

Book review

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Robert Shaw, *The Nocturnal City*, Routledge Research in Culture, Space and Identity: London: Routledge, 2018; 126 pp.: ISBN 9781138676404, £84.00 (hbk)

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The night is a fascination for many people. This book emerged from PhD research and is a highly theoretical book that draws on Guattari and other French philosophers, psychologists and activists. It is innovative in putting the night at the centre of geographical enquiries into the city and the world. The way the night is described in the introduction is telling for the whole book. Night cannot be reduced to one essential feature. It is not darkness. It is not sleep. It is not the time in which services close down. Rather, night is multiple. It is atmospheric, it is affective, it is subjective, it is natural, it is social, it is static, it is rhythmic. While reading the book you are fascinated by the multiple aspects of the city at night, but you don't really 'feel' the night because empirical findings are scarce. You mainly think the night, which is also important since the night is generally underestimated in urban studies (see also the special issue by Van Liempt et al., 2015).

The book starts with the idea of night as a limited but not empty time space and tells the story of the night and society as a story of expansion. Melbin (1987) used the idea of a frontier and showed in his work how time

is a container that we are filling in a new way because 'we are putting more wakefulness into each twenty four hours'. Though the night may have been colonised as Melbin argues, Shaw shows in his book that there are multiple nocturnal cultures which seem to be independent of or at least distinct from day. An interesting suggestion that is offered by Shaw is to study the night and rhythms of the city in a planetary context. Are there spaces which are urbanised at day but not at night?

Chapters 1 and 2 provide the conceptual underpinnings for the book. The night is positioned within urban theory and debates around 'planetary urbanisation'. These theories have traced the spatial spread of urban forms, but Shaw shows with this book that the temporal expansion of urban capitalism is less explored and mapped and that there is a need to rectify this. Understanding what goes on at night in cities can add important nuances to debates on planetary urbanisation. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 introduce key fields in which researchers have explored the night. This is a comprehensive overview of geographical and social theories and research about the urban night but it has limited empirical data to illustrate their importance.

In the third chapter, night infrastructures are central, with lighting as its key example. the introduction of street lighting not only marked a moment of technological innovation and sociological advancement but also fitted alongside other socio-political changes in the 18th and 19th centuries to give birth

to the modern understanding of the operation of the state. Foucault's idea of the co-evolution of technology and surveillance to control could easily be applied to street lighting. Lighting as such was part of the regulation and control of new forms of nocturnal activities. Even though the empirical descriptions in this chapter are scarce, the description of how street cleaners clean the city at night and how the day relies on the night time to restore communities' well-being is very powerful. Shaw's description of how the buildings and streets are 'reset' at night is a metaphor that stays with the reader for a long time. This chapter also shows how the night is also a timespace into which some people are forced to enter in order to seek work or escape, and how as such it is a timespace in which oppressed groups are more vulnerable than those who are in positions of power.

The fourth chapter is on nightlife and the Night Time Economy. It is a refreshing chapter because it goes beyond the standard work on nightlife districts and gives global examples of night activities other than clubbing, such as night markets, like the famous one in Taipei. Night markets show that the conviviality of cities at night is often more than about alcohol consumption alone. Indirectly, a plea is made in this chapter for including more examples from other cities all over the world than is currently done.

Chapter 5 focuses on the aesthetics of the night and contrasts the city as a spectacular with the city as spectacle and illustrates this by diving into the phenomenon of the 'night walker'. Charles Dickens' famous book *The Uncommercial Traveller* (1876), and more recently the collection of his essays in *Night Walks* (2010), is referred to as inspiration, just like Beaumont's work on night walkers. Walking through the city at night as a means of producing urban literature is a known phenomenon. More recently we see an increasing number of tourists who make

excursions into the nocturnal streets and consider it an aesthetic landscape for inspiration.

Shaw's wider approach to the night means that he also moves us beyond the public sphere and into the night at home. Chapter 6 is all about the home and how that space has increasingly become connected with the outside world, limiting our time for sleep. Reflections on public space and how it contrasts to the home also indirectly show us that the way the urban night is presented is predominantly male. The literature on night walking that is referred to only talks about white male flaneurs. The important work by women in this field, like Laura Elkin's (2017) *Flaneuse*, is not mentioned – which is a missed opportunity.

In the concluding chapter (Chapter 7), Shaw argues that the night should be in and of itself an object of research. The urban night according to him is a fruitful place, both a dark underbelly of the city and a core element of how we must understand urbanism as a way of life. The last chapter also includes suggestions to what a future nightology might study. First, Shaw argues for looking at the night beyond public spaces and including houses, offices, workplaces, community centres and other civic spaces that have been less well understood until now. Second, a plea is made for looking beyond the prevailing Euro-American focus. I totally agree with that conclusion, as nocturnal research so far has been heavily biased towards Western Europe, the USA and Australia and we need more work from other parts of the world.

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