

BOOK REVIEW SECTION

Kern, L.: *Feminist City: Claiming Space in a Man-made World*. London and New York, Verso, 2020. 204 p.

Leslie KERN is an associate professor of geography and women's and gender studies at Mount Allison University, Canada, and she writes about gender, gentrification, and feminism and teaches urban, social, and feminist geography. In her recent book *Feminist City*, published in 2020, she explores the man-made city drawing on her own experiences as a woman living in different urban contexts (including Toronto, London, and New York). She reflects on her experience as a girl, a woman, a friend, and a mother, utilising the growing and diverse knowledge accumulated by feminist and critical urban researchers and geographers.

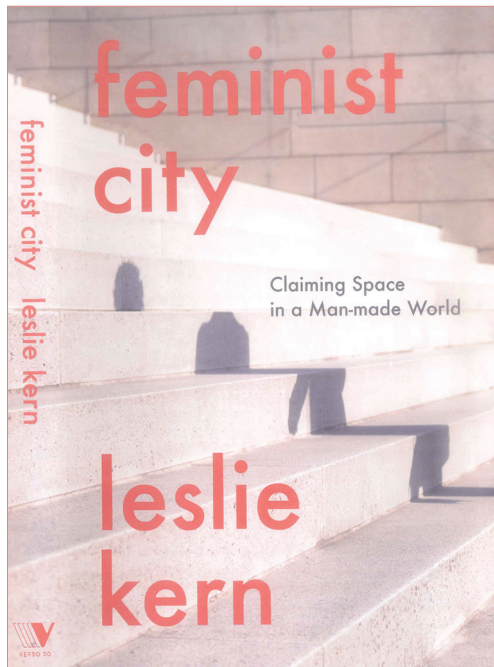
The present book review takes the opportunity to go beyond summarising this extraordinary book, and it aims to highlight the rejection (or at least lack of engagement with) feminism and feminist theories in the context of Hungary in the field of geography and outside. Anti-feminist and anti-gender sentiments are embedded in popular and political discourses internationally, in Central and Eastern Europe, and

in Hungary in particular (GRZEBALSKA, W. and PETŐ, A. 2018). This is especially relevant in countries like Hungary, where feminist movements were never as strong as the rhetoric that claimed their threat to traditional national values. Feminism critiques the patriarchal structure of society (thus, the fact that men dominate decision-making and traditionally masculine characteristics enable one to hold power), and it highlights what's wrong with patriarchy and how it leads to gendered and other forms of inequalities. Gender has become an important concept for feminists to be able to discuss inequalities that are the result of socialisation and social (power) relations. Within feminism, there are many trends and approaches that are often in conflict with each other. However, feminism is by no means limited to the critique of gender inequality, but it is concerned with racism, classism, ableism, and other forms of inequalities as well.

Feminist urban research or feminist geography still barely made it to Hungary. Judit TIMÁR (1993, 2019) has written about feminist geography and women in geography in 1993 first and since then, she has incorporated a feminist perspective into her research. Nevertheless, feminism and feminist theory are still greatly missing from geography in Hungary (SÁGI, M. 2018; TIMÁR, J. 2018). Therefore, this review also hopes to highlight the variety of research areas which could benefit from feminist approaches.

KERN is not only concerned with gendered inequalities, but by drawing on intersectional feminist ontology, she is able to highlight inequalities that are produced in cities, predominantly, designed by a very narrow segment of society: white, able-bodied, affluent men. While this book engages with feminist epistemology, it is not a traditional academic book presenting research articles in a traditional manner, but it is structured around the personal experiences of the author as a woman in the city and utilises popular culture. Therefore, the *Feminist City* is accessible to a wide audience and able to engage not only academic readers interested in gender and urban studies but anyone open to reflecting on the everyday urban experience of women and other marginalised groups from a critical perspective.

The *Introduction: City of Men* starts with establishing the relevance of women's experience as a distinctive experience of the city. KERN starts with a personal reflection on moving to Toronto from the suburbs to start university just like her brother did, highlighting



the inherent differences in city life for the two: “our experiences of city life have been vastly different. I doubt Josh has ever had to walk home with his keys sticking out from his fist or been shoved for taking up too much space with a baby stroller. Since we share the same skin colour, religion, ability, class background, and a good chunk of our DNA, I have to conclude that gender is the difference that matters.” (p. 2). Following the introduction, KERN structured the book into five chapters each focusing on a perspective of women experiencing the city: *City of Moms*, *City of Friends*, *City of One*, *City of Protest*, *City of Fear*.

City of Moms discusses the struggles women face from pregnancy through child rearing while living in the city. Discussing changes in the way one perceives their own body as well as the way that body navigates the wider environment. “If you’ve ever been pregnant, the ‘geography closest in’ gets real strange, fast. Suddenly, you’re someone else’s environment.” (p. 22). Pregnancy contributes to the lack of anonymity and invisibility women experience in the city; it makes women’s bodies public property that can be touched and discussed even by complete strangers. The chapter summarises the existing literature on feminist urban research concerned with the long-discussed public/private, suburbia/city centre divide that has defined women’s and men’s places and activities in the context of US and UK middle classes (e.g., Jane JACOBS, Linda McDOWELL, Susan SAEGART), the gentrification led by middle-class families moving back to the city choosing and/or forced into two-earner family model. It discusses the everyday experiences of breastfeeding, walking, and commuting around the city with pushchairs and small children on narrow, wobbly sidewalks and so on. The chapter, however, is not stuck with the experiences of white, middle-class women, but emphasises the importance of intersectional approaches, reinforcing that a feminist approach to the city must always be concerned with any forms of oppression, including race, class and ability, considering the distinctive circumstance of mothers. KERN argues that in order to achieve a feminist city, it “must be care-centred not because women should remain largely responsible for care work, but because the city has the potential to spread care work more evenly” (p. 54).

City of Friends starts with the image of the four friends of the *Sex and City* TV series. The then-revolutionary set is centred around female friendship. The TV show presents the idea that The City (New York) is actually not just a location, but the fifth friend. As KERN refers to WUNKER, E. (2016), focusing on female friendship has revolutionary potential as it depicts an alternative to the nuclear family, to gendered roles and “defies patriarchal logic”. It takes the focus away from traditional female reproductive roles and reimagines love outside of heteronormative (or even homonormative) relations as a primary organiser of everyday life and motivations.

KERN highlights the increasing depiction of female friendship in popular culture that goes beyond the

floppy friendship overpowered by love interests and jealousy, enclosed in the bedrooms of white-middle-class girls. Recent portrayals are more likely to be placed in a public urban environment. These stories are also more likely to allow girls (with diverse socio-economic, and racial backgrounds) to take up and claim their space in the city. As KERN writes “[p]erhaps imagining the city centred on friendship seems impossible simply because of this: if women dedicated even a little bit more of their love, labour, and emotional support to their friend networks, the system – as men know it – would come crashing down. It’s a radical prospect to consider, and one that profoundly decentres both the family and the state” (p. 86).

City of One is concerned with the personal lived experience of the city as women by themselves negotiate their everyday lives. Elizabeth WILSON (1995) refers back to Victorian London where moral panic surrounding women’s increased visibility on the street can be best highlighted referring to sex workers as “public women”. Thus, the idea was that women alone on the streets would be mistaken for being poor or being a sex worker.

KERN warns the reader about the easy trap of romanticisation of past public spaces without new technologies where allegedly people were more sociable with each other. She argues that – like popular discourses around anti-social children and the destruction caused to “bonds of civility and sociability that hold human societies together” (p. 87) – urban researchers also subscribe to this sentiment. While blaming smartphones and headphones for the lack of participation in public life and hostile cities, such equipment is in fact enabling more comfortable access to the urban space for many. As KERN writes: “I love having my headphones and music with me in the city too, but for me and many other women, they provide more than a form of entertainment. They may be small, but they create a social barrier against the all-too regular and almost always unwanted intrusions of men. It’s impossible to know how many unwelcome conversations and incidents of street harassment I’ve avoided or been unaware of because of my headphones” (p. 88).

Being alone under such circumstances is a privilege. Women often feel made to feel like “guests” in their own city, people of colour as trespassers or criminals, and disabled people often experience well-meaning, but unwanted physical contact from strangers persisting to helping without consent (e.g., by taking the hand of a visually impaired person).

City of Protest draws on the idea of “the right to the city”. For KERN, like many, participation in protests brings a “sense of belonging in the city”, while confirming a “righteous indignation at the widespread injustices” that affect one personally, but also the “lives of millions of others”. She argues that activism is at the core of achieving the feminist city, as marginalised groups are unlikely just to be presented with – “freedom, rights, recognition, resources – without a struggle” (p. 118).

Examples throughout history and across geographies have highlighted that in most cases women's life in cities (and otherwise) got better through activist movements: "For me – [KERN writes] – activist spaces are my greatest teachers. I wouldn't be able to articulate what a feminist city aspires to without those experiences. I've learned a lot about how to protest over the years, but more importantly, I've learned that a feminist city is one you have to be willing to fight for" (p. 141).

The fifth chapter, *City of Fear*, is the most relevant to my own research (SÁGI, M. 2022) and perhaps this has been one of the most discussed topics in academia when it comes to women and the city. The idea of "female fear" is so embedded in socialisation that it has been often mistaken for being an innate trait of girls and women. Understanding and mapping fear of crime has been a focus for many social scientists for many decades, where surveys have piled data on where, when, and from whom women fear. "Study after study produced similar patterns: women identified cities, night-time, and strangers as primary sources of threat" (p. 145). Nevertheless, the concern over women's fear (and safety) in the city has brought a paradox that was already clear by the 1990s: Data has suggested that while women are significantly more likely to be abused and harassed by people they know (including home and workplace) than in public space, men are more likely to experience crimes in public spaces (assault and mugging). At the same time, studies have consistently reported that women are more afraid of strangers in public spaces. This has been conceptualised as the "paradox of women's fear", often characterising women's feelings as "irrational" and "unexplained" (p. 145). KERN, drawing on existing literature, collects the multiple arguments that dissolve this alleged paradox and irrationality and highlights that the paradox exists only when gendered power structures are ignored. One of these arguments is that "the crime women most fear is rape. The crime men most fear is robbery. Robbery is a bad thing to have happen to you. Rape is worse" (p. 146). Socialisation from early childhood throughout women's life course has a major effect on fear in public. Warnings from significant others, teachers and peers are further reinforced by media representation (both fiction and news reporting), implying that stranger danger is always around.

Meanwhile, domestic violence and abuse by acquaintances are tabooed and receive much less public attention, in media coverage, educational environment and from significant others. As KERN writes, the feminist explanation for this phenomenon is that women's fear is being directed outward strengthens the patriarchal power structure and women's dependence on the nuclear family and the reinforcement of the image of home as the space of security.

In the chapter it is emphasised that fear limits women's everyday experiences of the city, accumulating a variety of hidden costs. This includes time and energy-consuming measures, such as getting off the subway

earlier, taking longer routes, avoiding shortcuts through parks, pretending to be on the phone, and squeezing keys in our fists. The combination of these self-imposed measures adds up to exhausting everyday routines. Fear also affects financial decisions, including paying more for cabs to get home safely or paying more for housing in order to live in a more secure area or building.

Where (else) does space come into this? – KERN asks the question to further reinforce the important role of geography. – Drawing on Gill VALENTINE, she writes that geography in fact provides potential control over fear. It is impossible to control *whom* we encounter on the streets; it is also unlikely that we can control *when* we go from one place to another. However, we have some control over what routes we take, consequently, we (dis)place our fears onto specific locations within the city, such as alleys and underpasses. Therefore, women's fear in public space is far from irrational, "we're accurately reflecting the messages society has drilled into us" (p. 149).

It is an important message of this chapter that fear cannot be just "designed out" of the city; the physical environment and social power relations are tightly connected. The chapter is closed with the statement that there is no perfect recipe for the feminist city that is safe and comforting. Nevertheless, KERN argues that it won't require private or governmental safety measures and it definitely won't be achieved by sacrificing marginalised groups (e.g., homeless people) for the needs of more privileged women.

KERN concludes with the chapter titled *City of Possibility* and closes the book with the following thoughts: "The feminist city is an aspirational project, one without a "master" plan that in fact resists the lure of mastery. The feminist city is an ongoing experiment in living differently, living better, and living more justly in an urban world" (p. 167).

I highly recommend Leslie KERN's book, the *Feminist City*, to everyone interested in feminist urbanism and geography, and even more so to those who are not interested in it, to those who believe it is not relevant to our realities, to those who think negatively about feminism – in academia and otherwise. This book should not be dismissed in the context of Hungary on the grounds that it is not relevant to the Central and Eastern European context. Keeping in mind the diversity of women's experiences, I hope that this book review was able to highlight some of the topics that make it clear that the *Feminist City* has great explanatory potential for urban life in the context of Hungary and, more broadly, in Central and Eastern Europe.

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