

Urban Culture: Critical Concepts in Literary and Culture

Contributors

Fraser Benjamin et al.

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Preface

Urban culture is the culture of towns and cities. The defining theme is the presence of a great number of very different people in a very limited space - most of them are strangers to each other. This makes it possible to build up a vast array of subcultures close to each other, exposed to each other's influence, but without necessarily intruding into people's private lives. In recent years, cities have been increasingly at the forefront of consideration in both humanities and social science disciplines, but there has been relatively little real dialogue across these disciplinary boundaries. *Urban Culture: Critical Concepts in Literary and Culture* is an interdisciplinary study focusing on the various cultural aspects of city life. The text is comprised of ten chapters. First chapter gives a focus on urban cultural studies and second chapter aims to present the contemporary youth culture, with an emphasis on the underlying role of cultural globalization. Third chapter attempts to unfold the crisis in the epistemology by problematizing the mainstream poetics of culture and seeking new possibilities of reflection beyond the edges of definition. Chapter four considers one methodological viewpoint for promoting interdisciplinary studies by using the concept - cultural editing - and shows some new horizons for urban studies. The focus of fifth chapter lies on different fields; such as biodiversity, urban climate, air pollution, and resilience, as well as their impact on urban planning and governance. Chapter six presents the cross-cultural differences and similarity in health behaviors between Saudi and British adolescents. A framework of adaptive risk governance for urban planning is presented in chapter seven. The main emphasis is on each of the five phases of risk governance: pre-assessment, interdisciplinary assessment, risk evaluation, risk management and risk communication. The chapter also explains how these phases of risk governance can be applied to the area of urban planning and improve the dynamic sustainability of cities. Chapter eight reviews an anthropological study on **post-traumatic stress disorder and urban violence** and purpose of ninth chapter is to assess dietary intake data and identify risk factors for nutritional inadequacy in pregnant women

from urban and rural areas. Chapter ten gives an approach on **the role of the historic urban landscape**. The Historic urban landscape approach becomes the guarantee that the transition toward the smart city development model is based on specific local cultural resources, and not only on technological innovations.

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Chapter 1

INAUGURAL EDITORIAL: URBAN CULTURAL STUDIES – A MANIFESTO (PART 1)

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ABSTRACT

This inaugural editorial launching the first volume of the Journal of Urban Cultural Studies details, in two parts, the need for and significance of an urban cultural studies method, broadly conceived. Part 1 (in Issue 1) culls insights from the work of urban philosopher and cultural studies pioneer Henri Lefebvre (1901–91) as a way of exploring the role of philosophy in urban cultural studies research and examining its key terms: cities, the urban, interdisciplinarity and culture. Overall, urban cultural studies (UCS) foments a dialogue between art and society – between textual/representational (humanities) understandings of culture and anthropological, geographical, sociological (social science) approaches. This is ideally accomplished within a reconfigured urban studies paradigm that continues to embrace its characteristic focus on architecture, built environment, city planning, everyday life, identity formation, landscape, space/place, transportation and more, while venturing further into artistic terrain than ever before – films, literature, music, sequential art, painting, digital humanities approaches and more.

To consider ‘the city’ is it not already to extend philosophy, to reintroduce philosophy into the city or the city into philosophy?

As the two terms 'cities' and 'the urban' are essential to this newly inaugurated project, an interdisciplinary publication which goes by the name of the Journal of Urban Cultural Studies, we do well in seeking to understand what 'cities' are, what 'the urban' is, and why they are important. Those who have read this editorial's title will note immediately that there is a third term that is also of great importance to this project – that term is 'culture'. In fact, it may seem to many, correctly in a sense, that it is the term 'culture' that requires a more careful and extended explanation. This worry is perhaps well founded – and particularly so given the schisms that persist between humanities and social science invocations of the term. My fear is that even by the end of this lengthy two-part editorial the term 'culture' may remain quite a baffling concept – and I pledge that it will surely be worthy of further consideration in these pages. In fact, I can say that I have very little to offer, indeed, as consolation to those seeking tidy categories and precise definitions – whether in regards to 'culture', 'cities' or 'the urban', for that matter. Some readers may balk at my use of the word 'philosophy' in the paragraphs that follow, but I assure you that the discussion will be brief and to the point. Moreover, I suspect that those who would dismiss the role of philosophy would dismiss also the role of culture in understanding the urban phenomenon. Indeed, as will become clear, the way one approaches philosophy echoes the position one takes on culture. For now, however, let us concentrate on the matter at hand.

REINTRODUCING PHILOSOPHY

This distinction between 'cities' and 'the urban' is a matter that is surely philosophical, and yet it is not merely philosophical. For the sake of argument, let us adopt a flawed but commonsensical position that admits there are things called cities, and also that there is something called the urban. Let us propose also – from this simple, provisional viewpoint – that these notions, cities and the urban, overlap in some respects, and that they are also opposed in others. It is necessary to admit there is a contradiction between the two terms. Some will say that contradiction is a sign of weakness of argument or of position – that what is desired is that we arrive at a unitary approach. Others will say that there can be no unitary approach that does not admit contradiction.¹ Some will suggest

that philosophizing cities and the urban in the present way is itself an abstraction, an alienation, a distraction from politics, even from the whole of social life ... and so I must point out also that this is not my own unique way of approaching the topic. In affirming that the relationship between cities and the urban is complex, perhaps also contradictory, in asserting the relevance of philosophy to urban matters, I do nothing but echo Henri Lefebvre (1901–91), urban theorist, philosopher of cities and interdisciplinary thinker

Some would ask us to ignore that Henri Lefebvre, like Karl Marx before him – whose ideas he extended, elaborated and made contemporary (Elden 2004; Fraser 2011; Lefebvre 1988; see also Lefebvre 1947, 1964, 1982; Merrifield 2002, 2006) – was a philosophical thinker. We must take note of the disdain for philosophical questions that crops up intermittently in both the humanities and the social sciences. Certainly there are those who content themselves with the realm of philosophical abstraction, sadly admitting of no relationship between it and what might be called everyday life. For such thinkers, it is true, philosophy indeed becomes an alienating abstraction, although they pursue it with vigour nonetheless. Equally, there are some who would see philosophy as wholly irrelevant, as a blight to be excised from the scholarly landscape. But Marx, Lefebvre and many others, still, with varying degrees of attention to the political or the urban specifically – Henri Bergson in France, Miguel de Unamuno in Spain, for example – have been philosophers intent on reconciling philosophy with life (Fraser 2008, 2010). In brief, those who believe that they live in a post-philosophical world cannot hope to understand the urban phenomenon. We must remember what Lefebvre wrote in *The Urban Revolution*: ‘The philosopher and philosophy can do nothing by themselves, but what can we do without them? Shouldn’t we make use of the entire realm of philosophy, along with scientific understanding, in our approach to the urban phenomenon?’ (Lefebvre 2003a: 64; see also Lefebvre 1991a: 14; Lefebvre 1996a; Fraser 2008, 2010, 2011). In fact we should and indeed we shall make use of philosophy in the pages of this new journal, just as we shall make use also of culture – its multiple textures and varying applications.

If there is any hope of understanding contemporary urban life, we must admit that philosophy is more than a mere part of the urban puzzle. Indeed, writes Lefebvre, in his ‘The Right to the City’, ‘In

order to take up a radically critical analysis and to deepen the urban problematic, philosophy will be the starting point' (Lefebvre 1996a: 86; cf. Lefebvre 1991a: 14; Fraser 2008: 343–44). Why is this so? This is so, first and foremost because philosophers 'from Plato to Hegel' have long 'thought the city' – they have 'brought to language and concept urban life' (Lefebvre 1996a: 86). Philosophy has long influenced how we view ourselves, the city and our relationship to it. It is thus appropriate to speak of the role of philosophy in the 'elaboration of theoretical knowledge' (Lefebvre 1996a: 87). Philosophy has long been an activity with consequences not merely theoretical but practical, both explicit and implicit, and now historical and enduring. Part of the commonsensical distance that obtains between 'the city' and 'the urban' is due, no doubt, to a pernicious philosophical legacy; perhaps that same legacy which has conceptually distanced the city from country, the theoretical from the practical, culture from nature, being from thought, the spoken from the written and so on (Lefebvre 1996a: 87–88). Philosophical thought understood in this way as the creation and mediation of concepts – not an unproblematic activity, to be sure – is nevertheless fundamental.

But we must recognize that philosophy is also, itself, a nuanced concept with two diverging meanings. On one hand – taken as a pattern of thought necessarily linked to social development and more recently to modern industrialization and radical shifts in contemporary urbanization – philosophy has sought to reach 'totality through speculative systematization' (Lefebvre 1996a: 86). Whether we take it as one of the many origins of alienation, an effect of alienating processes or an aspect of these processes (Lefebvre 1991b: 249), philosophical thought has sought to fragment a whole world into manageable pieces, all of them objects seemingly boasting their own autonomy. In this way – and particularly since the nineteenth century – a bourgeois scientific and fragmented understanding of knowledge has sought to frame even the city as a simple object (Lefebvre 1996a: 94–99; Lefebvre 2003a: 49; Fraser 2011).² This invocation of philosophy is suspect, as are all attempts to fragment experience into self-sufficient realms, ripe for analysis and of course potentially also for profit (by whom? for whom? we must ask). And yet, on the other hand, the philosophical systematization and speculation whose role has been to produce partial knowledge and to fragment totality is paradoxically crucial if we are to recover a total sense of the urban phenomenon, the notion of urban totality, for:

'only philosophy had and still has the sense of the total' (Lefebvre 1996a: 175; see also Lefebvre 2003a: 56). In his many works, Lefebvre admits the flaws of philosophy; but he nonetheless recuperates its potential 'to reclaim or create totality. The philosopher does not acknowledge separation, he does not conceive that the world, life, society, the cosmos (and later, history) can no longer make a Whole' (Lefebvre 1996a: 88). Lefebvre thus makes use of philosophy in order to turn thought back upon itself; a manoeuvre not unlike Bergson's insistence, before him, that 'We must do violence to the mind' (Bergson 1998: 30; see also Bergson 2002: 188–200; Fraser 2008).³

Lefebvre's emphasis on the Whole, on totality, boasts a Marxian inheritance that we shall not ignore (cf. Elden 2004; Kolakowski 2005). Here we can see how philosophy's two diverging meanings are reconciled with political life. In Lefebvre's view, philosophy properly reconstituted is a key arm in the class struggle: The proletariat has this historic mission: only it can put an end to separations (alienations). Its mission has a double facet: to destroy bourgeois society by building another society – abolish philosophical speculation and abstraction, the alienating contemplation and systematization, to accomplish the philosophical project of the human being. (Lefebvre 1996a: 91) Bourgeois society is here (as elsewhere in his oeuvre) specifically linked to the flaws of one such type of philosophical thought ('speculation and abstraction') noted above (the 'alienating contemplation and systematization' of life); while at the same time, another type of philosophical thought is rendered synonymous with a humanist project yet to be accomplished. It is philosophy itself that has the power to 'abolish philosophical speculation and abstraction' – i.e. only by revealing the process of fragmentary thinking along with its alienating effects do we gain a sense of the real totality, the Whole which has been thus divided according to a spatializing logic that is at once mental and physical, ideal and material. (Without this insight, many will no doubt fundamentally misunderstand Lefebvre's key assertion in books like *The Production of Space* (1991a) and *The Survival of Capitalism* (1976); and as a consequence, for such readers, space will be reduced and ossified (reified) in de facto collusion with those who stand to profit from philosophical schisms.)⁴ While this is not the place to engage concerns voiced by reductive invocations of Marxist thought which short-sightedly divorce the material from the ideal (and thus the physical from the mental, body from mind, concept from reality and theory from practice), it shall be sufficient