

## Book review

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Tom Slater, *Shaking Up the City: Ignorance, Inequality, and the Urban Question*, Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021; 258 pp.: ISBN 978-0-520-38622-8, £24.00 (pbk)

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Sitting down with *Shaking Up the City: Ignorance, Inequality, and the Urban Question* is like pulling up a chair with Tom Slater to talk about the state of play of urban studies. Slater takes on some popular tropes in this book, such as urban science and data-driven innovation (pp. 9–19), urban resilience and the Chicago School of human ecology (pp. 30–51), New Urbanism (p. 52), gentrification and neighbourhood effects (pp. 125–136), sink estates and the ghetto (pp. 127–162), right to buy and rent control (pp. 84–108) and more besides. You take an empirical trip around the world too, stopping off in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Cape Town, Detroit, New York, Vancouver and more.

Slater's identifiable voice is loud and clear in this book, a feature I like. It is honest writing in this respect. Slater takes a sneaky swipe or two at a few people as he weaves his way through the key ideas and case material. Jane Jacobs, William Whyte (p. 2) and Gehl Architects (p. 3) are called out early for their utopian thinking. A much more measured, albeit brief, critique is

levelled at authors of an urban science report soon after (p. 14). Later, it is Andres Duany (p. 52), Matthew Desmond (p. 86) and the 'much-trumpeted' Richard Florida's turn (p. 109). In a slight change of pace, 'academic Twitter' (p. 29) wanders into the firing line and a quote from film director Spike Lee provides some light relief (p. 79). Surprisingly, even Loïc Wacquant gets an ever so slight reproof in the backend of the book (p. 146). Although Wacquant is better characterised as a key interlocutor in this work, along with Neil Smith and to a lesser extent Pierre Bourdieu and David Harvey.

There are some colourful – laugh out loud – Slater-isms in this work too. Like the 'university managers and senior science professors in several countries [who] are bleating about discovering a new urban science' (p. 12), the 'essay for American Enterprise Magazine [that was an] obnoxious and declamatory rant' (p. 53), the economists going 'completely berserk' (p. 95) or the 'spectacular torrent of unsubstantiated assertions' from some commentators (p. 156).

Yet the highlight of this work is the intellectual contribution, which I see as holding the idea of epistemology – that is, the production of knowledge – and the idea of agnotology – that is, the production of ignorance – in tension with each other. Drawing on Robert Proctor's notion of agnotology and Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power, Slater defines his 'agnotological approach' most clearly when he writes

that it ‘seeks to dissect the ignorance production methods and tactics of [the] messengers of disinformation’ (p. 22). Slater operationalises this tension by bringing the co-production of knowledge and ignorance together as a field of inquiry, and this is a powerful intervention into critical urban studies.

Loïc Wacquant captures what is at stake here when he writes in the Foreword that:

*Shaking Up the City* tackles many of these issues head on and sounds an urgent clarion call for epistemic reflexivity, that is, the critical examination of the core categories, questions, methodological moves, and discursive tropes informing scholarly and policy debates on the metropolis. (pp. xi–xii)

Wacquant rightly notes that Slater is taking aim at academic and policy actors. Indeed, Slater charges some urban scholars with ‘tautological urbanism’, whereby policy makers and others are setting the urban research agenda *for* urban scholars who ‘keep getting huge grants to research something they keep finding to be not very important’ (p. 26).

In terms of structure, then, and at the risk of perhaps oversimplifying the book, Slater starts by outlining the conceptual contours of his approach in Chapter 1. Thereafter he pivots back and forth in each chapter between: (a) demonstrating how various powerful actors in the city (from the property lobby to academics) are caught up in the production of fallacies about the city; and (b) rigorously clarifying what are often well-known theories, such as rent gap theory, in order to show how these theories can be deployed to both produce better knowledge about the city, and thereafter challenge the urban fallacies that are produced by agnotologists.

In Chapter 2, Slater sets out to demonstrate the utility and explanatory power of the agnotological approach. He does this by

returning to the Chicago School of human ecology, and the ‘long – and disturbing – history of concepts being brought from biological sciences to be applied to the social sciences and especially the study of cities’ (pp. 23–24), to critique the production of ‘urban resilience’ as an urban solution through the Rockefeller Foundation’s 100 Resilient Cities challenge in Glasgow and Cape Town (pp. 23–24). Slater argues that resilience operates as a discursive instrument (i.e. the symbolic power to produce ignorance) that powerful urban actors can use to shift the blame for urban inequalities from ‘larger economic and social structures’ onto individuals (p. 51).

Chapter 3 sits firmly in Slater’s scholarly wheelhouse, gentrification research. Slater starts by showing how the production of ignorance about gentrification has emerged through a discussion about the supposed ‘pros and cons of gentrification’ (i.e. the agnotology of false choice urbanism). He then takes the pros and cons argument head on by shoring up Neil Smith’s work on gentrification via rent gap theory (pp. 24–25). Slater goes right back to Smith’s undergraduate dissertation and his first publications in journals such as *Antipode* in 1978 (p. 61) to make four claims about rent gap theory: (1) The rent gap theory is not narrowly economic, but a theory of the state’s role in creating the economic conditions for gentrification (p. 65). (2) The rent gap theory helps us understand the circulation of interest-bearing capital in urban land markets, together with speculative landed developer interests (p. 66). (3) Rent gaps are produced via the activation of territorial stigma (p. 69). (4) The rent gap theory can help explain gentrification beyond the Global North (p. 71). The latter point I wish to return to below.

Building on the previous chapter, Chapter 4 turns to rent control and three mythologies that have been produced about it (p. 97).

Here rent control seems to operate in both an agnotological and epistemological register, as Slater perhaps hints at when he says, 'I now focus on the most harmful effect of the process (displacement from urban space) and the production of ignorance vis-à-vis one of the more effective policies to address it: rent control' (p. 84). Questions of race and gender are sprinkled throughout this discussion, such as 'how evictions disproportionately impact women of color' (p. 86), which is a minor theme of the book I wish to return to below too.

Chapter 5 covers – by Slater's own admission – some well-trodden ground, neighbourhood effects research. He takes this discussion in two directions. The first is the well-rehearsed discussion of the politics of neighbourhood effects research. The second, which is far more interesting, is prompted by a conversation between Slater and a young black Uber driver in Cape Town, which allows Slater to discuss neighbourhood effects within the historical legacies of colonial oppression and the racial logics of urban dispossession in Cape Town (p. 119). Chapters 6 and 7 are again firmly in Slater's scholarly wheelhouse, namely the discursive politics around ideas such as the 'sink estate' and 'ghetto', with some fascinating examples from contemporary Vancouver and Renaissance Venice.

The final chapter of the book opens – and holds open – a topical proposition about 'potential pathways for the field of critical urban studies' (p. 28) in relation to Indigenous, feminist, critical race, post- and settler-colonial theory (p. 188). Slater points to a recent public debate that played out over Twitter, which was, according to Slater, structured around 'those who work with feminist, queer, and postcolonial approaches to urban questions, who argue

that the planetary urbanization thesis does not leave adequate room for equally important considerations of racism, coloniality, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and nationalism' (p. 188).

Slater goes to some lengths to argue that theories such as rent gap theory and concepts such as gentrification have a productive universality even if local conditions and circumstances between, for example, the Global North/South are radically different. Slater writes that the:

challenge is to take [locational diversity] seriously, and if it turns out not to be useful vis-à-vis a certain geographical context or struggle, then it should not be used. But at least from the research that is available, and still emerging, it seems to be the case that rent gap theory has a lot to teach us about gentrification in contexts beyond the [Global] North. (p. 75)

This *universalism* versus *particularity* tension is important, and Slater seems to have a bet each way. Yet, reading this book on Aboriginal Country in Australia – from a site of Aboriginal land ontologies and settler-colonial logics of dispossession – I wonder what it would mean to bring Aboriginal (or other Indigenous) ontologies into this discussion. For example, rent gap theory is built on a notion of land that is conceived in western legal terms, landed property. Aboriginal ontologies of land might productively unsettle the notion of landed property that sits at the bottom of rent gap theory. It is a question that is not addressed in the book, but it is certainly a conversation that the book will prompt.

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