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Cities for people, not for profit

Introduction

Neil Brenner, Peter Marcuse and Margit Mayer

The rapidly unfolding global economic recession is dramatically intensifying the contradictions around which urban social movements have been rallying, suddenly validating their claims regarding the unsustainability and destructiveness of neoliberal forms of urbanization. Cities across Europe, from London, Copenhagen, Paris and Rome to Athens, Reykjavik, Riga and Kiev, have erupted in demonstrations, strikes and protests, often accompanied by violence. Youthful activists are not alone in their outrage that public money is being doled out to the banks even as the destabilization of economic life and the intensification of generalized social insecurity continues. The Economist Intelligence Unit (2009) recently offered the following observation:

‘A spate of incidents in recent months shows that the global economic downturn is already having political repercussions ... There is growing concern about a possible global pandemic of unrest ... Our central forecast includes a high risk of regime-threatening social unrest.’

Similarly, the new US director of national intelligence has presented the global economic crisis as the biggest contemporary security threat, outpacing terrorism (Schwartz, 2009). Preparations to control and crush potential civil unrest are well underway (cf. Freier, 2008).

In light of these trends, it appears increasingly urgent to understand how different types of cities across the world system are being repositioned within increasingly volatile, financialized circuits of capital accumulation. Equally important is the question of how this crisis has provoked or constrained alternative visions of urban life that point beyond capitalism as a structuring principle of political-economic and spatial organization. Capitalist cities are not only sites for strategies of capital accumulation; they are also arenas in which the conflicts and contradictions associated with historically and geographically specific accumulation strategies are expressed and fought out. As such, capitalist cities have long served as spaces for envisioning, and indeed mobilizing towards, alternatives to capitalism itself, its associated process of profit-driven urbanization and its relentless commodification and re-commodification of urban spaces.

It is this constellation of issues that we wish to emphasize with the title of this special issue of CITY, ‘Cities for People, Not for Profit’. Through this formulation, we mean to underscore the urgent political priority of constructing cities that correspond to human social needs rather than to the capitalist imperative of profit-making. The demand for ‘cities for people, not for profit’ has been articulated recurrently throughout much of the history of capitalism. It was, for instance, expressed paradigmatically by Engels (1987 [1845]) as he analyzed the miserable condition of the English working class in the dilapidated housing districts of 19th-century Manchester. It was articulated in yet another form by writers as diverse as Jane Jacobs (1962) and Henri Lefebvre (1996 [1968]) as they polemized against the homogenizing, destructive and anti-social consequences of postwar Fordist urban...
renewal projects. It has been explicitly politicized and, in some cases, partially institutionalized by municipal socialist movements in diverse contexts and conjunctures during the course of the 20th century (Boddy and Fudge, 1984; MacIntosh and Wainwright, 1987). Of course, both negative and positive lessons can also be drawn from the experience of cities under really existing socialism, in which top-down, centralized state planning replaced commodification as the structuring principle of sociospatial organization (see Flierl and Marcuse, this issue). And finally, the limits of profit-based forms of urbanism have also been emphasized in the contemporary geoeconomic context by critics of neoliberal models of urban development, with its hypercommodification of urban land and other basic social amenities (housing, transportation, utilities, public space) in cities around the world (see, for instance, Harvey, 1989; Smith, 1996; Brenner and Theodore, 2003; Keil, this issue).

Most of the contributors to this issue of CITY seek to extend reflection on this same problematic in the current moment, in which the worldwide financial crisis of 2008–2009 continues to send shock-waves of instability and conflict throughout the global urban system. One of our goals in this collection is to contribute intellectual resources that may be useful for those institutions, movements and actors that likewise aim to roll back the contemporary hypercommodification of urban life, and on this basis, to promote alternative, radically democratic, socially just and sustainable forms of urbanism. Writing over 30 years ago, Harvey (1976, p. 314) succinctly characterized this challenge as follows:

‘Patterns in the circulation of surplus value are changing but they have not altered the fact that cities […] are founded on the exploitation of the many by the few. An urbanism founded on exploitation is a legacy of history. A genuinely humanizing urbanism has yet to be brought into being. It remains for revolutionary theory to chart the path from an urbanism based in exploitation to an urbanism appropriate for the human species. And it remains for revolutionary practice to accomplish such a transformation.’

Harvey’s political injunction remains as urgent as ever in the early 21st century. In Harvey’s view, a key task for critical or ‘revolutionary’ urban theory is to ‘chart the path’ towards an alternative, post-capitalist form of urbanization. How can this task be confronted today, as a new wave of ‘accumulation by dispossession’ (Harvey, 2008) washes destructively across the world economy?

The need for critical urban theory

Mapping the possible pathways of social transformation—in Harvey’s terms (1976, p. 314), ‘charting the path’—involves, first and foremost, understanding the nature of contemporary patterns of urban restructuring, and then, on that basis, analyzing their implications for action. A key challenge for radical intellectuals and activists, therefore, is to decipher the origins and consequences of the contemporary global financial crisis and the possibility for alternative, progressive, radical or revolutionary responses to it, at once within, among and beyond cities. Such understandings will have considerable implications for the character, intensity, direction, duration and potential results of resistance.

The field of critical urban studies can, we believe, make important contributions to ongoing efforts to confront such questions. This intellectual field was consolidated in the late 1960s and early 1970s through the pioneering interventions of radical scholars such as Henri Lefebvre (1996 [1968], 2003 [1970]), Manuel Castells (1977 [1972]) and David Harvey (1976). Despite their theoretical, methodological and political differences, these authors shared a common concern to understand the ways in which, under capitalism, cities operate as strategic sites for
commodification processes. Cities, they argued, are major basing points for the production, circulation and consumption of commodities, and their evolving internal sociospatial organization, governance systems and patterns of sociopolitical conflict must be understood in relation to this role. These authors suggested, moreover, that capitalist cities are not only arenas in which commodification occurs; they are themselves intensively commodified insofar as their constitutive sociospatial forms—from buildings and the built environment to land-use systems, networks of production and exchange, and metropolitan-wide infrastructural arrangements—are sculpted and continually reorganized in order to enhance the profit-making capacities of capital.

Of course, profit-oriented strategies of urban restructuring are intensely contested among dominant, subordinate and marginalized social forces; their outcomes are never predetermined through the logic of capital. Urban space under capitalism is therefore never permanently fixed; it is continually shaped and reshaped through a relentless clash of opposed social forces oriented, respectively, towards the exchange-value (profit-oriented) and use-value (everyday life) dimensions of urban sociospatial configurations (Harvey, 1976; Logan and Molotch, 1987; Lefebvre, 1996 [1968]). Moreover, strategies to commodify urban space often fail dismally, producing devalorized, crisis-riven urban and regional landscapes in which labor and capital cannot be combined productively to satisfy social needs, and in which inherited sociospatial configurations are severely destabilized, generally at the cost of considerable human suffering and massive environmental degradation. And, even when such profit-making strategies do appear to open up new frontiers for surplus-value extraction, whether within, among or beyond cities, these apparent ‘successes’ are inevitably precarious, temporary ones—overaccumulation, devalorization and systemic crisis remain constant threats. Paradoxically, however, the conflicts, failures, instabilities and crisis tendencies associated with capitalist urbanization have led not to its dissolution or transcendence, but to its continual reinvention through a dynamic process of ‘implosion–explosion’ (Lefebvre, 2003) and ‘creative destruction’ (Harvey, 1989). Consequently, despite its destructive, destabilizing social and environmental consequences, capital’s relentless drive to enhance profitability has long played, and continues to play, a powerful role in producing and transforming urban sociospatial configurations.1

These analytical and political starting points have, since the 1970s, facilitated an extraordinary outpouring of concrete, critically oriented research on the various dimensions and consequences of capitalist forms of urbanization—including patterns of industrial agglomeration and inter-firm relations; the evolution of urban labor markets; the political economy of real estate and urban property relations; problems of social reproduction, including housing, transportation, education and infrastructure investment; the evolution of class struggles and other social conflicts in the spheres of production, reproduction and urban governance; the role of state institutions, at various spatial scales, in mediating processes of urban restructuring; the reorganization of urban governance regimes; the evolution of urbanized socio-natures; and the consolidation of diverse forms of urban social mobilization, conflict and struggle (for overviews, see Dear and Scott, 1980; Soja, 2000; Heynen et al., 2006). Such analyses in turn contributed to the elaboration of several distinct strands of critical urban research that have inspired generations of intellectual and political engagement with urban questions. These research strands include, at various levels of abstraction: (a) periodizations of capitalist urban development that have linked (world-scale) regimes of capital accumulation to changing (national and local) configurations of urban space; (b) comparative approaches to urban studies that have explored the place- and territory-specific
forms of urban sociospatial organization that have crystallized within each of the latter configurations; and (c) conjunctural analyses that attempt to decipher ongoing, site-specific processes of urban restructuring, their sources within the underlying crisis tendencies of world capitalism, their ramifications for the future trajectory of urban development, and the possibility of subjecting the latter to some form of popular-democratic control.

This is not, however, to suggest that critical urban studies represents a homogeneous research field based on a rigidly orthodox or paradigmatic foundation. On the contrary, the development of critical approaches to the study of capitalist urbanization has been fraught with wide-ranging disagreements about any number of core theoretical, methodological and political issues (for overviews, see Saunders, 1984; Katznelson, 1993; Soja, 2000). Even though their form, content and stakes have evolved considerably in relation to the continued forward-movement of worldwide capitalist urbanization, such controversies remain as intense in the late 2000s as they were in the early 1970s.

Nonetheless, against the background of the last four decades of vibrant theorizing, research, debate and disagreement on urban questions under capitalism, we believe it is plausible to speak of a broadly coherent, ‘critical’ branch of urban studies. This critical branch can be usefully counterposed to ‘mainstream’ or ‘traditional’ approaches to urban questions (for further elaboration on the specificity of ‘critical’ urban theory, see the contributions to this issue by Marcuse, Brenner, Goonewardena and Rankin, respectively). In the most general terms, critical approaches to urban studies are concerned: (a) to analyze the systemic, yet historically specific, intersections between capitalism and urbanization processes; (b) to examine the changing balance of social forces, power relations, sociospatial inequalities and political-institutional arrangements that shape, and are in turn shaped by, the evolution of capitalist urbanization; (c) to expose the marginalizations, exclusions and injustices (whether of class, ethnicity, ‘race’, gender, sexuality, nationality or otherwise) that are inscribed and naturalized within existing urban configurations; (d) to decipher the contradictions, crisis tendencies and lines of potential or actual conflict within contemporary cities, and on this basis, (e) to demarcate and to politicize the strategically essential possibilities for more progressive, socially just, emancipatory and sustainable formations of urban life.

Cities in crisis: theory ... and practice

This special issue of CITY is concerned with each of these issues, and in this sense, it represents a sustained collective engagement with the project of critical urban studies. Earlier versions of these contributions were presented in November 2008, at a conference held at the Center for Metropolitan Studies, Berlin, in honor of Peter Marcuse’s birth 80 years earlier in the same city. The conference was framed broadly around some of the key issues to which Marcuse has devoted his academic career as a critical urbanist and planner—the transformation of cities and urban space under contemporary capitalism; the role of the state and urban planning in mediating those transformations; the politics of urban sociospatial exclusion and polarization along class and ethnoracial lines; and the possibilities for progressive or radical interventions and mobilizations to produce more socially just, radically democratic and sustainable urban formations. These themes are well represented in the contributions that follow, which span from reflections on the nature of critical urban theory and the concept of the right to the city (Marcuse, Brenner, Goonewardena, Rankin), through analyses of historical alternatives to the commodification of urban space (Flierl and Marcuse, Steinert), discussions of how best to interpret the contemporary moment of worldwide urban restructuring (Keil), critical engagements with established bodies of knowledge.
on urban questions (Rankin, Slater, Bernt and Holm), concrete investigations of various contemporary patterns of urban sociospatial restructuring and exclusion (Steinert, Keil, Yiftachel, Uitermark), and critical accounts of contemporary mobilizations that contest currently dominant patterns of urbanism (Scharenberg and Bader, Boudreau, Mayer).

All of the contributions to this special issue insist on the centrality of commodification as an intellectual and political reference point for any critical account of the contemporary urban condition. But they approach this problematic through various theoretical and methodological lenses, and they assess its implications for concrete urban configurations from diverse thematic standpoints. The majority of the contributions focus on patterns of urban restructuring and their associated contradictions during the last decade, with particular reference to the hypercommodified urban spaces of western Europe and North America, but also, in some contributions, with reference to urbanization processes in the Middle East (Yiftachel) or in the global South (Rankin).

Several contributions engage with Lefebvre’s classic concept of the ‘right to the city’ (1996 [1968]), which has recently been rediscovered by radical academics and activists alike (Marcuse, Mayer). This slogan represents one important rallying cry and basis for transformative political mobilization in many contemporary cities, and it also resonates with earlier calls to create ‘cities for citizens’ through the reinvigoration of participatory urban civil societies (Douglass and Friedmann, 1998). However, as Mayer points out, this potentially radical political slogan, much like that of ‘social capital’, is also being used ideologically by state institutions, which have co-opted it into a basis for legitimating existing, only weakly participatory forms of urban governance, or for exaggerating the systemic implications of newly introduced forms of citizen participation in municipal affairs (see also Mayer, 2003). Lefebvre (2009 [1966]) himself grappled with an analogous problem in the 1960s and 1970s, when the Eurocommunist concept of autogestion—literally, ‘self-management’, but perhaps best translated as ‘grassroots democracy’—was being pervasively misappropriated by various interests to legitimate new forms of state bureaucratic planning. In contrast to such tendencies, Lefebvre insisted that ‘limiting the world of commodities’ was essential to any project of radical democracy, urban or otherwise, for this would ‘give content to the projects of democratic planning, prioritizing the social needs that are formulated, controlled and managed by those who have a stake in them’ (Lefebvre, 2009 [1966], p. 148). While several contributions explore the challenges and dilemmas associated with such an urban politics of grassroots participation (Marcuse, Rankin, Scharenberg and Bader), others advocate its construction, extension or reinvention in the wake of restructuring processes that are intensifying the marginalization, exclusion, displacement, disempowerment or oppression of urban inhabitants (see, for instance, Yiftachel, Steinert, Slater, Uitermark; cf. also Purcell, 2008).

Clearly, since the Fordist–Keynesian period, urban social movements have had their ups and downs. On occasion, they have succeeded in producing major changes, but in other cases their radical promise has been aborted, co-opted or ‘mainstreamed’. Of course, as the above remarks indicate, not all such movements actually sought systemic change.2 But from the perspective of the field of critical urban studies, one may venture the following conjecture regarding the current situation: the transformative potential of social movement mobilizations will depend on two basic factors—the objective position, power and strategies of those currently established in positions of domination; and the objective position, power and strategies of those who are mobilizing in opposition to established forms of urbanism.

As indicated above, the objective position in which both elements currently find themselves is crisis. Initially, that crisis appears to
be rooted in the economic structure, but it has also been extended to forms of governance, regulation and political consciousness. The strategy of those in power is unfortunately quite clear, and can be summarized under the rubric of neoliberalism and its various permutations. This forms the backdrop for many of the contributions to this special issue, which examine various ways in which the social power relations of capitalism—along with imperialism, colonialism, racism and other modalities of social disempowerment—are inscribed within urban sociospatial landscapes around the world (Keil, Rankin, Yiftachel, Steinert, Slater, Bernt and Holm, Uitermark). But what about the forces of resistance to domination, those suffering due to the current crisis and, indeed, the longer-term relations of exploitation of which the current situation is a consequence and part? What is their future, and what kind of change, if any, will they produce?

The nature of the groups that are adversely affected by existing arrangements and contemporary restructuring processes is likewise addressed in several papers below. For instance, Marcuse distinguishes between the deprived—those who are immediately exploited, unemployed, impoverished, discriminated against in jobs and education, in ill health and uncared for, or incarcerated; and the discontented—those who are disrespected, treated unequally because of sexual, political or religious orientation, censored in speech, writing, research or artistic expression, forced into alienating jobs, or otherwise constrained in their capacity to explore the possibilities of life. Members of both of these partially overlapping groups have considerable cause to oppose the existing system of capitalism and contemporary forms of urbanism. But they are a heterogeneous group, and their common interest is not always obvious, nor is concerted action easy. The events of 1968 are mentioned recurrently in several of the contributions here as manifesting, simultaneously, the transformative potential and the endemic difficulty of united, collective action across diverse constituencies. The possibility for such action is further constrained by the potent force of the corporate media, the daily, routinized language of politics and the perceived need to deal with everyday crises before long-term, systemic issues can be addressed. And, above all, transformative action is constrained by the propaganda of market fundamentalism, the induced appeal of mass consumerism, the technically instrumentalized educational system, the oppressive weight of bureaucracy and, through it all, the overwhelming force of dominant ideologies of exclusion and supremacy (for instance, nationalism, Eurocentrism, Orientalism, heteronormativity, speciesism and so forth).

Several different approaches to resistance and change are, however, possible. The overwhelming reaction to the collapse of the prevailing private market financial system, whose trivial public regulation is itself in the hands of the dominant institutions and corporations of the private world, is popular outrage. That outrage could well be directed against the system as a whole; it could take a radical turn, in the spirit of Lefebvre. The argument could be made that the present crisis exposes the vices of the capitalist system as a whole, and that the realization of a genuine right to the city requires the abolition of the rule of private finance, and thus with it the rule of private capital, over the urban economy, and indeed, that of the world economy as a whole. That would be a radical response, one oriented precisely towards the construction of an ‘urbanism appropriate for the human species’, as envisioned by Harvey (1976, p. 314).3

A liberal-progressive or reformist response, on the other hand, would focus on individual and ‘excessive’ greed, whether of bankers or financiers or politicians, as the villains that have produced the current crisis. Such a response would, accordingly, focus on regulating the activities of such power-brokers more thoroughly than existing regulations permit. It would direct outrage not at the system as a whole, but at the bonuses which
executives get from it, the Ponzi schemes which some have perpetrated or the abuses of political power that have likewise been implicated in the current crisis. To the extent that this response thematizes nationalization at all, it sees this as a step towards restoring the banks to ‘health’, that is, renewed profitability, and then returning them to their private, corporate owners, perhaps now sheltered from excessive ‘risk’ through ‘better’ regulation. Thus the outrage is eviscerated, and the right to the city shrivels to a right to unemployment benefits and public investment in urban infrastructure (needed anyway to keep businesses ‘competitive’), with massive bailouts for banks being offset by some minimal protections for small and middle-class borrowers of ‘viable’ mortgages.

Will contemporary urban social movements be thus co-opted, as they were during the austerity, roll-out phase of neoliberal restructuring in the 1980s? Will they be content with reforms that merely reboot the system, or will they attempt to address the problem of systemic change as did the militant student and labor movements of 1968? As of this writing (May 2009), both increased militancy, as in the squatting of foreclosed homes, and co-optation, as in the endless debates about mortgage regulation, appear possible. Prediction is hazardous, not least because urban space continues to serve simultaneously as the arena, the medium and the stake of ongoing struggles regarding the future of capitalism. It is, in Harvey’s formulation (2008, p. 39), the ‘point of collision’ between the mobilizations of the deprived, the discontented and the dispossessed, on the one side, and on the other, ruling class strategies to instrumentalize, control and colonize social and natural resources, including the right to the city itself, for the benefit of the few. As such struggles over the present and future shape of our cities intensify, we hope that this issue will contribute to clarifying what needs to be understood and what needs to be done in order to forge a radical alternative to the dismal, destructive status quo of worldwide capitalist urbanization. The slogan, ‘Cities for people, not for profit’, is thus intended to set into stark relief what we view as a central political objective for ongoing efforts, at once theoretical and practical, to address the crises of our time.

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Notes

1 Exploration of the nexus between cities and commodification had, of course, already been initiated in the mid-19th century by Engels in his classic study of industrial Manchester [1845]. However, this constellation of issues was subsequently neglected by most mainstream 20th-century urbanists, who opted instead for some combination of transhistorical, technocratic or instrumentalist approaches and tended to interpret cities as the spatial expressions of purportedly universal principles of human ecology or civilizational order (for a partial exception see Mumford’s revealing account of ‘coketown’ [1961, pp. 446–481]).

2 While Castells [1972] limited his definition of social movements to those that succeeded in producing systemic change, we embrace a broader conceptualization. The issue of success or failure is contested, particularly on a systemic level, and it may vary according to whether it is assessed under, for example, genuinely emancipatory criteria or those of mainstream power politics. Both are relevant.

3 If the election of Obama shows the power of the people to use the political process to achieve some change, it also underscores the intrinsic limitations of election-based, parliamentary-democratic strategies of social transformation. When the centers of economic power remain in the hands of multinational corporations and unaccountable financial institutions, elections may have only a limited impact on the actual operations of global capitalism.

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