes that underline the multiple, ambiguous ways that the city emerges as a collective representation.

After expanding the beginning premise of the book first chapter, Blum uses his dialogical writing strategy to magnify a range of 'anxieties' under each themed chapter. The initial chapters of the book (2 through 4) are very tightly knit, with their respective themes interwoven so that the distinctiveness of the city as a category of collective life is clearly and engagingly underlined. Blum begins this exposition in chapter 2 by looking at the relations between periods of social change and visions of the 'common situation' imagined in relation to particular cities. In such circumstances, he says, the 'Good' of the city constantly appears as a crucial social distinction. Proceeding from this theoretical groundwork, Blum reiterates and re-informs his 'common situation' concept by considering how the status of the city is invoked in two related themes. These are, first, the ambiguity of where the city begins and ends in (globalized) space (chapter 3), and

secondly, the uncertain tensions between a city's cosmopolitanism and its parochialism (chapter 4). Blum's tight thematic connections seem to unravel as he explores other anxieties of the city over the remainder of the book. Chapters 5 through 9 are slightly more freestanding, if still anchored to each other and the book's overall thematic narrative. Anxieties associated with public spaces are considered through the connections of specific cities with both their nighttimes (chapter 5) and with particular social and cultural scenes (chapter 6). The tensions involved in the materialistic desires of the (locally-orientated) bourgeoisie toward the city are then explored (chapter 7), followed by a thoroughly interesting illumination on the apprehensions around impermanent city identities as found through the processes of physical building and rebuilding (chapter 8). In the final chapter, the anxieties illuminated in chapter 8 are turned on their head by examining the converse, where the city's very impermanence – its 'excitement' – is invoked as an object of desire.

These themes of the book capture only a simplified picture of the multiple ways that Blum illustrates the imaginative structure of the city as a crucial feature of modern collective life. I presume very few readers of this journal would require convincing that writing on cities, both recent and historical, has habitually either questioned outright the usefulness of the 'urban' as an object of study, or stressed its uncertain, borderless and amorphous character. The latter perspective is exemplified, for example, in recent work particularly in UK urban geography, which accentuates the 'relational' character of cities and urbanity. In this new stream of writing the intricate ontology of cities as sites of human and non-human complexity as well as multiple, heterogeneous connections with other places is strongly emphasized. As innovative and fresh as this new research is, I think that the dialogical journey Blum presents is an incisive antidote to extreme deployments of the relational perspective on cities. Though it is likely Blum would be sympathetic to relational views on the city, he would undoubtedly resist the over-extension of these analyses to the point where the 'existence' or meaningfulness of cities is questioned. Indeed, in this book he underscores the very real, practical import of 'the city' to matters of the human social imagination, and to everyday practices.

The writing style is perhaps another matter. For many readers, the dialogical and philosophical style that Blum employs may prove frustrating and even obstructive. To get at all the insights this text offers most readers will need to carefully navigate Blum's intricate ponderings. Yet there are many fascinating insights to be gathered. Further, I suspect that an over-simplification of language would have muted the innovative dialogical style. For this reason I am not sure these points on writing style are as much a critique as they are a warning. What readers gain from this book will depend on the depth of their previous reading, and their place (or non-place) in relation to debates on the city. In sum, Blum's *The Imaginative Structure of the City* is an exceedingly inventive text on cities, but one that demands an equally adventurous (and patient) reader.

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