



Book Review – *The Barcelona Reader:*

***Cultural Readings of a City*, by Enric Bou and Jaume Subirana (eds).**

Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017. 464 pp. £25.

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When Cerdà drew up his plans for Barcelona in the 19th Century, he envisaged a place where street and person were inextricably intertwined and where permeable neighbourhoods would allow spaces to become places and thereby encourage a new culture of interaction amongst their communities (Soria y Puig 1999). This is the concept on which urbanists base their modern perceptions of Barcelona, along, perhaps, with the popular images of the Catalan colours of Barcelona F.C., or the infamous image of Freddie Mercury serenading the world at the 1992 Olympics. However, this urban spectacle offers much more than Las Ramblas and Camp Nou. As Bou and Subirana's reader shows, Barcelona is a historic and dynamic city, whose story has roots in the nation state, football, language, film and more. For residents, Barcelona may be encapsulated in the unique social structure of the aforementioned localised neighbourhoods, and the tourists which may both sustain and threaten them. Barcelona's ancient and recent past is scrawled on its well-planned, geometric thoroughfares and plazas; the barest of walls, street corners and squares all tell a story which stretches from Ancient Rome to the recent glories of the Olympic Games. A cultural feast for both visitors and residents, the city is captured with depth and precision in *The Barcelona Reader*.

Bou and Subirana's reader is an ambitious attempt at conceptualising a complex urban area; however, from the outset, they appear to be ticking all of the obvious boxes. The compartmentalised and thematically laid out table of contents gives the reader an *amuse-bouche* of what is to come, as if one were exploring the food stalls of Le Bouquenegra market before making a decision on what to indulge upon for the main course. In this case, the offerings are correspondingly disparate and numerous: crime, film, graveyards, football, politics and governance and just about everything in between. Bou and Subirana's stated aim is to produce an up-to-date English representation of Barcelona as a city and a place (p. 3), an aim that those with an interest in Barcelona, for urban, spatial, cultural and socio-political

reasons, not to mention those frequenting as a tourist, will surely qualify as achieved. The prize offered by this reader is the discovery of Barcelona as more than the urbanist's model, as more than the sandy beaches and planned neighbourhoods, more than the startling diversity in food, architecture and people. Bou and Subirana's reader digs below the surface to reveal the real city, a discovery which satisfyingly complicates this model image. Issues surrounding political decision making, immigration, tourism and the ostensible crisis of the authentic are among the most salient topics explored.

It can be difficult for any text to cater to both casual and academic readers, a difficulty further complicated by the differences in terminology and theory inherent to adjacent, but ultimately distinct, specialities such as planning, cultural and urban geography and the social sciences. This reader is intended, however, for all, as Subirana and Bou state in their introduction, and succeeds in being a mostly jargon-free insight into the city which is suitable for both lay and academic audiences. This accessibility is, perhaps, its main achievement. Those who study and read about cities, people, places and spaces are particularly well catered to and the extensive bibliographies provide roadmaps for further reading.

Robert Davidson's essay, "Barcelona: The Siege City", opens *The Barcelona Reader* and describes a city in a crisis of the 'inauthentic'. The titular siege is not of a military bent, however, but a postmodern one, waged by the spectre of the 1992 Summer Olympics. In preparation for the Olympic games, Barcelona underwent much regeneration, mainly along its seafront. This physical regeneration was paired with a massive advertisement campaign which was intended to sell the city to those millions sitting at home. This legacy, initially welcomed due to the tourism and economic benefits, is now viewed by many as a blight on a city. Davidson argues that the legacy of the Olympics obscures the authentic and traditional with picturesque 'branding', a commodification which, he maintains, has leached the city of its identity and culture. Consider, for example, the polarisation present even in the stereotypical images used to sell the city: the manmade beaches of imported sand, a sea of selfie-sticks bobbing through the city's historic Las Ramblas, and the ever-present queues surrounding and obscuring La Sagrada Familia. Davidson suggests that the city "is becoming a zombie" and that it has, now, "finally been drained of its authenticity" (p. 41). This raises questions haunting not just Barcelona, but perhaps all world cities: in the age of unparalleled tourist, who is the city for?

The concerns that Davidson opens the reader with are not easily shaken off. Nevertheless, the reader does serve to alleviate greater fears in relation to the authentic, largely through showing one where it is still to be found. For this reviewer, familiar with

Barcelona in both personal and academic contexts, the most successful of these perspectives came from perhaps the most surprising of the authors: Irish novelist, poet and journalist Colm Tóibín. Tóibín's chapter, of all the chapters, brings the book together, acting as a welcome break for the casual reader, but providing more than enough content for those studying the socio-cultural elements of the city. Tóibín compares the people of Cataluña not to the Spanish (unsurprisingly), but, for their manner and dialogue, to the Irish.

Writing in the style of a *flâneur*, Tóibín flaunts a uniqueness in his detail and dialogue and draws the reader into a distinctly local account of the people and their mannerisms that is yet filtered through the perceptions of an outsider. Place, it is contended, can be rewardingly evoked from the everyday interactions of its peoples (Cresswell 2009). Tóibín's interactions with the people of Cataluña provide this insight into the everyday ways of the citizens of Barcelona and its hinterlands and will be of particular interest for those who study the interactions between people and place. Tóibín's, a perspective that works so well in an Irish context, works, too, for those from Cataluña (Bou and Subirana 2017).

The concept of place, studied closely today by the scholars such as Cresswell, Holloway and Hubbard, is a re-emerging area of investigation in spatial and human studies (most notably in geography). Subirana's own chapter engages this concept through an investigation of street naming, or "toponymy" (p. 80). This provides a novel and particularly detailed take on Barcelona: its people, their sense of place and their history. Street naming, in this instance, is used to disseminate Catalan history to younger generations (p. 77). Place is a powerful tool and has allowed those who take note of the signs above their heads to walk through the pages of history, making a living archive of the city. It also provides legibility in planning terms and a connection to the past for the people of Barcelona. For those interested in the idea of place, Subirana provides an interesting take on how Barcelona thereby conveys a sense of identity and belonging to past, current and future generations (Bou and Subirana 2017).

Overall, the reader provides an in-depth study of Barcelona, from its crimes and graveyards, to its grand streets, to the questions of authenticity and tourism, to the showcase of the 1992 Olympic games. This is a reader that achieves its *raison d'être*, covering a broad range of specialities and topics for just about everyone. Ultimately, *The Barcelona Reader* succeeds in capturing the true essence of the city.

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