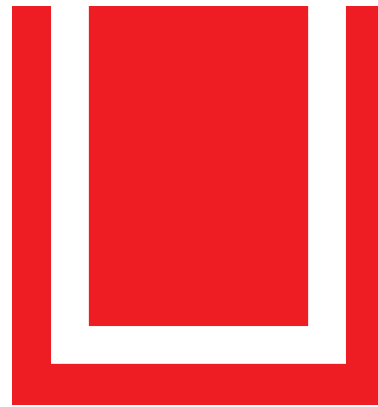


'Critique' is not simply an oppositional orientation towards extant spaces, institutions and ideologies; it requires a continual interrogation of the changing historical conditions of possibility for such an orientation. Through its irreducible abstraction, critique is an essential moment within the ongoing struggle to imagine and to pursue alternative pathways for the production of space.



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Neil Brenner



Critique of Urbanization: Selected Essays



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Framings



1 The *Problematique* of Critique

This book assembles a series of texts devoted to the critique of urbanization. Most of the articles, essays, interventions, manifestos and dialogues contained herein were produced since 2009; two chapters stem from the early 2000s; about half were coauthored with other critical urban researchers, who have generously permitted their inclusion here. All reflect a concerted, collaborative and still ongoing effort to develop a critical approach to understanding emergent forms of urban transformation. Just as crucially, the analyses gathered in this book grapple with the changing conditions of possibility for the very critique of urbanization they advance. In this sense, this book is not only an attempt to develop critical perspectives on specific patterns and pathways of urban restructuring, but a series of sustained reflections on how, why and in what forms such a critique might be articulated, even as the geographies of urbanization are continuously transformed before our eyes, at every imaginable spatial scale.

The chapters that follow are grounded upon a specific, if evolving, normative-political orientation – the goal of facilitating the collective imagination and radically democratic appropriation of the “right to the city,” or what I term *alter-urbanizations*, by the inhabitants of our rapidly urbanizing planet. Crucially, however, the critique of urbanization proclaimed in this book’s title is not intended merely to signal a specific criticism of emergent urban formations – for instance, due to their manifestly unjust, exclusionary, undemocratic, militarized, fragmented or environmentally destructive character. Nor, for that matter, do I propose here a specific alternative framework for reorganizing the life of cities, regions and territories – for instance, based upon more substantive forms of redistribution, inclusion, participation, security, solidarity or sustainability. While such agendas are, obviously, absolutely essential to the work of critical urban theory and research, including to the texts presented here, this book explores a still more wide-ranging *problematique*: the multifaceted critique of urbanization that, under modern capitalist conditions, persistently animates everyday life, counterpublics, insurgent social movements, counter-hegemonic political strategies, radical planning and design interventions, and the writings of critical urban scholars, generating new, if always ideologically

contested, horizons for interpreting, representing, imagining, shaping, regulating, governing and appropriating the variegated, urbanizing landscapes of our planet.

As conceived here, then, the critique of urbanization is a *problematique* that emerges from within, and conflictually co-evolves with, the very urban transformations towards which its subversive energies, dissident analyses and counter-hegemonic visions are directed. This book is focused upon that *problematique* itself. Its goal is not only to develop critical perspectives on the neoliberalizing, increasingly planetary forms of market-disciplinary urban transformation that have been unfolding since the 1980s, but to track the vicissitudes of critique that have been provoked by, and that have actively shaped, those transformations.

In the expanded sense proposed here, the critique of urbanization is necessarily multidimensional, at once in spatial, institutional and political terms. It includes everyday forms of experimentation, resistance, rebellion and insurgency, as well as organized political strategies, reflexive design projects, and small- and large-scale planning interventions that, in some way, call into question the necessity, rationality or legitimacy of hegemonic spatial arrangements. Such critiques may be directed, for instance, at the commodification of housing; the class-based and racial polarization of social space; the enclosure and privatization of public space; speculation-driven approaches to property development; the lack of public investment in key infrastructures for social reproduction (including housing, transportation, education, health care and other public goods); the insulation of key planning and design decisions from relays of democratic control and accountability; the legal institutionalization or cultural normalization of spatial exclusions based on class, race, gender or sexuality; the dispossession of local inhabitants from common, community-based resources; the concentration of environmental risk, public health hazards and social vulnerability among low-income, minority or historically oppressed communities; or the intensifying degradation of our planetary environmental commons in pursuit of endless capital accumulation. Across diverse arenas, territories and scales of politico-ideological contestation, however, what such critiques share is the relentless insistence that “things could be otherwise” – or, as I argue in several chapters below, the notion that *another urbanization is possible*.

This proposition lies at the heart of the idea of alter-urbanization, the goal of which is not only to pursue alternative models of spatial organization, whether within streetscapes, neighborhoods, cities, regions or territories, but to envision alternative *processes* for the common appropriation and transformation of the shared,

intensely interconnected urban world we all now inhabit. This emphasis on processes rather than spatial forms or territorial units necessarily requires a sustained critical interrogation of the political institutions, regulatory frameworks and legal rule-regimes that govern the production of spatial configurations and modes of interspatial connection under modern capitalism. In the absence of new institutional spaces – or, more precisely, new institutional *processes* – alter-urbanizations are impossible to imagine, much less to pursue. This politico-epistemological orientation lies at the heart of the dialectical approach to radical sociospatial transformation famously encapsulated in Henri Lefebvre’s concept of the production of space, and more recently elaborated by David Harvey.¹ Its implications are explored in several chapters of this book which critically evaluate the prospects for more socially just, radically democratic, territorially balanced and ecologically viable interventions into emergent patterns and pathways of urban restructuring.

The pursuit of alter-urbanizations is grounded, above all, in everyday life, social mobilization and political struggle, but it is necessarily mediated through and animated by questions of ideology – in Stuart Hall’s terms, “the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought and the systems of representation” through which “different classes and social groups [...] make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works.”² Such frameworks of interpretation saturate everyday life and spatial practices with meaning while also, as Hall emphasizes, serving as a “material force” insofar as they may “stabilize a particular form of power and domination” or, by contrast, “move the masses of the people into historical action against the prevailing system.”³

It is for this reason, I believe, that the work of critical urban theory is essential to the project of pursuing alter-urbanizations, since its proper task is precisely to investigate the historically contingent social and institutional sources of human suffering – “social suffering,” in Pierre Bourdieu’s memorable phrase – underlying spatial arrangements that, in mainstream political discourse, are represented as natural, necessary or optimal.⁴ While the historical, institutional and ideological mechanisms of this generalized projection of “false necessity” are a matter of considerable controversy,⁵ its deconstruction, both in theory and in practice, is surely a shared goal among all critical urban researchers, whether of a neo-Marxian, post-Marxist, anti-racist, feminist, poststructuralist, postcolonial, queer-theoretical, ecosocialist or anarchist orientation. Indeed, in contrast to mainstream or “traditional” forms of urban research, which produce knowledge in the service of

dominant political-economic institutions oriented towards profit-maximization, labor discipline, social control, political tranquilization, militarization, cultural normalization, consumerism and/or ecological self-obliteration, each of these broadly allied streams of critical urban studies aims explicitly to destabilize the hegemonic urban institutions, practices and ideologies that sanctify, naturalize or legitimate extant sociospatial arrangements and the manifold injustices, dispossessions, dislocations, degradations and irrationalities upon which they are grounded.⁶

Against the background of this broader agenda, the chapters assembled in this book aim, in particular, to illuminate the spatial operations of power and ideology that underpin the capitalist form of urbanization, especially in the wake of the successive waves of crisis-induced and crisis-inducing neoliberalization that have radically, if unevenly, reterritorialized and rescaled the urban landscapes of the world since the 1980s, generally with socially and ecologically disastrous consequences.⁷ The opening and closing chapters of the section on *Urban Strategies, Urban Ideologies* (Chapters 3 and 10) result from my long-term collaboration with Nik Theodore and Jamie Peck. Positioned as theoretical bookends for this section of the book, these essays propose a framework through which to decipher the variegated spatial, politico-regulatory and discursive dynamics of neoliberalization processes, across regions, territories, scales and contexts. This framework strongly informs the other contributions to that section of the book, which include coauthored essays with Roger Keil (Chapter 4), David Wachsmuth (Chapter 5) and Peter Marcuse and Margit Mayer (Chapter 9). Here, with my colleagues, I mobilize the tools of critical urban theory to contextualize, assess and deconstruct some of the hegemonic urban keywords of our time – including “global cities,” “territorial competitiveness,” “good governance,” “open city,” “tactical urbanism” and “post-neoliberalism,” among several others. Such ideological discourses naturalize, and thus depoliticize, the spatial (il)logics and enclosures of neoliberal urbanism.⁸

Precisely because, as Stuart Hall notes, ideology serves as a “material force” which can “reconcile or accommodate the mass of the people to their subordinate place in the social formation,” its sustained critique, including through the rigorous, often abstract, work of critical theory, can also help transform the “terrain of ideological struggle,” facilitating the production of “new forms of consciousness [and] new conceptions of the world” that may, in turn, animate new forms of social experimentation, alternative spatial practices and oppositional political mobiliza-

tion.⁹ For this reason, these chapters are intended not only to serve deconstructive purposes; they are presented in the hope of offering some measure of intellectual, normative and political orientation to those social forces and political alliances struggling to envision and to realize some of the “possible urban worlds” which such hegemonic, depoliticizing and normalizing spatial ideologies systematically hide, devalorize, stigmatize, repress or criminalize.¹⁰ Such dialectical, always shifting connections between theory and practice (and, inversely: from practice back to theory) are of particularly central concern in Chapters 9 and 10, where my coauthors and I reflect on the prospects for alternative pathways of urbanization and regulation following the global financial crises of the post-2008 period.

Here arises a further, equally essential contrast between traditional or mainstream approaches to urban knowledge and the form of critical urban theory espoused in this book. Mainstream approaches to the urban question tend to presuppose what Andrew Sayer has termed an epistemology of “naïve objectivism,” in which the city and the urban are conceived as self-evident empirical entities that can be transparently understood and instrumentally manipulated by a neutral observer occupying a vantage point external to the sites and processes being investigated.¹¹ In contrast, as I elaborate in Chapter 2, one of the hallmarks of any form of critical social theory, including critical urban theory, is its emphasis on the practical situatedness of all forms of knowledge and on a rigorous epistemological reflexivity regarding the changing contexts, conditions and mediations of that situatedness in relation to ongoing processes of historical-geographical restructuring. Accordingly, building upon the epistemological foundations developed by Frankfurt School social theorists, I argue that the work of reflexive critique requires a continual interrogation of the changing historical conditions of possibility for such an orientation. Rather than presupposing a rigid separation between subject (knower) and object (the site or context under investigation), reflexive approaches emphasize their mutual constitution, practical interdependence and ongoing transformation through social relations, including in the contested realm of interpretation and ideology. In Margaret Archer’s more general formulation, a reflexive approach to social theory involves “a subject considering an object in relation to itself, bending that object back upon itself in a process which includes the self being able to consider itself as its own object.”¹²

In the context of critical urban studies, this philosophical requirement involves not only the constant interrogation of changing urban conditions, but the equally

vigilant analysis and revision of the very conceptual frameworks being used to investigate the urban process itself. For any reflexive approach to urban theory, therefore, the categories, methods and cartographies of urban analysis are themselves important focal points of inquiry: understanding their conditions of emergence and intelligibility, as well as the possibility of their destabilization or obsolescence, represent essential, ongoing, and potentially transformative research priorities. Simply put, reflexive approaches to urban theory must constantly subject their own epistemic assumptions and categories of analysis to critical interrogation, even as the latter are being mobilized in ongoing research endeavors.

The texts assembled in the final section of the book, *New Urban Geographies*, put this epistemological imperative into action in order to explore the possibility that some of the most entrenched categories, cartographies and methods within the field of urban theory – in particular, those associated with inherited notions of the city, the urban/rural divide and the hinterland – today require systematic reinvention under rapidly mutating planetary conditions. This analysis builds upon my ongoing collaborative work with Christian Schmid on the *problematique* of “planetary urbanization.” In our writings thus far, we have mobilized this concept to critically interrogate the inherited metageographical assumptions of twentieth-century urban theory, and on this basis, to demarcate the limitations and blind spots of contemporary triumphalist ideologies of city-centric capitalism and the “urban age.” Just as importantly, our theorization of planetary urbanization is intended to help illuminate the variegated, profoundly uneven geographies of urban restructuring around the world, at once within expanding megacities and large-scale metropolitan regions, as well as across the landscapes of erstwhile rural zones, inherited hinterlands and even wilderness areas that are now increasingly being integrated within, and operationalized by, planetary-scale urban-industrial strategies, mega-infrastructure configurations and intercontinental logistics corridors.¹³

Following a programmatic overview of this wide-ranging agenda in a short text written with Christian Schmid (Chapter 11), subsequent chapters explore some of its contours through engagements with several key terrains of analysis in contemporary urban studies – including debates on the notion of an urban “revolution” (Chapter 12), the transformation of inherited hinterlands into operational landscapes (Chapter 13), the agency of design under conditions of neoliberalized, planetary urbanization (Chapter 14), and the uses and potential hazards of actor-network theory in critical urban studies (Chapter 15; coauthored with David J. Madden and

David Wachsmuth). In a brief manifesto produced to orient work in the Urban Theory Lab, a research platform I established at the Harvard GSD, I reflect upon the challenges of pursuing theoretically speculative, postdisciplinary, cartographically experimental and unapologetically critical approaches to urbanism in a global academic and political climate that systematically prioritizes the modalities of application-oriented, policy-driven research (Chapter 16). This section contains two “dialogues” with my colleagues, Daniel Ibañez and Martín Arboleda, which further elaborate some of the book’s core arguments in relation to contemporary urban discourse and research practice in the social sciences, urban planning and the design disciplines (Chapters 14 and 17).

Taken together, then, the contributions to this book advocate a constant reinvention of the framing categories, methods and assumptions of critical urban theory in relation to the rapidly, unevenly mutating geographies of capitalist urbanization, especially in the contemporary era of hyperfinancialized, planetary-scale spatial, institutional and ecological transformation. If urbanization is, at core, a process of producing and transforming space, then the moment of critique is, in practice, already contained within it, while also itself being recurrently, relentlessly transformed through the cascading dynamics of creative destruction that underpin and articulate this process. As understood here, therefore, critique is not simply an oppositional orientation towards extant spaces, institutions and ideologies; it is a pulse of subversion *and* transcendence that is embedded within, yet suppressed by, the apparent facticity of the present. In this sense, the moment of critique is not produced from a standpoint external to the process of urbanization; it is immanently contained within the latter, as an animating force that at once internalizes the enclosures, dispossessions, crisis tendencies and contradictions of the current urban configuration, while also pointing beyond them, towards alternative possible futures. In precisely this sense, I believe, critique is a mode of counter-interpretation that – to return once again to Stuart Hall’s phrase – can operate as a “material force” shaping and continuously reshaping the process of urbanization itself.¹⁴

Through its irreducible abstraction, then, critique is an essential moment within the ongoing struggle to imagine and to pursue alter-urbanizations – alternative pathways for the collective production and appropriation of space. As the process of capitalist urbanization continues its relentless, if systemically uneven, forward movement of creative destruction across places, territories and scales, the meanings and modalities of critique must be continually reinvented, and so too must the

parameters for imagining, mapping and pursuing alter-urbanizations. This is, from my point of view, one of the major intellectual and political challenges confronting critical urban theorists today, and it is accordingly a central concern animating the texts assembled in this book. Only a theory that is dynamic – which is constantly, reflexively being transformed in relation to the restlessly, unevenly evolving social worlds and territorial landscapes it aspires to grasp – can be a genuinely *critical* theory.

Notes

- 1 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991); David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).
- 2 Stuart Hall, “The Problem of Ideology: Marxism without Guarantees,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10, no. 2 (1986): 29.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 30.
- 4 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*, trans. Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson (Stanford, Ca: Stanford University Press, 2000).
- 5 Roberto Mangabeira Unger, *False Necessity: Anti-Necessitarian Social Theory in the Service of Radical Democracy* (London: Verso, 2004).
- 6 On the distinction between traditional and critical theory, see Max Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew O’Connell (New York: Continuum, 1982), 188–243.
- 7 David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford, 2010).
- 8 Other urban-ideological keywords could be added to this list – including, in more recent years, “creative cities,” “smart cities,” “sustainable cities” and “resilient cities.” For powerful critical contextualizations and deconstructions of such terms, see Jamie Peck, “Struggling with the Creative Class,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 29, no. 4 (2005): 740–70; Adam Greenfield, *Against the Smart City* (New York: Do projects, 2013); Timothy Luke, “Neither Sustainable nor Development: Reconsidering Sustainability in Development,” *Sustainable Development* 13 (2005): 228–38; and Susan Fairstein, “Resilience and Justice,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 39, no. 1 (2015): 157–67.
- 9 Hall, “The Problem of Ideology,” 30–31.
- 10 The concept of “possible urban worlds” is developed in David Harvey, *Justice, Nature and the Geographies of Difference* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).
- 11 Andrew Sayer, *Method in Social Science: A Realist Approach*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1992).
- 12 Margaret Archer, *Making Our Way Through the World: Human Reflexivity and Social Mobility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 72.
- 13 These arguments are developed at length in several coauthored texts that are not included in this volume, as well as in several other collaborative writing projects. See, in particular, Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid, “The ‘Urban Age’ in question,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 38,

no. 3 (2014): 731–55; and Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid, “Towards a New Epistemology of the Urban,” *CITY* 19, no. 2–3 (2015): 151–82. See also Neil Brenner, ed., *Implosions/Explosions: Towards a Study of Planetary Urbanization* (Berlin: Jovis, 2014).

14 Hall, “The Problem of Ideology,” 30.

