

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

EVELYN RUPPERT, *The Moral Economy of Cities: Making Good Citizens*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006, xiii + 283 p., index.

This book is an empirical study of a plan to redevelop a downtown Toronto district contiguous with the intersection of Yonge and Dundas streets. A major undertaking proposed in the mid-1990s and eventually approved, this ambitious project foresaw construction of a major entertainment complex to be called “Metropolis” with high-end retail shopping, theatres, and restaurants; a media tower with neon signs and a massive video screen; and an open public space to be named Dundas Square which was supposed to feature a permanent stage for musical performances and related amenities. The plan was to entail considerable destruction or acquisition of existing private property in the city core and triggered in 1997 an appeal by landowners to an administrative, quasi-judicial body called the Ontario Municipal Board (OMB) that resolves disputes in relation to the Ontario Planning Act. Ruppert engages in a thorough empirical analysis of the resulting OMB appeal hearings that centred on this revitalization scheme, paying close attention to the content of witness submissions and exhibits from both supportive and oppositional urban actors. Through this analysis, Ruppert seeks to show how moralization “underpins visions of the good city and how what constitutes good conduct is brought into being through processes of constructing and shaping ways of being a good citizen in the city” (5).

Two key concepts are used throughout the book: the “moralization of conduct” and “city making.” In contrast to a static morality, moralization refers to a process of assigning to persons, places, actions, and objects a bad or good essence: nothing is therefore inherently moral. Moralization in the Yonge-Dundas redevelopment context targets behaviours such as panhandling, littering, “postering” (plastering unsightly advertising posters in public spaces), and low-end shopping at “dollar stores,” thus rendering them “bad.” The conduct of the imagined middle-class consumers drawn to the new Yonge-Dundas Square simultaneously becomes “good.” This moralization was encouraged by citizen ratepayer and business groups and supported by professional planners, architects, and marketers. The second concept, “city making,” means “practices that shape both materially and symbolically not only the physical spaces of the city, but also the ways of being a citizen of the city” (5). The two concepts are linked in that the moralization of conduct is asserted to be the foundation on which “dominant groups unite and consent to professional strategies and technologies of city making” (195).

Details of the moralization of conduct are revealed through discussion of three overlapping visions of the city as evinced in the hearings. In one chapter each, the secure city, the consumer city, and the aesthetic city is elaborated. Ruppert then proceeds to analyze how professional authority that helps shape and construct the three visions was produced within the OMB hearings through the construction of professional expertise and the use of seemingly objective devices such as maps, statistics, and photographs. Drawing on Bourdieu and Foucault, Ruppert then explicates the role of professionals, including planners and security consultants, in the moralization of conduct as evinced in the Yonge-Dundas project. Here the concept of moral economy is also dealt with (192): rather than assuming a clear separation between the moral and the economic, Ruppert argues that economic justification for redevelopment is inseparable from the moralization of conduct.

Consistent with a “governmentality” focus on her subject matter, Ruppert consistently avoids the temptation to rely on ideology as an explanation (148), instead showing how moralization and economic justification are mutually constitutive. The three visions of the good city emerging from the hearings, then, are elaborated as more than ideological excuses to redevelop Yonge-Dundas on behalf of powerful groups (e.g., trans-national corporations), thus offering a complex and nuanced account of what occurred. Also laudable are Ruppert’s efforts to avoid approaching Yonge-Dundas as a case study in the usual “governmentality” study style. Instead, she endeavours to discover more general conditions, often comparing the elements comprising the visions that constituted Toronto’s Yonge-Dundas to those in urban contexts beyond Toronto. In relation to the vision of the “secure city,” for example, Manchester and New York are referred to extensively, thereby making the point that the rationales deployed by professionals (such as invocation of the “Broken Windows principle” taken from New York) for redevelopment of this specific district are partially consistent with those used elsewhere. However, perhaps for this same reason, the elaboration of the three visions is not always novel. In the “secure city” chapter, for example, the analysis of the punitive strategies deployed to shape conduct in the Square through various forms of law (71-76) was fresh, but this chapter also includes summaries of situational crime prevention strategies from a “governmentality” perspective (53-61) and discussion of the business improvement district (62-66) that are well-trodden and available elsewhere.

A couple of other minor criticisms should be mentioned. Given its relatively late (and light) treatment in the book, “moral economy” probably should have been replaced in the book’s title with “moralization,” the book’s main concept. The absence of discussion of the related concept of “moral capital,” as found in the work of Canadian scholars who have also been influenced by “governmentality” concepts (such as Mariana Valverde and Bruce Curtis), was also unexpected. Finally, and most importantly, I would have welcomed more detail about the alternative visions of the appealing landowners, as well as those of street youth, low-income consumers, and the others who came to be seen as the “non-public” or evidence that they were entirely inconsequential. The choice of method and

reliance on the official texts from the hearings without complementary interviews or examination of alternative texts – an increasingly common criticism of governmentality studies – seems to eliminate the possible discovery of what has been termed “urban governance from below” in relation to moralization and the three visions of the city.

These are for the most part minor quibbles. Originally a planner by trade, Ruppert’s insider knowledge of the profession does shine through in her theoretically-informed analysis, especially in later chapters, and she ultimately transcends an orthodox “governmentality” account by effectively invoking the work of Bourdieu. One noteworthy consequence of the book is to open up for future study not only OMB and other similar quasi-judicial hearings, but also planning and related city making professions. Overall this is an accessible, impressive, and superbly detailed empirical study. As an account of how city making works, the book represents a significant contribution to urban studies. It will likely have a very wide readership across several disciplines, including sociology and socio-legal studies.

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