



Shaking up the city: Ignorance, inequality, and the urban question, by Tom Slater

Oakland, CA, University of California Press, 2021

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BOOK REVIEW

Shaking up the city: Ignorance, inequality, and the urban question, by Tom Slater, Oakland, CA, University of California Press, 2021

Shaking Up the City is an open invitation for academics to revisit and question some of the prevailing research topics in the urban studies field today. In this book, urban geographer Tom Slater argues that current urban research narratives respond to the interests of political and economic elites, thus eroding the intellectual autonomy in urban studies. In an era of rising pressures on university finances, the flow of funds mediated by political and private interests is shaping scholars' research agendas and promoting policy-driven research. Slater takes a "double-move approach" (p. 185) that combines social and epistemological critique to discuss the covert mechanisms of urban inequality and question how scholars are producing knowledge (or ignorance) about these issues. Lastly, this book criticizes the lack of collective reflection in urban studies and invites scholars to adopt a critical approach examining the links between academic production, funding, politics, and media.

Through a set of case studies, Slater illustrates how politicians and policy experts impose pre-fabricated categories that promote specific policy agendas and do little to effectively address urban inequality. Using examples from Europe, Africa, and North America, Slater effectively supports his criticisms against such categories of research using, for instance, rent gap theory and Marxist theory to explain the political and economic processes that shape urban inequality. Central to Slater's arguments is the work of L  ic Wacquant on neoliberalism, urban inequality, ghettoization, and urban poverty. The author succinctly put all these pieces together to highlight the necessity of unsubordinated and objective research in urban studies.

Slater begins by introducing two concepts that form the basis for his arguments: agnotology and symbolic power. Agnotology—the production of ignorance—is a central lens through which Slater examines the methods and strategies of actors like politicians and organizations to produce misinformation. Additionally, the author uses Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power to highlight the symbolic structures of institutional arrangements that legitimize specific visions of urban development and perpetuate unequal social relations. Thus, Slater reviews how actors with symbolic power disseminate misinformation about urban resilience, gentrification, rent control, neighborhood effects, and territorial stigmatization to deviate conversations from the real causes of urban inequality.

In Chapter 2, Slater illustrates how the problem of urban agnotology emerges in research about urban resilience. Using the 2018 Cape Town water crisis as a case study, the author argues that urban resilience is a regressive concept that makes people responsible for surviving challenging situations created by an oppressive neoliberal system that only benefits the market. According to Slater, neoliberal theorists and politicians have used urban resilience to make people tolerant of miserable situations by resorting to their heroism while hiding government and the market's responsibility for creating those situations.

Chapter 3 examines research on gentrification and criticizes the false dichotomy between prosperity and urban decline that gentrification, as a concept, has created for policymakers and urbanists. Slater explains that the consensus among politicians is that gentrification (prosperity) is beneficial for cities because it prevents neighborhoods from deteriorating, thanks to new investments that improve their quality. Rent gap theory, however, helps demonstrate that gentrification, in fact, requires capital depreciation through disinvestment in deprived neighborhoods and territorial stigmatization to create opportunities for investors to redevelop cheap properties and earn the highest possible returns. Besides, the agnotology of gentrification ignores the trauma of displacement and the pervasive consequences of predatory capitalist urbanism while publicizing false benefits.

In Chapter 4, Slater scrutinizes the arguments against rent control as a tool to provide affordable housing in cities. He explains that rent control agnotology focuses on the tripartite view that such controls will damage the housing market's quality, supply, and efficiency, negatively affecting low-income people. Nevertheless, evidence from France, the United Kingdom, and the United States indicates that those claims are wrong. Rent control agnotology also conceals the neoliberal interest of reducing restrictions in housing markets to allow developers to build more. Slater encourages researchers and policymakers to focus on making housing policies a tool for achieving housing justice and defending low-income residents from the exploitation of landowners, rather than discussing rent controls' merits based, primarily, on the concept of economic efficiency.

The book also presents a critique of the literature on neighborhood effects. According to Slater, the "places shape our lives" (p. 116) thesis is misleading and never questions the underlying factors that exacerbate urban inequality. Nevertheless, such a thesis is widely accepted and repeated among researchers and policymakers who pay full attention to neighborhoods as the problem, and not as the materialization, of structural issues. As a result, we end up in a "tautological urbanism" (p. 132)—that is, all scholars repeating the same conclusions in different publications, even though they do not find strong evidence that neighborhood effects matter. Slater's argument is provocative because, in the absence of convincing evidence, it invites scholars to approach inequality in cities from a different perspective: blaming the system, not the place, for determining people's life chances.

The activation of territorial stigmatization and "ghettoization" as state instruments that illustrate the interplay between agnotology and symbolic power are the main topics of chapters 6 and 7. The author reviews how powerful groups in the United Kingdom readopted the *sink estate* term, first used by journalists in the late 1970s, in their attempt to dismantle social housing programs. Think tanks and political leaders in the United Kingdom used this term between 2012 and 2016 to spread the vision that social housing projects create pockets of urban poverty and, therefore, propose their demolition. Slater adds that the activation of territorial stigmatization has allowed governments to reduce the welfare state by implementing regressive policies that blame low-income populations for their living conditions. Similarly, Slater explains how *ghetto* as a term has been deployed as an instrument of ethno-racial control in Europe since the 1990s when, in reality, it has been a protective and integrative device for the oppressed. In a call that I find appealing and necessary, these chapters advocate for a critical approach toward some concepts in urban research that have been intentionally misused by powerful political and economic groups with negative consequences for marginalized communities.

To summarize, Tom Slater makes a thorough and thoughtful critique of some of the dominant narratives in urban research today. The author urges scholars to discuss the structural mechanisms perpetuating inequality in cities with "epistemic reflexivity" (p. 194) instead of accepting imposed research agendas. This book is suitable for academics and graduate students working on issues related to urban inequality, gentrification, neoliberal urbanism, rent control, and residential segregation. The predominance of a North-centric vision, however, is a weakness in this book, considering that multiple urban development narratives, like resilience and urban renewal, have been implemented in developing countries without question. Slater's interpretation of agnotology and symbolic power can inform future research about the role of actors in the movement of ideas from developed regions, i.e., Europe and North America, to developing areas, such as Africa and Latin America. Preserving the autonomy of urban research is critical for challenging the political and economic structures that sustain rampant urban inequality.

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