

Book Review: The New Urban Question by Andy Merrifield



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The New Urban Question considers connections between radical urban theory and political activism, taking in 19th-century Paris, 1970s Detroit, and the Occupy movement. **Oliver Cowan** finds this a compelling and inspirational read.

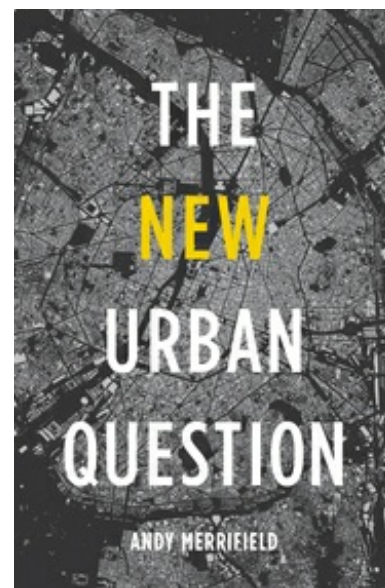


The New Urban Question. Andy Merrifield. Pluto Press. 2014.

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We all ask questions of our cities. These questions can vary from the everyday (“where to go tonight?”) to the longer term (“where shall we live?”). Although we may all ask such questions, the kinds of answers we are after, or are afforded, will vary. In asking “where to go tonight?” a City banker would seek a very different answer from someone sleeping on the city’s streets. These everyday questions are at the heart of city life, but for those whom the city is an object of academic enquiry there is a long tradition of asking questions of and about it to help inform theoretical discussion, as well as social and political action.

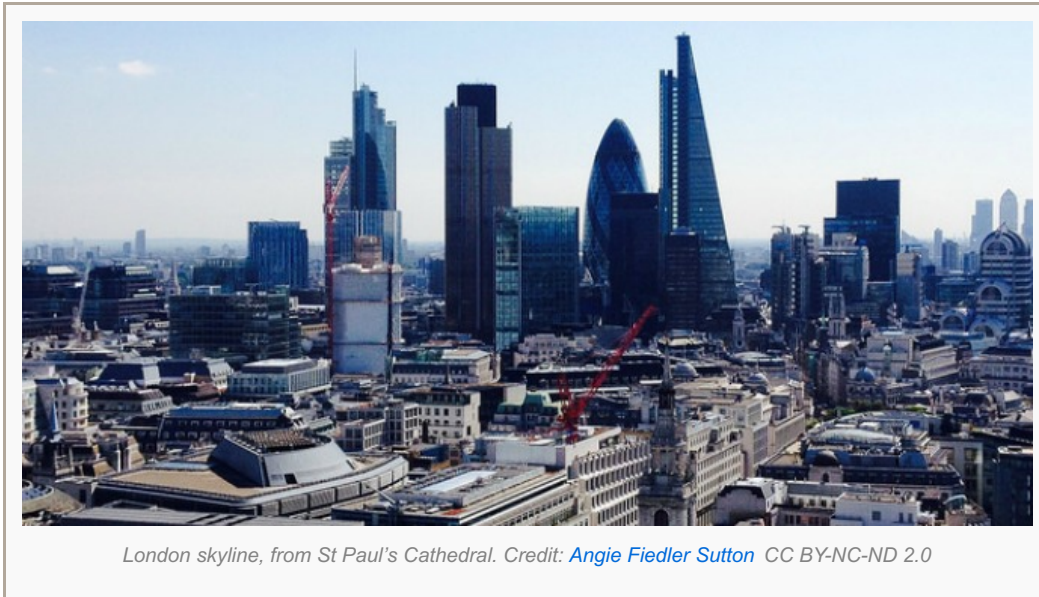
The idea of the city as a specific, critical and theoretical object has its roots in 1970s urban Marxism, perhaps most prominently in *The Urban Question* by Manuel Castells. For Castells, and others such as David Harvey and Henri Lefebvre, the urban was (and continues to be) worthy of critical enquiry because of the role it plays in capitalist society. Writing from the same perspective, [Andy Merrifield](#) is concerned that contemporary urban studies has become politically disengaged and overrun with empiricism, not least because of the constant need to demonstrate ‘impact’ when bidding for research funding. He feels that urban professionals – planners, city managers and economists – espouse the global city as a ‘growth machine’, while obfuscating the parasitic pandemic that is rapidly overwhelming urban life.



Merrifield describes how for various reasons (and through numerous crises) the state has divested from and actively undermined the very items of collective consumption (such as schools, hospitals and mass transit) that Castells identified in *The Urban Question* as vital to reproducing the conditions for capitalist society. How has this been possible? Across 130 lively, impassioned and convincing pages, Merrifield argues that rather than looking to the city for answers, *The New Urban Question* is about finding specificity in ‘the curiously novel mode of urbanisation we have in our midst’ (p. 119). Each chapter is based on the ideas or actions of particular individuals or groups: urban theorists, revolutionaries, and political activists – or sometimes a mixture of all three. Merrifield’s intention here is to provide ‘a deeper insight into what’s happening to our urban world, how it is used as an accumulation strategy by wealthy, powerful people, how they produce spatial and social inequalities’ (p. xiv). He hopes this will allow us to rediscover a participatory, grounded and theoretically informed politics to help solve the problem of the urban.

Early chapters lean on the work of Lefebvre, Harvey and Castells; Merrifield argues that we should not think in terms of cities, but instead of an *urban society*, understood ‘not as simply bricks and mortar, as high-rise buildings and autoroutes, but as a process that produces skyscrapers as well as unpaved streets, highways as well as back roads, by-waters and marginal zones that feel the wrath of the world market – both its absence and its presence’ (p. 5). He shows that urban society has survived the dissolution of goods of collective consumption by either profiting from it, or ensuring that ordinary people pick up the bill. This process is conceptualised by Merrifield in something he

terms 'neo-Haussmannization'. Many will be familiar with [the large-scale reconfiguration of Parisian infrastructure and architecture](#) by Georges-Eugene Haussmann in the second half of the 19th century. Dense, chaotic, 'old' Paris – whose medieval streets provided the perfect setting for revolutionary barricades – was torn down and replaced with sweeping, wide boulevards and grand buildings. Thus spatial transformation produced a superficial 'modernity', and along with it an apparently increased social 'order', through division, expulsion and polarisation. Under neo-Haussmannization, Merrifield argues, global capital – and its symbiotic integration of financial, corporate and state interests – has plundered urban space by dispossession, transforming it from a lived realm into a pure financial commodity.



Inspired by recent democratic movements such as the Arab Spring and Occupy, he shows that it need not, indeed *should not* be like this. As the book progresses he builds on an early chapter featuring the work of Eric Hazan to slowly develop a blueprint for an urban insurrection, one that channels the Rousseauian 'general will' of the people. Like Rousseau, Merrifield is neither economist nor empiricist, and he relies instead on his own compelling interpretation of the ideas of those such as Guy Debord, Robespierre and Balzac. He argues for 'the urban as use-value not exchange-value, as a lived not ripped off realm, with integrative not speculative housing' (p. 31). This urban movement will inhabit a territory both real and ideal, a 'citizen's agora' arising out of encounters and meeting points both physical and virtual, an 'affinity group that yearns to repossess what has been dispossessed' (p. 88). One of the book's final chapters is devoted to the political insurrection of the 1970s and 80s in Detroit, that poster-child of urban decay and disaster. However, the picture that emerges is inspirational: people getting together and standing up for what they feel is right.

The example of Detroit is all the more striking for the fact that *The New Urban Question* has Paris as its conceptual and spiritual home; Guy Debord and the Situationists, Robespierre, Lefebvre, Hazan, Rousseau and Walter Benjamin are the characters that Merrifield chooses to inhabit his particular reading of urban life. Critics might wonder how Merrifield is able to account for the experience of those in The Middle East, Africa, South America and Asia. He pre-empts this by arguing that the traditional binaries of urban/rural, developed/underdeveloped, public/private and North/South no longer stick. For him, "Paris is a cell-form of a bigger urban tissue that's constituted by a mosaic of centers [sic.] and peripheries scattered all over the globe, a patchwork quilt of socio-spatial and racial apartheid that goes for Paris as for Palestine, for London as for Rio, for Johannesburg as for New York" (p. 29).

Although often also territorially peripheral, what he is getting at here is the immanent marginalisation of those of us in the 99%, no matter where we live. Some readers will dismiss or dismantle some of Merrifield's more radical ideas, but he feels the problematic is as much Kafkaesque as anything. Instead of putting up with the parasite within, instead of fruitlessly knocking on the doors, we need to take action, to look to the urban as a conceptual space for

participatory rather than representative democracy. Recent urban resistance in Hong Kong, as well as [Detroit](#) itself, suggests that many share his viewpoint. The FocusE15 movement in Stratford perhaps best captures what Merrifield is getting at. With their rallying cry of '[these homes need people, these people need homes](#)', they embody what is perhaps the central message of *The New Urban Question* (p. 80): 'houses make a city, but citizens make the urban.'

Oliver Cowan is an Associate Lecturer in Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of Plymouth. He received his PhD from Cardiff University in 2011, and his current academic interests relate to the study of crime and place, bringing together approaches from urban sociology, cultural geography/anthropology and mainstream criminology. His doctoral thesis looked at how pedestrian practices of residents living in a regenerated urban neighbourhood inform and are informed by experiences and perceptions of crime and place. Oliver tweets [@ollycowan](#). [Read more reviews by Oliver](#).

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