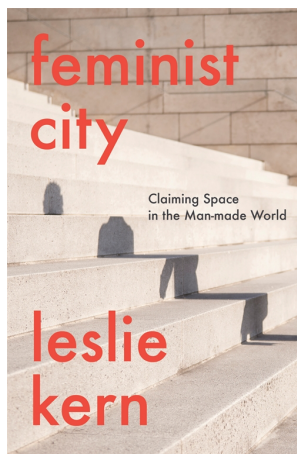

Book Reviews

**Leslie Kern 2021: *Feminist City: Claiming Space in a Man-Made World*.
London and New York: Verso**



Leslie Kern's *Feminist City* should be understood not as a future goal but as 'an ongoing experiment in living differently, living better, and living more justly in an urban world' (p. 176). The author's aim is similar to that of many contemporary thinkers—how to live together peacefully—but her feminist geographer's perspective sets this book apart. Kern argues that the signs or examples of a feminist city are already out there, in cities from Copenhagen to Glasgow to Toronto, or in women-led protest movements. The book is therefore not a utopian project, but rather a critical analysis of the existing (predominantly male) capitalist city, current alternatives, and the steps needed to improve the feminist cities that already exist.

In her analysis of today's dominant masculine urban environment, Kern's multiple sources of data include her own life experiences—the book is quite autobiographical in this respect—gender studies, feminist geography and gentrification literatures, as well as popular culture in the form of films and television shows. She applies the same multiplicity to the book's structure, where she examines the city from the different angles of patriarchy and capitalism, motherhood, friendship, being alone (not in the sense of loneliness, but as a right to be alone in public that is mostly denied to women in their daily lives), women's activism, and fear, before concluding with a consideration of the possibility of a feminist city.

The author skillfully incorporates individual lives and collective actions—as well as the circumstances surrounding these individual and collective experiences—into a single work. In doing so, she places women's experiences of the city in a spatio-temporal context that makes her analysis of the current situation more meaningful. The historicity and spatiality of her analysis underlines the changing nature of feminism—both in form and material practice (as reflected in the physical design of the city and its various other constitutions), and in idea and content. However, there is still much to be achieved for the inclusion of women's needs in the planning, design and creation of the physical and social environments of the city, as Kern demonstrates throughout the book's chapters.

The author also points to the growing safety concerns in contemporary cities that are both real and propagated by the system to achieve ‘social control of women through socialization into fear’ (p. 169). However, it is not enough to focus solely on the built environment to address these safety issues. If these countermeasures only consider the safety of white women, they will also fall short of Kern’s idea of a feminist city, which should take into account the multiple experiences of women in the city. The danger of focusing only on improving the urban environment for white and professional women with a certain level of educational and economic power is a feminization of the city that can easily lead to gentrification. The whole process is then to the detriment of the less powerful or vulnerable populations, including working-class women, women of colour, single mothers, women in shelters and homeless women. What Kern proposes, therefore, is a more ‘intersectional feminist vision of a safer city for women’ (p. 165), as opposed to, for example, the option ‘to “buy” their safety through condo ownership’ (p. 165), which represents a privatization of safety.

The same is true of feminist activism, which can sometimes end up reproducing the exclusionary, segregating, discriminatory and xenophobic discourses and practices of the current political-economic system without realizing or intending to. Thus Kern conceives of the feminist city as a more open and evolving alternative to the male city than the ‘sense of enclosure’ (p. 168) provided by car ownership and/or condominium ownership as a means of private security. Similarly, she is not nostalgic for the close-knit urban community. Nor does she demonize the technology of smartphones, which are usually blamed for increasing people’s isolation in the city. Kern counters that headphones and smartphones can sometimes protect women from sexual harassment on city streets. In doing so, she often breaks with some of the stereotypes of urban research, such as the benevolence of neighbourhood communities. Instead, she promotes the right of women to be alone in public spaces in the city without fear of being exposed to any form of the deeply entrenched ‘rape culture’ (p. 9) that prevents them from living ‘full, free, and independent lives in the city’ (p. 150). These fears have not only individual physical and psychological consequences, but also socio-economic ones for both women and society as a whole.

The use of popular culture in the book makes it both easy to read and slightly questionable in terms of methodology. However, Kern manages to support her own life experiences, such as being a young university student or a new mother, with other secondary data and literature to balance the subjective and objective aspects of her research. Furthermore, her reliance on her own experiences of the city as a woman provides a more situated perspective on the issue, which is likely to be seen as a plus from a feminist standpoint. Another success of the book lies in its cautious approach to presenting what a feminist city looks like—or more normatively, how it should be—without creating a rosy scenario.

Overall, improving the existing feminist city and transforming it into a larger vision of an alternative requires active interventions that are spatial and social, public and private, planned and lived. This is how to avoid a misunderstanding of the

feminist city, such as carceral feminism. For this reason, *Feminist City: Claiming Space in a Man-Made World* celebrates the already existing ‘pockets of resistance or simply alternative ways of organizing care, work, food, and more’ (p. 173) and could therefore be of interest to a wide range of readers in the social sciences, gender studies, urban planning and women’s movements. The larger vision of a caring city is particularly relevant to everyone in our cities today, which are especially vulnerable to the man-made crises of ‘a heteropatriarchal capitalist system’ (p. 148).

Meriç Kırmızı, Ondokuz Mayıs University