

NEW URBAN SPACES: URBAN THEORY AND THE SCALE QUESTION

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It can be a common thought, but there's no doubt that urban spaces and cities are undergoing very significant transformations today. The challenge of urban restructuring today affects practically the entire global space, especially large metropolises, but also cities on an intra-urban scale. It is a process indisputably associated with the capitalist production of space carried out at multiple scales and dimensions. In "New Urban Spaces: Urban Theory and the Scale Question", Brenner (2019) asserts that to comprehend these changes we need a conceptual and methodological renewal that aspires to a total, holistic and integrated understanding of the urban phenomenon, from the socioeconomic fabric of urban space on its micro scale, to the macro scale of the transnational processes that feed the capitalist production of urban space.

Neil Brenner presents us with the perspective of critical urban theory on the process of urbanization, which we are witnessing today at a global level, while reviewing the epistemological, theoretical-conceptual and methodological bases of this approach in light of contemporary conditions in the 21st century. The work is structured into ten chapters, each one explaining the best of the state of the art of the thinking of the Professor of Urban and Regional Planning at Harvard, to guide reflection around the issues of capitalist urbanization and critical urban theory and whose brief analysis here we decided to structure it into two fundamental and transversal axes to the author's work: critical urban theory and the rescaling rationale.

I. CRITICAL URBAN THEORY AND THE SOCIAL PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE AND PRAXIS

Firstly, it is worth saying that Brenner's approach focuses on deciphering emerging forms of urban restructuring and transformation, especially in the Euro-American context but also on a global scale, since the 1980s. The urban condition is never static; it is a relentless whirlwind of socio-spatial transformations and socio-political contestations. After all, all space is socially (re)produced and results from the dialectical convergence of the agendas of many agents, players, and social actors with imminently contradictory interests. For example, the redevelopment of a former industrial waterfront into a gentrified neighborhood illustrates how urban space is socially (re)produced through the conflicting agendas of various actors. City governments seek to attract investment and increase tax revenues, real estate developers prioritize profit through luxury projects, and longtime residents resist displacement due to rising costs. Environmental and cultural activists push for sustainability and historical preservation, while private investors focus on commercial gain. The resulting space reflects a dialectical synthesis of these competing interests, where dominant forces shape the area for economic growth, yet concessions are made to accommodate community and environmental concerns, embedding contradictions within the urban landscape itself. Therefore, any investigation of urban life is necessarily an analysis of flow, transition, mutation, and restructuring. The interaction between old and new, continuity and discontinuity, reproduction and rupture, persistence and emergence is the central theme of this book.

If not the most important, the investigations contained in this book articulate the elements of what Neil Brenner considers as a critical approach to the urban question. Conventional approaches to

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the urban question still tend to presuppose principles of the Chicago Ecological School and neopositivism of the second half of the 20th century, in which the urban is conceived as neutral, abstract, and empirical entities understood in a transparent way and instrumentally manipulated by a supposedly totally objective researcher who would occupy an outside, non-participating point of view of the places and processes he dedicates himself to investigating. Here, the urban space is viewed as neutral, with social phenomena understood as spatial distributions influenced by external, objective factors like geography or population density, rather than shaped by power dynamics or social inequalities.

Now, right from Chapter 1, Brenner argues that one of the main characteristics of any critical urban theory is its emphasis on the social production of knowledge and praxis (reflected practice), along with a rigorous epistemological reflection on urban theory. This includes evolving scenarios, conditions, and mediations in relation to ongoing socio-spatial restructuring.

Therefore, critical urban theory argues that reflexive or critical approaches emphasize the mutual constitution of the subject and object in a total, dialectical way. They depend on each other in practical terms and transform intermittently through socio-spatial relations, including within ideological frameworks and interpretations. To undertake any critical approach to urban theory, categories, methods, and cartographies are essential questions for analysis. Critical urban theory examines urban dynamics and structures through a critical lens, often drawing on social and political theories to critique the forces shaping urban environments, particularly around issues of power, inequality, and social injustice.

Frequently influenced by Karl Marx (1973), this theory focuses on how capitalism and capital accumulation shape urban development unevenly, exacerbating social contrasts. It analyzes how cities are shaped by capital and how capitalist production relations perpetuate spatial and social inequalities.

A key focus of critical urban theory is identifying and analyzing social and spatial inequalities in cities. This includes the exploitation of marginalized groups, gentrification, spatial segregation, and social exclusion. Critical urban theory also investigates how urban space is produced, controlled, and transformed by governments, corporations, and social movements, examining urban planning practices, real estate development, and public policy.

Furthermore, it explores the resistance and struggles of urban social movements, such as the fight for affordable housing, residents' rights, environmental justice, and other forms of urban activism. Critical urban theory is interdisciplinary, drawing on sociology, geography, political science, economics, and other fields, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of urban complexities.

However, Brenner also argues that critical urban theory must question and criticize traditional approaches to urban planning and development, which are often seen as technocratic and disconnected from the realities and needs of local communities. He highlights the contributions of important theorists in critical urban theory, including David Harvey (1982), Peter Marcuse (2009), Henri Lefebvre (1991), and Manuel Castells (1977), among others. Their works have been fundamental to the development of this approach, providing insights into how cities function and how they can be transformed into more just and equitable places.

II. CRITIQUE OF NEOLIBERAL URBANISM AND THE LIMITS OF ECOLOGICAL DETERMINISM

In his analysis, Brenner argues that critical urban theory rejects state divisions of labor and forms of urban understanding that are technocratic and market-oriented. He critiques the contemporary application of these ideas in neoliberal forms of political science, which serve an urbanism that is not only capitalist but also deeply rooted in austerity and extractivism. This perspective is intimately intertwined with the urban socio-economic fabric, manifesting in both individual and collective neoliberal subjectivities. Again, Brenner makes several criticisms of the Euclidean and aseptic thinking typical of the Chicago Ecological School. His major criticism lies in the ecological perspective, which underpins much of the neopositivist knowledge still prevalent in urban studies. This perspective tends to devalue the importance of action and conscious planning in city organization, viewing urban development as a "natural" process and ignoring the role of the capitalist state in producing urban space.

The urban form model created by determinists and positivists spatially documented the city as a functionalist competition between social groups and economic forces, driven primarily by biological

imperatives of human nature from a behavioral standpoint. Thus, the cycles of evolution in the city's internal structure were explained by naturalistic biological analogies and social Darwinian principles, essentially *laissez-faire*. This generated the functional selection of urban areas and the division of labor, where ecological competition occurred between individuals, overlooking the role of social classes and the capitalist mode of production in shaping the city.

An example of this deterministic and positivist urban model would be Ernest Burgess's concentric zone theory, which depicted the city as a series of rings representing different social and economic functions. This model suggested that social groups naturally competed for space, with wealthier classes moving outward and poorer groups concentrating in inner-city areas. The city's structure was seen as a result of natural competition and human behavior, neglecting the influence of social class, power, or capitalism in shaping these divisions, ignoring the reproduced inequalities that are inherent to the functioning of this mode of production.

Therefore, it involves knowledge produced in a “glocal”, situated way, as a result of socio-historically specific power relations and a critique of utilitarian and instrumental reason. Critical urban theory argues that a different form of urbanization – one that is more democratic, socially just, and sustainable – is achievable, despite these possibilities currently being suppressed by institutional arrangements, practices, and the dominant hegemonic ideologies of neoliberal and financialized capitalism.

III. STATE RESCALING AND THE SPATIAL ORGANIZATION OF CITIES AND REGIONS

The state's multiscale interventions are vital for creating a conducive environment for capital cycles. By regulating, stabilizing, planning, and investing in key areas, the state manages and facilitates capital accumulation and economic development, thereby promoting sustained economic growth and stability. The state enacts laws and regulations that create a stable environment for economic activities, including enforcing property rights, contract laws, and financial regulations essential for predictable and secure capital investments. This regulatory framework helps mitigate risks and uncertainties that can disrupt capital cycles.

Additionally, states often invest in large-scale infrastructure projects – such as transportation networks, utilities, and communication systems – that are necessary for economic growth. These investments facilitate the movement of goods, services, and labor, enhancing productivity and enabling efficient capital accumulation.

Through fiscal and monetary policies, states can influence economic conditions to promote investment and consumption. Tax incentives, subsidies, and grants can attract investments in specific sectors or regions, while monetary policies can control inflation and interest rates, affecting borrowing and spending behaviors. The State, with its multiscale interventions, plays a crucial role in accommodating and developing capital cycles. And so, it introduces another essential dimension to the author's thinking and which has been the basis of his rationale and seminal work for decades: the concept of rescaling, which owes much to Yves Lacoste's multi-scale rationale. It refers to the idea that urban and spatial processes are influenced by multiple geographic and institutional scales that interact in a complex way, particularly regarding the theory of spatial restructuring and planetary urbanization. Brenner argues that urbanization cannot be understood solely in terms of cities or metropolitan areas as stagnant and atomized spaces but must be analyzed through a lens that considers multiple scales, from the local to the global, in “glocal” articulation. This view suggests that urban processes are shaped by dynamics that transcend the traditional borders of cities, involving global infrastructure networks, international economic flows and transnational policies.

Brenner discusses how the restructuring of global capitalism has impacts on multiple scales, influencing the spatial organization of cities and regions. He argues that economic globalization and changes in the global political economy require an analysis that incorporates multiple scales to understand contemporary spatial transformations. In his analysis of state rescaling, Brenner shows how urban and regional policies are shaped by dynamics at different levels of governance, from the local to the national and supranational (such as the European Union). It explores how neoliberal reforms and economic development strategies require a coordination and reconfiguration of scales of state intervention, that is, involving articulation at multiple spatial scales.

IV. RETERRITORIALIZATION IN NEOLIBERAL GLOBALIZATION: CAPITAL, STATE RESCALING AND THE POLITICS OF SPATIAL CONTROL

Regardless of the focus and/or paradigm underlying the different analyzes of globalization, a common point is the focus on the accelerated circulation of people, goods, capital, identities and images in global space, in a process that David Harvey (1989) called spatial-temporal compression. These accelerated and global circulation flows generate processes of deterritorialization through which capitalist social relations and the processes of appropriation and production of space are being detached from places and territories on very diverse geographic scales, in what Yves Lacoste states is the reasoning of globalization, and which the neoliberal revolution brilliantly appropriated. And, in fact, studies on globalization, especially in the 80s and 90s, seem to have forgotten the importance of sub-global scales and the primordial role of re-territorialization and geo-institutional restructuring that occurred in these for the success of globalization.

Two significant deficiencies characterize interpretations of globalization that unilaterally focus on flows, circulation, and processes of deterritorialization. First, such analyses tend to neglect the relatively fixed and immobile forms of territorial organization – particularly regional urban agglomerations and state regulatory institutions – that enable this accelerated movement. Second, and most importantly, these analyses overlook the forms on which the current cycle of neoliberal globalization intrinsically depends, which are intertwined with major transformations of territorial organization at multiple geographic scales.

Based on these criticisms, Brenner's central thesis is to demonstrate how the processes of reterritorialization (the reconfiguration and rescaling of administrative and territorial organization) should be seen as an intrinsic aspect of the current cycle of neoliberal globalization. This cycle serves its hegemonic powers to overcome the contradictions arising from the capitalist crisis since 2008-2009.

Through the hegemonic control of social and regional space, articulated in a multi-scale geoinstitutional exercise, administrative rescheduling asserts itself as one of the most strategically significant dimensions of reterritorialization. An example of this control can be seen in government-led metropolitan reforms that redraw municipal boundaries to incorporate surrounding suburbs into a larger city. By doing so, regional elites consolidate political and economic power, controlling key resources and planning decisions across a broader area.

This multi-scale reterritorialization allows the central city to assert dominance over previously autonomous regions, strategically aligning governance and development agendas to favor capital interests while marginalizing local communities and smaller municipalities. Functioning as a grand strategy of neoliberal crisis management and capital revaluation, applied by the guarantor capitalist State in a wide variety of urban-regional contexts, it aims, ultimately and despite the pursuit of other objectives, to significantly recalibrate the relationship between capital, territorial administration, state institutions and territorially circumscribed sociopolitical forces. While capital continually strives to improve spatial mobility, reducing local dependence, contemporary "glocal" states try to fix capital, tie it ever more directly, within their territories, through the provision of real estate, specificities and externalities that cannot be found elsewhere, nor abandoned without considerable devaluation costs. In this way, through processes of State rescaling, the state's scales of territorial organization become central mediators of capitalist restructuring to improve each state's capacity to mobilize urban and regional space as a productive and extractive force.

V. METATHEORETICAL SYNTHESIS AND THE REIMAGINING OF URBAN THEORY: NEIL BRENNER'S APPROACH TO PLANETARY URBANIZATION

In the final chapter of *New Urban Spaces*, Neil Brenner (2019) explores the concept of *metatheoretical synthesis* as part of his broader analysis of urban theory. Brenner's work, particularly in this chapter, is framed by a critical need to synthesize and transcend the fragmentation of contemporary urban studies, which is characterized by a diverse array of theories, frameworks, and methodologies. His call for metatheoretical synthesis is an attempt to build a more coherent, comprehensive, and flexible understanding of urbanization processes in the context of rapid global transformations.

Brenner critiques existing urban theories for their limitations in addressing the complexities of planetary urbanization. Many of these approaches, while valuable in specific contexts, fail to account for the multifaceted and interconnected nature of urbanization across scales, from the local to the global. This theoretical fragmentation often leads to isolated debates and siloed research. Brenner's synthesis does not propose a single, unified theory of urbanization but rather advocates for an integrative approach that draws on multiple theoretical traditions.

The metatheoretical synthesis Brenner envisions operates at two levels. First, it seeks to integrate insights from diverse intellectual traditions – ranging from critical geography and political economy to sociology and environmental studies – into a more holistic urban theory. This means engaging with the strengths and limitations of various approaches, critically assessing their contributions, and determining how they can be combined or reconfigured to produce deeper insights. For instance, Brenner draws on Lefebvre's concept of the "production of space" and incorporates it with contemporary debates on neoliberal governance and environmental urbanism, creating a richer, multilayered framework for understanding urban dynamics.

Second, the synthesis aims to transcend disciplinary boundaries and analytical frameworks that often constrain urban studies. Brenner argues for an interdisciplinary approach, which is crucial for addressing the complex challenges of urbanization in an era of climate change, economic restructuring, and socio-political instability. By encouraging the cross-fertilization of ideas across fields, Brenner's synthesis seeks to construct a more flexible and responsive urban theory capable of adapting to shifting empirical realities.

Overall, Brenner's concept of metatheoretical synthesis emphasizes the need for an ongoing, reflexive process of theory-building. Rather than offering a fixed solution or a single path forward, Brenner proposes a method of engagement with urban theory that is open-ended, constantly evolving, and attuned to the diverse and dynamic nature of contemporary urbanization. This synthesis thus offers a framework for scholars and practitioners to navigate the theoretical and practical challenges of understanding urban spaces in the 21st century.

Employing critical geopolitical economy and spatial approaches to state theory, Brenner presents a comprehensive analysis of how rescaling processes are fundamentally transforming traditional urban spaces. His work examines the varied impacts these processes have on the emerging patterns and pathways of contemporary urbanization, illustrating the complex ways in which urban spaces are reconfigured and the implications for economic, social, and political dynamics within cities. The book also promotes the idea that critical urban theory must be continuously revised: essential urban concepts need to be persistently reimagined in response to the ever-changing realities of urbanization they seek to explain.

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