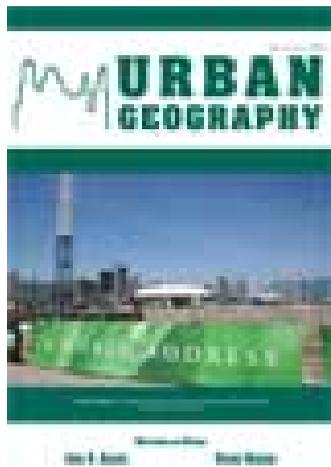


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### Implosions/explosions. Towards a study of planetary urbanization, edited by Neil Brenner

Michele Acuto<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University College London

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Implosions/explosions. Towards a study of planetary urbanization**, edited by Neil Brenner, Berlin, Jovis, 2013, 576 pp., £31.24 (paperback), maps, illustrations, index, €42.00, ISBN 978-3-86859-317-4

*Implosions/Explosions*, edited by Neil Brenner, is suggestive from its front cover: the landscape of Tar Sands in Alberta, Canada, as frontier of a now fully urbanized planet. To the uninitiated, the book presents a *tour de force* in a densely theoretical, far-reaching and alternative depiction of a divergent narrative of urbanization to that of the popular ‘urban age’. To the updated urban scholar, *Implosions/Explosions* offers the chance to consider fully, in book rather than article format, the state of Brenner and Christian Schmid’s assertion for a ‘theory of extended urbanization’. Thanks to lectures, panels and journal articles, Brenner’s project has already placed centre stage in urban studies the planetary urbanization concept (next to growing debates on comparative urbanism, the ‘ordinary city’, and urban crises). Key to Brenner’s intention, and in the overall project foreshadowing the volume, is presenting an ‘urban theory without an outside’ where the writings gathered in the book help us encounter a renewed agenda to theorize the global pervasiveness of the *process* of urbanization.

Brenner’s volume, by the editor’s own assertion, is less of a neat framework than an experiment in gathering key voices from the present and the past of Lefebvrian urban studies. It might be fair to argue that *Implosions/Explosions* is essentially a ‘real-time’ reader of planetary urbanization, where project participants from Harvard, ETH Zurich, New York University (NYU) and beyond have (carefully) sought to put themselves in dialogue with key voices that engaged with Lefebvre’s provocation that society has been completely urbanized. Before proceeding further, I suggest that it might be beyond the scope of a small book review to do justice to the richness of the texts and propositions in this book.

Over 500 pages of the volume take place across seven core sections that begin by engaging with the ‘urban question’ and proceeds to discuss the geographical limits (or lack thereof) of the urbanization process. The book moves on to chart the contours of Brenner and Schmid’s core ‘theses’ on (planetary) urbanization in section three, the first gathering substantive theoretical, and most importantly new, writing on this topic as recently published by Brenner, Schmid and Merrifield. After a section on the historical dimension of these processes, and before an experimental part on the need and challenges of visualizing an urbanized planet, comes perhaps the book’s most provocative part. Presenting excellent writing by Brenner’s NYU team (Wachsmut and Angelo), along with a provocative piece by Brendan Gleeson on the role of social science versus the renewed hype on positivism in urban research, this section offers important provocations on the risks of treating the ‘city’ as an ideology and as a statistical artefact of a methodological ‘cityism’—both themes that have already sparked meaningful discussion ahead of this publication. The book concludes with a much-needed section on the political strategies of planetary urbanization, which offers (along with a reprinted coda by Lefebvre) a reiteration of the challenge of the ‘right to the city’ and a provocation, as in

John Friedmann's last chapter, on what it means to be 'urbanists' as the world 'becomes urban'.

The book is no small feat. It presents a variety of viewpoints on the renewed importance of a Lefebvrian take on the urban age, seeking to discuss the possibility, reflecting Brenner's close connection with Andy Merrifield, of a 'new urban question' (Merrifield, 2014). Overall, a set of core issues transcend the book and speak directly to other debates in urban studies. Obviously, the strong advocacy for the continued relevance of Lefebvrian thinking in the age of the 'planetaryization of the urban' is espoused loud and clear throughout the volume. This is coupled with an often still uneasy engagement on the relation of planetary urbanization with the countryside. If we have, indeed, gone past the Lefebvrian 'critical point' for the urbanization of society, then the move beyond the 'city' promoted in section five is important. Here, Brenner's collection promotes a fluid and totalizing view of urbanization that, in a legal analogy, might be pushing for *process* thinking against the focus on other 'turns' in contemporary urbanism. For example, the rhetoric of planetary urbanization poses itself against the city as a unit of analysis, especially in its reiteration as a statistical artefact, and in doing so it clearly raises productive tension with the growing interest in comparative urbanism. Yet this is not necessarily a destructive, as much as a productive, tension. Where the volume, and the various flavours of an urban theory without 'methodological cityism' presented in it, can perhaps offer a strong reminder is in its advocacy against the 'naturalization' of the city in the study of urban processes. Fundamental, then, is the positioning of planetary urbanization in partial contraposition to the 'urban age' discourse, against the 'neo-Haussmannization' and 'market fundamentalism' that some of this popular rhetoric has too easily embraced.

Yet, like many editorial experiments, *Implosions/Explosions* still leaves some necessary questions open and in urgent need of more systematic discussion. If we have indeed moved from urbanization as emergent condition to actualized reality, we will then need a far stronger normative iteration, not just re-iteration, of the sociopolitical implications of planetary urbanization. Section seven, in taking issue with the right to the city, foreshadows this move but remains central for critical urbanists beyond this project to demand more from the planetary urbanization camp. The politics of planetary urbanization, while core to several chapters, are rarely tackled methodically and beyond a reiteration of Lefebvrian thinking. Merrifield's new urban question, while connecting radical urban theory and political activism in cities, might help us in this direction, but a more extensive and open (to other kinds and narratives of politics) treatise is still much needed.

Finally, only mentioned in Lefebvre's coda is the place of the individual in the interplay between city-dweller, city-zenship (*citoyenneté*) and the planetary metamorphosing, dissolving city. As we focus on large comparisons and planetary processes, we need not, as the work on global cities and world systems did at the turn of the century, forget the individual and the mundane challenges of the city-dweller. Planetary urbanization need not become yet another comfortable totalizing rhetoric like the 'urban age' itself criticizes. Rather, it can remain and improve as a slightly messy playing field for urban studies. It can remind us of not simply accepting the bases of our theorizing, whether 'urban' or 'city', and of the importance of treating the city, as Doreen Massey (1999) had pointed out more than a decade ago, as an 'open intensity' always in dialectic with wider emergent processes, always open to contestation, always in connections with an elsewhere. In this, *Implosions/Explosions* will need an even wider and

open debate with other strands of urbanism, to continue pushing (as Lefebvre would) towards a progressive urban theory.

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Michele Acuto  
*University College London*  
[m.acuto@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:m.acuto@ucl.ac.uk)  
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