

a e t h e r
the journal of media geography

Book Review
***City of Rhetoric: Revitalizing the
Public Sphere in Metropolitan America***

David Flemming
Albany, State University of New York Press, 2009

Reviewed by

RON DAVIDSON

California State University, Northridge

CITIES ARE MEDIA. THROUGH CIRCUITRIES OF PRIVATE and public spaces, densely intermingled urban populations transmit and receive an incessant flow of symbolic messages—architectural, verbal, gestural and written, intended and unintended, direct and implied, graspable and unintelligible—night and day, block after block, from end to end of the urban grid.

Geographers (and others) have been keen to examine how cities, as media, are subject to manipulation by powerful, ideologically-driven actors, the economic elites and bureaucrats most capable of shaping urban reality. What remains less than fully developed in this work, and what David Fleming's *City of Rhetoric* begins to invoke, is a specifically rhetorical approach to theorizing the city-as-media. The book's appearance highlights how studies of urban-based symbols tend to under-theorize or bracket out rhetoric. Radical geographers employing Gramscian assumptions are intentional bracketers. (It is their point that the dominant class's worldview becomes encoded into the common-sense assumptions of others without having earned its way in through persuasive argument.) But even geographers who emphasize the individual's agency in interpreting and contesting symbolic communications tend to address rhetoric itself implicitly or obliquely.

Fleming's *City of Rhetoric* is a welcome invitation to adopt rhetorical theory in urban geography. Unfortunately, and rather bizarrely, however, Fleming himself, a professor of English at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, fails to interrogate

the rhetorical spaces of the city except in a few almost comically-perfunctory chapter summaries after promising much more than that in his introduction (and book title). He delves back into rhetorical theory towards the end of the book, with an apology to the reader for having gone off track in the intervening pages. As Fleming is an authority on rhetoric, and perhaps a master of its use, we are justified in speculating about his intentions. Does he have a hidden purpose? Does he skillfully execute an obscure plan? Might the rhetorician be arousing suspicions about his own text by design? While admitting this as a possibility (though towards what end I daren't conjecture), I advance a more cautious theory: Fleming has welded two separate projects together, without quite managing to integrate them into a cohesive whole. Both are worthy, but held rather awkwardly together.

Project 1: In his introductory and concluding chapters, Fleming integrates political and spatial theory in an effort to determine the best-sized community for encouraging rhetorical practice (and hence civic participation). The project is necessary, he argues, because at present two main spatial obstacles retard civic participation in American life. The first arrived with liberalism as a regnant political philosophy. Liberalism is agnostic on local, community-based values while providing an aspatial framework of rules and procedures for resolving conflicts. The second obstacle occurs in the standardized content of English and composition classes in the public educational system. These classes train students to form opinions and write about distant, national-scale issues (e.g. gun control) over which the students have little or no direct influence. As a result Americans are trained to be "weak" citizens of the nation rather than "strong" citizens of their own communities.

Fleming's solution, which he develops by linking Aristotelian rhetorical theory with the precepts of modern town planning, is to re-scale and divide our citizen-identities to function on two simultaneous urban levels. These are the district with a population of 50,000-100,000, and the metropolitan area which may comprise millions. The district (like the Greek polis) is small enough to offer its citizens meaningful political roles; the metropolitan area, which is an agglomeration of districts, has the power to influence the state and nation where decisions that affect it are made. Gratifyingly, Fleming's prescription for the education of his urban-based citizens is a geographic one. It emphasizes local knowledge; "mapping" (i.e. "observing, recording, interrogating, theorizing and understanding" the environment; "surveying" places and representing data in charts and diagrams; learning the principles of planning and design; and, finally, practicing how to form judgments about local issues (208).

Project 2: The bulkier portion of Fleming's book consists of "case studies" of specific urban places, all in Chicago, ostensibly to assess their value as stages for rhetorical exchange. Fleming describes these places—a ghetto, a suburb, a mixed-income New Urbanist development and a building in the Cabrini Green public housing complex run by a successful Resident Management Corporation (RMC)—in impressive sociological,

historical and geographical detail. His account of the formation of Chicago's ghetto is by itself a powerful example of urban historical geography. Occasionally the details do get the better of him, as where he allows a torrent of unnecessary minutiae to inundate his discussion of north side revitalization, but on the whole Fleming provides a lucid and compelling narrative worthy of its inevitable "Chicago School" connotations.

Unfortunately, however, Fleming never really gets around to carrying out his ostensible task, assessing the rhetorical potential of these places. He merely concludes each chapter with a few tacked-on, common-sense thoughts about the subject. This reader closed the book impressed by its urban geographic detail, but burning with some non-rhetorical questions.