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Recommended Citation

Addie, Jean-Paul D.. 2019. "Review of New urban spaces: Urban theory and the scale question by Neil Brenner." *Regional Studies*, October 18, 2019

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New Urban Spaces: Urban Theory and the Scale Question

Neil Brenner

Oxford University Press, New York (2019)

480 pp.

Paperback

\$29.95

ISBN: 9780190627195

New Urban Spaces is a landmark contribution to urban and regional studies. Through a rich, dense, and provocative argument, Neil Brenner synthesizes over a decade and a half's work on state rescaling, globalization, and urban governance into a comprehensive and radical re-theorization of urbanization. His central assertion – that “the relentless implosion-explosion of socio-spatial relations through capitalist industrialization... must today be placed at the analytical epicenter of critical urban theory” (p. 388) – unfurls through a systematic reframing of the urban question; initially as a scale question but ultimately as a provocation to transcend the limitations and blind fields on city-centric urban theorizing. While the book collates several previously published articles (some predating 2004's *New State Spaces*), all have been considerably updated and expanded to construct a definitive statement on the spatiality of urbanization under late capitalism.

Brenner pitches his argument at a relatively high level of abstraction. The book's theoretical foundations pull at the scalar underpinning of David Harvey's and Henri Lefebvre's explorations of capitalism's 'fixity/motion contradiction' (chapter 2) to develop a 'scalar attuned' approach to urban theory (chapter 3). This critical formulation is then wielded to critique major urban theories pertaining to global city formation (chapter 4); new economic spaces (chapter 5); new regionalism (chapter 6) and urban growth regimes (chapter 7). The final chapters (8-10) engage in a process of 'theoretical renovation' to forward a polymorphic theorization of uneven spatial development and the emergent spaces of planetary urbanization. The substantive content of each of these chapters will be of clear interest to readers of *Regional Studies*. The processes of restructuring and reterritorialization discussed indicate that the new urban spaces of the book's title are, more often than not, regional in nature – whether in terms of their territorial extent, networked connectivity, or relational co-production. Indeed, the insistence (drawn from Lefebvre) that geographical scales (including the urban and the region) “are constitutively relational... at once embedded within and shaped through broader interscalar architecture” (p. 63) provides Brenner with a conceptual apparatus to interrogate the territorial organization of capitalism, the imbrication of urban space and state space, and, as his argument evolves, the potentiality of a planetary urban epistemology.

At the center of *New Urban Spaces*'s analytical framework is the reflexive, open-ended dialectic that Brenner finds in Lefebvre. For all its theoretical insights, this is as much a book about method – or in Brenner terms, on theorizing as “an active process” (p. 335). Much like Harvey's seminal *Limits to Capital* (2007), *New Urban Spaces* reveals its most profound and generative insights when read as a multi-leveled exegesis on *dialectics as method*. While offering an olive branch to his critics in the spirit of 'engaged pluralism', Brenner resolutely defends the value of uncovering the 'context of contexts': identifying the underlying processes that construct and destabilize socio-spatial configurations and asserting the importance of producing “generalizable knowledge regarding historically constituted, constitutively uneven patterns and pathways of urbanization” (p. 38). As such, *New Urban Spaces* is “fundamentally committed to the need for abstraction... [to delineate] the essential properties of specific types of phenomena or sites that are being investigated” (pp. 39, 40).

On a functional level, this involves a mode of analysis animated through ‘concrete abstractions’ that are “intended to underscore the historically specific, growth- and profit-oriented mode of industrial development that so powerfully animates and meditates the urban process under capitalism” (p. 43). More generally, Brenner’s argument is reinforced through the dialectical elegance of the book’s structure (schematically represented on p. 22). The mode of argumentation defies a neat linear reading. Readers are compelled to re-appraise ideas, arguments, and methodological strategies as they are re-formulated with increasing complexity and sophistication. It is fascinating to follow the author’s initially interest in (the politics of) scale resolve itself, through critical elaboration, into the encompassing *problematique* of ‘planetary urbanization’. *New Urban Spaces* certainly helps contextualize the more bellicose postulations of planetary urban theory by firmly tethering them to an analytical project that logically extends Brenner’s thinking on scalar structuration and state territoriality. What emerges through the course of the book is a grounded yet open – almost playful – intervention that seeks to unmoor urban theory from the prohibitive confines of ‘methodological cityism’.

Those unconvinced by Brenner’s previous work or feeling fatigued by the recent incendiary debates surrounding planetary urbanization (e.g. Oswin, 2018; Walker, 2015), though, are unlikely to be swayed by *New Urban Spaces*. The book’s mode of abstraction, dialectical method, and level of generality do not result in an argument that places its feet on solid ground. Brenner does not dive into the materiality – and politics – of everyday urban life. There are few, if any, people or social actors identified as animating the monumental urban and governance transformations charted here. The lack of tangible explorations of actually existing urban spaces means the book’s concrete abstractions can appear frustratingly detached from the lived experience of urban inhabitants. Where one might hope for Brenner to take his theory to the street, he instead slips terrestrial gravity to uncover extended urbanization’s imprint in the detritus of satellites orbiting the globe (p. 368).

That said, *New Urban Spaces* needs to be engaged on its own terms. Brenner goes to great lengths to respond to his critics by demarcating the contours of his approach to urban theory (see pp. 31-45). The argument that unfurls across these pages is clearly concerned with the process of urban restructuring and the tensions emanating from the fixity and fluidity of capitalist territoriality rather than the qualitatively distinct modes of urbanism taking hold as the urban process is writ at a planetary level. The attention paid to theoretical exposition provides needed clarity regarding what falls within the purview of Brenner concepts, what does not, and the epistemological and political implications of the claims that can subsequently be made. Those engaging in an intellectually generous reading of the text will be richly rewarded: not just with a deep, systematic, and rigorous analysis of the socio-spatial dynamics of urban restructuring under late capitalism but with a robust methodological toolkit that can be utilized, adapted, and remade through the praxis of conducting geographically and historically contextualized urban research.

In sum, *New Urban Spaces* is *demanding* reading. The intricacy and complexity of the ideas presented here demand critical interrogation and debate. Lefebvre’s own appeal that “the whole must be recovered by moving from the abstract to the concrete” (2009, p. 75) demands that Brenner’s abstractions be brought to life through empirical investigations that disclose their concrete production, consolidation, and contestation. Most significantly, *New Urban Spaces* demands to be put to work – on the street as well as in the academy – to identify “alternative pathways for the production and collective appropriation of the urban worlds upon which planetary life now depends” (p. 43). To this end, Brenner has provided a vital (if partial) statement on, and an incisive analytical instrument to cut through, the unfolding problematics of our planetary urban condition.

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