
— BOOK REVIEWS

Neil Brenner 2019: *New Urban Spaces: Urban Theory and the Scale Question*. New York: Oxford University Press

I distinctly recall purchasing R.E.M.'s 1991/2001 *Unplugged* sessions album in 2014 and listening to it with a slight sense of confused amazement: alongside packing in a third of previously unaired performances—including some sudden bits of Bob Dylan in the midst of a hitherto unknown track—the album simply re-played, in partly different keys, some of the 'best of' I was expecting. In a way this was a treat, but it also stripped away R.E.M.'s work and recast some of their classics in different forms, even going against the group's original ethos to some extent. Without trying to draw too many parallels here, Neil Brenner's *New Urban Spaces* left me with something of the same feeling. While it reinterprets some well-established tenets of urban political writing, it does so with the author presenting a new version of familiar arguments alongside another, stronger argument—which, a little like *Unplugged*, proves that theory is never really fixed in time and is always subject to change.

By that metric, Brenner's most recent monograph is a challenging, dense and surprising read that will likely reshape our understanding of the long-established scholarship of one of the world's finest contemporary urban theorists. Conveniently summarized in a table on page 10, the book is pretty much a 'Brenner Reader' put together by Brenner himself. It follows his 2016 *Critique of Urbanization*—which already argued in part against 'locking in' scholarship—and moves towards a very explicit re-examination of his scholarship over the last two decades. This entails on the one hand collecting together a series of classic chapters from Neil Brenner's scholarship for re-publication—some of which are at the heart of previously published popular books and journal articles—and on the other re-editing those chapters and articles and, even more importantly, re-reading their relevance into contemporary urban theorizing.

The book hence proceeds near chronologically by taking us through various stages of Brenner's thinking about how the 'urban question' can (or not) be framed as a scale question, including more explicit discussion on the value and challenges of scalar thinking (ch. 3) and its application to global city formation (ch. 4), which revisits his work of the late 1990s and early 2000s. This excursus traces the 'threads', as Brenner notes, of what he believes is a complex 'problematique' in regard to the mobilization of scalar narratives in depicting the current urban condition. With nods to his later 2000s work, this includes his critique of urban growth regimes (ch. 7) and also critical pieces on the complexity of thinking about scale in a context of uneven development and multilayered governance (ch. 8).

As Brenner argues at the book's outset, urban researchers need to start from a more specific discussion of Castell's urban question as a scale question and explore applying a 'scale-attuned' ethos to a deeper engagement with the 'scalar imaginaries' that underpin contemporary urban restructuring. The book finishes, unsurprisingly, with Brenner's more recent focus since 2010 on planetary urbanization—even advocating for stepping beyond 'scale centrism' and methodological 'city-ism' (ch. 9)—and it concludes with a further move towards what Brenner calls a 'polymorphic

theorization': challenging the purpose and positionality of urban theory in an age where even 'urbanization' has become an 'intellectually imperialistic' master concept. As Brenner argues in conclusion to this wide-ranging and mentally taxing examination of his threads of the scalar urban problematic, critical urban theorists have a fundamental role to play in terms of the collective imagination and widespread 'city effect' that has brought the 'urban age' to the fore in many fields and stages. It is a role which demands continuous reflexivity and a propensity for constant theoretical re-examination, open to changing theoretical bases and against universalist logics.

This proposed theoretical 'renovation' is built around Brenner's (and to a degree Christian Schmid's) theorization of extended urbanization and the 'implosions/explosions' of the contemporary urban condition underpinned by capitalist processes. Those who have yet to engage with Neil Brenner will find in this book a dense and deep read into nearly three decades of complex spatial-political thinking about urban theory. Those well attuned to Brenner's scholarship will recognize a continuous effort towards recasting Castells and Lefebvre in dialogue with 'new' urban questions and changing conditions of planetary urbanism: symptomatic of this, for instance, is the reading and re-reading of figures 10.1 and 10.12 (p. 387) calling for a careful consideration of decades-old statements and stances. We are still going back to Andrew Sayer's 'what is the urban' question, yet *New Urban Spaces* also offers something quite surprising: ultimately the book calls for going beyond the planetary urbanization debate.

The heavily theoretical approach taken by Brenner can of course lead to some degree of scepticism. As Jean-Paul Addie succinctly put it in another review of the book in *Regional Studies*, much of *New Urban Spaces* offers a pretty limited engagement with the everyday materiality of the urban processes at stake. Perhaps we should not expect any new empirical material though, given that the real value of *New Urban Spaces* lies very much in a quite unique approach to autocritique instead. Indeed, it might be misleading to read Brenner's admirable effort on any terms other than its own. This is essentially, as Brenner puts it himself, a 'second order' tome discussing the logic of urban theorizing and the role of scale in it.

Brenner's intervention comes in after bitter peer-review and social media debates on the value of 'planetary' thinking about the contemporary urban condition. Yet perhaps those who expect *New Urban Spaces* to take an even firmer stance might be disappointed—or pleasantly surprised. Brenner is advocating here for a conscious stance on the way we theorize the urban: one that is against finding a single ontological foundation that settles the urban question 'once and for all' and is open to critically examining not just the object of our studies, but our own studies in themselves. In fact, Brenner's call might even be contra theory, read monistically as a firm entity, and pro relentless theorizing and continuous reflexivity.

In that, *New Urban Spaces*—and its last chapter and afterword in particular—offers in my view a fundamental contribution, both to recent and current debates focusing on the nature of urban theory per se, and more generally to a broader conceptualization of our role as urban scholars. It raises key questions around the changing positionality of urban scholars, and about whether we should lay our previous work to rest within its historical framing or instead constantly revisit it whilst we grapple with the changing (and unequal) realities around us. Against a backdrop of the contradictions and perversions of current capitalist modes of urbanization, Brenner highlights clearly the urgency of this conversation. In his view, it is a matter of taking a clearer stance vis-à-vis critical theorizing, 'or else bust' (p. 329). The onus is now on urban scholars to respond to this challenge and to prove that the urban theory debate is alive and well, because it is certainly very much needed.