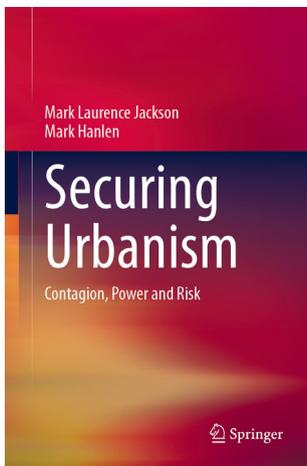


book review / ANDREW DOUGLAS

INTERSTICES 22

Securing Urbanism: Contagion, Power and Risk By Mark Laurence Jackson and Mark Hanlen Springer, 2020, 483 pp.



Unsecured reading

Securing Urbanism: Contagion, Power and Risk is a book I read mostly at 35,000 feet or so in planes flying between regional centres in the UK—glasses fogging from a mask only I felt compelled to endure—and, if not airborne, then in the waiting spaces of airports, post-security screening. My overweight checked luggage couldn't quite stand the extra grams this weighty hardback contributed; carry-on was how we continued journeying together. Between COVID-indifference, petty security despotism, and the crude herding underpinning inter-urban air travel, though, reading this way seemed entirely in tune with the disquieting conditions pictured by *Securing Urbanism*—our everyday acquiescence to commercially inflected risk management and its shuttering and productive shaping of urban possibility.

In setting this review initially then within the actuality of my engagement with a text and self in transit, it occurs to me that such a setting-up usefully captures a particular unease its reading impressed. While everything to do with airline travel is geared towards reaching a calculable destination securely, no such security existed in my reading relationship with *Securing Urbanism*, tasked as I was with not only getting from front to back, page upon page, but also saying something about this page turning on time and with the sophistication its address called for.

Reading depth

Completed in Aotearoa New Zealand in 2020, *Securing Urbanism* is a profound meditation on the long arc of western urbanism *and* its most immediate global convolutions. At almost 500 pages, the book reads, relative to typical academic essay publishing, akin to the “long read” offered by certain papers like the *Guardian* or the *Washington Post*. With such journalism, you know you're in for a lengthy engagement when, after some immediate exposition on a current topic, the text announces, “It was back in [such and such a time] that ...” *Securing Urbanism*'s deep dive is announced thus:

One of the aims of this book is to draw out this ontology [in urban depiction] of urbanism and security, an ontology whose securing may be determined in

the Greek founding of Western metaphysics with Plato and Aristotle, along with Platonic, and especially Aristotelian, understandings of the city and political thought.¹

“One of the aims”! This commencing ontological ‘draw-down’ hardly meets the book’s concluding chapter, “Cruel Festival,” via any mundane, chronological line-up:² the text makes a great show of wandering expansively and seemingly effortlessly—although the intricate footwork bringing all this together perhaps owes something to the labyrinthine dexterity of Leopold Bloom in James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (Why not? *Securing Urbanism* and I did happily weave our way through Dublin too). On Homeric comparisons, it is noteworthy, as Declan Kiberd comments: “As he wrote *Ulysses*, Joyce sometimes wore four watches, each telling different time.”³ Multiple temporalities course through *Securing Urbanism* too, and the ‘what-o’clock’ of things was not always discernible to my travel-pitched mind. Nevertheless, the parrying of temporalities in *Securing Urbanism*, much like Joyce’s doubling of a certain urban-single-day-ness with deeper temporal and journeying echoes, aligns, in key ways, with a radical shake-up of the contemporary ‘now’ sought by Jackson and Hanlen. As they say, present circumstances offer a veiled persistence rich in “revealing, or unconcealing” possibilities.⁴

3x3x3

How is this revealing approached? In outline terms, the book is divided into three parts: “Politics of Contagion”; “Securing the Urban”; and “Post-political Urbanism”. In a neat decanting, each part is further shared across three chapters. So, for instance, Part One addresses: firstly, the broader situation of the urban across political, ontological, and inhabiting registers; secondly, an entanglement of the urban with social medicine, issues of governmentality, an evolving thrust towards self- or personal governance in certain liberal Western contexts; and thirdly, the overlap of practices and discourses on human contagion and financial health evident within neoliberalism. Roughly, Part Two addresses the intersection of power and space, and its conceptualisation by way of Michel Foucault’s evolving thinking on discipline and normalisation, and the decisive emergence of biopolitics as a mode to life management. And Part Three—likely the most complex philosophically (although no part of the book escapes that attunement)—urban unveiling and an overlap in thinking between Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, and Martin Heidegger, ancient Greek truth-telling and the problems of democracy, and states of exception with their post-political shaping of urban spheres.

Working complexly

This is a lot, and in a phrase that might well serve as the book’s motto, the authors caution, “Everything is more complex than *that*” (emphasis in original),⁵ meaning more complex than what might typically pass for academic summary and scrutiny. Footnotes frequently running halfway up the page, and not infrequently more, testify to just how nuanced and intricate that complexity can get. Nevertheless, despite the striking breadth and depth ambitioned by Jackson and Hanlen, what they are at pains to impress is resistance to any grand synthesis or universal ‘theory’ of the urban, or that one is indeed desirable at all.

Consequently, there is no enduring or definitive answer to the “‘what is’ question concerning the urban” as they say.⁶ Following Foucault instead, they look to maintain a “disjunctive ... non-homogeneous ... non-isomorphic” approach, one that looks to the urban as a thing practised before it can be described, “named or known.”⁷

Getting at such varied practices and the resulting urban morphological and thought contours needed to know them, even provisionally, does, of course, need the measure of time but also the labour time of their unpicking. Not that time is the sole register of concern here: as teachers and practitioners of spatial practices, for the authors, Foucault’s own reframing of a philosophical bias for the temporal over the spatial is no doubt activated in the text too:

That is to say, for Foucault, there is a thinking of space that construes and makes possible a more fundamental relationality than either [temporal] structure or genesis, that yet provides the space for either encounter and differentiations.⁸

Attending to spatial differentiations is one way of sidestepping the fixing and security of the temporal (read enduring) ‘truth,’ with spatiality better capable of articulating, in Jackson and Hanlen’s words, “the spacings within which games of the true and the false are played.”⁹ Spacing, with its foregrounding of distributed life energies or “way of life,” in turn opens towards the authors’ valuing of the ancient Greek notion of *áskēsis* or discipline and a certain malleability or reworking of the self and its worlds—even, and especially, against the grain of normalisation and their disciplinary strictures.

This working-towards-a-reworking and the redistributive spatial intersecting it flourishes on is, of course, no better depicted than in the confluence of the authors themselves: a good deal of *Securing Urbanism* arises from Mark Hanlen’s not long completed doctoral research and Mark Jackson’s career-long, philosophically inflected investigation of urbanism, itself finding companionship in the writing of favourites like Foucault, Agamben, and Heidegger—to name just a few of the thought-champions making an appearance.

A generous burden

Despite the rigorous and complex scholarship underpinning the book, evident from the beginning is an ethos of generosity: the generosity of a doctoral graduate and their supervisor co-authoring, but also, the making-space for diverse perspectives on the urban in the text itself—what the authors refer to as an attendance on “manifold urbanisms” or working in a “plural register.”¹⁰ In turn, across the book are numerous in-depth explications on particular critical perspectives, expositions that are then unpicked in patient, considered ways designed to correct or capture possible missteps—including missteps the authors themselves suspect they may have made while addressing particular vantage points in their argument: “we may be forgiven for wondering if we somehow missed something along the way”;¹¹ or, say, “Have we now strayed too far from our concerns with COVID-19, wandered too far into errancy?”¹² I found this directness disarming and compelling in an argument itself intricate and easy to lose my own way in! On the other hand, such empathetic plurality comes at a price, one that had this reviewer continuing in the space of discourse with

some trepidation: had the writers and their reader reached a culminating point or orientation that could be rested upon? Instead, was some other correction or reorientation coming? If proceeding this way across 500 pages is straining—and the continually corrected terrain covered by *Securing Urbanism* is undoubtedly stretching—I should add that this challenging abundance was also thrilling.

Accruing and suspending

I say thrilling firstly in the sense of just finding in one place so much detailed knowledge that I had wanted to better grasp. No doubt, *Securing Urbanism* across its numerous chapters, will offer an abundance of thinking resources to readers irrespective of their particular engagement with specific aspects of the book's argument. Sections that I found of acute value personally included Chapter 1's "Urbanizing," with its patiently detailed survey of an array of urban orientations spanning social, governmental, and infrastructural dynamics, and Chapters 3–6 of Part Two with their detailed engagement with the work of Foucault.

And secondarily thrilling here is the uncertain way this multiplex assemblage of critical concerns and its arresting erudition might find a summation. Particularly intriguing at the level of endings is a hunch offered early on in *Securing Urbanism* concerning the contemporary urban and a politics Jackson and Hanlen suggest may now be beginning to come into view. A certain Aristotelian inheritance around *kinesis*, growth, and change understands cities as "essentially [managed and understood in terms of] movement, flow, whose securitizing at times requires impediments to flow and at other times requires unimpeded flow."¹³ On the other hand, a richer, truer, perhaps more apposite urban motivator—although none of these adjectives are exactly right I realise—can be thought to rest on "pre-Platonic *Lēthē*," or what in Ancient Greece meant a kind of oblivion or forgetting—the Underworld River of Lethe traversing, as it is said to have done, the cave of Hypnos, the deity commanding sleep. In fact, Jackson and Hanlen pitch this 'urbanizing' dynamic as itself something like a 'sleeper notion,' introduced at the beginning in passing but with the intention of rousing it to be "discussed at the book's conclusion."¹⁴ Seeded and then suspended as it is, what exactly do the authors intend with this appeal to pre-Platonic *Lēthē* for grasping the work of the urban today? The backgrounding relays are complex—there is reference to classicist Marcel Detienne, but also Jacques Derrida, along with Heidegger, Foucault, and Agamben of course—and perhaps my struggle with the intent could be forgiven too, given the authors' own deferral. On the other hand, richer articulation is offered in Chapter 7, "Indistinct Politics," in discussion with Agamben's consideration of the growing indistinction between the ancient conditions of *zōē* (or bare, animal, or in specifically human terms, household life) and *bios* (the life of the citizen or that life understood more broadly as political). Doubled back with Foucault's notion of biopolitics, or the direct governance of life by extra-political agencies and mechanisms, the point of Jackson and Hanlen's Part Three is to recognise how the securing of urban place is increasingly, perhaps exclusively, achieved through post-political means: that is via militarisation, staged strategies of consensus and dissensus, through a governmentality articulated according, as they utilise Agamben's framing, a state of exception whose "exclusionary inclusion" puts the agonistic dynamic of politics—as working through of differences democratically—and the political institution sustaining it to sleep.¹⁵ Still, as rich and as provocative a set of positions as these are, running up towards

the concluding chapters of Part Three it really couldn't be anticipated how this argument would ultimately come to rest.

3x3x2+1

Contingency in fact forced an answer. In place of a three-by-three-by-three poise anticipated for *Securing Urbanism*, a perturbing +1, or what eventually found expression as Chapter 9, "Cruel Festival," was called on to close the covers. As Jackson and Hanlen themselves describe the circumstances leading to this realisation:

In summarizing our, admittedly limited development of paradigms of urban theorizing, we emphasized a series of critical concerns that we thought would carry us through the book ... What we did not engage, or foresee as critical, or even glean as something we were ignoring or overlooking in the literature, was what happened to, or within, our urbanizing "fabrics", our "circulating metabolisms", our "conflict cities" or urban *stasis*, when the planet, more or less simultaneously, or over the "space" of a few months, encounters a pandemic that simply brings most cities on the planet to a halt ... It seems as if nations once again define the insularity of their borders, tear this planetary "urban fabric" into territorial pieces, in a situation, somewhat ironic and tragic, where a virus becomes a planetary phenomenon.¹⁶

If I quote the authors at length here, it is because they more than anyone else capture the pathos of a writing project and trajectory of inquiry brought into caesura by a planetary urban dynamic shorn, in large measure, of its correspondingly globality. In the severely truncated circumstances of that *first year* of stay-at-home orders, radically reshaped economics, and the terrible effects of illness, death, and amplified societal inequities, the collapse of common life into what the Greeks considered the domain of household living or *oikos*—for those fortunate enough in our contemporary pandemic to have viable versions of 'home'—must certainly have looked like darkly mirrored confirmation of how bare-faced a polity of disposability at every level (from consumer items to types of persons) would run its reign of exclusionary inclusions.¹⁷ Jackson and Hanlen's response in "Cruel Festival" movingly captures the radicality of the moment, although reading it now, some two-and-a-half years after its publication, I am compelled to imagine what a postscript might have to say about the astonishing forgetting of this so recently endured global seizure.

Irrespective, the last thirty odd pages composing *Securing Urbanism's* +1 present a kind of whirl, a calculated gamble even. New authors appear, whole other strands of argumentation are spliced in, earlier portions are dropped or left in suspension, even a reconceptualisation of historical revolution versus the time of revolt (the cruel festival) is introduced, explicated, compared, critiqued, and put to work, *on a dime*. Counting down remaining pages, so much seemed still to warrant saying. And yet, as if in a virtuoso tap finish, the strands are wound abruptly into a resonant whole and stood precariously balanced as, and at, the finish.

Quite what happened here? I'm not sure I know exactly, but there are urban/critical insights enough in these last pages alone to mine for an appreciable time to come.

Amazing.

Statement of interest

I wish to acknowledge long-held professional and personal connections with the authors of this book.

NOTES

1. Mark Jackson and Mark Hanlen, *Securing Urbanism: Contagion, Power and Risk* (Singapore: Springer, 2020), 5.
2. For one of many instances of Jackson and Hanlen's eschewing of homogeneous, linear or regularly circular time, see *Securing Urbanism*, 386.
3. Declan Kiberd, *Ulysses and Us: The Art of Everyday Living* (London, UK: Faber & Faber, 2009), 230.
4. Jackson and Hanlen, *Securing Urbanism*, 338.
5. Jackson and Hanlen, *Securing Urbanism*, 310.
6. Jackson and Hanlen, *Securing Urbanism*, 47.
7. Jackson and Hanlen, *Securing Urbanism*, 3.
8. Jackson and Hanlen, *Securing Urbanism*, 234.
9. Jackson and Hanlen, *Securing Urbanism*, 234.
10. Jackson and Hanlen, *Securing Urbanism*, 6.
11. Jackson and Hanlen, *Securing Urbanism*, 385.
12. Jackson and Hanlen, *Securing Urbanism*, 408.
13. Jackson and Hanlen, *Securing Urbanism*, 5.
14. Jackson and Hanlen, *Securing Urbanism*, 5.
15. Jackson and Hanlen, *Securing Urbanism*, 11–22.
16. Jackson and Hanlen, *Securing Urbanism*, 432.
17. Jackson and Hanlen, *Securing Urbanism*, 458.