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There Is a Politics of Urban Knowledge Because Urban Knowledge Is Political

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These are interesting times for urban studies. Rapid, planet-spanning urbanization is widely recognized as one of the defining processes shaping the contemporary world. As a result, in many parts of the world, urbanism—knowledge about urbanization, understood in the bureaucratic, technocratic, derogatory sense used by Henri Lefebvre (2003 [1970])—is an important element of what used to be called the ruling ideology. In almost all parts of the globe, 'the city' is held to be ascendant and is now, much more than the nation-state, widely thought to be the key to a number of economic and political problems. Transnational corporations see the growth and management of cities as key to twenty-first century accumulation and are adjusting their investment strategies accordingly. Urbanist techniques—again in the instrumental-rational and technocratic sense—are central to contemporary forms of statecraft and other dominant practices.

Urbanization and urbanism are, in some sense, ruling the day. Critical urbanism, however, is not. We can use this term two ways. In a narrow sense, it denotes the largely though not entirely academic discourse of critical urban studies (see e.g. Brenner, Marcuse and Mayer 2011; Davies and Imbroscio 2010). But more broadly, critical urbanism means the situated knowledges and theories of an infinite, ever-shifting worldwide array of 'system-challenging' (Marcuse 1976) urbanites: organizers, activists, social movement participants, community group members, planners, political actors, heterodox designers, angry old timers, alienated youth, community leaders without portfolio, organic intellectuals, free radicals, anyone who in countless ways seeks to build a different, better, more egalitarian, more democratic urban world. Neither of these ways of thinking about critical theory and action imply a party line or set of principles—rather, they illustrate the diversity of positions that Catterall (2013) invokes with the idea of 'critical pluralism.'

It is clear that critical urbanism in the narrow sense is a thriving intellectual orientation and academic project. And in the broader, more public sense, critical urbanism is in many places a powerful force and a vitally important aspect of urban political culture. But in both the narrow and broad senses, critical urbanists are, for the most part, external to the apparatuses and institutions that dominate and determine the production of urban space across the planet.

CITY has long been engaging with these issues, with regular interventions over the years dealing with what and whom critical urban knowledge is for. The most recent contribution to this discussion is Alex Schafran's 'Debating urban studies in 23 steps' (Schafran 2014). Schafran offers a critique of critical urban studies itself, which he laments is 'smart, correct and weak' (Schafran 2014: 322-323). Taking as his starting point the fiftieth anniversary of Ruth Glass's landmark *London: Aspects of change* (Glass 1964), where Glass coined the term 'gentrification,' Schafran argues that critical urban theorists keep talking about things like gentrification and neoliberalism but never do anything about them. Still in thrall to twentieth-century social science

paradigms, and stuck grappling with the legacy of destructive twentieth-century urban renewal projects, critical urbanists, according to Schafran, are not living up to their potential. To remedy this, he argues that urban studies should make peace with a number of aspects of the current urban status quo, in order to challenge others. He urges critical urbanists to become more active within cities, 'to shed the baggage of 20th-century social science if we are to establish ourselves as more central to the production of space in the 21st century' (Schafran 2014: 326).

There is much with which to agree in Schafran's provocation. Critical urbanism does not automatically translate into better forms of urbanization. More energy could always be devoted to making scholarship more useful to the worlds outside the academy. Whether or not critical urbanists should 'embrace our inner Georgists,' much less 'accept that some form of the investment/profit nexus is essentially eternal' (Schafran 2014: 324), he seems right to argue that urban studies should have 'a very specific debate about land and profit' (Schafran 2014: 325). In general, all urban thinkers should welcome this kind of reflexive auto-critique. But I want to take issue with a number of the points that he makes, in order to ask some broader questions about the critical urban theory and action today.

First, Schafran isn't completely fair to those who research, write, and teach within the broad traditions of critical urban studies. He writes, for example, that 'we must ask—critically, *por supuesto*, if we have not instead become satisfied with defining a 'posture', an 'antagonistic stance', and arguing that this in itself constitutes an 'intervention'' (Schafran 2014: 324). To me, this image of disengaged *philosophes* promoting theory for theory's sake is just a caricature. It doesn't match the contentious, diverse, action-oriented and often explicitly activist-oriented scholarship that one finds in the pages of *CITY*, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, *Antipode* and other outlets for critical urbanism. And while of course there are examples from public and academic discourse of terms like neoliberalism, revanchism, or gentrification being employed as epithets, I doubt that anyone really believes that merely invoking them constitutes a sufficient analysis.

I don't know any 'justice-oriented thinkers and doers' (322), as Schafran aptly puts it, who see some kind of grandiose critical urban theory per se as a 'sufficient aspiration' (324). Theory is, among other things, one of the tools that urbanists use to define and refine their terms, problematize their objects of study and politicize their subject matter. Theory is *necessary* for urban research, in the sense that is inescapable. Urbanists cannot avoid mobilising concepts; the choice is between doing so explicitly, in a way that is open to critical scrutiny and disputation, or implicitly, in a manner that disguises one's assumptions and politics. But no one, as far as I can tell, thinks that theory is *sufficient* in itself as an intervention in urban politics. I'd imagine that critical urbanists would almost universally agree that the point is not only to interpret urbanization but to change it. Certainly there are important questions to be asked about how urban research can contribute to social and political change. But to say that critical urbanism has become an exercise in posturing is idly dismissive.

Secondly, Schafran's piece is part of a more general backlash against the critique of neoliberalism—a backlash that is itself becoming part of contemporary political common sense. He writes that 'the utility of neoliberalism as a critique and in particular as a counter-hegemonic discursive strategy has run its course, regardless of whether or not a 'redux' is happening or not' (323). For Schafran, the critique of neoliberalism—and not the shibboleths and orthodoxies of neoliberal capitalist urbanism itself—has become so repetitive as to be useless. 'Part of the problem,' he argues, 'is our obsession with neoliberalism' (323).

Schafran isn't the only critic to experience neoliberalism fatigue (e.g., Castree 2006; Barnett 2005). But I would argue that Schafran is confusing critical discourses and hegemonic projects. If anything is repetitive, it's the parade of elitist and exclusionary neoliberal urban development agendas. This is not at all to make the straw man claim that all things neoliberal are identical. Rather, neoliberal processes and actors, as concrete historical phenomena, exhibit a family resemblance, a core set of qualities that have been succinctly said to share 'an articulation of state, market, and citizenship that harnesses the first to impose the stamp of the second onto the third' (Wacquant 2012: 71; see Jessop 2013). Schafran's accusation that critical urban theory has a neoliberalism 'obsession' implies an irrational attachment. But given the seemingly endless supply of variations-on-a-theme neoliberal 'innovations' in cities around the world, the attachment is all too rational. If urban governments and institutions were to start adopting en masse radically different policies or developing alternative political economies, I'd bet that critical urbanists would be happy to adjust their targets accordingly.

Rather than saying that urbanists should make peace with neoliberalism, perhaps a better way to put this would be to stress the importance of imminent critique. I agree that as a matter of tactics, it's vitally important to engage with actual possibilities for concretely transformative political projects. It is crucial to identify the imminent political opportunities that arise within neoliberalism. And this certainly should not preclude finding ways to work with government agencies and other institutions that might otherwise be part of the problem. The critique of neoliberalism will have indeed run its course if it leads to complacency or to blindness to the openings that invariably stem from any process of restructuring. But this is an argument for deepening and improving the critique of neoliberalism, not abandoning it.

Finally, Schafran seems to be overstating his case when he says that critical urbanists should 'start talking about building power' (Schafran 2014: 323). It is not entirely clear whom Schafran has in mind when he writes that 'every good idea can be coopted by power, and the question we must begin asking is how we can become powerful enough to ourselves coopt whatever concept can help' (Schafran 2014: 323). But he seems to have in mind academics and 'young scholars' (323), and he sees the 'weakness' of these critical scholars as problem to be rectified. His point here appears to be that urban academics should stop talking about power and start taking power.

Schafran acknowledges that his argument could seem elitist. As stated, it does strangely resemble the kind of technocratic politics that he elsewhere criticizes. Academics have no special claim on legitimacy simply by virtue of their academic positions. The people who should be

building power are the critical urbanists in the broader sense—the community social movements, the radical activists, the marginalized city dwellers who are currently excluded from that which is the true model of urban resilience, the inherited structures of economic and social power. To the extent that urban researchers are also part of these communities, projects and networks, they should indeed participate in building urban power. But they should do so from the same basis as any other city dweller. To suppose that academics qua academics should be building power is to argue for a politics of privileged expertise that urbanists should be critiquing rather than promoting.

Critical urbanists, in the narrow and broad senses, are not in most places a part of the ruling order. This may be what Schafran means when he writes that critical urban theory is weak. But he elides the difference between academic urbanists and critical urban actors more generally. And the lack of radical public urban philosophies and policies should be explained by reference to the needs of urban ruling classes, institutions and actors. Those in power prefer to make use of research that bolsters their chosen policies and strategies rather than to engage with critical knowledge that exposes problems and demands changes. Of course, merely recognizing this doesn't itself change anything. But it does refocus our attention on the broader field of urban politics within which the role of urban experts should be understood, rather than on the 'collective marginality' (Schafran 2014: 327) of urbanist academics per se.

Despite these points of disagreement, I welcome the overall spirit of Schafran's piece, and I agree that there should be a larger discussion about what, and whom, critical urban knowledge is for. Urbanists could use a better understanding of the politics and sociology of urban knowledge. O'Connor (2001) has detailed how 'poverty knowledge' has been shaped by, and in turn has shaped, broader political struggles. We should develop a similar understanding of urban knowledge. The field of urban studies needs to develop a better account of its own conditions of possibility, a more informed sense of its own place within the urban process both historically and in the present.

Urban knowledge does not just accumulate in libraries and online repositories. It is part of the field of contestation over urban space itself. Even the most technocratic and disembodied representation seemingly emanating from the view from nowhere has at least a crypto-political significance in that it establishes which measures are visible, knowable and hence valuable and which are not. What is measured in and about cities strongly shapes what matters. The on-going action of constituting a field of legitimate urban knowledge, privileged by the state as a basis for policy decisions and a baseline for political debate, establishes some points of view as hegemonic and casts other perspectives as unimportant. The entire process is part of the reproduction of the urban economic and political order. Is there any potential for alternative and subaltern urban knowledges to disrupt this process? Clearly, new urban knowledge on its own will not bring about systemic transformation. But it could play a part in a broader effort to bring about different urbanizations.

Critical urban knowledge is needed to act as a counterweight to mainstream social science, which has often been entwined with some of the most destructive urban policies. If twentieth century urbanologists were 'chastened by our own involvement in urban renewal' (Schafran

2014: 323), contemporary urban social science is currently being used to legitimize large-scale displacement, the destruction of social housing, aggressive policing, high levels of imprisonment and other forms of state violence. There are networks of think tanks and other research institutions dedicated to producing what Tom Slater calls 'decision-based evidence making' (Slater 2012). There's an important role for critical research within this political-epistemological field. At the very least, critical urbanists should use whatever intellectual resources are at our disposal to prevent urban social science from legitimizing reactionary policies. When policies are claimed to be evidence-based, the production of evidence will always be politicized.

Critical urbanists should also develop a more active stance towards the politics of the university itself. Schafran suggests that a 'different and partially separate urban academy' (2014: 327) should be developed. Arguably more pressing is for critical urbanists and other concerned academics to work to overcome the elitism and exclusion that increasingly characterizes many universities as they currently exist—for example, by working to increase the number of working class scholars and scholars of color in our departments and journals, or by actively working to change the exercises and institutions that serve to discipline academic labour. And the more that universities act like real estate companies intent on displacing working class communities, the more should university-based researchers with experience studying accumulation by dispossession speak up about its harms.

While the mainstream urbanist public sphere busies itself with faddish obsessions with pop-up shops or city livability rankings, there is nonetheless a growing space for public critical urbanism. Recent publications by Just Space, Southwark Notes and the London Tenants Federation (2014) or the Right to the City Alliance (2010) are good models of researchers and social movements working together to create critical urban knowledge that is clearly politically useful. In conditions of crisis, cogent analyses of urban problems have a habit of emerging in unexpected places. Raquel Rolnick's (2013; Human Rights Council 2009) discussion of neoliberalism and the financialization of housing as part of her role as UN Special Rapporteur shows how politically incisive urban analyses can inform mainstream institutions.

There has long been some connection, however distant, between radical, even utopian urban thought and the spaces of everyday life. Invariably the radical and utopian signals have been delayed and distorted. But perhaps the current era of radically intensified urbanization, even if it now appears as a succession of alienating forms, can repoliticize urbanism and allow for new channels connecting actually-existing cities and the urbanist imagination.

To adapt a Lefebvrean formulation: there is a politics of urban knowledge because urban knowledge is political. Urbanism needs to be reflexive about its own social position and epistemological basis. It needs to understand itself in relation to the broader processes and struggles of which it is inherently a part. Only from such a stance can those who research and write about urbanization help stop it from being a vehicle for inequality and dispossession, and instead contribute to making urban development a means to a more egalitarian, socialized, democratic life.

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