

CITIES FOR PEOPLE, NOT FOR PROFIT

CRITICAL URBAN THEORY AND THE RIGHT TO THE CITY



EDITED BY
NEIL BRENNER, PETER MARCUSE
AND MARGIT MAYER

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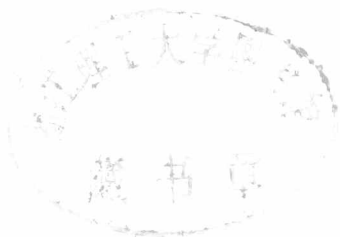
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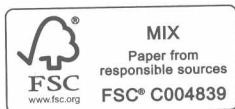
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CITIES FOR PEOPLE, NOT FOR PROFIT

The worldwide financial crisis has sent shock waves of accelerated economic restructuring, regulatory reorganization, and sociopolitical conflict through cities around the world. It has also given new impetus to the struggles of urban social movements emphasizing the injustice, destructiveness, and unsustainability of capitalist forms of urbanization. This book contributes analyses intended to be useful for efforts to roll back contemporary profit-based forms of urbanization, and to promote alternative, radically democratic, and sustainable forms of urbanism. The contributors provide cutting-edge analyses of contemporary urban restructuring, including the issues of neoliberalization, gentrification, colonization, “creative” cities, architecture and political power, sub-prime mortgage foreclosures, and the ongoing struggles of “right to the city” movements. At the same time, the book explores the diverse interpretive frameworks – critical and otherwise – that are currently being used in academic discourse, in political struggles, and in everyday life to decipher contemporary urban transformations and contestations. The slogan, “cities for people, not for profit,” sets into stark relief what the contributors view as a central political question involved in efforts, at once theoretical and practical, to address the global urban crises of our time.

Drawing upon European and North American scholarship in sociology, politics, geography, urban planning, and urban design, the book provides useful insights and perspectives for citizens, activists, and intellectuals interested in exploring alternatives to contemporary forms of capitalist urbanization.

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Early versions of most of the chapters in this book were presented at an international conference titled, "Cities for people, not for profits," held in November 2008 at the Center for Metropolitan Studies (CMS), Berlin (see Horlitz and Vogelpohl 2009). Linking debates in critical urban theory and conjunctural analyses of ongoing urban struggles, this conference attracted 250 participants, including 30 speakers, principally from North America and western Europe. The event was made possible by a primary grant from the German Research Association (DFG). Both the DFG and the Transatlantic Graduate Program Berlin–New York (housed at the Berlin CMS) also generously supported a co-teaching arrangement for a graduate seminar convened jointly by the three editors of this volume in the Department of Sociology, New York University and the Graduate School of Architecture and Urban Planning, Columbia University in Fall 2006. Many of the ideas behind this volume were forged through our discussions in that seminar and in follow-up workshops in the CMS Transatlantic Graduate Program; we thank both our New York and Berlin students for the seriousness of their engagement with our evolving ideas. We are grateful to the DFG for supporting our intellectual collaboration and for contributing essential funding towards the Berlin conference. We owe a special debt of gratitude to Katja Sussner of the Berlin CMS for her invaluable work in organizing the conference. Without her expert assistance and organizational support, this project would have been an impossible undertaking. Additionally, we thank Prof. Dr Heinz Reif of the CMS for his steadfast support of our work and, more generally, for his visionary organizational work in the field of transnational urban studies. We also thank the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung for contributing crucial additional funding towards the Berlin conference.

The argument and form of this book have been shaped foundationally through our ongoing dialogue with Bob Catterall and his energetic editorial board at the journal *CITY*. Earlier versions of many of the chapters included here appeared in a special issue of that journal (13, 2–3, 2009). We are grateful to the editorial committee of *CITY*, particularly Bob Catterall, Paul Chatterton, Dan Swanton, and Martin Woessner, for supporting our collective work both in the journal and, in revised and expanded form, in this volume.

CITY proved to be an ideal forum for discussion of the problematic developed in this book because of its long-standing commitment to bringing together, in readable form, theoretical reflections on the contemporary urban condition, analyses of practical experiences in contemporary urban conflicts, and perhaps most crucially, explorations of their necessary, if constantly evolving, interrelationships. It has been a privilege and a pleasure to contribute to *CITY*'s work and to engage in critical yet always comradely dialogue with its energetic team of editors.

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1

CITIES FOR PEOPLE, NOT FOR PROFIT

An introduction

*Neil Brenner, Peter Marcuse,
and Margit Mayer*

The unfolding effects of the global economic recession are 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) 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 US director of national intelligence 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 (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 book, “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 and spatial enclosure. 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 nineteenth-century Manchester. It was articulated in yet another form by writers as diverse as Jane Jacobs (1962) and Henri Lefebvre (1996 [1968]) as they polemicized 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 twentieth 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 real-existing socialism, in which top-down, centralized state planning replaced commodification as the structuring process of sociospatial organization (Flierl and Marcuse, this volume). 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 necessities (housing, transportation, utilities, public space, health care, education, even water and sewage disposal) in cities around the world (see, for instance, Smith, 1996; Harvey, 1989; Brenner and Theodore, 2003).

The contributors to this book seek to extend reflection on this same problematic in the current moment, in which the worldwide financial crisis starting in 2008–10 and its consequences continue 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 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 thirty years ago, Harvey (1976: 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 twenty-first century. In Harvey's view, a key task for critical or "revolutionary" urban theory is to "chart the path" toward alternative, post-capitalist forms of urbanization. How can this task be confronted today, as a new wave of "accumulation by dispossession" (Harvey, 2008) and capitalist enclosure (De Angelis, 2007) washes destructively across the world economy?

The need for critical urban theory

Mapping the possible pathways of social transformation – in Harvey's (1976: 314) terms, "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 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 (2003 [1970]), 1996 [1968]), 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 (Lefebvre, 1996 [1968]; Harvey, 1976; Logan and Molotch, 1987). 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 [1970]) 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.