

## Book Review: The Nocturnal City by Robert Shaw

When it comes to understanding ‘night’ as a sociological and geographical phenomenon and integral component of urban life, we remain somewhat ‘in the dark’. A number of pertinent questions demand further exploration; how do lighting and infrastructure create, shape and define the boundaries of contemporary urban night in ways that might both mimic and contrast with day? How is life after dark changing as urban capitalism expands and continues to encroach on what we understand as night? And what can an exploration and conceptualisation of night tell us about urban and planetary life more widely? Such questions preoccupy Shaw in his quest to bring to light some of the ways in which exploring night extends our understanding of global urban life more generally. Using night as a lens through which to explore different aspects of the contemporary city, Shaw takes as a premise the idea that the world is indeed largely urbanised, but studying ‘night’ helps to reveal some of the ‘borderlands’ and limits of these urban worlds.

Of course, previous work within the social sciences has taken place against the backdrop of night (obvious examples include work on the Night Time Economy and women’s safety). But this previous work rarely takes ‘night’ itself as the point of focus. In this sense, Shaw offers a refreshing twist on some familiar nocturnal sites such as the NTE, but also sheds light on more neglected areas (most notably, the home at night). The result is a somewhat eclectic but interesting collection of chapters as we journey from a focus on urban lighting and infrastructure to place marketing, and from Taiwanese night markets to domestic spaces. Whilst united of course by a focus on the nocturnal and night, the diverse chapters cover a broad range of topics and examples. However, as Shaw himself acknowledges, there remain significant gaps in our understandings of – for example – the rural night, and night outside of Eurocentric, Western contexts (Shaw’s own brief case studies on topics such as karaoke in Uganda represent a welcome exception here). Throughout the book, the everyday, lived experiences of those who inhabit and encounter the urban night – and the ways this is shaped by gender, race, class etc. - are also somewhat superseded by a focus on atmosphere, infrastructure and the *processes* of creating urban nocturnal space. Similarly, those seeking an in-depth exposition of a single case study or a detailed account of primary research should look elsewhere; rather, this book marks a culmination of Shaw’s previous work and adopts something of a theoretical focus, albeit one that is sporadically brought to life through illuminating and diverse case studies.

In *The Nocturnal City*, Shaw convincingly offers up the notion of night as a ‘fragmenting frontier’ (p. 26), locating night as contradictory, complex and simultaneously outside of and within contemporary urban life and also at the border of the social (cultural, political) and the natural (biological, geographical and astronomical). Whilst we might tend to think of frontiers as *spatial* boundaries, Shaw builds a compelling case for considering the *temporal* boundaries of urban life throughout this book. This new and revitalised ‘nightology’ (p. 117) marks a timely and welcome contribution to our understanding of ‘night’, cities and planetary urbanism.