

The hidden history that winds through every city
Critical Urban Studies, Social Movements, and Radical Transformation
 Giacomo Pozzi in conversation with David Madden

Aim of this special issue of *Tracce Urbane* is to stimulate an exploration of the historical, political, social, and intellectual reasons that brought to a peculiar and, in a way, ambiguous field of knowledge: that of critical urban studies. David Madden, Professor in Sociology at the London School of Economics and Political Science, Co-Director of the Cities Programme, and co-author, with Peter Marcuse, of *In Defense of Housing: The politics of crisis* (Verso, 2016), whose Italian edition is forthcoming (by Barbara Pizzo for Edit Press), has been invited to discuss the complex social arena in which critical urban studies stands, reflects, and acts. In the conversation that follows, Madden explores some fundamental topics related to the production of this specific academic knowledge, such as the 'canonlessness' that characterizes urban studies, the emphasis on intervention and radical transformation that inhabits critical urban studies, the utopian dimension of this tradition of study, the heterogeneous genealogies that should be considered when approaching this discipline, the necessity of listening and considering the social sources of critique that rise in every neighbourhood or city around the globe, the future of critical urban studies and its relation with urban struggle, the way in which social movements contribute to its development, the role of academics in promoting social changes, his personal commitment in defense of housing as a space for inhabitants. In his words we can find a first answer to Saskia Sassen's argument that «spaces of the expelled cry out for conceptual recognition» (Sassen, 2014: p. 222). According to Madden, this recognition cannot be only conceptual. It must be grounded, it must be critical, it must be radical.

Giacomo Pozzi (GP): *Urban studies in Italy represents a peculiar field of knowledge. Differently from other contexts, such as the USA and the UK, urban studies is not recognized formally as academic field. At the same time, scholars related to different disciplines work and recognize themselves in this discipline. In England – where you work – urban studies received a formal and academic recognition, but the 'path of recognition' that conduced*

to that point is not well known. Which were the main stages of this process?

David Madden (DM): In the United Kingdom, urban studies is, as you point out, partially recognised as an academic field, but this process is actually far from complete. There are some departments and institutes specifically oriented towards urban studies as an academic space. But even compared to the United States, in the UK there are fewer degree programs in urban studies specifically. Most of the urban-focussed undergraduate and graduate programs are oriented towards professional accreditation in architecture or planning, rather than academic urban studies or critical urban studies specifically. So, as a field, urban studies has perhaps not gone as far down the 'path of recognition' as it might seem. It's quite fragmented. It's true that there are a lot of urban studies journals and conferences based or centred in the UK, but these remain, strictly speaking, interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary, spanning different areas of geography, sociology, politics, architecture, planning, design, and other academic and practice-oriented fields. There isn't really a unified discipline of urban studies. There's certainly no canon. It's not as if everyone who studies anything urban is required to read Henri Lefebvre or Saskia Sassen the way that every sociologist is required to read Karl Marx or Pierre Bourdieu. This fragmentation does have some negative consequences. Since the field is not held together by any one body of knowledge, it's possible, for example, to study architecture and never encounter critical urban sociology, or to study planning and not engage with urban social movements. But fragmentation and 'canonlessness' also have advantages. Urban studies as an interdisciplinary field is attuned to many different political and theoretical currents, so it is constantly changing and grappling with new problems and struggles. A lot of concepts and debates in the past few years in urban studies have really been shaped by its interdisciplinary nature. Fragmentation also means that no one is guarding the disciplinary boundary. No work is ever dismissed as 'not being real urban studies,' whereas that kind of dismissal does happen all the time with established disciplines. There's no ideology of the discipline, and nothing to be gained by policing its borders. I think that this is, on balance, a positive thing for urban research and theory.

GP: *With no formal recognition of the discipline, in Italy urban studies – and critical urban studies in particular – seems to represent the meeting space of approaches often consider far from each other: the analytic one (from geography to sociology and anthropology) and the normative one (from planning to political economy to administration science). This distance is partially exceeded, first of all, by the communal intention of intervening in reality, considering not sufficient to improve – even if with raffinate methods – the analysis level. A praxis seems to be always interconnected with the analytical work. Do you agree with this definition of critical urban studies?*

DM: I think critical urban studies is marked by a very productive tension between two tendencies that might appear to be opposed but which really are two sides of the same idea. On the one hand, there is an emphasis on intervention. From planning, urban studies in general has inherited a direct interface with policy and design. And from critical theory, critical urban studies has inherited a strong suspicion of any attempt to separate theory from practice. The two are inherently linked, meaning both that theory needs to be in touch with radical practices and vice versa, and that urban social movements themselves generate their own theoretical perspectives and directions that scholars need to engage with. If being critical for critical urban studies means anything, it means taking seriously the idea that ‘the point is to change it’. Urban studies as a broader collection of research, theory and methods might be happy merely interpreting the urban world, but specifically *critical* urban studies always tries to stay in touch with the goal of the radical transformation. So, the core of critical urban studies is the imperative to contest, and attempt to change, capitalist urbanisation. On the other hand, it is not as if this means that everything in critical urban studies needs to be single-mindedly practical and applied. The tradition of critical urban studies has a utopian dimension that is also important – utopian not in the sense of dreaming up fantasy worlds, but utopian in the sense of imagining alternatives. Ten years ago, Neil Brenner argued that critical urban theory is distinguished, among other things, by its emphasis on «the disjuncture between the actual and the possible». The real potential for urban change is always present, but it is suppressed by the classes and institutions that profit from and govern

capitalist urbanisation. Uncovering, imagining and agitating for this potential is important theoretical and practical work. One of the tasks of critical urban studies is to engage with these 'real utopias' that capitalist urbanisation simultaneously makes possible and blocks.

GP: *Setting aside for a moment the formal recognition of the discipline, we believe that – in a global perspective – critical urban studies represents the product of a 'hidden history'. A history made of exchanges, hybridizations, connections, inspirations between different disciplines in different times and spaces, founded on circulation of knowledges that oversteps disciplinary barriers and academic categories. A history that we need to write down, starting with an identification of a genealogy. In this regard, we would like to invite you to reflect with us in the identification of the cornerstones of this field of knowledge. How far can we go in this archival analysis? What is the 'past line' that we should identify? Should this analysis be extremely localized or global?*

DM: Critical urban studies as an academic practice has certainly developed around some intellectual touchstones, and it emerged from a broad anti-capitalist intellectual culture. But there really is no singular urban genealogy to trace. There is, instead, a multiverse of different radical urban traditions and discussions. It is true that urban studies in Anglophone contexts has centred upon people like David Harvey, Saskia Sassen or Doreen Massey, and usually in translation Friedrich Engels, Henri Lefebvre, and Walter Benjamin, but work in other languages and contexts has other scholarly touchstones. So, I'm reluctant to say that there's any single 'past line' that critical urban scholars should look to. Rather, I think it's more important to think about the social sources of critique, which is to say, urban politics itself. In any city, neighbourhood or other urban site where you have contestation and conflict, you can find critical urban thought. It may not always be generated in a specifically academic or theoretical form. It might be in the form of a manifesto, or a rallying cry, or materials produced as part of a specific campaign. But part of struggling to change a neighbourhood or a housing system or a city entails understanding why and how one's neighbourhood or housing system, or city is the way that it is. If you look at the

rhetoric of housing movements or other urban mobilisations, it's clear that there's a real dialogue between movements and critical scholars. One clear example is the way that the phrase 'the right to the city' has moved back and forth between academic and activist contexts. So, I think we should avoid thinking there's one global history of urban critique. But it would also be a mistake to see these critical urban knowledges as inherently localised, because they are often put into dialogue, by activists and city-dwellers themselves, with other forms of knowledge in order to understand enduring and expanding urban patterns and not see everything as idiosyncratic, singular situations.

GP: *In the genealogical exercise we proposed earlier, which are in your view the main works and scholars that still have a great influence, maybe hidden, in the contemporary critical urban studies?*

DM: I don't think it really makes sense to talk about works that have had a strong but hidden influence, but we can point to scholarly works that are currently semi-marginalised within urban studies that are likely to become more central widely read in the near future. The scholarly discussions and concepts that will have a rising influence on urban studies are the ones that speak to contemporary political predicaments. It seems likely, for example, that the global anti-racist uprisings that have emerged following the murder of George Floyd will lead to a closer engagement between critical urban studies and radical Black and anti-colonial thought. Currently, not every urban studies syllabus includes people like W. E. B. du Bois or Frantz Fanon. But du Bois was one of the pioneers of urban social science, and Fanon had a sharp critique of colonial urbanism. This work is going to seem increasingly relevant. Similarly, work by contemporary post-colonial and radical Black scholars like Achille Mbembe or Angela Davis is not always read by urban scholars but is likely to become much more commonly cited. These uprisings are deeply urban in many ways, and making sense of them requires an analysis of urbanisation as well as of racialised inequality and the afterlife of colonialism. Other contemporary crises will bring their own theoretical currents to the fore. As struggles over social reproduction intensify, theorists like Silvia Federici and Nancy Fraser and others

writing about capitalism's crisis of care are going to become increasingly common citations in urban studies. There are also really interesting intersections happening between urban studies and radical ecology, and with critical technology studies.

GP: *I believe that in this hypothetical genealogy we should concentrate not only on the academic production, but we should try to expand our look to social movements, workers' union, collective struggles, urban associations, and so on that certainly contributed to the critical analysis of urban context. Historically, what role do you think these experiences have had in this path?*

DM: The knowledge produced by activists, workers, organisers, inhabitants, and movements have long been central to shaping critical urban studies. Critical urbanists have often studied social movements, frequently engaged with their concerns, and sometimes participated in them. We can see a number of different, overlapping ways in which movements have contributed to critical urban studies. Sometimes social movements provide the perspectives and concepts that scholars pick up. A lot of times critical scholars adopt frames from social movements, such as with writing about issues like housing inequality, environmental injustice, or police brutality. Other times scholars coin terms that themselves become part of the social movement lexicon and are no longer tied to academic usage. The concept of gentrification itself might be the best example of that. It was coined by Ruth Glass, a Marxist geographer, but adopted, altered and extended by social movements themselves in many different urban contexts. Obviously, social movements are diverse and can pursue a number of different, sometimes conflicting goals, so here it's also good to avoid generalisation. But it's probably the case that any academic critique that's completely out of touch with social movements and concrete urban struggles is likely to miss its target.

GP: *Through your works, it is very clear that you consider urban studies – mainly from an epistemological point of view, but not only – as deeply and intimately political. As you wrote, «There is a politics of urban knowledge because urban knowledge is political». Urban studies – and critical urban studies in particular – are now facing many challenges, related to the different ways*

in which cities are acquiring more and more centrality in the global economy. In this sense, critical urban studies seem to have – dialectically – more and more responsibility not only in analyzing the logics of this wider urbanization process, but also in the possibility of intervening for promoting most livable cities. In which way critical urban studies and urban studies in general could interact with politics?

DM: I think academic urban studies exists in a kind of critical ecosystem. Academics work on urban problems in specific ways, and there are almost always activists, planners, organisers, designers, officials, and others working on similar problems in other specific ways. So, the question is how politically-engaged academics should relate to everyone else. I don't think academics need to become planners or organisers. But they should try to use their place within this ecosystem to help facilitate social change. This can happen in many different ways. I don't think academics should try on their own to intervene in urban contexts, because anyone who does intervene needs to work in concert with others. They shouldn't try to 'take power' directly, because that would be presumptuous and anti-democratic. But as I said above, contributing to the broader process of intervening upon, reshaping, and transforming urban space has always been central to the critical urban venture. Critical urban scholars should participate with others in on-going processes of trying to emancipate, democratise and decommodify urban space. By the same token, what they resist is important as what they embrace, so they should also participate in on-going efforts to resist making urban space more oppressive, stratified, and unequal. These are struggles that run through academia as well as the broader political life of the city.

GP: *Within the next months, in Italy will be published the Italian translation of your and Peter Marcuse's suggestive book In defense of housing, edited by Verso in 2016. We consider this book one of the most important reference and cornerstone of critical urban studies in the last years. You and Marcuse demonstrated the Marxist analysis is very useful to understand housing issues in wealthy countries in the 21st century. You connected chronicles of the beginning of the 20th century (such as the rent strike in Glasgow in 1915) with actions of contemporary social*

movements for the right to adequate housing, showing the long wave of capitalistic predatory logics, as Sassen would say. In this sense, your book is already a 'classic' of the Marxist current. Nevertheless, as we said in the previous questions, we are deeply interested in the 'hidden history' of critical urban studies. Is there any covert reference in your work, some author or book that inspired you?

DM: We use terms like 'the commodification of housing' and 'residential alienation', so I think our influences are pretty overt. We start from a position developed with reference to Engels and Lefebvre, and from there we try to build a critique of the commodification, financialisation and precarisation of contemporary housing. But we quote a range of critical voices on housing, including scholars like Iris Marion Young and bell hooks as well as activist groups like Abahlali baseMjondolo and the Movement for Justice in El Barrio. We wanted to connect older political projects like Red Vienna and "The Coops" in the Bronx with today's struggles around the world. And we wanted to produce a book that would not only speak to academics, but also to anyone involved with housing politics. If we engage with a hidden history, it's a history that winds through every city: the history of struggles over who and what housing is for. Our agenda is to defend the role of housing as a space for inhabitants, against those who seek to use it as a vehicle for capital accumulation or a tool for political control. What's hidden is the fact that the financialisation and hyper-commodification of housing are recent, unstable and changeable processes. In the book, most of our examples are from New York City, but it is possible to uncover histories of residential contestation and struggle in any place. That is the hidden history we try to uncover. We hope the readers of our book will also be inspired to help uncover this history, and to participate in it.

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