

Title—Imperial Cities: Landscape, Display and Identity

Authors—Felix Driver and David Gilbert

Year—1999

Categories: Urban History, Colonialism/Imperialism, Europe, Culture

Place: Europe

Time: 1800-Present

Argument Synopsis:

This essay collection is concerned with the ways in which the experience of empire and urbanism intersect by exploring the role of imperialism in the cultural history of the modern European metropolis. Overall, the collection argues for more attention to be paid to the ways that imperialism has shaped the modern European city. Driver and Gilbert have brought together contributors from across several disciplines to consider a range of urban settings, including London, Rome, Vienna, Glasgow, Marseilles, and Seville. The contributors consider both cities that have long claimed their imperial role and those who are not usually thought of as imperial. Some of the chapters are concerned with a specific monument or exhibition, while others are more concerned with how imperial identities were composed, reproduced, and contested. The collection is concerned specifically with nineteenth and twentieth century forms of imperialism, rather than its predecessors. The collection seeks to fill a perceived gap in the literature, the editors argue that the modern imperial city has been neglected in favor of studies on the formation of the colonial city.

Driver and Gilbert argue that the ways in which monuments and landscapes were actually used and understood frequently departed from the intentions of their designers. They are critical of the postcolonial perspective in terms of study of the city, claiming that there is a tendency to underestimate the historical diversity and geographical heterogeneity of imperial cultures. Importantly, the editors note that the relationship between imperial culture and urban space worked out differently across European cities, thus it is impossible to speak of a homogenous European imperialism. The essays explore the role of imperialism in shaping the history and geography of a variety of modern European cities and are grouped into three sections. The first section, Imperial Landscapes, considers some of the ways in which the design of urban landscapes articulated competing visions of the imperial city, including large-scale planning and architectural schemes, urban design, and public monuments. The second section, Imperial Display, considers the role of various forms of visual display, including pageants, imperial exhibitions, suburban gardens, in the cultural life of metropolitan imperialism. The third section, Imperial Identities, is concerned with the association between imperial identities and the history of urban space in a variety of European cities.

A key theme in the collection is the association of different aspects of empire not only with different cities, but also with different parts of cities. The collection is not attempting to provide a universal survey of the imperial city, but rather to open an agenda for students of urbanism and imperialism. The social history of European cities is, in part, a history of migration and movement, and this history cannot be fully appreciated without understanding the cities' imperial role.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- The culture of imperialism left a substantial impact on the histories and landscapes of the modern European city
- National debates over imperial urbanism were conditioned by understandings of the global reach of empire
- The form, use, and representation of modern European cities has been shaped by the global history of imperialism