

Beyond “planetary urbanization”: recasting contemporary urban research

Matthieu Giroud

Reviewed: *Implosions/Explosions. Towards a Study of Planetary Urbanization*, Neil Brenner (ed.), Berlin, Jovis, 2014.

We were profoundly shocked to learn of the death of Matthieu Giroud, a victim of the attacks of 13 November in Paris. Matthieu was a gifted researcher, and a specialist in the fields of urban transformations and gentrification processes. He was also a communicator of knowledge and a translator of fundamental texts of critical geography. For many of us, he was above all a colleague and a friend, and we are deeply saddened; he has left us far too soon. We have chosen to publish a translation of his most recent article for our journal, which originally appeared in Métropolitiques on 9 October, as a homage to his thinking and his creativity. Our most sincere condolences go out to his family.

The collective work Implosions/Explosions. Towards a Study of Planetary Urbanization follows in the long tradition of critical urban theory. Its ambition is to take up the thesis of “planetary urbanization” developed by Henri Lefebvre and provide food for thought with regard to a possible theoretical restructuring of urban studies.

Implosions/Explosions. Towards a Study of Planetary Urbanization is built on a strong theoretical foundation, broadly derived from the thinking of Henri Lefebvre, namely that of the existence of a “planetary”, “global”, “generalized”, “complete”¹ urbanization. Coordinated by Neil Brenner, this work seeks to provide a new foundation for contemporary urban studies from a theoretical standpoint.

A unique editorial object

In editorial terms, this voluminous work (570 pages) seems difficult to categorize. It is composed, after all, of 33 texts grouped into 7 parts, which were written at different times, and thus in different contexts: 11 “classic background texts”, written between 1970 and 2007, including two by Henri Lefebvre, which begin and conclude the book; 14 “recent texts” written between 2011 and 2013; and eight “texts commissioned for the book”. The aim of this temporal breadth is to establish the legitimacy not of the book itself but of the theoretical reconceptualization that it seeks to convey. However, this heterogeneity is something of a façade, as all the more empirical texts, articles or essays are logically connected to the theory of planetary urbanization and the “legend” that Henri Lefebvre’s thinking now represents among certain colleagues in the English-speaking world.

This original editorial construction and this apparent substantive coherence have two main flaws: the work as a whole seems extremely repetitive, particularly in its references to certain “classic”

¹ A term used by Henri Lefebvre himself.

authors such as Henri Lefebvre, of course, as well as Manuel Castells, David Harvey and Edward W. Soja, and therefore also in its presentation of very general ideas that switch from one author to another during this period. Its second shortcoming concerns the apparent harmony and clarity in terms of the work's overall agenda: a few nuances can be found in places, but overall this book does not do enough to enable potentially discordant voices to be heard, just as it far too quickly glosses over the theoretical disagreements that do, in fact, exist between certain authors. What we are dealing with, therefore, is a book that is not a reader, or an essay, or a presentation of research, although it could admittedly be considered a *de facto* forum for the thoughts and findings of Neil Brenner's Urban Theory Lab team at Harvard or of Christian Schmid's ETH Studio Basel team in Zurich – in sum, this is a work that is very smooth in its logic, and yet is potentially a source of controversy as a result of its desire to “shake up” urban studies.

A theoretical *aggiornamento*

For Brenner and certain others among the book's authors, the *aggiornamento* must be theoretical if it is to be political. Indeed, in order merely to envisage what makes up the “contemporary global urban condition” (p. 334) and reflect upon the alternatives from an economic and political point of view, urban studies must urgently move away from a whole panoply of categories and concepts that are now outdated and, above all, pernicious because of their popularity among agents in the technological sphere. The book thus enjoins us to eschew all categories that make a distinction between “urban” and “rural”, along with all those that describe any kind of circumscribed location (the “city”, the metropolis, the megalopolis, the edge city, etc.) – in short, to replace the discrete with the continuous, the place with the process (p. 382), and the stagnant with the dynamic.

Giving priority not just to a new vocabulary to describe the processes of urbanization (on which the book is convincing), but also to new ways of analysing them (in which endeavour it is less successful), would appear to be an essential condition for being able to identify and understand the unstable and changing geographies and the forms of socio-spatial differentiation produced by the capitalism of the early 21st century. It is here that lies the first level of political criticism of Brenner's project: in its analysis of the forms and processes associated with the spatial development (described as urbanization) of the capitalist economy – an admittedly uneven but comprehensive urbanization of capital, which dialectically includes dynamics of “implosion” (processes of concentration and agglomeration) and “explosion” in urban spaces (sprawling/scattered urbanization; extension of the urban fabric; interconnections between places and scales), as well as processes of spatial destruction and creation (reflected in the concept of “creative destruction” that David Harvey borrowed from the economist Joseph Schumpeter).

Deconstructing “erroneous visions” of contemporary urbanization

The second level of political criticism attacks the causality between “diagnosis” of the urban state of the world and the concrete implementation of public policy. For several authors of the work, and Neil Brenner in particular, the concepts that bound and circumscribe the urban reality propagate an erroneous vision of the world, widely disseminated by the experts that inform the action of international organizations and public authorities. The challenge is therefore one of deconstructing these “techno-scientific” visions of the urbanization of the world (around the paradigm of the “urban age”) and the resulting policies – especially those that involve continually increasing the concentration of amenities, investments and populations in the most economically prosperous metropolises.

But it is also a question of enabling other problems to emerge, of highlighting and taking advantage of new “differences” (p. 426) which, if envisaged politically and strategically, could lead to greater territorial and social equity. What is important is not so much the observation of the

existence of urbanization on a planetary scale² but rather the calling into question of both the ideological foundations on which it is based and the political versions that have been derived from it. It is precisely in this respect that authors – all cited in the book – such as Jürgen Habermas, Herbert Marcuse, Jean-Luc Nancy and, of course, Henri Lefebvre appear as precursors. Indeed, Lefebvre’s criticism concerns the techno-scientific ideology that underlies expert opinion – the influential “techno-science” made up of statistical and cartographic descriptions that ignore the social, economic and political contexts and the conflicts that planetary urbanization provokes: for Lefebvre, and therefore for Brenner, on the contrary, space is not politically neutral but profoundly ideological, and therefore strategic.

This leads to the third level of political criticism of Brenner’s project. Using a new set of theoretical tools to promote planetary urbanization results in reconnecting the different forms of “dispossession” that capitalism produces through its frenetic desire for accumulation, from both an analytical and a strategic standpoint; this, in turn, opens up the possibility of considering the different forces that contest such dynamics of capitalist predation (p. 199) in a combined, connected way. As they share, in the name of the existence of widespread urbanization, the same “urban condition” composed of dispossession, eviction, compartmentalization, injustice and creative destruction, then the struggles of farmers, small landowners and local populations that take place on land transformed by scattered urbanization should be compared to those that take place in spaces of concentration – for example, by the Indignants (15-M) movement or the Occupy movement. It is in this regard that, in the wake of Henri Lefebvre, the authors insist on the fact that the revolution will necessarily be “urban”...

Against the positivist-empiricist tradition

There is one final element of political criticism: the theoretical ambition clearly expressed by the book is an attack against what Brenner and Andy Merrifield call the “positivist-empiricist tradition” – not just the tradition already evoked by experts and technocrats fascinated by the quantification of its so-called objectivity but also that of researchers in the social sciences who “give priority to concrete investigations and the production of graphic representations instead of questioning the conceptual assumptions upon which they are based” (p. 331). The suggestion is that everyone – experts, technocrats, researchers – participates in the same system. And one of the mechanisms of this system concerns funding measures for public research that prioritize the collection of empirical data (p. 388) with the sole aim of producing economical and political experts in both the public and private sectors. This is a dominant approach to what is, in their view, “doing research” – namely “accumulating data” – that has become established to the detriment of in-depth reflection about phenomena, which implies the formulation of concepts and a certain level of political commitment.

In such a context, and even though “pure” theorization – that is to say theorization without content – raises certain questions for the authors, producing theoretical work, according to Brenner and Merrifield, stems from a subversive research position. Such a stance may well leave the reader sceptical, especially when one is aware of the extent to which researchers in the social sciences, even those who are “critical”, are constrained by institutional and editorial policies that push towards publication and bibliometric performance. Furthermore, the solution in this race for publication is precisely to produce theory, as theory does not force researchers to do fieldwork, which, as we know, is time-consuming. The result is often disappointing, or frustrating at the very least, producing articles that are theoretically robust but methodologically and empirically poor. This book evidences this very contradiction. Theorizing means convincing through demonstration, and maintaining a relationship – which may or may not be dialectical – with the facts, which may be publicized through postures of observation. Yet here, this relationship appears to be too often dominated by abstraction or a lack of precision, which naturally raises the question of its legitimacy.

² Theses of this kind were defended throughout the 20th century by thinkers as varied as Ebenezer Howard, Patrick Geddes, Constantinos A. Doxiadis and R. Buckminster Fuller, as Nikos Katsikis shows in his excellent text (ch. 29).

This contradiction and discrepancy between meta-theorization and the translation of research into concrete applications leads to some suggestions for how this work could be opened up, particularly in the context of reflections towards a theoretical recasting of urban studies.

How to recast urban studies?

First of all, it seems important to study the processes that lead to the shift from the “non-urban” to the “urban” more closely, or, as Lefebvre puts it, to move beyond the study of urban forms in order to accomplish the study of urbanization processes, on every spatial scale: just one text in the book – a most interesting piece by Álvaro Sevilla-Buitrago (chapter 16) – addresses this question head-on, despite the fact that it forms the heart of the book’s argument, by interpreting the process of enclosure of the British countryside as a form of “extended urbanization”. It is therefore a matter of studying “the processes of urbanization in their entirety”, which must lead, if we follow David Wachsmuth’s proposal (p. 377), to abandoning all forms of methodological “cityism” (the pitfall of which is to isolate and naturalize the city in studying urban processes, whereas the non-city is just as significant). But it is also a question of looking more closely at what Christian Schmid calls “the differences in the nature of the urban” (p. 406). Even if, as it stands, the book lacks certain concrete elements in the analysis of these urbanization processes in all their variety, John Friedmann, in conclusion, opens up a most welcome avenue: “‘Urban prospect’ might be the general descriptive term, but what ultimately counts most lies in the detailed histories” (p. 559). Without studying these differences, the variations in intensity of the process of urbanization and, above all, the social effects of this, the thesis of planetary urbanization thesis would appear to be at risk of being “fetishized” (as evidenced to some extent by this book), diluted and, in the end, losing its substance and its heuristic power (in the sense of the art of invention).

The above also opens up a second avenue of interest: in addition to focusing on what makes up the “urban condition”, shouldn’t we also attentively observe those elements that constitute the “urban experience”³ of populations in these new conditions? In real, concrete terms, how is the urban (according to the theory of the book) understood, appropriated and produced by populations and individuals? How is “the urban”, as shaped by the new logics and demands of contemporary capitalism, experienced, reworked, circumvented, diverted and combatted by “ordinary” people? We can, of course, provide some partial responses, as David J. Madden and Andy Merrifield do in the book, making use of the theories and concepts from studies on social movements (whether in terms of the right to the city – at once “too vast and too narrow”, as Merrifield asserts in an astute critique of the notion (chapter 31) – or in terms of politics of the encounter); but the urban experience is also that which includes the day-to-day, the banality, the habitual and the unexpected, the repeated and the instantaneous. In studying the processes of urbanization, the structural dimension of the social question represented by the spatial practices and modes of appropriation of the urban cannot be ignored. On this point, the book unfortunately seems to be insufficiently demanding: the few empirical works cited are based on fixed cartographies (a problem recognized by Brenner himself, p. 454) and “bird’s-eye views” – sometimes resembling the kinds of works continually criticized by Lefebvre.

A concept such as “urban experience” would no doubt make it possible to maintain the equilibrium, via mediation at the meso-“urban” level, between global structural transformations (those of contemporary capitalism) and their “reception” (a very broad term) by populations, and therefore to link two theoretical traditions whose opposition often seems sterile, namely structuralism and phenomenology (something, furthermore, that Henri Lefebvre tried to do over 60 years ago through his concept of “everyday life”).

In conclusion, this work – ambitious and fascinating in equal measures – raises a fundamental question: what can we do, as researchers, in response to such a theoretical agenda and ambition?

³ To borrow the title of one of David Harvey’s works (1989).

Should we limit ourselves to amending it (and improving it in the process)? What other theoretical alternatives, or “cognitive maps of emerging urban formations”, to cite Neil Brenner (p. 331), might we defend and contrast it with? Do any others really exist?

Bibliography

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Matthieu Giroud was an assistant professor of geography at the Université Paris-Est Marne-la-Vallée. He was a member of the ACP (Analyse Comparée des Pouvoirs – “Comparative Analysis of Powers”) research unit. His research focused in particular on the social effects of gentrification (such as resistance and evictions). He coordinated the translation into French of David Harvey’s 2003 work *Paris, Capital of Modernity* (titled *Paris, capitale de la modernité*, Paris, Éditions des Prairies Ordinaires, 2012) and, with Cécile Gintrac, edited the collection of translated texts *Villes contestées. Pour une géographie critique de l’urbain* (Paris, Éditions des Prairies Ordinaires, 2014). He also co-authored *D’une métropole à l’autre. Pratiques urbaines et circulations dans l’espace européen*, along with Hadrien Dubucs, Françoise Dureau and Christophe Imbert (Paris, Armand Colin, 2014).

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