REVIEW

‘Polarisation and cohesion in divided cities’

Diana Martin


Battles over identity, ideology and class are increasingly fought in cities. Various disciplines such as sociology, political science and history have engaged in the study and understanding of conflict in urban spaces in all its forms. While most of the literature on divided cities explores violence and the state of the conflict, very little is said about the processes that lead communities to grow apart or processes that instead can bring the city back together. As the focus remains on socio-political and psychological aspects of the conflict, only recently have scholars, especially architects and geographers, recognised the crucial role that the urban environment itself plays in urban conflicts and their peaceful resolution.

The Radicals’ City: Urban Environment, Polarisation, Cohesion by Ralph Brand and Sara Fregonese is a timely intervention into the debate that investigates processes of polarisation and cohesion. In their study of urban divisions and connections, the authors adopt an innovative integrated approach that brings together the socio-cultural and political perspectives along the urban materiality aspect of conflicts. As polarisation and cohesion literally ‘take place’ and ‘happen somewhere’, they are manifested in the urban environment through particular infrastructures that are not limited to buildings, walls, fences or bridges that may divide or connect residents (see Figure 1). The presence of territorial markers such as graffiti, stickers and posters express identity belonging as well as influence relations and decisions such as commuting routes or choices of where to live, to shop and socialise (see Figure 2).
Acknowledging that the urban environment has an agency too, the authors capture the relations between the human and non-human. On the one hand, the urban environment ‘mirrors’ social, economic and political conditions. On the other, it also ‘mediates’ and intervenes on social relations, behaviours and practices enhancing cohesion or polarisation.

Looking at four different cities (Belfast, Beirut, Berlin and Amsterdam) Brand and Fregonese investigate social and spatial dynamics and processes that lead to conflict or peaceful encounters. Guiding the readers through stories of conflicts and instances of cohesion, they explore the defensive architectures and artefacts of the cities as well as more recent projects that open up more neutral and shared spaces. They do so visually, by utilising several photographs taken by the authors themselves during their fieldworks which show both spatial and ideological divisions or connections. The account is also accompanied by the voices of interviewees which include ‘local politicians, planners, academics, community activists, NGO representatives, architects, shopkeepers, company managers, city councillors, victim organisations, artists, police officers and so-called extremists’ with whom the authors conducted 90 semi-structured interviews (13).

While Belfast and Beirut are part of a vast literature on divided cities, an innovative approach leads the authors to consider polarisation before violence and war may break out. The term polarisation is a loose and flexible concept that allows for the analysis of different kinds of divisions that are not necessarily determined by an open struggle. Better than radicalisation, that places blame on one group over another as it withdraws from a supposedly
mainstream position, the authors argue that polarisation is ‘a more relative phenomenon of mutual distancings’ of two poles (124).

The use of the concept of polarisation opens up new possibilities of investigation and understanding of division that look at conflict through the everyday accentuation of differences. The latter, if not opposed, might ultimately lead to more violent manifestations of identity or ideology. Beyond looking at the reality of cities that have been torn apart by violence such as Belfast and Beirut, the book also considers divisions in their early stages by looking at ‘the everyday dynamics by which people grow apart or come together in cities’ (2). Refusing the idea of a model and paradigmatic divided and polarised city (see also Allegra et al., 2012), Brand and Fregonese explore the everydayness of polarisation and cohesion in urban social and spatial practices and bring the divided cities literature into ordinary cities’ lives. The Radicals’ City shows how ordinary and peaceful cities like Amsterdam and Berlin may conceal degrees of polarisation. This analysis includes the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and xenophobic fears towards immigrants from Turkey and Morocco in Amsterdam, and the rise of the right-wing extremism in Berlin. Interestingly, Berlin is not analysed according to its past famous division embodied by the Wall, but investigated through contemporary manifestations of the neo-Nazi culture and the ways in which civil society has attempted to counteract it. Here, rather than materialising through fences, walls, or other physical infrastructures that would undermine and change the corporeal experience of the city, radicalisation is marked through smaller artefacts such as stickers, flags, graffiti and posters that determine political and ideological affiliations and often require careful decoding.

The discussion of polarisation and division, however, is also accompanied by attempts of depolarisation and instances of cohesion through the construction of shared and neutral spaces such as the Sterwartstown Road Regeneration Project of Belfast, the Beirut Mall, the opening of the Intercultural Garden Lichtenberg in Berlin (see Figure 2).
This book makes a particularly interesting link between the theory and the practice. Based on what the authors learnt from the four case studies, they urge policy-makers, urban planners and architects to seriously consider the importance of urban environment as a ‘mirror’, and also a ‘mediator’ of potential divisions and connections. While they recommend that practitioners and decision-makers involve local communities in any urban regeneration and renewal project, they also point out that if communities are not offered the instruments to take part in the decision-making process, participation would be destined to be unsuccessful. New urban projects should avoid and defuse instances of polarisation of different groups, and reduce their mutual suspicion facilitating peaceful encounters through the establishment of shared spaces.

While the extensive use of photographs guides the readers through the divisive or cohesive urban environment, perhaps less effective is sometimes the use of interviews. Given the anonymity of participants, at times it is unclear if the person interviewed is, for instance, a general resident, an architect or an urban planner (who might be aware of the spatial implications of certain infrastructures) or a local politician (who, for instance, might have an interest in maintaining polarised situation unchanged). These details would have clarified the level of awareness of each interviewee quoted, her role in society and agenda. As the authors themselves recognise, local knowledges and understanding are crucial to unravel meanings and codes and to find ways of avoiding conflict.

As the book already highlights through the case study of Amsterdam, polarisation may increasingly manifest itself through the social and spatial segregation of the immigrant. As Jon Calame, author with Esther Charlesworth of Divided Cities: Belfast, Beirut, Jerusalem, Mostar and Nicosia, suggests in his interview with the authors, looking at urban dynamics through the prism of the ghetto would be an interesting approach to capture the nature of
divisions. Segregation and encampment are increasingly part of the landscapes of many cities in Europe and beyond such as Roma camps punctuating French and Italian cities of Lille, Marseilles, Paris, Rome and Milan to mention but a few. As Calame points out, the Jewish ghetto ‘was like a “horribly brilliant” invention and unless we fully understand the brilliance and horribleness of that Jewish ghetto invention, we can’t fully understand the persistence and the recurrence of urban ethnic partitions today’ (168). As such, the case of Beirut is examined only in relation to polarisation and radicalisation taking place among Lebanon’s citizens over political and ideological affiliations. This focus may have occluded sensitive issues affecting the Lebanese context such as the undesired presence of Palestinian refugees and refugee camps spread in the periphery of the capital and the country, and the most recent flux of thousands of Syrian refugees.

Although the authors also considered Kuala Lumpur and Samarkand as potential case studies that in the end were not included in the project, with the exception of Beirut, all the cities examined are European. Future studies may want to investigate how processes of division and connection take place in the developing world where polarisation may also revolve around economic and social issues of displacement. In line with this, segregation and division may run along poverty lines. If growing inequality leads to social and spatial separation, what are the ways in which the urban environment and planning may respond to the widespread segregation typical of refugee camps, townships or gated communities? How can cohesion be promoted if we witness the rampant encroachment of private infrastructures on public spaces and the increasing establishment of gated communities? If anything, what could the de-polarising strategies be in public spaces and residential areas?

Written with the aim of sensitising readers to the crucial role that the urban environment plays in the enhancing and defusing of conflicts, the book is of interest for the general audience who, even without a particular disciplinary background, will acquire awareness on the ways in which social relations in cities operate and take place spatially. The book also appeals to an audience of academics of various disciplines focusing on division and connections in urban spaces. More importantly, it is a guide for practitioners (policy-makers, urban planners and architects) who are ready to translate de-polarising frameworks and ideas on the ground.

*The Radicals’ City* creates an invaluable bridge between disciplines (sociology, political science, history, geography and architecture) and perhaps, even more so, between academics and practitioners. It is a connection that should be taken forward in future researches and projects of urban renewal and regeneration taking place in any ordinary city.

**References**

Diana Martin is Visiting Academic at the Centre for African Studies at the University of Cape Town, South Africa. Email: dianamartin.int@gmail.com