

***Cities for People, Not for Profit: Critical Urban Theory and the Right to the City,***  
by Neil Brenner, Peter Marcuse, and Margit Mayer eds.,  
Routledge, 2012, 296pp.

Changhyun Kim  
Seoul National University

**What Are Cities for?**

Recently, urban theories seem to have been largely utilized by urban planners and policy makers in South Korea. They have made slogans based on urban geographic and planning theories, such as global city, smart city, making the city, slow city, and others. Owing to these slogans, local governments can efficiently promote the direction of their urban strategies without belaboring explanation. However, urban issues, such as uneven development between the center and the periphery, gentrification, urban redevelopment, depression of housing markets, the spatial polarization, and other problems after the financial crisis in 2007-08 have been unfolding steadily. When dealing with these problems, urban theories and slogans do not seem to be sufficient although they were initially fabricated

to answer the urban issues as follows.

“What are cities for? Is it for making profit or for serving people? And where are these slogans based? Are they from urban reality or only from theory?”

The book, *Cities for People, Not for Profit: Critical Urban Theory and the Right to the City*, which I will introduce in this essay, is an attempt to answer the questions above and to deliberate the urban problem at a theoretical level, as well as at an empirical level. The editors of this book, Neil Brenner, Peter Marcuse, and Margit Mayer, sought to illustrate urban issues after the financial crisis in 2007-08 to review various critical approaches and to find a solution for urban problems on the basis of the framework of critical theory, developed initially by Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse as a reflection of modernization.

This book was also intended to celebrate the 80th birthday of an urban planner, Peter Marcuse, the son of Herbert Marcuse, who participated in establishing the critical theory and influenced the urban social movement in 1968. In addition to the editors, a number of scholars of different disciplines, such as geography, sociology, and urban planning took part in this book and gave insights. As stated in the preface and acknowledgement, this book was a result of a long-term collaborative project designed to understand the urban process and problems after the financial shock in 2007.

## **Theory and Practice**

The introduction of this book is helpful to make sense of why it is pertinent to pay attention to the urban critical theories here and now. First of all, capitalist cities are places where accumulation of capital occurs and where conflicts and contradictions take place. Within the framework of geography, the alternatives of the capitalist system as a social structure would not be complete without providing the appropriate urban theories as a material and spatial foundation of social structure. In addition, theorizing the urban process complements the transformation of existing cities, so it is necessary to ask a question on how to upgrade urban life beyond capitalist society in a globalized world. Briefly, the purpose of this book is to make foundations to establish an urban paradigm that is democratic and sustainable. In this regard, a geographer, David Harvey (2008), denoted this aim as “charting a path” that includes both theoretical investigation and action in practice (3).

Even though the history of capitalist cities is also taken into account, the basic point of view in this book is the critical approach on urban theories and phenomena. As Brenner stated in Chapter 2, prior to searching for an alternative urban theory, it was necessary to focus on critical theory as it contributed to the conceptual foundation of student and labor movements of 1968. As such, the critical theory was an intellectual effort to overcome the limits of modernity brought by the development of

industrial capitalist society and modernization. It expressed that even though modernization and industrialization might have given us material richness, they were also responsible for the emergence of the Hitler regime and the Holocaust in Germany, the extreme polarization between the rich and the poor, and eventually the World War II.

Critical theorists, called as Frankfurt school, Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse, developed the rationale to criticize the modern characteristics of capitalism and called for reflexive frameworks to overcome the limits of modernization such as the dominance of instrumental reason. They probably sought to answer the questions on how capitalism's contradictions simultaneously undermine the system, and point beyond it, towards other ways of organizing material life, social capacities, and society or nature relations (13). While critical theory evolved at an abstract level, it also gave insights to urban theories, concentrating on the practice. For example, Marcuse insists intensively that "the need for qualitative change is as pressing as ever before by society as a whole, for every one of its members" (cited by Brenner, 18). In this light, critical theory has also affected the formulation of critical urban theory by reviewing the essence of the modernization process under capitalism during the early 20th century. The editors contend that the critical urban theory is a good starting point to unfold more critical reviews on the existing urban theories.

## **The Right to the City and Other Theories**

Another crucial reason why editors put out this book was to theoretically develop the right to a city, as identified in the subtitle. The right to the city, initially suggested by Henry Lefebvre in 1968, has multiple meanings, which needed to be investigated in depth. It is worth notable that urban problems in the 1960s emerged as a significant social issue despite the rapid growth after the World War 2. In this period, capitalist system under the cold war achieved economic growth and prosperity in part due to the success of Keynesian Welfare strategy, stimulating the role of the nation state within the free market. Despite the economic growth during this period, urban life was not stable. As riots occurred in many European cities, Lefebvre developed a new theory explaining the inner structure that had led to urban problems and eventually constructed the concept of the right to a city. As stated in Chapter 5 in this book, Lefebvre develops urban theories to interpret various meanings of urbanization and to suggest the alternative to the urban (52). In this regard, the right to the city would stand for the struggles to solve the urban problem.

Beside the right to the city, you can find a number of reviews on diverse urban theories in this book. Representatively, Florida's theory of creative city was criticized by Stefan Krätke in Chapter 9. He not only criticized its weakness of premises, but

also pointed that Florida's theory would provide national and local governments with a hope to gain more profits by attracting the creative class. Further, Oren Yiftachel identified geopolitical problems with regard to urban colonialism and elaborated the concept of *gray space*, which meant developments, enclave populations and transactions positioned between the "lightness" of legality/approval/safety, and the "darkness" of eviction/destruction/death in Chapter 10 (153). Brenner *et al.*, also analyzed the actor network theory (ANT) suggested by several scholars, such as Latour and Amin, concluding that ANT, despite several theoretical advances, needed to be criticized because it overlooked the role of formation of capital accumulation and historical configuration of uneven development. Apart from these, the book contains critical comments and insights on the contemporary urban theories.

## Conclusion

In the past, the problems of cities were considered as specific, occurring only within *the city* in comparison with the rural space. However, as Mayer pointed out in Chapter 5, the modern capitalist society was founded on the formulation of material type of *the urban* and it suggested that the social problems underlying the capitalist society would not be completely solved without concentrating on the city and its material foundation,

the urban. In this sense, the critical urban theories in this book are worth reconsidering to establish the conceptual foundation of the right to the city. While this book does not seem to provide a key solution for urban problems, it can be utilized as a way to “chart the path.”

**[Reference]**

Harvey, D. 2008. The right to the city, *New left Review*. 53. 23-40.

