

**Review:**  
**Neil Brenner (ed.), 2013. *Implosions/Explosions.***  
***Towards a Study of Planetary Urbanization***  
**(Berlin: Jovis)**

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An anthology of urban studies, *Implosions/Explosions. Towards a Study of Planetary Urbanization* builds upon the methodological foundations of the scalar turn, embedding the urban within a fluidly extending landscape, and continues the critical assessment of place-based approaches to the urban question. The latter, place-based and binaries-oriented explorations, have dominated the mainstream, traditional field of urban studies and their adaptations for cultural and literary research. They have provided a basis for such studies as John McLeod's *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis* (2004), Jean E. Howard's *Theatre of a City: The Places of London Comedy, 1598–1642* (2007) – whose title evokes Lewis Mumford's classic, *The City in History* (1961) – *Babylon or New Jerusalem?: Perceptions of the City in Literature* (2005), a collective work coordinated by Valeria Tinkler-Villani, or Paul Newland's *The Cultural Construction of London's East End: Urban Iconography, Modernity and the Specialization of Englishness* (2008). Underneath the tumult of superficial disagreement and claims of paradigm shift, all of these publications recognize the *city* and a *methodological cityism* as the core concepts in their explorations. This recently published collective work follows in the tradition of critical urban theory but its ambition is to take up the thesis of "planetary urbanization" put forward and developed by Henri Lefebvre, in order to reopen a discussion with regard to a possible theoretical restructuring of urban studies. *Implosions/Explosions. Towards a Study of Planetary Urbanization* rests on a strong theoretical foundation, broadly derived from the subterranean stream of urban research involving the processes of territorialization and reterritorialization, Henri Lefebvre's approach and that focusing on the existence of a "planetary", "generalized", "global", "complete" urbanization. The collected studies aspire to supersede the long-established urban/non-urban divide. The anthology, coordinated by Neil

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Brenner, seeks to provide a new foundation for contemporary urban studies from a theoretical standpoint and may affect literary as well as cultural studies on urbanism. Berit Michel's *Mapping the City – Narrating 'Complexity'* (2015) provides a good example of literary studies – notably his analyses of an 'augmented' cityscape – which seek for a new theoretical approach that would shatter the architectural outline of the city and forecast the demise of geometry. The chapters in Michael's book which evidently depart from place and geometry-oriented concepts focus on Jonathan S. Foer's *Extremely Loud&Incredibly Close* and *Tree of Codes*, on Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* and on Norman Klein's *Bleeding Through: Layers of Los Angeles 1920–1986*.

### **The editorial project**

There are numerous anthologies on the book market, often called "city readers." The 6<sup>th</sup> edition of *The City Reader* (2016), edited by Richard T. Le Gates and Fredric Stout, offers an updated version of an anthology whose beginnings go back to 1996. The layout is traditional, starting with a historical overview, followed by conceptualizations of the city – the key concept which remains at the core of the discussion – followed by concepts of space, politics, economy and governance, and urban planning and finally focusing on place-making and globalization. Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson select more abstract and less historical categories for their *Blackwell City Reader* (2010). Much greater emphasis is put on the process. Hence materiality is succeeded by mobility, division and difference. The Routledge *Global Cities Reader* (2006), edited by Neil Brenner and Roger Keil, is more specific in still another way, but converges around the history of global cities rather than attempting to formulate new theoretical foundations in urban studies. In editorial terms, *Implosions/Explosions. Towards a Study of Planetary Urbanization* (570 pages) seems difficult to categorize. This voluminous work is composed, after all, of 33 texts grouped into 7 sections, which were written at different times and in different geographical contexts. Eleven essays are "classic background texts", written between 1970 and 2007, including two by Henri Lefebvre ."From the City to Urban Society" and "Dissolving City, Planetary Metamorphosis" begin and conclude the book. The project, as the frame suggests, was not intended to provide a historical survey. Still, the editor has decided that some topics from earlier periods have acquired "renewed contemporary significance"(Brenner 22) and for that reason should be included in the collection. Fourteen "recent texts" were written between 2011 and 2013, while a further

eight were specially commissioned for the book. The newly produced essays introduce the research developed at the Urban Theory Lab since 2011 and cover topics that were not properly addressed in the preceding work (for instance colonization and everyday life). The aim of this broad temporal spectrum is to establish the legitimacy of the theoretical re-conceptualization that the book seeks to convey. However, this diversity is something of a façade, as all the more empirical texts, articles or essays are logically connected to the theory of planetary urbanization and the revival of interest in Henri Lefebvre's thinking within certain academic circles. Unlike many readers, *Implosions/Explosions* has an interesting and original editorial construction. However, its apparent substantive coherence has certain flaws. In references to the classic authors, the book becomes fairly repetitive, especially in its numerous returns to Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey, Edward W. Soja and Manuel Castels, whose conceptual work the reader should appreciate in the context of recent findings and approaches, notably those of the Urban Theory Lab team. As an editorial project, the book strives at uniformity, trying to subsume the collected texts under its overall theoretical agenda rather than accept the inevitable differences and nuances. Differences that do exist between authors and more general theoretical disagreements tend to disappear. There is a strong feeling that, trying to convey its theoretical project, the book refuses to offer space to the spectrum of existing discordant voices, as a result producing a somewhat distorted image of harmonious cohabitation.

The editorial project proposed by Neil Brenner is not easily classified as either a reader or a survey presentation of diverse contemporary research. What we are dealing with, therefore, is a "real-time" reader of planetary urbanization or simply a platform for the display of the findings of Neil Brenner's Urban Theory Lab team at Harvard and/or of Christian Schmid's ETH Studio Basel group in Zurich. Driven by a desire to stir up the stagnant waters of urban studies, the book provokes a discussion, if not a controversy, by imposing a smoothing-out logic on material that is more hybrid than it admits.

### A plea for a new theory

The theoretical and the political intertwine in the editorial experiment coordinated by Brenner, Schmid and several of the book's authors (e.g. Stefan Kipfer, Kanishka Goonewardena, and Max Ajl) expresses the belief that there is a strong need for a new vocabulary of urbanization, i.e. that a new language

of description and analysis is required to grasp what is taking place globally in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Concluding their joint project, Brenner and Schmid assert that the inherited “analytical vocabularies and cartographic methods do not adequately capture the changing nature of urbanization processes” and therefore emergent patterns “require the development of new analytical approaches ... including experimental and speculative ones ... new visualizations ... a new lexicon of urbanization processes and forms of territorial differentiation” (Brenner and Schmid 334). Finally, to be able to reflect on change comprehensively, urban studies must abandon, the authors claim, a whole array of outdated categories and concepts whose popularity in the techno-political sphere, as well as in cultural studies, is detrimental. The authors demand the removal of categories describing circumscribed locations, such as the “city”, “polis”, “megapolis”, “edgy city”, “divided city”, and “town” along with the typical distinctions between “urban” and “rural” – as in the classic survey of English literature, *The City and the Country* by Raymond Williams – “centre” and “periphery”, “centre” and “suburb.” The same applies to the often investigated “boundaries”, for example between the “haves” and “have-nots”, as in Loren Kruger’s *Imagining the Edgy City: Writing, Performing, and Building Johannesburg*. In sum, the authors enjoin us to replace the discrete with the continuous, the stagnant, *locum*-oriented with the process-oriented and dynamic approaches (Angelo and Wachsmuth 382–383).

The authors argue persuasively for a new vocabulary needed for the description of hitherto unknown urban processes, but are less convincing in their analysis. This causes certain difficulties, as a credible analysis of the changing and unstable geographies and socio-spatial differentiations seems to be the sole condition for their understanding. Hence, although intellectually challenging, Brenner’s project can be criticized for its less impressive analysis of the forms and processes involved in the spatial development of the late capitalist economy – a process called “urbanization.” It is mainly this process which the book refers to in terms of “implosion” and “explosion” as well as “spatial destruction” and “creation”.

### **Visions of urbanization**

Though converging around specific research results, in fact, the book speaks directly to a whole range of issues and addresses a broad spectrum of debates in urban studies. Notably, it offers important comments on the risks of treating the “city” as ideology. Aware of the ideological component, Brenner criticizes

the unpremeditated acceptance of causality between the examination (and theorizing) of urbanity on the one hand and implementations of social policies on the basis of these theories. Several authors, Brenner in particular, point to the fact that organizations and public institutions easily absorb and disseminate concepts that become foundations for their political agenda. Some of the “techno-scientific” visions of urban development turn out to be particularly influential, especially those that lead to a rapid concentration of investment and inhabitants in prosperous metropolitan centres. Schmid emphasizes the fact that cartographic depictions have never been innocent (426). At the same time, however, he observes that the redrawing of traditional divisions and propositions of new ordering systems in urban studies may function as eye-openers, revealing a positive potential that has not been fruitfully explored. To conclude, what most of the authors recognize as dangerous is not so much the observation of urbanization on a planetary scale, but the fact that institutions and authorities are often driven by the underlying ideologies that the authors of the project would like to challenge. To expose the function of ideologies, urban researchers call upon a whole range of precursors, including Jürgen Habermas, Herbert Marcuse, Jean-Luc Nancy and Henri Lefebvre. It is Henri Lefebvre who reveals and criticizes the techno-scientific ideology of cartographic descriptions underlying expert opinion. Brenner, calling upon Lefebvre, reminds us that constructions of space are politically charged and, therefore, strategically vital. The new set of theoretical instruments, notably the concept of the urban without an “outside”, enables Brenner and his colleagues to extend their political criticism by reconnecting the previously (“urban age”) separated forms of dispossession. This stance opens up a perspective for a broader critical evaluation of such processes as the dynamics of land-use, e.g. accumulation by dispossession, which affects everyday life globally. In the wake of Lefebvre’s proposition, the rights to the city, the authors of the project comply with the thesis that the revolution will be “urban”. The difference, however, consists in the fact that what is “urban” has changes and the “urban condition” in the times of widespread urbanization is no longer limited to what used to be called the “city”.

### Cognitive maps and the empiricist tradition

Brenner’s experimental project promotes a new concept of urbanity and it is more than natural that the next step should consist in submitting an alternative cognitive map that would supersede all the deficiencies

and misrepresentations propagated by the discourse of the urban age. However, instead of elaborating in detail on their alternative approach, Brenner and Schmid conclude their essay, "The 'urban age' in question", by "outlining a series of epistemological guidelines" (331–334) penned in line with their critique of urban age discourse. In accordance with the guidelines, the urban and urbanization are perceived as theoretical categories whose defence is, to some extent, based on an attack against researchers fascinated by empirical studies, and especially by their assumed "objectivity". Brenner and Schmid complain that their own task is "blunted by the entrenched empiricism that dominates ... contemporary urban social studies ... leading researchers to emphasize investigations and associated visualizations rather than interrogating the underlying conceptual assumptions" (331). In that way Brenner and Schmid express their suspicion of the "positivist-empiricist tradition" as following cartographic frames whose underlying ideology they fail to investigate. Instead of opening up new perspectives, empirical studies remain imprisoned in the same old system, a vicious circle embracing technocrats, experts and politicians who, in their own interest, prioritize research based on collecting empirical data through funding measures they actually control. In accordance with this critique, the insistence on "theorization", especially in the light of Brenner and Merrifield's writing (essays included in the anthology), stems from a subversive research position. For understandable reasons, this argument raises certain doubts concerning the relationship between theory and empirical facts in the book. An absence of facts and a disregard for fieldwork may and often does lead to excessive abstraction. As if in response to these queries concerning meta-theorization and its concrete applications, Nikos Katsikis (in his essay, "Two approaches to 'world management': C. A. Doxiadis and R. B. Fuller") discusses propositions divergent from Lefebvre and ventures beyond "the critical point of the urban revolution" (502), thus offering a reasonable solution to the paradox. At the same time, however, Katsikis warns against the mere data gathering that some erroneously equate with "substantive understanding".

### **A new approach to urban studies?**

Recent geo-historical developments in particular, as the authors of the project assert, have effectively challenged the epistemological assumptions of urban studies inherited from the twentieth century. It is in reaction to this crisis that *Implosions/Explosions. Towards a Study of Planetary Urbanization* aims at recasting

the studies in a way that would allow the requirements of these new developments, often subsumed under the umbrella term of “complete urbanization”, to be met. The epistemological shift already announced by Lefebvre becomes a point of departure for most of the studies included in the book and requires that, instead of the analysis of “urban form”, the interest should shift to the “process” of extended urbanization. “*Urbs in rure*: historical enclosure and the extended urbanization of the countryside” by Álvaro Sevilla-Buitrago directly addresses the problem of extended urbanization by analyzing the constitutive moments in the historical process of implementing the policy of enclosures in England. Enclosures, the author claims, mark the beginning of an urban society, where the urban extends “beyond the immediate zones of agglomeration” (Sevilla-Buitrago 237). The essay traces the process of extension and concentration from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, showing that the policy affected not only the consolidation of holdings in the country, but also the appropriation of commons on the “fringes of booming agglomerations” (Sevilla-Buitrago 252), in that way facilitating the growth of residential areas and industrial enclaves. Interesting for various reasons, the essay is perfectly balanced in juxtaposing theory and empirical data. On a more theoretical level, the urge to study urbanization as an extensive process is voiced in several chapters, leading to the appeal that all approaches isolating the city as a special entity are methodologically outdated. As a result, the well-known differentiations which also stand behind a collection of literary topoi, such as “city” versus “countryside” or “rural areas” (Schmid 405–406), should be abandoned as being no longer applicable and should be replaced by a new language and, accordingly, a new imaginary (Friedman 551). “Becoming urban: On whose terms?”, written by John Friedman, addresses both the question of language and the imaginary. Although he sympathizes with the critique of the “untheorized” city produced by “state-isticians” (Friedman 551), his essay relies on thorough fieldwork research conducted in regions of East, South East, and South Asia. Instead of the “bounded” city concept, the essay proposes an urban continuum with peri-urban zones of encounter. Dispensing with boundaries in attempts to quantify the city, according to Friedman, does not eliminate its spatial aspect. What he puts forward is the concept of “assemblages of certain measurable characteristics” (Friedman 552) and a cognitive map that would trace *degrees of urbanity*. As to the imaginaries, Friedman draws our attention to their constructedness, to the production of tailored imaginaries commissioned by authorities to boost investment and promote modernity.

Resistance to these policies in some circles as well as their acceptance are briefly commented on. What is perhaps more important is that Friedman's essay fills in a significantly persistent gap in the prevailingly theoretical, totalizing rhetoric of the book by referring to the individuals trying to inhabit the new urbanity though continually displaced in the planetary metamorphosing, dissolving urban clusters. He addresses the social effects of becoming urban in an ongoing process, finally suggesting that "what is ultimately important resides in the detailed stories: the specific actors and institutional settings", the "specificities that bring historical phenomena to life" (Friedman 559). The idea of an assemblage of stories ties in with existent social projects, e.g. tapestries, as well as with literary endeavors to grasp the fluid urban reality via individual story-telling. The book offers only partial answers to inquiries concerning the "urban condition" experienced and combated by ordinary individuals. At the centre of attention are zones of encounter rather than policies. Concentrating on processes of urbanization, the book fetishizes theory and remains insufficiently demanding on the urban experience, both the banal and the unexpected. A return to Henri Lefebvre's concept of "everyday life" and to Michel de Certeau's *practice* would allow for a better assessment of the changes in terms of their reception.

In conclusion, the work by Neil Brenner, Christian Schmid and the remaining authors opens a debate on recent strands of urbanism, proposing a fascinating if controversial approach to the study of urbanity. The proposition, perceived by some as a somewhat messy field, asks for comments, improvements and alternative propositions. Prevailingly theoretical, the essays retain a degree of scepticism as if trying not to follow the authoritative rhetoric of the urban age scholars. What the book deals with marginally is the place of the individual and social groups in the process of planetary urbanization. On the other hand, the essays avoid quoting empirical data excessively and cursorily refer to their fieldwork where, judging from what is available, there is ample material for comment. From the perspective of literary and cultural studies, the collection provides a useful point of departure for the study of urbanity in contemporary, post-millennial writing.