Book Review: The Sage Handbook of the 21st Century City edited by Suzanne Hall and Ricky Burdett

In **The SAGE Handbook of the 21st Century City***,* **Suzanne Hall** *and* **Ricky Burdett** *bring together contributors to explore the conditions that have emerged or intensified since the start of the new decade to shape cities today. While observing continuity as well as change when it comes to 'the urban question',* **Frederik Weissenborn** *recommends this volume for its breadth of themes and topics that seek to respond to the challenges facing contemporary urban populations.*

The Sage Handbook of the 21st Century City. **Suzanne Hall and Ricky Burdett (eds). SAGE. 2018.**

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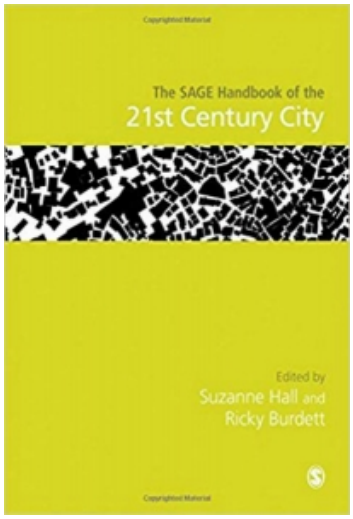

Urban sociology – the study of urban systems as socio-spatial phenomena – is a relatively young discipline. A concerted investigation of the relationship between urban settlements and urban social behaviour only really emerged in the 1920s through the writings of Robert Park, Louis Wirth and Ernest Burgess: the so-called Chicago School of Sociology. Of central interest to the Chicago School were urban agglomeration processes and the non-linear manner in which the densification of human social relations in urban settlements was thought to cascade through the body politic: eroding otherwise ingrained patterns of social coexistence, and giving rise to new, qualitatively different forms of behaviour (an increased potential for social mobility, of upturning existing social hierarchies, but also a greater degree of social fragmentation).

The Chicago School was later criticised by Marxist scholars, who, in the politically volatile 1960s and 1970s, developed a second, more critical wave of urban sociology. Marxist geographers theorised the city as inextricably linked with concerns for political domination but also emancipation: urban systems were in their eyes both capable of entrenching existing patterns of class relations, and of acting as a potentially revolutionary force, a driver of social change. If it is worth revisiting in this manner the brief history of urban studies, it is because it reminds us that urban sociology is a recent endeavour. It is also a twentieth-century endeavour: a paradigm arguably born from the socio-economic singularity of the second industrial revolution and the new patterns of habitation, social interaction and political exploitation that it fostered.

Almost two decades into the twenty-first century – and at a time when a new digital revolution is gathering pace – it is not unreasonable to ask whether any new conditions particular to this century have arisen which would set contemporary cities apart from those discussed in the literature of the previous century, conditions which demand a re-engagement with, if not reframing of, what Manuel Castells called 'the urban question'? This is addressed by *The Sage Handbook of the 21st Century City* – edited by Ricky Burdett and Suzanne Hall, both associated with LSE Cities – although the word 'anthology' seems more appropriate than 'handbook', with the volume coming in at 700-plus densely written pages.

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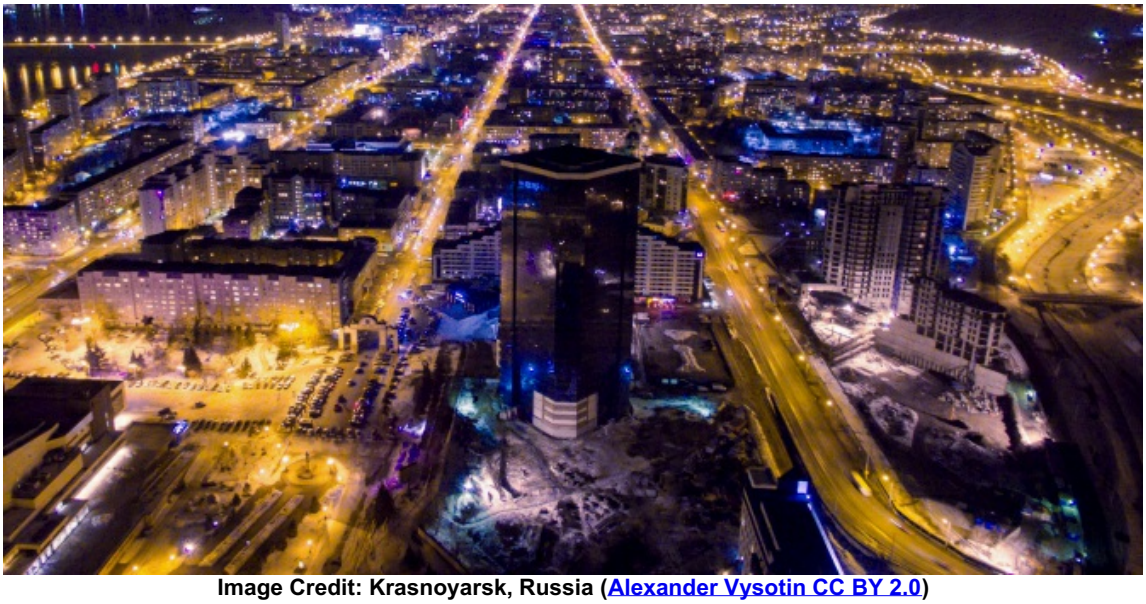

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The volume is organised around nine overarching themes – Hierarchy, Productivity, Authority, Volatility, Conflict, Provisionality, Mobility, Civility and Design – through the prism of which central aspects of contemporary urban experience, such as race, gender and class, are explored and discussed. It isn't possible to discuss each chapter in this review – the volume holds 37 individual essays – so I will focus on what I perceive to be the three most central contributions. However, the breadth of essays and themes is to be commended and furthermore ensures that the book responds to many of the challenges facing contemporary urban populations.

One of the central essays – and arguably a text that unlocks the book – is Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid's 'Elements for a New Epistemology of the Urban'*;* readers are advised to start here. Like the Marxist geographers of the 1970s, Brenner and Schmid takes an approach which focuses not on the settlements themselves but on the socio-economic forces shaping them: 'The essential task', Brenner and Schmid write, ' is less to distinguish new urban forms that are putatively superseding earlier spatial morphologies than to investigate the historically and geographically specific dynamics of creative destruction that underpins patterns and pathways of urbanisation, both historically and in the contemporary epoch' (63).

This is not social determinism. Urban systems, Brenner and Schmid argue, are both products of socio-economic forces and themselves a kind of inertial material force, refracting and sometimes redirecting the more volatile economic and institutional currents particular to a certain historical formation. Urban settlements on the one hand acquiesce to society, taking their shape from what are essentially external forces: the economic, the ideological and the social spheres. But they also involve powers of their own: locking social systems into socially and economically significant path dependencies, as for example in the case of infrastructure investments and the opportunities and dependencies these create (a problematic also explored by David Harvey in *The Limits to Capital*, 1982).

What, then, are the patterns of urbanisation particular to our current era of post-crisis, late capitalism? Brenner and Schmid mention several: the creation of a 'planetary' scale of urbanisation, of complete integration between urban systems and their suburban and rural hinterlands; the emergence of new corridors of urbanisation; and the end of wilderness. Theirs is a multi-scalar and essentially boundless urban system: a geographical and material entity that spans the globe and that corresponds closely to the 'World System' theorised by Immanuel Wallerstein. It is this kind of city – a product of local conditions, but also planetary in reach; prey to external forces, yet itself a force to be reckoned with – which *The Sage Handbook of the 21st Century City* explores.

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One of the paradoxes of the planetary urban system is that it is concurrently the site of a great increase in economic possibility and social mobility – with millions of people lifted out of poverty in the so-called developing world in the last decade – and the locus of significant and increasing inequalities, particularly in the developed world. In her essay on 'Urban Economies and Social Inequalities', Fran Tonkiss explores this issue, offering a useful taxonomy of the many forms that urban inequality takes on: 'consumption and welfare disparities; uneven shares of insecurity and vulnerability; skewed distributions of risk and harm; inequities of opportunity, access and expectation; inequality of treatment and regard'. As is clear from the terminology, inequality is here related to the material and social structures of the city, space thereby becoming an active force in the distribution of insecurity and the sedimentation of hierarchies. This is not necessarily a new insight – the idea that inequality can be perpetuated by urban systems and their material structures has been explored by other theoreticians – yet Tonkiss's essay offers useful nuance to the question and reframes it with respect to current urban populations and their struggles.

The relationship between urban systems and inequality is also explored by Mike Savage who, in his essay on the 'Elite Habitus in Cities of Accumulation', discusses different types of capital ('economic', 'social' and 'cultural', following Pierre Bourdieu) and their tendency to accrete in urban systems. Savage writes against modernist urban theories which, he argues, perceive cities as social mixing mechanisms: a type of settlement that has baked into its makeup transience and anomie. Counter to this position, Savage shows how urban land captures an increasing share of economic value – a trend that is particularly clear to those of us that live in London – and how this increasing centralisation of economic capital is, in turn, reflected in (and exacerbated by) concurrent increases in cultural and social capital:

> It is the steady accretion of accumulated capitals – the historical residues of previous forms of economic, social, cultural and political activity – which increasingly marks out the city in an era of accentuating wealth.

Does this handbook, then, move beyond what Savage refers to as 'the modernist mindset formed in the early 20th century'? Is there such a thing as a twenty-first-century city, a settlement with a fundamentally different makeup calling for radically new theories? The answer to that question isn't clearly affirmative, not to this reviewer at least, and that is perhaps surprising. The essays of the book, it is true, prod at supposedly new phenomena – the planetary scale of the urban system, the idea that cities entrench as much they dissolve power structures – yet these ideas have in fact been explored before. The planetary city is a term borrowed from Henri Lefebvre's book, *The Urban Revolution* (originally published in 1970) and repurposed by Brenner and Schmid. And the idea that the city may be the product as well as the accelerator of processes of accumulation is one explored already in the 1950s by V. Gordon Childe (in another text also called, somewhat confusingly, 'The Urban Revolution').

The issues dealt with in this volume therefore are not new, but they are perhaps more acute than they were 50 years ago. This does not necessarily detract from the individual essays or from the volume as a whole – which this reviewer recommends – but it does point to the fact that cities are slow-moving phenomena: systems which develop along a temporal gradient somewhere between the glacial tempo of differentiation particular to geological formations and the more volatile systems explored by economists. This may of course change at some point, but for the time being the twenty-first-century city bears many of the same traits as its twentieth-century forebear.

Frederik Weissenborn is an independent researcher. He holds a PhD in Architecture and an MSc in Advanced Architectural Studies, both from the Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL. Read more by Frederik Weissenborn.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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