

BOOK REVIEWS

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Review of:

Purbrick, L., Aulich, J. and Dawson, G. (eds). 2007. *Contested Spaces: Sites, Representations and Histories of Conflict*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. 258 pages. ISBN 0230013368. Hardback £50.

The study of the physical remains of modern conflicts is an intriguingly interdisciplinary one, encompassing fields as diverse as art history, geology, architecture and archaeology. Contestation and memory are the most powerful unifying concepts within this emergent sub-discipline, which is increasingly located within the broader fields of material culture studies and heritage management (Saunders 2004; Schofield et al 2006). *Contested Spaces* thus takes its place alongside a series of recent conferences and publications on contested pasts, contested bodies, contested objects and contested landscapes (e.g. Saunders & Cornish 2008).

Contested Spaces consists of a series of case studies examining conflict zones around the world, from the 1879 Battle of Isandlwana to contemporary divided Cyprus. The short discursive introduction lacks the theoretical and interpretive boldness that distinguishes published conference proceedings from excellent edited collections, a weakness exacerbated by the absence of a concluding discussion paper. The foreword, an evocative and painfully personal discussion of internment and torture in Abu Ghraib prison by Haifa Zangana, sits uncomfortably amongst the geographically and temporally diverse and often rather dry academic discussions that make up the body of the book.

In focusing on sites that are physically, politically and culturally contested, *Contested Spaces* adopts many of the themes and several of the study areas discussed in the 'Contested Landscapes' section of the book *Deterritorialisations* (Dorrian & Rose 2003), a debt that is acknowledged in the text. However the editors of this latter work, a rather slick and self-consciously theoretical production, admit that "it is often easier to acknowledge that [landscapes] are or were contested than to actually explore a contestation" (Rose 2003: 270). In contrast, the detailed case studies that make up *Contested Spaces* provide rich potential for further discussion and analysis.

Lisle's chapter on museum representations of the Dead Zone that divides Cyprus is a balanced and critical analysis: the contrasting narratives and sites presented to locals and tourists are shown to powerfully reinforce the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot claims of political and moral authority over the disputed territories. However, as Lisle subsequently demonstrates, these messages are increasingly anachronistic and politically embarrassing:

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As the drive for reconciliation gains momentum, these radically incompatible representations of Cypriot history will become increasingly obsolete ... the cultural institutions of Cyprus must be jolted out of their current 'victim/perpetrator' framework in order to start the difficult process of creating inclusive, diverse and sometimes uncomfortable representations of their dissonant heritage.

(p.112-3)

The notion of divided or bounded spaces recurs throughout the book, but the discussions of fixed borders in Nicosia, Berlin and elsewhere can be contrasted with the papers on the US/Mexican border and particularly that on Jerusalem. In these cases the partial fluidity and uncertainty of the barriers are part of their strength and mystique; in the latter example:

Routes and modes of passage are regularly altered according to shifting road blocks, checkpoints, security alerts and areas of disturbance, so that one's knowledge and experience of the city is often transient and temporary.

(p.50)

The subtleties of these cases elucidate the somewhat belaboured distinction between spaces and sites outlined in the introduction: the former are defined experientially as sets of power relations that contribute towards the formation of identity or sense of place (p.4). Sites, in contrast, are more straightforwardly defined in terms of distinct, bounded spaces, although this clashes with the more fluid category of 'sites of memory' as defined by Nora (1989), Winter (1995) and others.

Despite its focus on social spaces, the opening chapter of the book proper is a discussion of imagery: the photographs of torture and degradation of prisoners in Abu Ghraib by American soldiers in 2004. Following on from Zangana's personal account of this infamous prison as an experienced space this chapter seems stilted and somewhat abstract, while its focus on the social life of images places it apart from the rest of the book, which focuses firmly on actual locales or sites of conflict. Even the chapters on memorialisation of conflict are built on discussions of the contested sites themselves.

These explorations of post-conflict memory and representation are an intriguing collection, making up the latter half of the book. Read's paper on the commemoration of crimes against Australian Aborigines is a startling account of the degree to which memorial sites can become the focus for symbolic and actual violence. It describes:

a difficult story of what seems at first sight to be blind racism, at second sight, a rampant colonialism, and at a more reflective third, perhaps, the economy of the pastoralist and the farmer in deadly disharmony with that of the hunter-gatherer. Whatever the origins, the consequences of conflict endure for centuries.

(p.146)

The viciousness of these attacks is remarkable, including the repeated defacement and even the dynamiting of memorial slabs, and the erection of counter-monuments declaring “This plaque was erected by people who found the monument before you offensive” (p.147). Pollard’s discussion of war memorials notes that battlefields have traditionally been appropriated by right wing and extreme nationalist movements such as the Ku Klux Klan, the Spanish fascist movement and more recently the fringe British People’s Party who held an tiny rally at the site of the 1461 battle of Towton.

In contrast to these cases Pollard argues that battlefield sites can become sites of reconciliation and collective remembrance. The 120th anniversary of the battle of Isandlwana in the Anglo-Zulu war saw British and Zulu re-enactment groups meeting on the site to recreate the event for an appreciative audience. Pollard remarks that even earlier, “the fiftieth anniversary of the battle saw veterans from both sides meet amicably on the battlefield, where they exchanged stories” (p.137). However while there may be no lasting antagonism between the British and the Zulu nation, the site is nonetheless contested. The ANC have attempted to use the site as a forum for reconciliation between black and white South Africans, while the Zulu nationalist Inkatha Freedom Party have disputed this interpretation, using memorial events to promote their independence movement. The Isandlwana site and memorial illustrate the degree to which contested sites, contested pasts and contested representations create layers of meaning in historic landscapes. This, and the political manipulation of memorials and commemorative practices described in the chapters on Australia, Rwanda and Northern Ireland, question the logic of the book’s implicit division of the case studies into historic, recent and ongoing conflicts.

In assessing the scope, intentions and methodology of *Contested Spaces* I have found it illuminating to compare it with a conference I took part in called “Conflict Landscapes: Materiality and Meaning in Contested Places 1900-2007”, held at the Imperial War Museum in May 2007. While the theoretical foundations of contestation, memory, physical traces and cultural representations are strikingly similar, the focus of the case studies are markedly different. Where the book focuses mainly on the nation state and its oppression of, or violence against, non-state subaltern groups, the conference papers with one exception examined aspects of the First and Second World Wars. To some extent this could be seen as a reflection of the conference’s roots in military history and battlefield archaeology, and the book’s theoretical foundations in people’s history and cultural studies. However, this is a narrowly pessimistic view, belied by the common themes and theses of the two. I would argue instead that such distinctions are rapidly breaking down, and that the future of these fields is a shared one, based on the pioneering efforts and publications of individuals such as Louise Purbrick, one of the editors of *Contested Spaces*, John Schofield and others working in the fields of material culture and heritage studies.

I have judged this book rather harshly focusing on its mismatched chapters, weak structure, lightweight theoretical foundations and its absurd price. Perhaps this is missing the point. As a set of detailed case studies, many of them thoughtful and well presented,

it has considerable value. We can apply to them whatever analytical framework we might find appropriate, including models of heritage management, cultural memory, social space, trauma, narrative, nationalist and post-colonial politics, dissonance, difference and resistance: the possibilities are endless. But I'd wait for the paperback if I were you.

References

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