

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Andy Merrifield, Erik Swyngedouw, eds. *The Urbanization of Injustice*. New York: New York University Press, 1997. v + 245 pp. \$20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8147-5576-1; \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-5575-4.

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Published on H-Urban (March, 1998)

More than two decades ago the publication of David Harvey's *Social Justice and the City* [1] helped introduce a whole generation of urbanists to Marxist theory. Whereas earlier scholars of the city had produced largely descriptive accounts of urban patterns, Harvey's *Social Justice* set a stunning precedent in its emphasis on process and in providing the intellectual groundwork for thinking through the connections between moral philosophy, notions of justice, social relations, and spatial form. In his movement toward revolutionary Marxist formulations, Harvey defined the city under capitalism as an inequality-generating machine, and in this context he provided pathbreaking explorations of urban land use, ghetto formation, and the circulation of surplus value within urban economies. For these formulations alone, Harvey's *Social Justice* became required reading in virtually every major planning department in the country, and in retrospect, it is difficult to find a book which had a more definite agenda-setting influence on so many disciplines.

Yet, as Merrifield and Swyngedouw—Geographers at King's College and Oxford respectively—attest, far reaching changes in intellectual and political life have taken place in the last generation, so much so that we may need now to re-evaluate the substance of Harvey's argument and the character of social justice and urbanism more generally. In intellectual life, the cultural turn in the humanities, along with feminist and poststructuralist critiques of Marxism in particular, have moved attention away from the materialist reading of injustice that was central to Harvey's formulation. Further, the increasing diversity of identities that constitute the mosaic of contemporary urbanism have made it much more difficult to maintain conceptions of social justice which, like structural Marxism, are informed by abstract notions of a socially homogeneous populace and the universality of subject positions. Meanwhile, in political life the ascendancy of free-market liberalism and globalization have created a new context where debates about social justice are fraught with all sorts of new dilemmas.

It is precisely because of these changes and uncertainties that *The Urbanization of Injustice* is such a timely and provocative book. This impressive collection of essays—which brings together the diverse positions of geographers, planners, political scientists, and sociologists—is well situated within today's shifting economic, political, and intellectual reality. Together, the essays take on the paramount task of reassessing what was learned from *Social Justice* while setting these lessons against the more sober post-modernist critiques about difference and non-totalizing discourses. Those searching for a mantra to Harvey's earlier work will not find it here. Rather, the editors have envisioned this collection as an intervention against the groundswell of recent work which has "relegated the issue of social justice to the hinterland of academic inquiry" (p. 2). What we need now more than anything, the editors contend, is not a return to Marxist purity, but a critical rethinking of the relationship between spatiality, power, and justice; a rethinking which would allow us to push for a "political and intellectual agenda that rallies around the development of socially just urban practices" (p. 3).

But what might be the specific elements of such an agenda? The crux of the volume's theoretical argument is outlined in Merrifield and Swyngedouw's opening essay which sets the stage for the volume. The editors invoke the impasse in current social justice debates created by the contradiction between postulates of consensus and the reality of dissensus. The poles in this divide, which roughly approximate the chasm between the modernist and post-modernist world views, are defined by Rawlsian conceptions of social justice on the one hand [2] and the position advanced by Iris Young on the other [3]. The former pivots around an abstract universal ideal and the latter is a more relativist conception which redefines justice away from a purely distributional affair and contends that oppression and domination should be the primary terms for conceptualizing injustice.

In overcoming this impasse, Merrifield and Swyn-

gedouw argue for a middle position that is sensitive to oppression and cultural difference yet doesn't jettison universality entirely. This new formulation understands universality as constructed in dialectical relation with the particularity of difference where each defines the other in inexorable unity. From this standpoint universality isn't about totalizing or closure, but an open-ended and emergent construct, while similarity does not equate to sameness, but implies a commonality which bonds humans together in an inclusive ethical union. The revolutionary potential of this re-theorization of justice is that it allows for a "principled position" that accounts for social difference while not decoupling social critique from a materialist conception of social life (pp. 9-10). I would have liked at this point to have been offered a concrete example of how this dialectical conception of justice would play out in practice. This minor point aside, Merrifield and Swyngedouw do succeed in providing a succinct intellectual scaffolding for the volume and a clear set of guideposts which help the reader navigate the individual essays which follow.

The ten essays which make up the volume are organized into three thematic parts, the first and most successful of which aims to highlight the inadequacies we encounter when conceptualizing social justice. The three complementary essays here have as their common focus the desire to reinvigorate the theoretical apparatus of the political economic approach to social justice, although they arrive at quite different conclusions as to how this conceptual transformation might occur. In the first essay, Fainstein argues that the political economy approach can maintain a coherent concept of social justice and develop a program with majoritarian appeal if it incorporates Karl Mannheim's notion of "relationism" [4]. Fainstein also tentatively suggests how this theoretical advance might be given real world expression. In the second essay Katznelson explores the premise that the overriding duopoly in urban studies between political economy and post-structuralism has left us with a zone of academic silence in areas such as rights, law, representation, and constitutionalism. According to Katznelson, what is needed now is the promotion of a complex liberalism that is sensitive to both the historical inadequacies of abstract liberal theory and the blatant suppression of liberalism within the Marxist tradition. He concludes that the intellectual grounding of this reformulation could be based on the economic anthropology of Polanyi [5] who pioneered a theoretical space that pivoted between the materialist interpretations of Harvey and the highly abstract formulations of Rawls [6].

In a clearly more purist approach Harvey pleads in the

volume's third essay for a return to some of the basic formulations he outlined in *Social Justice*. He maintains that it is still crucial to conceptualize social justice, not as a matter of morality or eternal justice, but as something contingent upon the social processes operating in society as a whole. Harvey illustrates this contention empirically through a masterful summary of the various discourses of environmentalism that are dominant in the late twentieth century. He pays particular attention to the environmental justice movement which, unlike the standard view of environmental management, has its origins in the inequalities of power and the ways those inequalities have environmental consequences for the marginalized. The struggle over what principles of environmental and social justice prevail then is a struggle in which class is clearly implicated. Harvey also provides an implicit attack against the strong relativism that would hold all environmentalist discourses as equally valid and concludes with the assertion that the environmental justice movement must move beyond its localized and particularist base and strive for a discourse of universality that is able to theoretically integrate, and thus challenge, the material and institutional basis of production, consumption, and global power politics.

The second section of the volume aims to capture these preceding dialogues concretely through an exploration of contemporary urban injustice. All three of the essays here are empirically rich and theoretically astute. The most outstanding contribution is Massey's highly readable exploration of the relations between identity, spatiality, and power. She contends that a more democratic and just urban politics can be achieved if we critically think through the connections between these unstable and relational categories. In a more pessimistic essay, Smith concedes that he has doubts as to whether a reworked theory of justice is possible in the wake of the intellectual vacuum created by the marginalization of the progressive urban ambitions of the 1960s and 1970s. Smith sees this vacuum being filled by a particularly exploitive breed of urbanism defined by internationalization from above and revanchism from below. Liberal individualist conceptions of social justice can not sustain a critique of oppression in this new city, and, in an assertion that parallels Harvey, Smith calls for a return to the centrality of "exploitation" in our attempts to rethink justice. In a striking contrast, Keith follows with an embrace of the project of radical contextualization, which he maintains is particularly suitable to conceptualizing issues of social justice.

The third section of the volume broadly focuses on culture and the politics of group difference. The four es-

says presented here do a quite satisfactory job of assembling a diverse portrait of how contemporary identity politics has both enabled and numbed the struggle for just urban policy. In the first essay, Berman celebrates modernist ideals in a historically rich discussion of the cultural politics of rap music from its emergence in the ruins of the South Bronx to its appropriation by the culture makers in Manhattan. What bothers Berman is that rap, which itself emerged as a form of symbolic protest against injustice, extolled a “just us” philosophy. This emphasis on black exceptionalism ultimately enforced a particularistic tribalism which denied the ways in which poverty and misery are multicultural. Merrifield draws similar conclusions in his study of inner city mobilization in the Toxteth section of Liverpool, although he is less willing to equate tribalism with separatism. Rather, he argues for an activist politics which would strive to bind people together but in a “togetherness in difference” (p. 201). In a more radical account Soja offers us an invitation to a “thirdspace” where we can create a new radical mode of thinking which would erase identity categories altogether and the injustices that emanate from them.

Overall, Merrifield and Swyndegouw have engineered a book that will excite readers across a wide range of disciplines and philosophical positions. Those searching for the lockstep ideological certainty of Harvey’s *Social Justice*, however, may be a bit disappointed. This is a tentative volume that incorporates a diversity of opinions and possibilities, yet the cautious tone of the volume may ultimately be one of the its most compelling strengths. The individual essays are enriched by their openness to new ideas, while still sensitive to the contributions made by old ones, and are highly innovative in the sense that these ideas are often combined in progressive ways. For teachers the volume makes an ideal road map for a graduate seminar, not only one that focuses explicitly on the intersection of urbanism and exploitation, but also one intent on introducing students to the broader philosophical debates which rage at the center of the contemporary social sciences. Some of essays may be a bit formidable for the average undergraduate, particularly Keith’s and Soja’s which are bloated with an arcane and highly exclusive vocabulary. Most, however, are accessible enough to enrich and complement an upper level undergraduate reading list. Oddly, the empirical focus of the essays remains fixed on New York and other American or British metropolitan areas. This is a striking omission, a glowing irony even, given the general ideological thrust of the volume. It would have been nice to have been offered a glimpse into how ideas of justice, difference, and exploitation have been articulated in

the so-called global periphery; in places like Mexico City, where the maelstrom of capitalist urbanization has been more chaotic and recent.

These minor points aside, *The Urbanization of Injustice* is bound to be an important book that will assuredly become a cherished companion for readers in urban studies, geography, sociology, planning, and political science. At a time when the most extreme and opportunistic variants of postmodern thought have reduced oppression to mere text and image, this volume is an urgent call to arms. The editors should be applauded for returning our focus to what really matters and for providing a clear synthesis of the ideas and concepts that animate the contemporary academic Left. What is especially remarkable about the volume is that it makes explicit a theoretical concern for justice, something that for so many years, and in so much academic writing, remained only implicit and rarely theorized or problematized directly. This is a striking achievement in itself and in so doing the editors and authors here have begun to fill in a conspicuous gap in the literature. *The Urbanization of Injustice* is a first-rate volume that is a vital contribution to the corpus of radical thought in the social sciences.

Notes

- [1]. David Harvey, *Social Justice and the City* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1973).
- [2]. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).
- [3]. Iris Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).
- [4]. Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1936).
- [5]. Karl Polyani, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Books, 1944).
- [6]. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).

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Citation: Jeffrey Zimmerman. Review of Merrifield, Andy; Swyngedouw, Erik, eds., *The Urbanization of Injustice*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. March, 1998.

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