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David A. Banks, **The City Authentic: How the Attention Economy Builds Urban America,** Oakland: University of California Press, 2023, 224 pp, $95.00 (hardcover).

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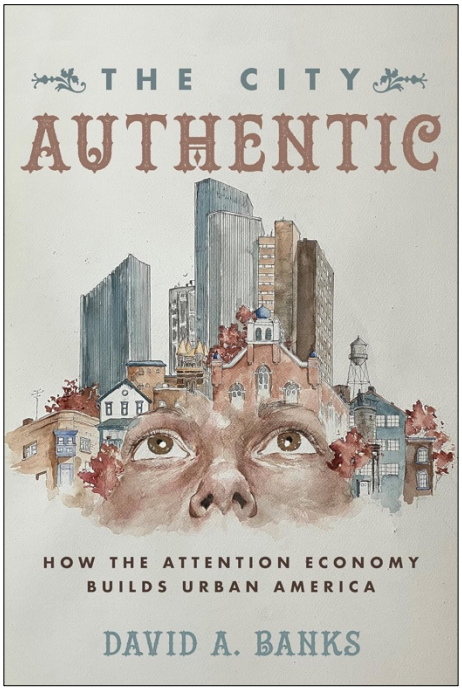

The exploration of authenticity frequently finds its origins in ancient Greek philosophy, where the essence of reality was perceived as divinely authored. The European Enlightenment brought forth fresh conceptualizations of authenticity as a fundamental dimension of human existence. Within the domain of urban studies, author David A. Banks poses a pivotal question: How do the Enlightenment-era conceptions of authenticity and identity manifest within a modern capitalist consumer society? To address this inquiry, Banks embeds contemporary urbanism within a broader historical continuum, juxtaposing the notion of city authenticity with two preceding movements: City Beautiful and City Efficient. This analytical framework holds substantial appeal for those seeking an in-depth understanding of U.S. urban history.

In Banks' argumentation, sequential urban movements underscore the necessity of unevenness for the perpetuation of capitalism's growth paradigm. Consequently, this timely publication scrutinizes emergent urban phenomena, such as the commodification of urban decline, the paradoxes inherent in digital-age placemaking, and the enduring reverberations of structural inequality. These insights collectively illuminate the complex interplay between authenticity, identity, and the socioeconomic dynamics shaping urban landscapes.

Banks' new book centers on the capital region of upstate New York, an area that markets itself to a variety of stakeholders, including real estate developers and prospective residents. Numerous authors have explored New York—urban scholar Sharon Zukin (1989, 2011), for example, has examined the city from multiple angles, ranging from its authenticity to its evolving economy. She argues that urban authenticity is a cultural battleground where middle-class aesthetics colonize working-class neighborhoods. Although Banks frequently references Zukin's work, he distinguishes himself by grounding his analysis in Troy, a city within New York where he currently resides. By adopting a regional approach, Banks acknowledges the limitations of case studies in capturing the entirety of an area. However, one notable strength of his methodology is the seamless integration of his personal life experiences into the academic discourse, resulting in a piece that is both intellectually rigorous and engagingly readable. His emotions, observations, and interactions with New York are intricately woven into the statistical data and factual information about the city. This methodological choice is unsurprising, as it aligns with practices employed by esteemed scholars. For instance, Sharon Zukin (1989) drew upon her own living experience in New York to write about lofts in the city. Similarly, Florian Grisel (2023) used the deviant case study

method to depict his intimate involvement in a Mediterranean fishery. These examples underscore the value of incorporating personal experiences into scholarly writing, enhancing both the depth and relatability of the research.

Banks hinges on Troy's transformation of industrial decline into curated symbols of authenticity for digital consumption. More specifically, by the early 2000s, its shuttered factories and vacant storefronts epitomized globalization's casualties. Today, those same ruins have been repackaged as industrial chic lofts, craft breweries, and retro boutiques, marketed to affluent remote workers and influencer migrants. Banks dismantles the myth of organic urban renaissance, revealing instead a calculated alliance among municipal governments, developers, and tech platforms to commodify decline. While Zukin (1989, 2011) focuses on how artisanal markets and hipster enclaves reshape urban taste, Banks observes Rust Belt cities now market the relics as untamed urban experiences on platforms like Instagram and TikTok, catering to middle-class fantasies of gritty, pregentrified city life. This process, Banks contends, epitomizes how attention economies have reshaped urban development while exacerbating tensions between gentrification and community rights.

Banks presents a thought-provoking synthesis of urban political economy, media studies, and critical urban theory. As previously mentioned, he also examines numerous valuable case studies. The strength of his monograph resides in its clear structure. The first two chapters introduce various city cases, providing a comprehensive overview of his subject matter. The following two chapters delve into the political economy of authenticity, a theoretical perspective that Banks employs. The final two chapters apply this theory to practice by analyzing governance policies, tactics, tools, and future social and urban imaginaries. More importantly, Banks successfully engages with the theories of urban scholars throughout this process. For instance, he incorporates tourism studies scholar Ning Wang's (1999) three models of authenticity—objective authenticity, constructive authenticity, and existential authenticity—into his critique of urban authenticity. He also extends urban scholar Sharon Zukin's (2011) critique of authenticity-as-bourgeois-construct by showing how digital platforms industrialize its production—transforming cities into content farms. Municipal governments, he reveals, now collaborate with real estate developers to treat urban planning as content marketing, deploying influencer-style tactics such as creating Instagram-able landmarks and staging viral events. Urban character is reduced to consumable aesthetics for capital accumulation. His takedown of Richard Florida's (2017) creative class analysis proves particularly scathing: Florida-esque strategies to attract artists and entrepreneurs have devolved into digital placebo effects, with cities chasing viral moments over sustainable economies.

Banks critiques mainstream urban economics for framing tax incentives and deregulation as panaceas, neglecting how attention economies prioritize transient elites over rooted communities. While attention-driven revitalization may boost economic density—a metric correlated with urban resilience, per the Industrial Development Agency/Authority—Banks demonstrates that such growth is rarely inclusive. In Detroit's Midtown redevelopment, for instance, tech firms and luxury apartments coexist with persistently high Black unemployment rates, revealing stark spatial inequalities. Similarly, Troy's influx of digital nomads has bifurcated the city into renovated lofts and neglected neighborhoods, mirroring what Saskia Sassen (2001) terms expulsions in global cities. Moreover, his case study of the Troy labor union poignantly illustrates the tension: Union members welcome job creation but question whether viral growth can restore stable manufacturing employment. Here, Banks might have drawn stronger parallels to Richard Florida's (2017)

creative class debates, yet his focus on grassroots perspectives offers a vital corrective to top-down urban policy narratives.

Equally compelling is Banks' critique of nostalgia marketing as historical revisionism. Rust Belt cities, he notes, repackage working-class struggles as retro-chic aesthetics, sanitizing the structural violence of deindustrialization. This aligns with Robin Malloy's (1987) earlier critiques of 1980s urban renewal, which prioritized financial capital over equity. Banks' linkage of past and present forms of exploitation—from factory closures to algorithmic dispossession—adds urgency to his call for ethical urbanism.

Banks' conclusion emphasizes that *The City Authentic* is not only tied to local economies but also to identities, worldviews, and culture. More importantly, he argues that we should abandon the modernist project of constructing an authentic self, which originated during the Enlightenment period, by navigating performance and urban environments. Instead, Banks proposes a postauthentic order or a postauthentic city that appears distinct from capitalist modes of living. It is, in Banks' description, a world of new possibilities founded on compassion and cooperation. While authenticity no longer holds meaning, the needs of the moment become central to a postauthentic city. It is particularly intriguing when Banks concludes the book with a story that envisions a new life and a new hope for people, leaving readers with urban imaginaries to contemplate.

Overall, this book systematically depicts aesthetics, governing, and social media as shaping forces into contemporary cities. It extends Sarah Banet-Weiser's (2012) analysis of authenticity industry to urban scales, and compels us to confront a paradigm shift in urban development: Cities now compete not through infrastructure but through curated images. Banks' greatest contribution lies in exposing how this branding turn entrenches inequality, transforming cities into growth machines for the attention economy, echoing Shoshana Zuboff's (2019) critiques of surveillance capitalism's spatial extractivism. For communication scholars, Banks offers a spatialized lens to dissect authenticity's commodification, urging critical dialogue on how platform logics reshape urban epistemologies and power hierarchies. This work bridges urban studies and media theory, challenging scholars to confront the algorithmic colonization of place-making. Moreover, the book's focus on U.S. Rust Belt cities, while analytically rich, invites comparative studies. How do Global South cities navigate similar pressures amid weaker governance structures? Future research might also explore how algorithmic bias shapes urban visibility or how postpandemic-era combinative work styles, both remote and onsite, reshapes place branding.

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