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# Reviews

**Visions of the city: utopianism, power, and politics in twentieth-century urbanism** by D Pinder; Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2005, 320 pages, £47.50, ISBN 0 748 614 877

It is perhaps hardly surprising that our current geopolitical moment has been accompanied by a wide-ranging dismissal of the utopian imaginary with numerous critics asserting the 'end of utopia' or the broad failure of utopian planning as a symptom of what the art historian Timothy J Clark (1999, page 306) once famously described as "the bad dream of modernism". If jeremiads against utopianism have become something of a commonplace, David Pinder's recent book is an eloquent attempt to rescue a series of episodes in the wider historical geography of utopian thought.

As Pinder reminds us, there is a longstanding association between utopian thought and urban space. *Visions of the City* focuses in particular on utopian engagements with the modern city. While the book may eschew the standard potted history of utopian urbanism, it does nevertheless seek to chart a genealogy of 20th-century utopian imaginaries and their relationship to the geographies of everyday life. In so doing, it also insists on the relevance—or even the actuality—of earlier utopian projects for understanding and cultivating contemporary critical utopian practices. This is not, to be sure, a blithe radicalism on Pinder's part. Rather, it is an attempt to write against dismissals of utopian urban visions as "irrelevant fantasies" or "compensatory distractions". In Pinder's own words, there is a "continuing need for forms of critical utopianism that challenge the conditions of the present, that offer glimpses of other possibilities and that maintain a creative game with those conditions so as to figure alternatives" (page 265).

The number of relevant 20th-century utopian experiments is, in this context, legion, and Pinder's wide-ranging study moves from the utopianism of Ebenezer Howard's Garden City to the experimental urbanism of the Situationists. Broadly speaking, the book is divided into two main parts. The first retraces the "restorative" utopian plans that characterised utopian thought in western Europe in the late-19th and early-20th centuries. Chapters on the utopian visions of Ebenezer Howard and Le Corbusier suggest that they should be examined not only as singular attempts at sociospatial reordering but in relation to their "other sides", that is, in terms that reconnect such plans and projections to the desires, dreams, and anxieties that they often sought to control, regulate, and repress (page 23). While these chapters, taken on their own, trade in relatively familiar ground, they are also counterposed with more overtly "oppositional" and "transformative" (page 130) forms of utopian practice. The second part of the book addresses the critique of urbanism produced by the Lettrists and Situationists from the 1950s onwards. There are, admittedly, a number of existing studies of the history and significance of the Situationist movement. Where Pinder's book differs is in its sensitivity to rethinking the historical geographies of situationist utopianism. The section on the situationists is indeed the strongest part of the book and benefits from a close reading of their often strained association with Henri Lefebvre. The chapter on Constant, in turn, paves new ground in highlighting the significance of his "dynamic transient architecture" (page 198) to earlier Situationist attempts to map and explore the utopian spaces of the city. A concluding chapter makes a strong appeal for ongoing work into the "histories of modernist urbanism" as well as for the need to extend such critical perspectives into the present (page 24). To do so, as Pinder ultimately points out, is to insist on the possibility of new modes of political practice capable of recasting the ways in which our cities are thought about and lived in.

In this way, not only does *Visions of the City* make an important contribution to recent work which has increasingly come to explore the cultural geography of the everyday city, it also does so in a way that engages—generously—with the vexed history of modernism *sensu lato*. Indeed, one of its main contributions is to recast the standard orthodox narrative of modernism in resolutely spatial terms and to ask what it means to think modernism otherwise and in

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relation to its mainstream currents. If the concluding gestures of the book toward new forms of critical utopianism remain somewhat opaque, this should not detract from what is, in the end, a lively and pressing intervention.

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**Home** by A Blunt, R Dowling; Routledge, London, 2006, 320 pages, £70.00 cloth, £19.99 paper (US $125.00, $39.95) ISBN 9780415332743, 9780415332750

Study of the home has undergone something of a geographical turn in recent years. Articles in new journals such as *Home Cultures*, or special issues of *Antipode* and *Cultural Geographies*, argue for home as a place, a site of living that is open and fluid. As this book amply demonstrates, geographers are no longer complicit in producing home as a place apart, outside society and politics. There is now a lively body of work interrogating, amongst other concerns, the gendered experience of home lives, how imaginative and emotional practices relate to the material, and how the meaning of home is articulated within power relations in homes.

*Home* is the third in a series of volumes that aim to provide accessible undergraduate texts on key spatial topics. Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling are aiming to create a critical geography of home, although the reader would be forgiven for thinking the word 'cultural' should be lurking in there too. The introductory chapter sets out some of the traditional perspectives from which home has been studied. Housing studies and Marxist and humanist outlooks are given fairly short shrift in favour of more recent cultural geographical approaches that have drawn heavily on feminist theory. This may frustrate some readers, but Blunt and Dowling's decision reflects the source of the most lively and productive studies of home in recent years.

Blunt and Dowling's critical geography has three conceptual trajectories, all of which are roundly developed in subsequent chapters. First, home is shown to be both material and imaginative, a living place continually created and recreated through everyday practices. Second, Blunt and Dowling are alive to the politics and power relations produced in normative visions of home, arguing that home is experienced differently according to how people are positioned. In this, they are concerned at least as much with conflict, isolation, exploitation, as with interrogating the traditional homely home. Third, their argument is open and multiscalar, bringing refugee camps and diasporic 'homeland' mythologies within the remit of the book. This conceptual scheme is in itself convincing and well proposed.

The second chapter, on methodologies, wears its bias proudly in the title, "Representing home". Oral histories, ethnographies, novels, household guides, art, and design are the main methods suggested to the student, with a small section on quantitative analysis appended to the end of the chapter. This chapter is perhaps the weakest of the book, falling somewhere between methodology discussion, handbook, and checklist. The main shortcoming is that there is little explicit discussion of methods elsewhere in the book—in marked contrast to *Nature*, another title in the same series, which consistently challenges the student to consider how methodologies interact with different kinds of knowledge production.

The substantive content in *Home* comes in three linked chapters. Chapter 3, rather than offering a systematic typology of all homes, or a thorough historical account of how home has changed through time, asks how and why does a house become a home? Blunt and Dowling examine the cultural specificity of normative notions of heterosexual, owner-occupied, suburban home forms and how these emerged from the Victorian ideology of separate domestic – public spheres. Such normalised ideals of home are performed through a range of practices, such as the middle-class front lawn. Sections on gender, race, and sexuality explore how the home can be a repressive place, and a section on 'unhomely homes' argues that rooming houses, squats, and hotels have some capacity to be made homely.

Chapter 4, on “Home, nation and empire”, demonstrates the multiscalarity of home and its use as a concept in both the extension of and resistance to imperial power. In colonial India, for example, domestic management was implicitly tied to ideas of imperial strength and nationhood—nicely captured in photographs and household guides of the period. Examples of ‘homeland’ being mobilised for nationalist politics include the role of Bharat Mata (Mother India) in Hindu nationalism since the 1980s, and the more recent Homeland Security Act in the USA invoking certain affinities with family, intimacy, refuge, and sanctuary where ‘we’ (not they) belong, thus justifying the repression of foreign spectres that may or may not threaten this home.

Through an examination of migration, diaspora, exile, and transnational domestic work, Blunt and Dowling show in chapter 5 that home can involve attachments to more than one place. For instance, refugees use their own cooking techniques in camps, and letters are sent back and forth between migrant domestic workers and their families and homes. Conversely, a lack of autonomy or the ability to reproduce customs can make these ‘transnational homes’ particularly unhomely.

The concluding chapter may disappoint some readers. There was an opportunity here to inspire students, but we are offered merely a couple of weak exemplars and a box-out pointing to several admittedly intriguing avenues of potential study. This is not necessarily a major fault, however, as most readers will be inspired down one of the many avenues offered through the preceding chapters. Although bringing together such a wide-ranging array of studies makes the book feel like something of a compendium at times, it is nonetheless pitched and structured perfectly for an undergraduate course text. Its scope is broad and *Home* is at all times rich and engaging. Inevitably, each reader would desire more attention for his or her own area of interest (for my part I was disappointed that nonhumans in the home were firmly bounded with a neat box-out), but this simply indicates the lively diversity of ways we now think about the home.

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**Precautionary politics: principle and practice in confronting environmental risk** by K H Whiteside; MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2006, 182 pages $50.00 cloth, $20.00 paper (£32.95, £12.95)
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It was a pleasure to find a well-written account of the precautionary principle that also introduced some new ideas—from both the philosophical and the practical aspects. However, the prospective reader should note well the main title of the book, namely *Precautionary Politics*, since politics and to a certain extent political theories are at the heart of this book. Nevertheless, the subtitle *Principle and Practice in Confronting Environmental Risk* correctly indicates that the scope is wider and this book offers a very good primer on the application of the precautionary principle for anyone with an interest in the tools of risk management under conditions of significant scientific uncertainty.

However, the fact that the author chooses genetically modified organisms (GMOs), and in particular GMO crops, as the thematic case study for the book is a disappointment. It is disappointing for two reasons: first, because this is an all too common case study, which suggests, falsely in my view, that there is something special about GMOs with respect to the precautionary principle, and, second, because the author displays some ignorance about the GMO case itself. Both the lack of case-study novelty and the errors of treatment are interlinked. Authors who write about the GMO case should be aware of the history of EU legislation in this area (see Cantley, 1995, page 551) and in particular the step in the legislative evolution from directive 90/220 to directive 2001/18, which the author glosses over and seems to misunderstand. Furthermore, although the author makes much of the importance of the precautionary principle in regard to GMOs, he fails to identify one serious risk that is posed by approved GMO crops. The fact that the risks which are discussed in the book are not different from those posed by conventional seed development procedures is ignored. For example, DNA diffusion is a ‘natural’ process and is not specific to GMOs. Moreover, many of the risks that are highlighted in the book are risks associated with intensive agriculture rather than GMOs per se.

Another area of disappointment concerns the political analysis. Winston Churchill, in his inimitable way, made the distinction between science advice and policy action for all time. He said that science should be "on tap not on top" (Churchill, 1965, page 127)—that is, scientists advise, policy makers decide. This fundamental distinction is critically important for advisers to appreciate, yet the book appears to blur the functional separation by introducing the concept of the 'action society' in which scientists make the risk assessment and action then follows more or less automatically, untouched by the policy process. Although Whiteside gives the Aristotelian view that politics arbitrates between all the activities which take place in communities (which was certainly Churchill's view), he suggests that the process has been highjacked by vested interests. To overcome this highjacking, he suggests that citizens' deliberations and consensus conferences should play a formal role in the policy process. Few observers would deny that there is a problem at the interface between expert advisers and policy makers. The European Commission's Governance White Paper (2001) and the subsequent Communication on the use of Expertise by the Commission (2002) were intended to address these problems, particularly in the aftermath of the BSE crisis in Europe.

Interestingly, Whiteside argues that the precautionary principle stimulates the growth of citizens' deliberation actions and hence promotes participatory democracy. "Precaution is not just for judges, legislators or policy analysts. It demands new linkages between scientists and laypeople, between political representatives, NGOs, and businesses. The precautionary principle touches the distribution and legitimation of regulatory power throughout society" (page 150). However, he goes on to state that "We do well to understand that *all* risk management is political" (which brings us back to Churchill's view of the different roles of advisers and policy makers). This book is not the first to argue that citizens should play a greater role in the formation of policy action in the technological sphere. However, in life one has to be careful what one asks for. If vested interests have distorted the process of expert advice concerned with risk assessment under uncertainty, then the obvious answer is to improve the governance of scientific advice along the lines of the European Commission's Communication (2002). Simply adding the voice of society will not solve the problem and may by imposing an additional layer on the process making it much less efficient.

In spite of its flaws, this remains a stimulating and useful book. It represents very good value (just £12.95 for the paperback version) and in my view it will be consulted rather more regularly than some other better known books on the precautionary principle.

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