

Book Review Symposium

Brenda Parker, *Masculinities and Markets: Raced and Gendered Urban Politics in Milwaukee*, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2017. ISBN: 978-0-8203-3511-7 (cloth); ISBN: 978-0-8203-5032-5 (paper)

Masculinities and Markets weaves together different strands of feminist urban analysis – political economy, social reproduction, intersectionality, and embodiment – to create a dynamic and multi-layered tapestry illustrating how race and gender have informed Milwaukee’s shifting urban politics over time. Developing a “feminist partial political economy of place” and making use of a diverse “toolkit” of feminist theories, Parker compellingly argues that sidelining gender, race, and other forms of social difference in accounts of urban politics represents a failure to reckon with the ways in which capitalist urban development and renewal strategies are always imbricated with raced and gendered social ideologies.

Parker’s deconstruction of masculinist urban politics is deeply satisfying in a period where feminist theory has often veered away from analyses of sexism and misogyny in favour of approaches that focus more abstractly on power, assemblages, and intra-actions. As contributors to a recent retrospective in *Gender, Place and Culture* noted, forthright takes on sexism and patriarchy have become rare in feminist geographic work (Valentine et al. 2014). While the growth of sophisticated frameworks for intersectional research is necessary and welcomed, as is the shift away from binary, taken-for-granted conceptions of sex and gender, Parker’s work reminds us that it is still necessary to ask pointedly: who *benefits* from the policies and practices of contemporary urban politics? Parker argues that it is not just that city building often ignores women, or is sexist in its outcomes, but that it directly results from masculinist ways of knowing and

acting, and its outcomes typically benefit men. Her deep dive into Milwaukee city politics illustrates how gendered exclusions are reproduced across contexts of representation, knowledge making, and policy analysis. The outcomes are that patriarchal work, household, and institutional relationships are fortified at women's expense. Parker's analysis is not a throwback to a second-wave mode of thinking about sex, gender, and power. The 2016 US election cycle and subsequent events have made it clear that sexism still actively animates politics at all levels. As Peake and Rieker (2013) assert, global urbanization trends only generate more gendered and feminist questions about cities, reminding us to keep renewing feminist interrogations of the urban. Parker contributes to this project by deftly tracing the continuities of sexist, masculinist political formations across different political eras, even supposedly progressive and post-feminist, post-racial periods.

One of the major contributions of feminism to geographic and social science research methods has been the inclusion of notions of care in research ethics and practices (Domosh 2003; Nagar 2014; Pratt 2009). Care has been elevated far beyond considerations of building "rapport" to an important criterion for sound research with human participants. Proceeding with care is not secondary to getting "good" data, nor is it a means to that end; it is integral to the research process, even if data gathering becomes limited in other ways (e.g. number of possible interviews or the nature of the topics discussed). *Masculinities and Markets* offers the reader a window on what care-full research looks like. Parker describes slow, quiet conversations; just sitting with interviewees; trying "to carefully and justly represent my research subjects and sites, not breathlessly characterize them with a sweep of a hand" (p.13). While proceeding with care as a core value does not magically dissipate power relations or dissolve the inequities built into academic research (who is paid, who benefits, who speaks, etc.), it is a vital way to counter a culture of fast, extractive, competitive research. Parker makes no apologies for the slow nature of her scholarship, noting the importance of observing for "long enough and with sufficient detail for something useful to be revealed" (p.176). Her

initial research in Milwaukee occurred at a moment when her critical analysis of the conjuncture of neoliberal urbanism and creative city policy-making was decidedly “on trend”. However, her desire to conduct ethical, grounded, intersectional research meant that her work would not be churned out prematurely to satisfy neoliberal academic imperatives of competition, timeliness, citation-seeking, and impact. Parker’s feminist partial political economy of place model thrives through a “slow scholarship” approach (Mountz et al. 2015) that resists the impulse – and the push – to produce fast theory with the potential for big citation counts. As Parker notes in her conclusion, “a feminist ethics of care, connection, and collectivity are needed as important correctives in urban politics” (p.177), illustrating how her research approach is intertwined with her aim to promote urban social justice.

The empirical and theoretical results of this approach are best exemplified in Chapter 6, “Getting by in Milwaukee: Amplified Lives and Labors for Low-Income African American Women”. Reading this chapter is an affective experience. Parker offers a detailed, evocative account of how various layers of structural oppression, combined with the day-to-day grind, work to intensify one another in ways that are often exhausting and debilitating. Here, we are fully immersed in a feminist partial political economy of place: a slow, detail-oriented, attentive, and engaged mode of research that shows deep respect for the experiences of women and does not attempt to smooth out the seemingly small bumps of everyday life. Indeed, by paying attention to these bumps, Parker is able to convey one of the meanings of “amplification” that is salient here: the ways that the struggles of everyday life are intensified as they are layered onto one another through the prism of racism, classism, and sexism in Milwaukee. This method also allows Parker to connect embodiment and a political economy framework. I present the following quote as an example:

An emphasis on the body reminds us how sometimes only a theoretical veil separates production and reproduction: the same person toils on the fast-food line

and helps her children with homework, the same splitting headache joining the two moments. And, of course, ill and abused bodies do not easily carry out labor. This also reminds us that bodies are sites of resistance. This resistance might not be only collective action, but also bodily sacrifices that are made in order to protect oneself, and create, nurture, and reproduce political space. (p.129)

The conceptual contribution of this chapter emerges via careful attention to real stories and engagement with black feminist theory. Parker concludes that “social reproduction theories should be unhinged from narrow Marxist frames and would benefit from further conversation with black and antiracist feminism” (p.132). This is an important insight and call to action for urban geographers to heed.

The stories in Chapter 6 force us to reckon with the reality of illness, pain, disease, and disability and their connection to both social reproduction and production. I believe that it is absolutely crucial to bring these experiences into our analyses of urban lives and the structural processes shaping them (Moss 2013). However, Parker’s work does not engage with disability theory or even geographies of disability. But to critique Parker here is to critique most feminist urban geography. While it is now more common for disability to be added to the “list” of sites of identity or oppression when we describe what we mean by intersectionality, it still rarely figures as anything more than a side note unless disability is the primary theme of the research. I believe that Parker’s work makes a necessary foray into considering disability as part of the lived experience of raced and gendered neoliberal urbanism, but we still have a long way to go towards substantively engaging with either the experience of disability or the wider critical disability studies literature that might enrich our understandings of the connections between embodiment, cities, and neoliberalism.

While the framework of the “creative city” arguably no longer holds the same sway over urban policymakers (including Richard Florida himself) as it once did, creativity-led strategies are far from dead in urban planning and state labour market

strategies. Parker’s work on neoliberalism and the creative class has been especially valuable to me as a teaching tool in my senior feminist urban geography class. Paired with McLean’s (2017) writing and video performances in which she literally embodies the creative urban explorer through drag-kinging, Parker’s research offers a clear critique of the “creative class” idea in terms of both the highly racially-segregated nature of the professions and cities deemed “most creative”, and the gendered implications of ignoring social reproduction and valorizing creative work as a lifestyle. My students really connect with this critique, seeing in it a way to understand the daunting futures they face: trained to be “creative knowledge professionals” by the university, but groomed to accept tenuous, insecure, flexible work conditions with no safety net. They then “get” the creative class/creative city strategy as one that attractively re-brands neoliberalism while actually strengthening already existing systems of power and oppression. I look forward to adding Chapter 5, “Could the Violent Femmes Save Milwaukee? Richard Florida, the Young Professionals of Milwaukee, and Embodied Creativity”, to my syllabus.

I position *Masculinities and Markets* within a loose collectivity of work in feminist geography that seeks to engage a more affirmative politics (Braidotti 2011) even as it pursues rigorous critique of the structures, systems, and institutions that perpetuate inequality (Kern and McLean 2017; McKittrick 2013; Morrow and Dombroski 2015). Parker closes her book with a call to foreground the significance of care, connection, love, renewal, vulnerability, and life itself as we go forward with new languages and new imaginaries for feminist urban futures. Including the radical poetry of Audre Lorde here, Parker powerfully reminds us that there are other grammars available for feminist world-making and that we can and must pick up these tools in our work as urban scholars and activists.

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