

Implosions/explosions: towards a study of planetary urbanization edited by *Neil Brenner*

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For a book that aims to speak to the field of urban studies, having a vast, desolate and barren field with tar sands on the cover – an epitome of the massive socio-ecological degradation that is associated with the use of fossil fuels – instead of the usual skyscraper or highway is by all means a provocation. Even classics in the field that are known for promoting nuanced and counterintuitive views of what ‘the urban’ is, such as *Nature’s metropolis* by William Cronon or *The urban revolution* by Henri Lefebvre, did not attempt to go that far. By deploying such aesthetic as a bold narrative technique, *Implosions/explosions* lets the reader know from the very outset what is at stake with the urbanisation of the world. In the words of Neil Brenner, the book’s editor, the purpose is to reclaim a subterranean strand of critical urban theory that questions ‘established understandings of the urban as a bounded, nodal and relatively self-enclosed sociospatial condition in favour of more territorially differentiated, morphologically variable, multiscalar and processual conceptualizations’ (p 15). In fact, the book is titled after a metaphor used by Henri Lefebvre to describe the concentration of population and built environments in cities (implosion) that goes hand in hand with the projection of myriad urban fragments across non-urban geographies (explosion), a contradictory tendency that underpins the capitalist form of urbanisation (see Lefebvre 2003 [1970], 14). As such, the book constitutes an attempt to move beyond the dominant epistemology of urban studies in which zones of agglomeration (cities) are analytically isolated to the point of being considered the only possible expression of urbanisation processes.

This epistemology, Brenner suggests, is a deeply misleading vantage point from which to analyse the emergent dynamics of global urbanisation, because it tends to obscure the processes of enclosure, dispossession and socio-ecological degradation that support the growth of cities, but that take place in putatively non-urban contexts, or what he refers to as ‘operational landscapes’. Such operational landscapes, Brenner contends, may not have the densities or population thresholds of cities, but nonetheless ‘they have played strategically essential roles in supporting the latter, whether by supplying raw materials, energy, water, food or labour, or through logistics, communications or waste processing functions’ (p 20). As such, he goes on to propose an ‘urban theory without an outside’ in which all of these variegated sociospatial morphologies – the hinterland, the landfill, the mine – are considered internal to contemporary processes of urbanisation. On the basis of that rationale, *Implosions/explosions* sets out to offer an astonishing *tour de force* in which its contributors – throughout its 34 chapters – engage in diverse theoretical, analytical, cartographic and even experiential speculations that explore and unfold such immanent critique of the urban.

The chapters are grouped in seven sections according to themes, and most of the contributions are undergirded by a direct engagement with Lefebvre’s philosophical explorations of space. For the purposes of this review, however, one could group them into three broader groups as follows. The first would encompass classic and background texts by Harvey (chapter 3), Soja and

Kanai (chapter 10), Schmid (chapter 4) and by Lefebvre himself (chapter 2 and 34), which are formative of this emergent strand of scholarship, and that appear republished in the book. A second group of contributions would offer the theoretical and analytical grounds to extend Lefebvre’s notion of generalised urbanisation to the contemporary global conjuncture. Central to this group are contributions by Brenner (chapters 1 and 13), Brenner and Schmid (chapters 11 and 21), Schmid (chapter 14), Goonewardena (chapter 15), Soja (chapter 19), Kipfer (chapter 20), Angelo and Wachsmuth (chapter 24), Wachsmuth (chapter 23), Merrifield (chapters 12, 25 and 31), Madden (chapter 30) and Ajl (chapter 32). A third group of contributions encompasses empirical case studies of urbanisation patterns in Switzerland (chapters 6, 7, 18, 26), Brazil (chapters 8 and 17), Asia (chapter 9) and the United Kingdom (chapter 16), as well as visual and cartographic explorations of urbanisation processes (chapters 27 and 28). Although the scopes, objectives and methodologies of these chapters are diverse, a relentless pursuit for re-imagining the urban beyond notions of density and population thresholds is what drives all of them.

The quest of *Implosions/explosions* is, therefore, an ambitious one, because the claim that more than half of the world’s population now lives in cities has become a form of ‘doxic common sense’ that determines the way in which questions regarding the urban condition are framed (Brenner and Schmid, chapter 21, 310). Such ‘Urban Age’ discourse not only pervades the practices of multilateral agencies like the United Nations and the World Bank (see Brenner and Schmid, chapter 21), but also the conceptual repertoires of politically progressive strands of thought in urban studies. For example, Angelo and Wachsmuth’s chapter notes how the Marxist School of Urban Political Ecology (Heynen *et al.* 2006), despite its tremendously valuable effort to render visible the socionatural processes that take place in cities, has been reluctant to investigate the dimensions of urbanisation that transverse city and country (Angelo and Wachsmuth, chapter 24, 377). This ‘methodological cityism’, which consists of an analytical privileging and naturalisation of the city in studies of urban problems where the non-city may also be significant (Angelo and Wachsmuth, chapter 24, 377), poses many problems in a world where the city is exploding ever more chaotically into the countryside. McGee’s chapter provides a clear demonstration of how misleading a city-centric conception of the urban can be in empirical research by showing that many agro-industrial regions in Asia can reach population densities comparable to those of Western suburbia (McGee, chapter 9). In a similar vein, Meili’s chapter points at how certain parts of the Alpine meadow in Switzerland – despite epitomising the opposite of urban life – have similar road, telecom and energy infrastructures as the country’s most populated cities. Soja and Kanai’s chapter on the emergence of ‘megacity regions’, which consist of expanding regional networks of cities that can even stretch beyond national borders, also points in a similar direction (Soja and Kanai, chapter 10).

In sum, these burgeoning sociospatial morphologies demand an urgent reconsideration of the categories of practice that inform not only theory, but also everyday planning and policymaking. For that reason, *Implosions/explosions* is likely to be a watershed book not only for the field of urban studies, but for the cognate field of urban political ecology as well. In my opinion, the only

aspect that seems to be missing in the book – and especially given its Lefebvrian orientation – is an enquiry into the possibilities for radical change that come with the expansion of the urban fabric. One of the foremost aims of critical theory – in the Marxist sense at least – has been to imagine and summon into being the revolutionary subject that will overturn a world on the brink of doom. Although Merrifield's excellent contributions hint at those possibilities, specific studies of social resistance and mobilisation in these emerging urban landscapes would have been a great addition to the book. However, and as Brenner cautions in the introduction, *Implosions/explosions* is not a definitive statement but a set of 'intellectual resources' for the elaboration of a research agenda (p 21). Opening the floor for this much-needed research agenda is what will make of *Implosions/explosions* a widely influential book in the field for years to come.

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References

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