McCann, Eugene and Ward, Kevin (Eds) – *Mobile Urbanism: Cities and Policymaking in the Global Age*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 2011, pp. 213 ISBN978-0-8166-5629-5

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In the film *Contagion*, Steven Soderbergh's latest film, which premiered in September 2011 at the Venice Film Festival, a woman becomes infected with an unknown and highly infectious virus – the fictional Meningoencephalitis Virus One (MEV-1) – while dining out at a casino during a business trip to Hong Kong. Unknowingly, she infects people with whom she relates to during that night, as well as on her way home to Minneapolis via Chicago the day following the contagion. In a matter of days, the World Health Organization and the US Center for Disease Control and Prevention declare a new pandemic and the film centres on the political game for discovering and distributing a vaccine, a period of a few weeks in which 25 million people die. The film also illustrates the fear of contagion and how it travels across social, economic, political and biological boundaries.

The film is certainly alluding to recent pandemics such as the N1H1 in 2009 or SARS in 2002/2003. But the film is also a sophisticated depiction of contemporary global mobility within cities and the critical role that governance and policymaking plays in today's urban condition, a key concern in McCann and Ward's edited collection of essays, *Mobile Urbanism: Cities and Policymaking in the Global Age.* The book is a collection of seven essays plus a critical introduction and conclusion chapters by the editors, and was coincidentally released only a few months before Soderbergh's film. Above all, the collected essays work very well both in themselves, and as a whole, to demonstrate the significant weight that cultural geography carries in today's social and cultural research landscapes. Cultural and political geography, and this book, demonstrate the contingency of thinking spatially about culture and politics, and thinking culturally about space and the emergence of new urban mobility at the beginning of the 21st Century.

The book succeeds – above all – in demonstrating the material and non-material dynamics at play in the study of cities and how cities might be better understood as simultaneously global and local arrangements of policies, practices, technologies and ideas. Just as in the abovementioned film, a central concern in all chapters of the book is the notion of mobility, a concept that has gained currency in sociology and geography during the past decade. In Soderbergh's film the concern is with the mobility of fear – how fear of contagion travels across overpopulated cities – and with how public health policies and practices are also made mobile by several agents of transference such as scientists, policymakers and journalists. In one way or another *contagion* has also become a key trope through which to examine diverse phenomena such as the spread of economic crises in Europe or political uprisings in the so-called Arab Spring. Human geography, as the book clearly demonstrates, has become in the past few decades a favoured site from where to examine and understand the causes and effects of large-scale movements of people, objects, capital, and information across the world and how these are made possible by both large and small, local and global, processes of daily transportation.

In *Mobile Urbanism* the authors attempt to go one step further and examine the critical role played by agencies and agents whose role is the coordination and governance of mobilities within ever-changing urban ecologies. Some of the most interesting analyses of this concern with the governance of urban mobilities in a networked world are provided by several contributors who share an interest with the role that neoliberal processes since the 1980s have had in the reconfiguring of cities. For example, Doreen Massey's essay (Chapter 1) provides an analysis of a short-lived agreement between the cities of Caracas and London as an example of counterhegemonic relationality between places. Donald McNeill (Chapter 7) in turn provides a novel analysis of the globalization of airport governance, the rise of airport-cities assemblages which, as borderlands, McNeill contends, become crucial sites in the regulation of mobility. Finally Keil and Harris Ali (Chapter 6) account for how the cities of today are vulnerable to a wide range of global incursions such as emerging diseases like SARS, and how for example, during the SARS pandemic, the most important problematic for the World Health Organization was the regulation between cities. In this way all the chapters included in this edited collection address in differing ways the processes through which urbanism is assembled through policymaking and policy mobilizing and thus constructing novel ways of understanding the diverse practices of place-making as a layout or more precisely an *agencement* of – as the editors put forward in their introduction – 'territorial' and 'relational' geographies.

The empirical case studies in the book are rich and the contributors provide dense and thick accounts of urban assemblages and the mobilities of policy-making in Latin America, Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia, the US and Canada. However, although the editors claim to depart from a methodological nationalism by acknowledging the relevance of interlocal policy mobility, what the book as a whole fails to achieve is a more critical perspective on the global dynamics of knowledge production in social science in general and human and cultural geography in particular. While the idea of totally autonomous social theory is epistemologically almost impossible in the highly connected world of today, the book as a whole reproduces a methodological fallacy whereby – as Raewyn Connell (2007) has so eloquently argued through a survey of sociological literature on globalization, data from the periphery are framed by concepts, debates, and research strategies from the metropole. There is no reference to the social thought of the periphery in these texts. The politics of location of the nine contributors to the book is clearly grounded in an Anglo/American academic framework.

The strengths of this book heavily outweigh its only perceived weakness and I think the three main ambitions of this edited collection of thought-provoking geographers are realized. First, to advance a theorization of urban policymaking and place-making where the city is constituted by assemblages of relational and territorial geographies; and second, to emphasize the ways through which policies are rendered mobile through practices and agencies (and agents) of transference. In conclusion, the book is effective in providing an expanded geographical imagination and in theorizing cities as social formations. In fact, both Soderbergh's film and McCann and Ward's book seem to coincide in one very significant concern: that "cities are implicated in each other's futures" (McCann & Ward, 2011: 170).

References

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About the reviewer

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