

The Ecological Imperative of Urban Cultural Studies

Matthew Feinberg and Susan Larson

The volume, *Ethics of Life: Contemporary Iberian Debates*, considers what the editors Katarzyna Beilin and William Viestenz have referred to as the “Ethics of Life” in contemporary Spain. As Beilin argues in her introduction, the term “life” does not encompass human experience exclusively, but refers more broadly to the many interconnected relationships between the human and the non-human that make up “life” on this planet. Within the framework of this broader definition, the essays in this volume have used a range of approaches to examine the intersection of human culture with the biological and ecological. Taken as a whole, this collection of essays contributes to the re-contextualizing of humanistic inquiry that has come to be known as the post-humanities, avenues of investigation often derived from the theoretical framework of Actor-Network Theory. Post-humanism has been a productive means for deconstructing an Anglo-European tradition that posits the natural world as separate and inert, awaiting human intervention, and, more often than not, exploitation. Therefore, this volume’s call to study the ethics of life in contemporary Spain has not only been an opportunity to find points of intersection between literary studies and the life sciences, but also an endeavor to question the disciplinary silos of knowledge that oftentimes structure the modern university.

While the focus on environmental degradation found in many of the essays in this volume is, of course, of great interest and concern to us, the argument that we make in our contribution to this volume does not comment directly on the ethical concerns that emerge from the objectification and exploitation of the natural world. Rather, we focus on how biological and ecological processes can be used to understand the production of culture within an urban context. That is, we consider how the production of culture in cities should be understood within material, biological, and social circumstances. This “cultural ecology” paradigm has been a productive one for us as we look for ways to understand how cities are made, produced, and consumed. In our essay, we look at a number of ideas about recycling and

trash from Spanish philosopher José Luis Pardo as well as architectural theorists Iñaki Ábalos and Juan Herreros, among others, that see the refuse of the city—spaces that private, semi-public or public capital has destroyed or abandoned—as opportunities for the re-valuation of capital (both material and human). These thinkers believe that the important binary that must be undone in order for Spain to emerge from its current dependence on investment capital is not the division between the biologically human and non-human (a position espoused by many of our colleagues in this issue such as Beilin and Suryanarayanan, Prádanos, Ares López and Beusterien), but rather a new vision of recycling and trash that undermines capitalist discourses that delineate urban space and people strictly as (financially) productive or non-productive. These new ways of understanding the city have enabled citizens to re-use existing resources and derelict urban spaces in ways that disrupt the definitions of ‘refuse,’ ‘urban,’ and the ‘natural.’ Relying on models of participatory urbanism similar to those taking place in post-crisis Madrid, like those discussed in our essay, citizens of twenty-first century cities across the globe are currently using city space in innovative ways to produce food, art, and civic culture outside of the limits of financial capital. These new modes of producing the city require new terms that not only describe urban culture beyond the discourse of neo-liberal capitalism, but also engage with its dominance as the structuring ideology for how cities are understood.

Our privileging of space and how it orders the relationship of the human and the natural has its base in a number of phenomenological concerns that philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty famously articulated in works like *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968). For Merleau-Ponty, the mind-body rupture that he and other phenomenologists saw as underpinning Western philosophy since the time of Descartes was particularly problematic. The mind, he suggests, is not contained in the shell of the body, but rather the mind is the body. When we use our sense of touch it is not our hand that is interacting with the world while our mind contemplates it, but rather it is our mind at our fingertips. Merleau-Ponty’s work has informed contemporary ecocriticism because the corollary to the undoing of the mind-body split implies that we are not merely inserted into the world as discrete objects, separate from the world around us. Rather, we are always enmeshed in a shared realm that Merleau-Ponty calls the “flesh” (135) in which “my eyes which see, my hands which touch, can also be seen and touched” (123). Likewise, the work of Henri Lefebvre, especially in his 1992 book, *Rhythmanalysis* (considered to be the fourth volume of his series *The Critique of Everyday Life*), offers another model of how our physical relationship with the world is also caught up in material and cultural contexts through the bodily experience of our surroundings. These and a number of more contemporary approaches offer us a way of contemplating

biopolitics while thinking about the production of culture within place and space. Along with many of our fellow contributors, we argue that to make the humanities more engaged with these biological (and implicitly ecological) contexts it is necessary to make place and space central to what we do as humanists—to bring forth the setting of human endeavor not as backdrop but as instrumental to the very way that we conceive of ourselves and our relationships.

Michael Callon and Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and the closely associated transdisciplinary initiatives coming out of New Materialism have also been an important impetus for thinking of culture as resulting from the interconnection of the human and non-human worlds. While this perspective has its merits, the dismissal of the power differentials inherent in capital and the lack of attention to the social production of space within the framework of ANT make it entirely incompatible with the approach that we take here. For Callon and Latour, humanity is not discrete and distinct from its environment, but constantly intertwined with it in what Latour calls a “network with no a priori order relation; it is not tied to an axiological myth of a top and of a bottom of society; it makes absolutely no assumption whether a specific locus is macro- or micro- and does not modify the tools to study the element ‘a’ or the element ‘b’” (5). For Latour, nothing exists outside of the material-semiotic network, where human and non-human actors exist by virtue of their relationships to one another. Actor-Network Theory posits that there is no difference in the ability of technology, humans, animals, or other non-humans to act within the network because any differences between them are produced within the network and cannot be presupposed. This inattention to power differentials and agency makes ANT entirely incompatible with our research here that connects the human to the non-human in the context of the urban environment because the urban cannot be understood outside of the flow of urban capital.

This incompatibility is compounded by our understanding of place as central to political economy—that is, in its most basic sense, the notion that the production, consumption, and distribution of goods and services are processes that are always geographically situated. For this reason, the concerns voiced by many of the contributors to this volume regarding the rising hegemony of neoliberalism across the spectrum of daily life—a system of political economy that sees people, places, and experiences as always ripe for monetization—are consistent, compatible, and well articulated. We find these connections particularly resonant with our work on urban culture because underpinning this neoliberal ethos is what David Harvey has called “the urbanization of capital,” a process by which the urban terrain becomes a refuge of capital markets and an instrument for the system of flexible accumulation associated with financial capitalism. As Harvey has suggested—building on the philosophy of Henri Lefebvre—the

urban is not a place, but rather a process. For materialist geographers like Harvey and others, this perpetual process of construction and destruction, of investment and disinvestment is central to capitalism. Our research assumes that in order to critique neoliberalism it is not enough to analyze the semiotics of an ideology with no basis in the material world—one must engage directly with the very material processes taking place across the landscape. Because these processes are rooted in politically motivated power differentials, they bear close attention before we can find ways of dismantling them.

These spatial and material arguments are at the heart of our contribution to this volume. Although we are aware that our position may seem paradoxical given that cultural production has begun to appear ever more “place-less” in what Manuel Castells and others have described as our “networked society,” we believe that place continues to be as important as ever. In an era of digitalization, the production of literature and other forms of cultural expression can appear to be increasingly more ephemeral. Indeed, even our material engagement with data storage has become far removed from tactile experience. Gone are the days of various sizes of floppy disks, of compact discs, and even the flash drive. Everything is “out there” on the Cloud. Yet, significantly, this tertiarization of the economy, of our data, of our lives, is always still material. For geographers Erik Swyngedouw, Nik Heynen, and Maria Kaika this seemingly ephemeral world requires an ever more materialist political ecology. They see the overlapping, intersecting, and co-producing processes taking place between the biological and climatological world as key components of the material conditions of human and non-humans alike. The authors point to the malaria outbreak that occurred in Indonesia after construction projects, abandoned after the economic collapse of 1997, were subsequently filled with standing water caused by heavy rains from the *El Niño* weather phenomenon (Heynen et. al 1). We might also think of the alligators that appeared in the cooling ponds at one of Google’s data centers in South Carolina that were attracted to the abundant fish feeding on the algae blooms in the warm water (McMillan “Google Server . . .”). In the first case, the seemingly immaterial world of global finance driven by the clicks of a mouse (or even automatically possibly) not only gets expressed materially across Jakarta’s urban landscape in the form of half-finished buildings, but also in clouds of infected mosquitoes—an occurrence that gives new meaning to the idea of global financial ecology. In the second case, the actual physical objects that make up the seemingly ephemeral “Cloud”—the data servers—are fully interwoven into the ecology in which they are placed. While the swampy lagoons of a server farm may seem far removed from the hustle and bustle that we associate with the urban, it is important to understand how these very “natural” spaces are very much a part of a global urban metabolism. As

Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid have pointed out, it is important to stop thinking about cities along the urban/rural divide or as discrete, distinct, and territorially bounded units. It is only by paying attention to the wider urban *processes* of both concentration and extension by which modern capitalism is produced that we might begin to actually develop a more global and more ecologically-aware scale.

Attention to the intertwining of the digital, the material, and the cultural is ever more pressing as the post-Fordist economy continues to transform the world socially, culturally, and ecologically. This is particularly true as contemporary cities rely more and more on what Sharon Zukin has called the “symbolic economy” in which cities compete globally to attract tourists and investment dollars. It is an approach to urban production that requires cities to distinguish themselves as culturally unique from one another, a task that requires not only a robust cultural industry (art districts, high-profile museums, “foodie” culture, etc.), but also the related—often internet-based—“critical infrastructure” of critics, blogs, apps, twitter-feeds, and the like that help to create the “cultural capital” (to use Pierre Bourdieu’s term) that underpins the extraction of value taking place in many of the cities where we live. For city planners and government officials, these strategies are almost always intertwined with efforts to both attract capital investment and cultivate an innovative start-up economy. A prime example of this strategic relationship between cultural production, finance, and the creative economy in Madrid is the Casa Encendida, a cultural center in the city’s iconic Lavapiés neighborhood, whose main principles listed on their Web page are “Solidarity, the Environment, Culture and Education.” Notably, the cultural center is underwritten by Caja Madrid, one of the “too big to fail” banks responsible for the economic crisis of 2008. Connections like these underlie the intimate relationship between cultural production and urban entrepreneurship—the darlings of neoliberalism. With urban cultural studies as our point of departure, we assume, therefore, that both the “urban” and “culture” have become central to the strategies for the symbolic and physical development of cities that have become so pervasive in the twenty-first century.

Of course, because these strategies of global capital are often based in the cultivation of the arts and a certain neo-bohemian aesthetic, they are oftentimes insulated from critique. For this reason, we continue to believe that where we need to focus our energies as scholars is on the role of culture in the production of the urban as a physical setting and as a way of being. It is the place not only where culture and capital meet, but one of the reasons why the exploitation of the natural environment occurs—that is, urban growth and development and the ever increasing scope of the consumer economy have deleterious environmental impacts. Today, given our current ecological crisis, a heightened attention to the production of culture in cities

requires that we also consider the production of materials—the water, fuel, concrete, cobalt, titanium, copper, and other resources—needed to sustain the flows of capital and cultural in our burgeoning cities.

Spain is, of course, a particularly compelling site that demands new and up-to-date concepts of the urban because of the dramatic effects that neoliberal policies have had in shaping the physical environment in its largest cities as well as along its coastline. Because so much of Spain's economic crisis resulted from an intertwining of Spain's construction industry, the real estate market, and global finance, Spain offers a particularly important place to see how financial transactions in London and New York actually play out in the physical terrain of the city, with no effect more dramatic, perhaps, than the regularity with which indebted homeowners have been physically dragged from their homes. It is yet another example of the way that the seemingly immateriality of capital markets are enacted on the bodies of urban citizens. As we write this response in July of 2015, two years after we wrote the original essay for the *Ethics of Life* volume, the rise of Podemos and the election of Leftist mayors Manuela Carmona and Ada Colau in Madrid and Barcelona in May of 2015 were the results of the political legacy of the 15M or Indignados movement that began in 2011. It is a sea change in Spain's urban politics with the potential to rewrite nearly twenty years of urban legislation that handed the city over to banks and investment capital. It is the hope of many in Spain and beyond that all of the work that has taken place in the plazas, all of the latent gardens planted in those vacant lots left behind by the crisis, have finally begun to blossom. It remains to be seen if the fruits of those efforts might be cities whose cultural ecologies are more socially just, more ethical, and more habitable for Spain's citizens.

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