

Why we should look at space, and more closely at cities

The importance of space in the critical study of society is finally being increasingly recognized after centuries of neglect, mainly thanks to the work of geographers who are trying to emphasize it as an advantageous and insightful standpoint to look at all other human sciences. The fact itself that it was neglected for so long makes it today an almost untouched treasure trove of new perspectives that can add so much to disciplines like history, politics, sociology or cultural studies. Positioning the inquisitive eye in the cities, streets and neighborhoods where politics, artistic movements, social changes – and, more broadly, history – happened allows for an understanding of the movements of people and ideas in space, and of how these influenced and determined historical events. European history, for example, is generally studied and taught as a chain of events led by the great kings and politicians in power, in the form of wars, treaties, changes in political parties, etc.. The histories of countless and nameless individuals that heavily contributed to changes and innovations has so far been by and large ignored.

Leif Jerram's history book *Streetlife* is, in this sense, a revolution in the way history is looked at: he investigates topics ranging from politics to culture, from planning to gender and sexual relations, choosing the perspective of the "street": he plunges into the places and spaces where those histories were made (street corners, bars, brothels, nightclubs, squares, etc.), focusing not so much on the "great individuals" as on the "nameless ones". He investigates topics that have been lengthily studied before, but from a new, spatial – and, more specifically, urban – perspective, adding a great deal to what we already knew.

Jerram opens his book with an apologia of his spatial perspective, using the comparison of the "crime scene" that I found extremely convincing: if history is to be reconstructed and understood, like a crime, then the places where history is made should be taken as much into consideration for historical investigations as the crime scene is for criminal ones. Place holds, Jerram says, "crucial clues" that should be uncovered and analyzed. But the importance of space in human and societal analysis goes beyond that. Places, streets, and squares don't only contain clues about what happened in its aftermath; the study of specific environments prior to and during the historical events that took place in them can also reveal factors that contributed to the causality of these events, because of the significant effect that specific environments have on the people who live in them and on their actions.

In a nutshell, the study of the specificity of a place after, during, and before things happen can be revealing as to what happened, how it happened, and also why it happened. Policies elaborated by governments in golden palaces around Europe (what a good deal of historical studies has so far centered on) are not independent from what had happened/was happening on the streets around them; they are instead intrinsically conditioned by such events and environments, and Jerram's approach allows us to see this connection and thus to explain politics and history from a more truthful, bottom-up perspective.

Cities in particular can offer a very insightful perspective on the spatially-oriented study of social sciences. This is partly due to their growing importance since the 19th century: increasing urbanization resulted into a booming growth in their scale, and contemporarily – and not at all independently – intensifying globalization turned them into international portals, boosting their global relevance. The resulting interest in urban planning and studies has stimulated the government's faith and commitment in the shaping of the urban landscape, in an effort to consequently shape an "orderly" society; therefore, public policies can increasingly be understood through the study of places and of the built environments they produced.

But for some scholars cities are intrinsically crucial to the understanding of society and its development, and they have always been so. Jerram sees city streets as “points of encounter” that “witness rendezvous between big and small”, between the king and the ordinary man; this happens specifically in cities because they represent at the same time residential, productive, and administrative centers, thus clustering the people implicated in these activities into one common space. Jane Jacobs describes cities, because of their spatial clustering, as intrinsically economically advantageous, and at the basis of all wealth, arguing that “without cities we would all be poor”. Edward Soja puts cities at the top in the scale of causalities for all of human civilization, and calls their generative force “synekism”.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)