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Port cities and global legacies – Alice MAH (2014)

Book review – César Ducruet, May 21th 2015

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This book by Alice Mah entitled “Port cities and global legacies” provides a comparative perspective on the changing urban identity of three Western port cities, namely Liverpool, Marseilles, and New Orleans in the contemporary period. After a useful introduction situating her work throughout a variety of social sciences, the structure of the book is made of three transversal thematic chapters addressing issues of imagination and identity, and three other chapters focusing on specific events that occurred in each city. Overall, the book unravels important ties between various - and often unexplored - dimensions of port cities, associating labor issues with history, memory, sense of place, arts, and planning.

This book definitely helps port city research breathing new air. Not because it is the first essay of the kind – the author rightfully acknowledges her own indebt to former works on dockworkers in port cities, but rather, Alice Mah’s novelty lies in a much cross-disciplinary focus on the complexity of port-related labor and urban issues. At center stage are people, their voice and memory. This contribution taking into account emotions, beliefs, colors and sounds is a much appreciated “tactile” approach, far from the more classical and descriptive approach to waterfronts as places where high-rise buildings replace formerly vibrant harbors (Vermeersch, 1997). Rather, this book concentrates on the remaining original places and people having something to show and to say about not only past but current port activity, with a look at possible futures. It is not confined to the other, already gentrified, areas which are caricatures of the port city when trying to resemble its former sailortown to attract more tourists and white collars. The comparison of Marseilles, Liverpool, and New Orleans is meaningful as each city echoes the others in many aspects, from prosperity to decline and revival.

At the same time, containerization might have been too quickly categorized by the author as “bad” or going against the “good” local culture. The transition from sail to steam also had its damages long ago and the same goes for every technological evolution across history (Marnot, 2005). People who speak in the book are certainly aware of the impossibility to stop technological progress as it is simply constituent of our societies. The dichotomy between *bad bosses* and *good workers* is quite recurrent and this is perhaps caused by the majority of the voice given to unionized workers who tend to repeat the same discourse from one port to the other, notwithstanding local peculiarities. Less bipolar views could have been beneficial to the present volume if integrated, in a sense that they opened the framework to multiple actors’ views on urban-port transformations and their related politics (see Brocard, 2000; Fouilland, 2003; Rodrigues-Malta, 2004). Yet, this book is a useful companion to anyone interested in the social dimension of urban and transport studies. Well-written and concise, it is accessible to a large audience without necessarily a strong academic background.

Nevertheless, the book leaves us with a strong and firm desire to know more what is or could be the good or ideal port city, where maritime identity and jobs have been preserved from ruination. Based on only three case studies, this book carries universal value as the observed phenomena apply to most other large port cities of the world, bearing in mind differences in scope and pace of transformation. Further defining how ports and cities can act in order to stop their cultural and social hemorrhage instead of glorifying their past and diluting themselves in a futuristic global waterfront

model is worth of investigation, and the book of Alice Mah is certainly a great leap forward in such a direction.

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