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The city to come
Critical urban theory as utopian mapping

Eduardo Mendieta

Critical urban theory is a reflexive project with practical intent that engages our present situation in order to map humane paths to the future. At the heart of critical urban theory is the critique of the actually existing city and the unmasking of the ways in which its topography has been the result of different economic, political, social and cultural processes that are neither ad hoc nor inevitable. As a deconstructive/constructive project, critical urban theory can be considered as the tracing of a utopian map aiming at the city to come. Critical urban theory should be considered as the invocation of the city that is to come—the dwelling of the properly realized humanity. This city to come is configured as the topos where humans may fashion their humanity in accordance with their freedom—the contours of such a city are traced by the proclamation of the right to the city, which is to be understand as the right to have rights.

Key words: rights, utopia, critical urban theory, Ernst Bloch, Jürgen Habermas

I. Bottles wash up with maps to places we dreamt of, but forgot we yearned for

You may read the following paper as something akin to a Philip Glas composition, which generally sounds like mere monotonous repetitions, but which is in fact made up of musical iterations that build up a symphony. I neither want to criticize nor repeat what Neil Brenner, Peter Marcuse or Margit Mayer have already elaborated with respect to a ‘critical urban theory’. Instead, I would like to contribute a note that adds to the complexity and specification of the project of a ‘critical urban theory’. By all basic assumptions, so eloquently elucidated by Brenner, Marcuse and Mayer, then, critical urban theory is always a working toward a critical urban theory. All critical self-reflexivity is always aiming towards the not yet of an alternative future. Critique is always futurity—it always raises the question of the future, of how things may be different. At the heart of my contribution to this project is the following string of claims, each one building on its antecedent. If critical urban theory is a critical project with practical intent, with a pragmatic aim in sight, then it is a reflexive projection from our present circumstance that aims to map a way towards an alternative social reality. If the core of critical urban theory is the critique of the actually existing city, and thereby a critique of the processes that have congealed in its present topography, so as to demystify its appearing as ‘second nature’, then critical urban
Mendieta: The City to Come

theory is also an attempt to trace a map to an alternative city, a city that we have aimed to build, but that nonetheless has left a utopian remnant. Critical urban theory, qua project, is always the tracing of a utopian map aiming at the city to come. Critical urban theory is thus always the invocation of the city that is to come—the dwelling of the properly realized humanity. The critical, as well as utopian, invocation of a right to the city is in fact an evocation of the right to build the topos where humans may build their humanity in accordance with their freedom, and not as the mere objects of an ineluctable logic of commodified urbanization.

II. Ain’t got no theory ’cause I do theory

When we think about the relationship between ‘traditional’ and ‘critical’ theory, as Horkheimer first clarified the difference, building on Marx, the distinction is not that one is not theory and the other is theory. The distinction is not one of having and not having. The fact is that critical theory is always ‘ideology critique’, that is to say, a project of showing how what we take to be ‘second nature’, what is made to appear ineluctable and an uncircumventable practice, is but a social, that is to say, contingent and fabricated practice. Ideology critique is after all, at base, a phenomenology. Phenomenology is always the analytics of how things appear to us, inasmuch as they are products of social practices. Ideology critique is political phenomenology, or phenomenology as a critique of the way that we allow social practices let our creations disguise themselves as alien, reified and fetishized entities. In other words, ‘traditional theory’ is theory that passes as non-theory. It is an interpretation of social reality that masks and dissimulates its fabrication, its artificiality. The bourgeoisie had a theory, just as Nazis, Fascists, Neo-Cons had one, and Tea-Partiers now have one, cobbled up of old recycled disavowed theory. There is no way of living in society without living an ideology. All social practice is embodied theory. Bourdieu called this a habitus; Foucault called it a regime; Marx called it ideology. All praxis is the embodiment of a theory. Theory feeds on that practice. So, if all praxis is embodied theory, what is the difference that makes a difference between ‘traditional’ and ‘critical’ theory? The radical difference is that while the former wants to disavow its own interpretative, theoretical, subjective, hermeneutical birth-right, the latter embraces, and announces loudly: I am theory—I am a way of interpreting what we do in such a way that we can do other things. Critical theory is theory that is hyper-conscious of its ‘ideational’ character. Theory is about contemplating, ideating, imaging, reality not from a sub specie aeternitatis standpoint, but from the standpoint of how this reality may be different. Traditional theory announces ‘things can’t be otherwise’. Critical theory pronounces ‘things can be otherwise, because it is us that make history that construct our social environment’. The difference is not that they don’t have a theory, and we do. The difference is that we have a way of showing that how we think about what we do matters how we change the way we do things, while ‘they’ have a way of thinking that leaves things to remain or take place as a few want them to remain or to take place.

III. ‘Just do it’—I am resolute—but towards what?

Is the difference between ‘critical’ and ‘traditional’ theory one of merely recognizing their status as ‘theory’? In other words, are there other ways of differentiating between the two? Both Peter Marcuse and Neil Brenner (Brenner, 2009), echoing Marcuse, Adorno and Habermas, referred to the distinction between ‘instrumental’ and ‘substantive’ reason. Indeed, while one way of un-theorizing urban practice is to reduce it to mere instrumental rationality, namely, to claim
that this is what we must do so as to achieve this specific aim, goal, target, critical urban theory, instead, aims to show that when we grasp urban praxis at its root, at its source, we already grasp a ‘rational’ aim that is not merely instrumental, but also ‘universal’. The difference between ‘instrumental’ and ‘substantive’ reason is that the former is always circumscribed, contingent, ephemeral and blind to its own ultimate aims, while the latter is trans-historical, lasting, self-possessed, self-determining. If the one aims at a goal that is viewed through the narrow lens of its desire and calculation, the other aims at an end that is judged from the standpoint of accomplishment of our humanity. Not every rationalization is rational, but all given reasons must stand to the scrutiny of accomplished reason. Accomplished reason is reason that can pass the world judgment of human history. Substantive reason is reason that stands expectant before a timeless judgment yet to come. John Rawls, in his powerful and critical reflection on Hiroshima made a distinction between the politician and the statesman. If the former looks to the next election, the latter looks to future generations. I think something similar can be said about the distinction between instrumental and substantive reason. If the one looks to immediate aims, for instance, hypothetical imperatives, the other looks to the goals of future generations, that is, a categorical imperative.

Still, ‘substantive reason’ remains to be specified with respect to ‘critical urban theory’. In what sense does ‘critical urban theory’ aim to instantiate substantive reason? How is ‘critical urban theory’ a spelling out of something categorical rather than merely hypothetical, something that is a must, rather than a mere wish, or plan? It is clear from the work that Marcuse and Brenner represent and champion that they aim not at the immediate tomorrow, but a futurity dawning in the horizon. In their works analysis is not aimed at palliatives or momentary remedies, but it is critique that aims at pointing to the ways in which contemporary urban existence must be transformed to make cities for humans. All critical urban theory tears at the Potemkin façades of neoliberal megapoleis of affluence and megaurbs of destructive accumulation to unveil the realities of squalor and dispossession not so as to abandon us to a soulless urban existence, but so that we may claim our place in the properly human polis. The norm that guides all critique is thus not mere instrumental reason, but ‘substantive’ reason, reason that encompasses and guides the whole of human social existence.

IV. The right to the city as the right to have rights

The whole of human existence is best captured through the urban. This is one way in which we can interpret Aristotle’s formulation that the human being is a *zoon politikon*—our potentiality for humanity is only actualized in the polis. It is clear that nothing captures better the critical, emancipatory and utopian aims of critical urban theory than the moral imperative and political project of the ‘right to the city’. As Mayer has eloquently shown, Marcuse and Brenner both take up Henri Lefebvre’s interpellation of the ‘right to the right’, which in the latter’s formulation remains an abstract moral and political idea (Mayer, 2009). Marcuse gave it a more explicit and partisan formulation in the following terms (2009, p. 192):

‘The right to the city is a claim and banner under which to mobilize one side in the conflict over who should have the benefit of the city and what kind of city it should be. It is a moral claim, founded on fundamental principles of justice, of ethics, of morality, of virtue, of the good. “Right” is not meant as a legal claim enforceable through a judicial process today (although that may be part of the claim as a step in the direction of realizing the Right to the City).’

Recently, David Harvey has provided us with a more concise formulation, which I think all critical urban theorists could
embrace. This formulation has the additional virtue that it discloses the transformative, utopian dimensions of the ‘right to the city’ not simply as a ‘legal’ claim, but as a moral demand about the properly human. Harvey writes:

‘The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is the right to change ourselves by changing the city.’ (2008, p. 23)

The right to the city thus is not simply a demand for access to resources, or not to be deprived of those resources that allow us to pursue a proper human existence, although it should also not shy away from offering a list of what rights the right to the city should catalogue (Mayer, 2009). The right to the city is most fundamentally a right to determine the ways in which we fashion our own existence. The right to city as a struggle to remake the city is fundamentally a ‘struggle about power’—the power to refashion ourselves (Mayer, 2009, p. 369). If humans are essentially urban/political creatures, in the sense Aristotle argued, creatures who actualize their humanity in political interaction, then one of the most fundamental claims to our humanity would be to be able to determine the character of the political, qua urban. The right to the city is thus a right to determine the ways in which we can define and transform ourselves. We transform ourselves by transforming our environment. The city is the locus where our humanity is constantly being expanded or constrained. It is for this reason that nothing captures most intensely the brutality of human destitution in our age than the pictures and representation of life in the ‘planet of slums’ (Davis, 2006). This ‘planet of slums’ is the synecdoche of dehumanized and dehumanizing existence today. The radical critique of this de-socializing existence is precisely, and one could say dialectical counterpart, the claim to the ‘right to the city’. As against the neoliberal maps of destitution, marginalization, gentrification, accumulation by dispossession, with its massive and ever expanding zones of deurbanization and de-socialization (slums, favelas, shanty towns, ‘shadow cities’—here Mayer’s historical reconstructions of the social movements linked to the right to the city are indispensable (2009)), we have the sketchings of the utopian maps of critical urban theory and the right to the city as social movement that claim and project spaces in which human can dwell in accordance with the proper upright carriage of dignified human existence.

In 1961 Ernst Bloch published a book that has since been forgotten by most, to our great loss, but which can help us make even more concrete what is meant by the invocation of right to the city. I am referring to Natural Law and Human Dignity (1987). In this book Bloch tracked two types of utopias. Social utopias that addressed the condition of want and need, of destitution, and natural law, which addressed human dignity. What is interesting is that Bloch conceptualized natural law as a form of utopian thinking, or more precisely a form of utopian critique. In Bloch’s analysis it is not enough to be well fed, if one’s dignity is blemished, denigrated or malign. On the other hand, one can hold one’s head up high, and yet buckle due to a lack of nourishment. We can be brought to our knees and made to bow by hunger, but if we retain a sense of dignity, we can rise up to our feet and raise our fists. We can read Bloch as having made an argument that today has become quite common: namely, that we should understand rights, or the discourse of rights, more properly as a critical discourse, as a discourse about what is lacking and about what counts as being violated (Baynes, 2000). To invoke rights is already to enunciate a critique of a specific condition of violation and neglect, of destitution and denigration. In this sense, then, rights have a forensic aspect: they announce an undignified, unworthy, denigrated condition. If we think of the ‘planet of the slums’, to use Mike Davis’ expression, we then can begin to recognize the specific modern condition of destitution, violation and denigration. For
this reason, to call for a right to the city is to very specifically diagnose those conditions in which the human is rendered a despicable, contemptible, undignified being. An invocation of a right is at the same time the signaling of a violation, one that undermines the integrity of a being, whether it be human or non-human. Human rights, more specifically, however, aim to address the specific vulnerability of humans and the way in which their moral, personal, integrity may be violated. Rights are both seismographs and compasses. They point in the direction of the preservation of an integral life, but they also register when violations to that integral human existence have or are about to take place.

While Peter Marcuse has argued that the right to the city is not a specific legal claim, but rather a moral ideal, and David Harvey has argued that the right to the city is the right to transform ourselves, I want to argue that both assume nonetheless that the claim of a right to the city must have some traction (Mayer, 2009, p. 367). It is not simply a moral ideal, but also a map that guides us to the realization of that moral ideal. It can be shown that the invocation of a right to the city can be both a specific claim and yet remain a regulative ideal. One way to show this is to argue along the lines that Jürgen Habermas has been arguing recently with respect to human rights (forthcoming). In a recent essay entitled ‘Human Dignity and the Realistic Utopia of Human Rights’ Habermas (forthcoming) argues that:

‘Because the moral promise is supposed to be cashed out in legal currency, human rights exhibit a Janus face turned simultaneously to morality and to law. Notwithstanding their exclusively moral content, they have the form of enforceable subjective rights that grant specific liberties and claims. They are designed to be spelled out in concrete terms through democratic legislation, to be specified from case to case in adjudication, and to be enforced in cases of violation. Thus human rights circumscribe precisely that part of morality which can be translated into the medium of coercive law and become political reality in the robust shape of effective civil rights.’

Rights, inasmuch as they are expressions of both claims and duties, are embodiments of moral promises. Rights in general are translations of moral intuitions that seek to be specified and made concrete. But at the same time, rights are moral promises that have the specific role of commanding a legal enactment, what Habermas calls ‘legal currency’. Moral intuitions remain empty and merely rhetorical if they are not translated into the medium of efficacious administration. Rights give efficacy to our moral intuitions, our moral promises. It is in the medium of law that our moral intuitions signal to what Bloch called the upright carriage of a dignified moral existence (Bloch, 1987). Now, the invocation of a right to the city can and must be both: a concrete project and a utopian project. It can be said, now using the language of Hannah Arendt that the right to the city is the right to have rights. If the right to the city is the right to ‘transform ourselves while transforming the city’, as Harvey put it, then the right to the city is the right to have rights, the right to be a human being, whose most fundamental characteristic is self-determination in the midst of society. Again, to be consigned to the planet of slums, that is, to be rendered destitute and denigrated, relegated to the space of de-socialization, is to be deprived access to the space in which we can be properly human. It is to be denied not just one right, but all rights. The refusal, negation, denegation of the city is the privation, denial and withdrawal of the right to have rights. The right to the city is not the claim to one right, but to the right to have rights. For Habermas, human rights trace the contours of a ‘realist’ utopia. This is not an oxymoron. Human rights have an efficacy that other normative ideals don’t have inasmuch as they are light to the power of polities to enact law. Rights must, if they indeed are the enactment of substantive moral promises, must assume
legal efficacy—their violation commands a commensurate punishment or reappraisal. But at the same time, rights have an asymptomatic relation to that which they aim to both protect and give voice to, namely, our moral integrity and promises. In this sense rights also point to a humanity to come. The right to the city is the right to have rights, which is the right to ‘transform ourselves as we transform the city’. The right to have rights is the right to our future. The right to the city is the right to the city to come, the city in which we may begin to dwell in a dignified upright carriage worthy of the human being.

References


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