

Review

Marie Huchzermeyer (2011) *Tenement Cities: from 19th century Berlin to 21st century Nairobi*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press

Garth Myers

garth.myers@trincoll.edu

This is an unusual book. It is unique, yet it may be the start of a new trend. Huchzermeyer has produced an empirically rich, robust comparison of two cities seldom placed on the same comparative plane, Berlin and Nairobi, with a focus, obviously, on the phenomenon of tenement housing. It is provocative on a theoretical level as well. Moreover, with the increasing calls for different sorts of comparisons within comparative urban studies in the 21st century, it is encouraging to see such an ambitious attempt genuinely to do a different sort of comparison.

I must admit I was on the side of the Kenyan scholars who expressed initial skepticism about this project when I approached the book for the first time. Huchzermeyer notes in her acknowledgements (p ix) that ‘In Nairobi, I initially had difficulty convincing my counterparts that I was not equating contemporary Kenya with 19th century Prussia or Germany’. It seemed to me, too, that there was a danger in seeming to say Nairobi is repeating 150 year-old patterns, where stale stages-of-development thinking or even paternalism might be lurking. Happily, Huchzermeyer mostly works her way around or out of these lurking dangers both through her careful, extensive and intensive research and through her lively, cogent engagement with radical urban theory. The latter aspect is particularly welcome for its tangible connection of theoretical concepts like the Lefebvrian notion of the right to the city to actual policy and everyday politics.

Following her introduction and a chapter reviewing the Anglophone literature on tenements (dominated by discussion of New York and Scotland), Huchzermeyer divides her book into sections on tenements in Berlin (three

chapters) and 20th/21st century Nairobi (three considerably longer chapters). Her relatively brief conclusion speculates on the potential role of tenement housing in urban futures around the world.

The chapters on Berlin are based on extensive archival research and the use of secondary sources in the German language. Although her book's subtitle mentions '19th century' Berlin, she takes the story of tenements in the city through the 20th century into the early 21st as well. The broader context of that story is, of course, one of the most well-known urban stories in the history of the world, but the rise and fall of Hitler's Nazi regime and then of the Soviet-allied East German regime and its dividing wall are narratives seldom discussed (other than perhaps by Friedrich Engels) with the intent of foregrounding tenement housing. Her main focus is the 19th century planning processes in Berlin which gave rise to the tenements, and her fieldwork and archival research lend depth and nuance to her argument, particularly in the case study of a tenement at 40 *Liebenwalder Strasse*. Her reconstruction of community and street life in that time in the city, particularly via her engagement with Heinrich Zille's cartoons, is quite lively and interesting. She very much gets inside Berlin-centered debates.

The Nairobi chapters move the reader swiftly, but thoroughly, through the post-independence expansion of the city. Huchzermeyer is well read in the extensive literature on housing and politics for Kenya's capital. As she does in the Berlin chapters, she grounds her study in the debates within this literature, connecting the narrative of tenement effectively to the broader context. As with Berlin, the case study method is usefully deployed; here, it is for two tenement areas – Huruma and Umoja Inner Core. Again, the analysis is rich, the research excellent. Chapter eight's close-in analysis based around mapping, interviewing and observation is especially rewarding reading for bringing out the everyday existence of people in tenements in these two areas – it is the longest chapter, by some way. The historical geography of planning in Nairobi more broadly is outstanding, with its focus in tracing out tenement development.

Although both city-studies are exemplary, I found the three Nairobi chapters more compelling. Some of the reasons for that are no doubt related to my interest in African urbanisms, and others related to the contemporaneity of the Nairobi side of the book. But this reaction did also cause me to wonder at the end of the book, again, what the ultimate purpose was behind making the comparison that Huchzermeyer has made. Despite great differences in the time periods upon which she focuses for the two cities, and

in the character of the respective urbanisms, it is striking indeed to see the extraordinary similarities in tenement housing – physically, functionally, and socially – between old Berlin and new Nairobi. But the comparison also raises old ideographic-nomothetic tensions for me. Berlin's and Nairobi's urban stories seem so particular that comparability and reproducibility come into question. She seems to want to use yesteryear's Berlin to offer a cautionary tale to today's Nairobi. But which trajectories are there that are inevitably there from one century to the next in such dramatically different cities? What do we do with the huge gaps between these urban dynamics - from Bismarckian politics through Nazism, the Soviet era, and reunification's gentrification, when compared to colonialism, the Kenyatta regime, Moi's Nyayoism and the gangster ethnopolitics of today in Nairobi? Huchzermeyer hints and comparative conclusions along the way, but her book's actual conclusion lacks the sort of robust stock-taking I expected for the purported comparison. It left me feeling, in some ways, like I had just read two excellent books.

At the same time, Huchzermeyer's conclusion does, in fact, do some justice to the comparison by disclaiming the value of linear, progressive historical accounts. She also makes plain her deeper concern for the tenement dynamics of Nairobi, and the future of those dynamics. Primarily, this results in her strong argument for bringing Nairobi's growing private tenements much more firmly into the debates in planning circles on the city's future. In valorizing tenements, without romanticizing them, Huchzermeyer offers opportunities for seeing the cry and demand (as Lefebvre would have put it) for the right to the city purposefully engaged by the ordinary residents and their networks of affinity in these mixed-blessing structures in the city.