

## **The Routledge History Handbook of Gender and the Urban Experience**

DEBORAH SIMONTON (Ed.) 2017

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*The Routledge History Handbook of Gender and the Urban Experience* explores how towns and cities have shaped, and been shaped by, cultural, spatial and gendered influences across a collection of 36 essays spanning the fourteenth to the twentieth century, in European, North American and colonial contexts. The volume considers the intersections and interactions between gender and urban history, successfully bringing together ‘issues of urban development, gendered identities and the relationship between these and human experience’ (p. 2).

*Gender and the Urban Experience* emerged from the ‘Gender in the European Town’ research network, brought together in order to ‘interject gender into urban historiography and therefore alter perspectives on urban identity and development’, and in this respect the *Handbook* certainly achieves its goal (p. xxiv). The resulting volume is arranged into six thematic parts covering economy, circulations and exchanges; space, place and environment; civic identity and political culture; objects, artefacts and material culture; intimacy and emotion; and the colonial town. Each of these sections offer both a detailed analysis of individual towns and case studies, and a broader consideration of urban development and the interactions between ‘nation’, region and the colonial and urban context.

Part one offers an overview of gender and the urban environment from an economic perspective, considering the multiple ways men and women understood and expressed their relationship to the gendered urban economy. The six essays in this section pay particular attention to work as a major social resource for operation and negotiation in the gendered urban economy, and together provide a good foundation for the following sections.

As Doreen Massey has highlighted, ‘space and place, spaces and places, and our senses of them ... are gendered through and through’, and the essays in part two invite the reader to consider the interplay of gender, space, place and identity across a diverse range of case studies.<sup>1</sup> Katie Barclay’s work on the spaces of seduction in early nineteenth-century Britain, Sanne Muurling and Marion Pluskota’s study of the gendered geography of violence in Bologna, and Amanda Flather’s chapter on male servants and identity in eighteenth century England all question the relevance of separate spheres for understanding gendered experiences of urban space, and further complicate the narrative of a sharp distinction between public and private. Along with the other chapters in this section, they continue the revision of the separate spheres model, and examine towns and cities as places of performance and experience.

As section editor Nina Javette Koefoed highlights, a focus on female and universal suffrage has to some extent put forward a narrative of women being excluded from formal political rights and citizenship, which has often made historians ‘overlook both the men excluded ... and the women included in different ways and degrees’ (p. 167). The chapters in part three of

the volume consider the relationship between political institutions and gender, and focus instead on the various political transactions that took place outside official institutions. The essays here cover a particularly broad geographic and chronological scope, with Sarah Rees Jones's chapter examining women and citizenship in medieval York, and Niels Nyegaard's contribution documenting questions over sexuality, civic identity and citizenship in Copenhagen in the early twentieth century.

Essays in part four of the *Handbook* examine material culture in gendered urban settings, offering detailed readings of a variety of sources, objects and contexts, drawing out themes of consumption, materiality and the body. Renata Ago's opening chapter sets the stage for the rest of the essays in this section by arguing that a focus on material goods can offer new ways of understanding the gendered urban experience. Similarly, in part five, the overarching theme of the contributions is that a close examination of the relationship between space, place and human emotion can shed new light on the ways that emotions have both informed gendered urban experiences, and are shaped by these experiences.

The final part of the *Handbook* focuses on the experience of gender in Europe's colonial towns, considering the various ways scholarship on urban life has contributed to understandings of gender in the context of European colonialism. Spanning an impressive range of geographic locations, periods, and imperial powers, the final contributions to the collection reveal the complexities of urban colonial encounters, and draw attention to the distinctiveness of urban colonial experiences and gendered identities.

*The Routledge History Handbook of Gender and the Urban Experience* brings together a broad collection of essays. Its scope is remarkably diverse, and it offers something for readers with a range of geographical and temporal interests. While not always completely harmonious, the *Handbook* manages to successfully highlight the individual dynamics of each case study, and offer insights into the connections and exchanges between urban cultures. Simonton and her section editors are to be commended for bringing to the fore the links between such varied chapters, though perhaps a conclusion to the volume would have allowed the connections between these diverse parts to be further drawn out. Overall, the *Handbook* is a vast and empirically rich collection of essays, which is a valuable resource for researchers, and will undoubtedly be informative for both scholarship and teaching. Students interested in gender, urban history and their relationship will also find much here, and will particularly benefit from the helpful advice for further reading included at the end of the book. The collection makes an outstanding contribution to our understanding of the gendering of urban experiences, spaces, and places, and what ultimately resonates throughout the volume is the exciting range and variety of current work on gender in an urban context.

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<sup>1</sup> Doreen Massey (1994) *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity), p. 3.