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Moving Beyond 'Cities for People, Not for Profit'

Margit Mayer

Both, because CITY's stated agenda is to record and analyse current and emerging urban, urbanizing and planetary trends so as to contribute to socio-economic liberation and to ecological survival, and because most on CITY's editorial board are, in varying ways, "scholar-activists," this journal was an ideal first publication venue for our intervention.

The special issue 'cities for people, not for profit' (CITY 13/2-3) and now our book have contributed one stepping stone towards that grand agenda: In spite of the fact that it does not explicitly take up all of the important issues raised as critical by the journal editors[i], we think that our perspective of critical urban theory and the emphasis on urban movements such as right to the city movements is productive and useful even for those issues, so in the spirit of productive debate I want to briefly indicate how.

One of its contributions is developing the relationship between practice and theory. The book builds on the assumption that an urban theory that wants to be intellectually and politically relevant, needs to explore the prospects for the critique of capitalism that are immanent within contemporary socio-spatial relations across places, territories and scales. That means it looks not only at economic restructuring, regulatory reconfigurations, and geopolitical shifts in the global division of labor, but also closely at struggles taking place on different scales and around different injuries. In other words, it is not just about

- how theory helps identify opportunities and risks for movements in particular conjunctions,
- but also how contemporary conflicts and struggles need to affect our conceptual and theoretical work,

so that it remains relevant rather than drift off into esoteric or ungrounded intellectual theorizing.

This cannot adequately be done simultaneously for all the varieties of urban societies at once; since our expertise pertains mostly to transatlantic urban studies, we sought to apply these suggestions primarily to (the conflicts around) urban restructuring processes in North America and Western Europe, seeing however that they have been significantly shaped by the new global division of labor and new relationships between what is coming to be called the global North and the global South.

The questions about theory and practice which we suggest need to be posed for and within each of these varied regions, and they need to be asked anew in every movement cycle -- as I showed in my own chapter on the scope of urban social movements in the context of political-economic periodization (Mayer 2012). Pinning down the respective logics and dynamics inherent in each period allows us to identify the specific openings and possibilities for movements, but also specific risks of entrapment or instrumentalization. I illustrate this for cities in the global North, where the shift from Fordist movements around the Keynesian city to those in the current phase of neoliberal politics has entailed new risks of movements being hijacked and used for branding and for entrepreneurial/creative urban policies, which in turn throws up very different challenges for contemporary urban movements than those faced by the movements around collective consumption and the Fordist city that Castells was writing about in the 1970s.

Sharon Meagher (2010) illustrates in her fascinating comparison of garbage routes in the global South (Oaxaca, Mexico) and global North (New York to New Jersey and Pennsylania) how our reflexive understanding of critical urban theory can productively be applied to environmental concerns and to conflicts playing out in the global South as well. It reveals how trash hauling in response to some (comparatively privileged) activists will not 'fix' the problem ("since the problem is caused by market patterns and policies that encourage consumption that produces waste," 432) and nothing is won by pitting disenfranchised and poor urbanites against another poor and disenfranchised group

somewhere else.

Thus we do not agree with Souza (2009) that our "speaking from *somewhere*" entails "excessive simplifications and generalizations" (485). Souza does not show in his contribution how our failing to mention the manifestations of right to the city and similar urban movements in many (not just Latin American) regions of the world has a problematic or distorting impact on our outline of a critical urban theory perspective that draws on the analytical framework of critical social theory (the classical Frankfurt School). He does not show how this perspective would disrespect 'Southern theory' (Connell 2007). And it is hard to see how the suggestions we make would be social-geographically exclusive – that the "methodological and political orientations associated with critical theory ... today require(s) sustained engagement with contemporary worldwide patterns of capitalist urbanization and their far-reaching consequences..." (Brenner 2012: 21), and that this theoretical-political project can only be developed by looking at both, these urbanization patterns *and* the movements and struggles around them, in various glocally specific instances.

The point of the book is not to cover "the majority of the world" (which Souza says we reduce to a kind of 'academic footnote', 486) nor "to find ... symptoms of and reactions against today's crisis" around the world, but to propose a critical urban theory perspective that emphasizes the agency of movements. One book can offer only so many illustrations of how the assumptions of our perspective work out in clarifying specific contemporary urban contradictions; hopefully scholar-activists embedded in or with deeper knowledge of other regions of the world will feel inspired by the approach.[ii]

One illustration in our book brings in the problems of urban praxis in the US today: the chapter by community organizer and Right to the City activist Jon Liss analyses the role of the demographic majority of people of color in the American urban movements (what he calls the rising historic bloc). He unpacks a variety of US specific tensions between horizontal and

vertical modes of leadership, between neighborhood/local orientations on the one side and union/left political party participation on the other, as well as the jostling of framing and consciousness that flow from those different political identities.

Interestingly, these US-specific tensions are not so different from the distances and tensions experienced by the alter-globalization movement between the traditional movements in the Global North and those taking place in the Global South, whose language and conceptual orientation is shaped by a similar vocabulary and similar values as in the communities of color organizations in many American inner-city neighborhoods. Like the black and Latino communities which play such a central role in the Right to the City Alliance in the US, the movements of the landless and the poor in the global South emphasize the dignity of the individual as part of the political struggle, values such as dignity, love, and a care economy are more essential elements of their movement vocabulary than the language of reform or class politics prevalent in many of the traditional leftist-led western movement milieus. These distances need to be appreciated and explored, if we want to be able to bridge them.

Not least because of the shift of the Occupy movement (after the evictions from public squares and plazas) to urban neighborhoods and into alliances with community groups in struggles over foreclosed housing, this gap has already become smaller in the US than in Europe. In Hamburg, for example, where one of the largest and most successful Right to the City networks is active, marginalized urban groups such as welfare recipients and migrant workers, let alone undocumented people, are not yet part of these networks.

As the economic crisis for the industrial democracies is far from over -- but a spring of resistance movements is challenging governments in their blatant support for financial capital, a new phase of neoliberal capitalism seems to be on the horizon. It looks as if it will be forcing more injuries and dispossession upon "the 99%" while militarizing its response to protest movements. Thus the need to create connections and coalitions across different urban divides becomes even more crucial, and the need

for critical urban theory to penetrate the obfuscations and help identify the real bases for our alliances in struggle ever more important.

References

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[i] These were: "the *approach does not give sufficient attention to urbanization as an accelerating denial of 'the city', the possible social/economic/environmental collapse of cities, to the experience of the global South, to feminist and anarchist/autonomist critiques, to shortcomings in the way we write socio-spatial studies, and to praxis.'*

[ii] Obviously self-reflexivity on the impact of the 'footprint' of our respective embedding in different geographical cultures on theory-building is essential – particularly as we encourage learning from cognate theoretical frameworks that share the concern with the connections between theory and practice (cf. Künkel/Mayer 2012).