

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Andy Merrifield, *The New Urban Question*, London: Pluto Press, 2014. ISBN: 9780745334844 (cloth); ISBN: 9780745334837 (paper)

Andy Merrifield is one of the most readable of contemporary urban critics. I remember flying through his book *Metromarxism* (2000) back in the day and being captivated by his concise locational biographies of some of the key Marxist urban theorists – Berman, Harvey, Castells, Lefebvre and so on. And while I haven't had the opportunity to open his more recent books, I was intrigued to open his latest, *The New Urban Question*.

Many of the key figures in *Metromarxism* reappear here. The book's title provides a fairly obvious cue to some of Merrifield's intellectual legacy: *The Urban Question* of the 1970s is of course something of a – Parisian – classic by Manuel Castells (1977), a reference point that Merrifield returns to throughout the book. This is a book I also opened back in the day, and sadly closed it quite quickly (it's a notoriously cumbersome read), preferring instead Castells' (1983) more accessible *The City and the Grassroots*. But what did come through was this questioning about how far class politics are spatialized, and whether the “urban” or the “city”, indeed, is a valid ontology for framing these problems. Merrifield's book follows the same path, and throughout the author reveals a constant, nagging tension about whether the “urban” is in fact a viable or relevant frame for a radical theory.

In the ten chapters, and a substantive preface and afterword, Merrifield sets out a range of interventions in trying to understand contemporary urban thought, drawing rather narrowly from Franco-North Atlantic sources and examples. Each chapter feels somewhat different, which has quite a pleasing effect – you are never quite sure what you will find within – but can also be somewhat jarring, in the sense that there is less of a sense of a progression in the argument. Some of the chapters

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read like review essays, others are more akin to manifestos; taken together, the book is girded by a number of key essays which together serve to pose, and partly answer, the question of the book's title.

The most direct engagement with (Marxian) urban theory comes in the opening two chapters: "Whither Urban Studies?" is a short meditation on the continuing relevance of Henri Lefebvre for today's urban theorists; the subsequent chapter, the longest of the book, "Old Urban Questions Revisited (and Reconstituted)" is concerned above all with a re-reading of Castells' *The Urban Question* alongside a consideration of the legacy of David Harvey's (1973) *Social Justice and the City*. "It may be brutal to admit", says Merrifield, "but *The Urban Question* is a dated book, at least in its content, even if its form continues to pose pertinent questions about the urban question ... why the latter book has had a longer radical shelf life, is that the city in Harvey's analysis assumes a much more dynamic significance" (p.19-20).

Such a concern with the immediacy that city life brings to theory is illustrated in Merrifield's very clear preoccupation with some of the key spaces of North American urban radicalism. Chapter 9, "Taking Back Urban Politics", is a commentary on Detroit, now in danger of becoming the new Los Angeles in its heady mix of urban dystopia and collectivist fables. In chapter 8, "Every Revolution Has Its Agora", Merrifield makes some interesting connections between the celebrated Occupy happening at New York's Zuccotti Park and Rousseau's social contract. The latter has almost been entirely ignored by urbanists, for reasons unknown, and so we get a pleasing, refreshing meditation. Similarly, Merrifield's intimacy with the lives of the key figures of post-war French Marxist theory pays dividends in what is my favourite chapter (which is also, perhaps, the most escapist): the "Sentimental Urban Education" of Guy Debord who had a fascination with the French travel writer, Mac Orlan.

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Not all of the French influence is as convincing, or satisfying. While the chapter on “Urban Jacobinism” provides an eloquent link between the revolutionary forms of late 18th century Paris and the Occupy movement, it is limited in its applicability to current affairs; Merrifield’s use of “neo-Haussmannisation” as a metaphor groans under this heavy explanatory burden:

“21st century grand boulevards now flow with energy and finance, with information and communication, and they’re frequently fiber-optic and digitalized, ripping through cyberspace as well as physical space ... As cities have exploded into mega-cities, and as urban centers – even in the poorest countries – have gotten de-centred, glitzy and internationalized, ‘Bonapartism’ projects its urban tradition onto planetary space.” (p.29)

Merrifield uses Paris both as an actual material site of struggle (the essay is linked to a discussion of Eric Hazan’s [2011] *Paris sous tension*) as well as a metaphorical comparator. It isn’t that successful as a strategy, as the chapter neglects to provide more than the briefest of commentaries on Parisian class struggle. This may be an unfair criticism, given that this is clearly written to engage rather than bear witness, but the cumulative effect after a few chapters of sweeping polemic may quickly alienate the reader.

Indeed, it is noticeable that the book is generally short on detail on the political economy of the contemporary urban condition. Merrifield (1993a, 1993b) made some important contributions some 20 years ago with penetrating case studies of London’s Docklands redevelopment and a factory closure in Baltimore. But, despite his eloquence and nimbleness even the most die-hard Marxist urbanists might find more purchase from the richly critical capitalist vernaculars than heterodox critics

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such as Fintan O'Toole, Michael Lewis and George Monbiot have evoked in recent years.

What one also won't find is a systematic guide to political intervention. There is an early call to arms on this: "Critical urban theory and philosophy must comprehend and create a new terrain for political intervention—for militant, revolutionary politics—in a process that is itself revolutionary" (p.10). But throughout the book, the essayistic format works against the development of a coherent platform of action. Merrifield's endpoint, expressed as an "Afterword", is an angry and somewhat baffling essay on "The Parasitic Mode of Urbanization". There is little that really helps identify the points of intervention that many contemplating this new urban question are seeking: should the focus be the state? Banks? Unions? Social media? So there may be more questions than answers for many readers.

In essence, *The New Urban Question* provides a set of insights into the contemporary urban world through the gaze of selected moments from French radical history and theory. It is readable, interesting, intellectual and eloquent. But the anthological format fails to gel, to my mind, and readers may ultimately find this to be a frustratingly disconnected approach to urban theory.

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