Book Review

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Nik Heynen, Maria Kaika and Erik Swyngedouw (Eds.), *In the nature of cities: urban political ecology and the politics of urban metabolism*, London and New York, Routledge, pp. 271, ISBN 0415368286

In the Nature of Cities is the outcome of an ambitious intellectual project that seeks to understand the urban environment as a result of complex interrelated social-ecological processes. In the first chapter the perspectives and approaches used throughout the book are presented in a ten-point manifesto for Urban Political Ecology (UPE). The reasons for starting with such an explicit manifesto are explained in the foreword to the book. Here, the common-sense separation of society and nature is criticized as a wrongheaded and globally destructive assumption underlying the rationalization and justification of the ongoing exploitation of nature, both human and non-human. In the manifesto, the notion of *metabolism* is introduced as a key to understanding the dynamic internal relationships between humans and nature. According to this notion—actually a translation of the German concept ‘Stoffwechsel’ as used by Marx, and so rooted in Marxist theory—“social relations operate in and through mobilizing the ‘natural’ environment and transform both society and nature.” And “While nature provides the foundation, the dynamics of social relations produce nature’s and society’s history.” Part of the metabolic relation is the *urbanization of nature*, which is the central focus of this book. So, the UPE approach sharply contrasts with approaches that consider urbanization as a process whereby the natural environment is taken over by a built environment.

Related to the concept of metabolism, the concept of *circulation* is presented as a key to understanding the production of urban nature. This term, coined by William Harvey in 1628 to describe how the blood is transported through the vascular system of the human body, became a dominant metaphor after the French revolution: ideas, newspapers, gossip, traffic, air, and power were said to circulate. By the mid 19th century, the circulation of water became a dominant theme among architects and city planners working on behalf of urban

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hygiene. The city was now conceived as a system of conduits. Originally identified with circular movement, circulation has become more and more associated with change, growth and accumulation and thus with the movement of capital, the flow of which is a constant phenomenon in capitalist societies.

The intellectual roots of the UPE approach are to be found in such diverse domains as Marxist urban theory, urban ecology, social ecology, environmental justice theory, and ecological modernization theory. One of the ambitions of the UPE approach is to make nature an integral part of urban theory again. Another important aspect of the approach is its focus on issues of social justice and socio-ecological sustainability. According to the manifesto, “the political program of political ecology is to enhance the democratic content of socio-environmental construction by means of identifying the strategies through which a more equitable distribution of social power and a more inclusive mode of the production of nature can be achieved.”

The book comprises 12 chapters, the first two of which present and discuss the theoretical core of the UPE approach. In the first chapter, the three editors of the book elaborate on the main theoretical perspectives and ambitions of urban political ecology. Erik Swynedouw wrote the second chapter, entitled ‘metabolic urbanization, the making of cyborg cities.’ It goes deeper into the possibilities that metabolism and circulation as a historic-materialist framework offer for understanding the social-ecological dynamics of urbanization. The remaining 10 are case studies, highlighting different aspects and perspectives of the UPE approach. The themes and character of the empirical cases vary widely. For instance, one is an analysis of ‘nature as play’ at Coney Island, New York, at the turn of the 20th century (chapter 5). Another is an analysis of a widespread urban phenomenon, the American lawn, a monosystem that is highly dependent on the use of pesticides and fertilizer inputs. The American lawn is analyzed in terms of a capitalized system that produces a specific kind of person: the lawn-owner and lawn-manager (chapter 7). The range of topics extends from an analysis of the metabolism of ‘obesity-city,’ focusing on flows of fat through bodies, cities and sewers (chapter 9), all the way to urban metabolism as a target of war, sketching a horrifying image of contemporary warfare as ‘forced demodernization.’ Aspects of the first and second Gulf War are compiled in a case study, providing a platform to discuss the terrifying consequences of the purposive devastation of everyday urban infrastructures like electricity and water systems (chapter 12).

Altogether, the 12 chapters give a good impression of what the UPE approach stands for. For those readers who are not well acquainted with critical social theory and historic materialism, the first two chapters in particular will be rather tough going. Readers will have less trouble with the case studies; most of them are relatively well accessible and give clear, though often disconcerting, analyses of the multiple relationships between society and nature. All case studies start with a short discussion of their specific perspective within the UPE approach and finish with conclusions and a reflection. This format contributes to the coherence of the book. For those who are used to thinking about nature as something separate from society, this book can be an eye-opener. Its main strength is in its *critical analysis* of social-ecological relationships rather than in any practical ideas about planning and action regarding ‘urban natures.’ Finally, the book may be considered a welcome and critical contrast to contributions about cities and nature according to the predominant neo-liberal discourse in architecture and spatial planning.

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