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Book Review: Post-Industrial Precarity

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***Post-Industrial Precarity: New Ethnographies of Urban Lives in Uncertain Times*, edited by Gillian Evans (2020). Wilmington, DE: Vernon Press.**

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POST-INDUSTRIAL PRECARIETY
New Ethnographies of Urban Lives in Uncertain Times

Edited by
Gillian Evans



This volume explores the experiences of cities and their residents contending with the “failed promises of post-industrial society” (p. i). Editor Gillian Evans argues that a generalized inability to deliver on the promises of a better life in the late-twentieth century, and the subsequent abandonment of the working class, informs the experiences of urban precarity in the world today. To this end, *Post-Industrial Precarity* features eight ethnographic studies of contemporary urban precarity. Via analyses of their field sites, the authors examine the relationship between neoliberal urban developments and the social and material fluctuations that these city residents must confront in their everyday lives. Familiar images of abandonment, deprivation, and neglect are, as with many studies of precarity, ever present. However, readers are also asked to consider “bold ambitions for future change and [...] a sense of resilience” (p. xxii) on the ground. Aided by a shared commitment to ethnographic inquiry, the authors not only

challenge narratives of “successful” urban development but also probe what it means to live precariously within post-industrial cityscapes.

These ideas are expertly demonstrated in Emma Fraser’s opening chapter on “modern ruins” in Detroit, Michigan, USA. Through her self-defined “ruin ethnography” (p. 1), she problematizes both the common perceptions of Detroit’s derelict architecture as well as the middle-class “disaster tourism” that haunts the city. As she details, modern ruins represent histories of neglect, decay, and failures of governance through their continued presence in residents’ lives. Their experiences of ruins as both historical and material precarities vividly come to life through Fraser’s ethnographic depictions of the art, vandalism, and temporary housing (for example, tents) that still inhabit these spaces. Indeed, top-down neglect of urban spaces such as those in Detroit are present throughout this volume.

Under the guise of “best urban practices,” policymakers’ attention is frequently redirected to the private sector. This is the case in Alice Stefanelli’s ethnographic study in Beirut, where aggressive real-estate development has resulted in the creative destruction of the city’s social and architectural fabric (cf. Harvey, 2007). Developments intended to repopulate Beirut’s city center have instead displaced (literally and figuratively) the livelihoods of many residents. Similarly, Donna Carmichael highlights how policymakers in Glasgow turn to

private enterprise to bring about cultural regeneration, through the instrumentalization of cultural events like the Commonwealth Games. In both cases, neoliberal responses to supposed urban decline are shown to be at the expense of the everyday practices of residents: local economies are transformed, strains on public infrastructure become evident, and the displacement of people makes way for limited-use stadiums and arenas (p. 83).

Where the state is an enabler (or direct cause) of urban precarity, examinations of “bold ambition” and “resilience” necessitate a local lens – between what Abigail Schoneboom calls the “urban cracks” of the city (p. 126). Within the “overly commodified, unvaried, [and] commercially oriented” (ibid.) foci of the state, she highlights the role of spaces that can disrupt the monotony of everyday cityscapes and, subsequently, provide residents with collaborative platforms to create tangible products. In her study, Schoneboom uses the example of the independently run Maker Spaces in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, in the north of England; a break from the illegibility of white-collar work, Maker Spaces embody tangible change through participants’ woodworking, metalworking, and mechanical projects.

The potential of informal spaces is expanded upon in chapters by Angela Torresan and Luciana Lang. Where Schonboom’s white-collar workers maintain their livelihoods outside Maker Spaces, Torresan and Lang highlight the importance of informal spaces for those on the margins of post-industrial cities. In the moral economy of post-industrial Manchester (UK), Lang shows how little sympathy there is for the unemployed and unhoused. Abandoned by the state (Denning, 2010), these residents must instead find their own autonomy to be able to provide productive and affective labor outside formal markets. By collaborating on makeshift outbuildings, small farming projects, and in informal markets, Lang argues, participants foster sites of resilience against the precarity of the city. Like Stefanelli’s study in Beirut, Torresan encourages readers to explore informal spaces in contexts that are not typically considered to be post-industrial cityscapes, such as among the *favelados* of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Here, the marginalization of *favela* residents becomes a direct consequence of state-initiated “precaritization” (p. 52). Whereas residents in other chapters are pushed to the periphery through state neglect, attempts to formally (re)integrate *favelados* back into the city are instead the cause of their precarity. For example, ostensibly good housing regulations in Rio nonetheless limit *favelados*’ rights to land, water, and sanitation. Resilience against precarity instead comes from the informal, locally regulated contracts between residents. While Torresan’s choice of location stands out in comparison to other chapters, she offers an interesting “reverse flow of theory” from the Global South, where precarity is commonplace, in contrast to the other, more Europe-focused case studies in this volume.

Jessica Symons’ contribution focuses on the practices of cultural regeneration in Salford, UK, where repeated outsider attempts to regenerate this city have been met with local antagonism. Rather than follow the narrative policymakers who label Salford as a “hard to reach” locale, Symons attributes past failures to a disconnect between policy initiatives and the local definition of “culture.” In this light, when culture is defined anthropologically as “how people make their lives meaningful” (p. 107), rather than via the instrumentalization

of the cultural sector (for instance, in Carmichael's chapter on Glasgow), residents are more likely to invest themselves in regeneration practices. By focusing on local livelihoods, thus, the ethnographic studies in this volume advocate against top-down attempts to "tame" post-industrial precarity and for embracing local ways of thinking about the city.

Embracing local categories, inevitably, also means embracing change. This is the take-away of Lucilia Barchetta's concluding chapter on the political ecology of waste in Turin's Michelotti Park. Akin to "culture," perceptions of material and natural degradation evolve across time and space. In the case of Michelotti Park – which has been the subject of multiple urban developments over its history, including a zoo – idealized borders between nature and the city fluctuate over time. The result, Barchetta argues, is a reframing of waste and decay, away from a green-brown dichotomy and toward an "island" of ecological, urban, and human diversity (p. 194).

Barchetta's conclusion discussing a post-industrial cityscape that blurs borders between nature and the city – between informal "urban cracks" and the city proper – undergirds the volume's contribution to the study of precarity. Whereas previous literature seeks to define precarity through purely political, economic, or geographical indices (cf. Standing, 2011), *Post-Industrial Precarity* instead takes a narrative approach. Influenced by Berlant's notion of "cruel optimism" (2011), experiences of precarity in this volume are consolidated around Evans' original narrative of the "failed promise." Moreover, rather than delineate a hard "precariat," Evans' notion of precarity sits as an overarching narrative above cities at large, infiltrating the decisions and livelihoods of all their residents in one way or another. Thus, despite being contextually different, locals' experiences – through their interactions with one another, with policy, and with the city – are comparable as instances of a broader, shared narrative of precarity. In turn, the case studies in this volume, especially those outside the Global North, present the opportunity for meaningful comparisons between existing and future literature (see Muehlebach, 2011; Allison, 2013).

The authors' shared commitment to ethnography is also of note. Methodologically, the contributors to the volume all demonstrate their commitment to ethnographically analyzing precarity, namely through participant-observation and thick description. As prefaced by Evans, ethnography represents an approach that is "equal to the demands of [...] post-industrial life" (p. xxiv). Experiences of precarity are, after all, messy (Allison, 2013:17) and require a degree of creativity that leads to multiple forms of analysis. Fraser's "ruin ethnography" is one such example, which outlines specific methods for capturing the ruins of Detroit and comparable cities (p. 2). The chapters by Stefanelli, who seeks to incorporate ethnographic methods into urban planning, and Barchetta, who offers a sensory ethnography of Turin, are also notable. However, little elaboration on the importance of ethnography is given. *Post-Industrial Precarity* would benefit, as a result, from making the role of ethnography in analyzing post-industrial precarity a more consistent theme, as is suggested in Evans' introduction. A concluding chapter by the editor would have also served readers well in summarizing the work's key themes of precarity, post-industrialism, and ethnography.

Nevertheless, *Post-Industrial Precarity* still represents an invaluable contribution to the anthropology of precarity and post-industrial urban life. The volume features eight outstanding chapters for readers interested in these key debates and amounts to a much-needed new wave of ethnographic studies with which scholars of the city can engage.

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