



**Ross E. Adams**, *Circulation and Urbanization*, London: Sage, 2018. ISBN: 9781473963306 (cloth); ISBN: 9781473963313 (paper); ISBN: 9781526415219 (ebook)

There is a curious character to urban studies. Unlike its cognate disciplines – geography, anthropology, sociology – it has been slow to seriously interrogate its terrain, or unit, of analysis. While ceaseless hand-wringing persists in those cognate fields regarding the nature of “space”, “culture”, and the “social”, much less has been made by urbanists as to what, both historically and conceptually, constitutes the “urban”. There are exceptions, of course. To those familiar with writing on the “urban question” – that is, with debates regarding the spatiality and particularity of the urban form under distinct historical (capitalist) conditions (Brenner 2000) – names like Lefebvre, Castells, Merrifield, and Brenner will immediately spring to mind. Readers of *Antipode* will likely recall, for instance, “Castells’ attempt to spatialize Althusserian structuralism” through an understanding of “geographical scales as spatial expressions of social functions” (Brenner 2019: 93); and, they will be familiar with Lefebvre’s understanding of the urban as “an intermediate level of totality” that mediates both the “macro level” and the “contradictory level of everyday life” (Kipfer et al. 2013: 124). And yet, it seems fair to say that this exceptional literature only proves the rule; and, even in light of that scholarship, key questions remain unsettled and hotly contested. These include: What, if anything, constitutes the *urban itself*, beyond its positionality under particular capitalist conditions? What is the relationship between the urban and the city? And, how, if at all, can we theorize and describe the urban beyond simple gestures toward the “unendingly multifarious” character of urban life (p.8)? In *Circulation and Urbanization*, Ross Exo Adams asks – and provocatively answers – each of these questions and many more.

In Adams’ capable hands, the urban is no longer a “transhistorical background condition”, nor is it “rendered as a category made legible by purely empirical knowledge” (p.5). Rather, it is positioned as a “historically situated spatio-political order in its own right – a

modern spatiality that first became legible and reproducible in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Europe, but whose genealogy spans centuries-old figures and disparate world spaces” (p.3). That’s a mouthful, to be sure. But Adams does well to explicate this point throughout his text, re-articulating it in a number of ways. As an organizing device, he primarily situates his thesis on the historical emergence of the urban in relation to the work of 19<sup>th</sup> century Spanish urban planner Ildefonso Cerdá, the author of *Teoría general de la urbanización*, published in 1867. Cerdá, who is credited with coining the neologism “*urbanización*”, may not have “invented” the notion of the urban, but he is read by Adams as representing in many ways that new spatiality as it came into being. Put differently, he is read as providing a “concise diagram” of an emerging spatial order (p.11).

In reading Cerdá, Adams finds that the urban “cohered” and operated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a way of thinking and implementing a scaleless “machine of governance” – “the materialization of a uniform grid of governmentally managed processes of production and reproduction” (p.25). Unlike the historical European city – with its fortified boundaries – the urban was an apparatus for a “specifically modern form of administrative governance over a population that makes sovereignty at once invisible and totalizing” (p.191). Key to the emergence of the urban was the transposition of ideas regarding circulation and power – which prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century were largely restricted to European theorizations on state space or “territory” – to this new scale of intervention and analysis. Put differently, Adams argues that ideals of circulation, which would come to define the urban, were first deployed in the historical construction of state territory. Thus, as a principle for biopolitical governance, circulation “must be seen ... as an idea adopted into the thinking of the city at a certain point in time” (p.10), and only later adopted into emergent conceptualizations of the urban.

To show how the idea of circulation entered into the city – and, eventually, shaped the idea of an ever-expanding urban – Adams traces its longer political history. Needless to say, the political history of circulation is a complex one. In this undertaking Adams weaves together a

*longue durée* story, bridging ancient theorizations of circularity, “in which the circle gave visibility to divine ... natural orders” (p.11), to the colonization of the New World and the appearance of space “itself as an infinitely empty terrain available to the needs of political calculus” (p.110). In fact, Adams makes much of the New World “encounter” and its role in the development of ideals of urban circulation. He argues that centuries before the city “became territorial” in Europe, we find a “proto-territorial” imperative in colonial American planning, which was premised on the racialized idea of homogeneous, “empty” space (p.202). The urban in Europe would later come to reflect this same epistemology, as it transcended “oppositions” of “interior/exterior, territory/city, nature/artifice, land/sea, etc”. (p.186). Put more succinctly, the colonial New World operated as a space in which administrative, biopolitical rationales could be deployed despite their *not yet* being sensible in Europe.

In spite of its historical orientation and focus, there is no doubt that Adams’ account bears the mark of contemporary debates regarding our so-called “urban age”. More specifically, the specter of what Neil Brenner and his collaborators have called “planetary urbanization” looms (Brenner and Schmid 2014), even if Brenner himself is only directly cited once (p.7). For instance, we are told that Cerdá – standing in for a broader 19<sup>th</sup> century paradigm shift – desired for the urban to operate as a system of circulation “at the *scale of the planet*” (p.204, emphasis added); as such, Adams understands the urban as a “scaleless meta-apparatus spanning from the body to the planetary” (p.14). And yet, it is important that we read *Circulation and Urbanization* as a sympathetic critique of writing on planetary urbanization, rather than as a historically informed endorsement. Adams seeks to depart from Brenner and his collaborators by rejecting (their purported) understanding of urbanization as a “world-encompassing organization of space ordered *principally by the dictates of capital*” (Adams 2014, emphasis added). For Adams, the emergence of the urban is decidedly not reducible to the history of capitalism – even if capital’s circulatory logics are a necessary part of the story. The emergence of the urban, as a fundamentally biopolitical technology that encloses “all of society” (p.63), is “more than simply

a reflection of ... [the emergent liberal nation-state] or the product of the capitalist relations it fostered”; rather, it is an “instrument of both – at once means and ends” (p.3).

With this in mind, I want to suggest that we can also productively situate Adams’ contribution in relation to a somewhat unexpected literature. Rather than solely situating his work in dialogue with the aforementioned debates on the urban question – and/or in reference to the ever-growing literatures on urban infrastructure, mobility, and the “circulation and metabolism of physical, chemical, or biological components” (Heynen et al. 2006: 12) – future research on the urban would do well to consider it in relation to work on the totalizing political economy of *racial* capitalism.

There are two distinct reasons for making that move. The first has to do with Adams’ concern for the historical linkage between biopolitics and circulation. As has been demonstrated, Adams is at pains to draw out the relationship between ideals of circulation, biopower, and the birth of territory and the urban. Several scholars working broadly on the topic of racial capitalism have pursued a similar line of inquiry – albeit in a different register. They have asked how the liberal-capitalist notion of “infinite exchange” – and, we might say, infinite circulation – has interacted historically with the distinctly modern “declensions” of racialized “humanity and subhumanity” (Barrett 2014: 12). One avenue, therefore, for future research on the urban is the relationship between Adams’ understanding of the spatialization of this circulatory “immunitary paradigm” (p.64), and blackness as a condition of possibility for circulation and the realization of value. Such an exploration would ideally attend closely to blackness as a structural feature of capitalism, which both makes possible (in theory) and radically undermines (in practice) the ideology of “infinite circulation”. That is, it would ideally extend insights regarding the tension between the “universalist” ideology of capitalism, and its simultaneous reliance on forms of “racism-sexism”, which serve “to structure the majority of the work force” and exclude some from the category of the personhood itself (Wallerstein 2011: 35).

In this sense, recent work like Jackie Wang's *Carceral Capitalism* (2018) unexpectedly functions as a useful companion piece to *Circulation and Urbanization*, insofar as it sketches out the ways in which the expropriative dimension of capital accumulation produces a geography of racialized urban *containment and immobilization*; for Wang, forms of immobilization are integral to contemporary racial capitalism and the "racial kapitalistate". Of course, any number of other studies are relevant here as well, from Ruth Wilson Gilmore's (2017) work on the contemporary role of "enforced inactivity" in the "circulation of money on rapid cycles", to Fanon's (2004) work on the relationship between the "economic infrastructure" and the "superstructure" in the colony. Situating this literature in relation to *Circulation and Urbanization* should go a long way [i] in addressing Adams' lack of attentiveness to racial capitalism as a broader "context of context", and [ii] in positioning urban circulation and mobility as dialectically bound to racialized forms of immobility.

The second reason to raise the literature on racial capitalism in relation to Adams' account is related to his enduring concern with totality, and his claim that the urban is a totalizing, planet encircling "space-process" (p.186). While several urban scholars have recently raised the question of totality – drawing variously on the "longitudinal totality" of Lukács, and the dynamic, conflictual, and "open totality" of Lefebvre (see Arboleda 2015) – the Black Radical literature is useful here for its explicit attention to the relationship between totality and racialized differentiation (cf. Goonewardena 2018; West 1999). This emphasis seems particularly important not only due to the above mentioned relationship between urban circulation and racialized confinement, but also due to the prominence that Adams attributes to processes of New World colonization – and to the "the maritime networks of trade in Europe's imperial spaces and colonial territories" more broadly (p. 11) – in the emergence of the urban.

Of course, future work that seeks to link *Circulation and Urbanization* to the literature on racial capitalism and totality will need to proceed with care. For one, this literature is hugely diverse, ranging from Cedric Robinson's enigmatic comments on the holistic "revolutionary

consciousness that has never been destroyed or subsumed” by global racial capitalism (Cheng 2013: 148), to Édouard Glissant’s writing on “tout-monde” (or, “world-totality”). Further still, much of the Black Radical literature on totality – particularly that which stems from Robinson’s writing on the Black Radical Tradition and its constitutive drive to preserve the “collective being, the *ontological* totality” (Robinson 1983: 171, emphasis added) – could be accused of presupposing “hermetically sealed and culturally absolute racial traditions” (Gilroy 1993: 223). Nevertheless, this literature on totality remains imperative to think alongside Adams’ account in the context of future work. Doing so should allow us to see the *totalizing and differentiating* character of urbanization, “however fractured this totality might be” (Weheliye 2014: 32); and, it should enable us to see why capitalist urbanization must be resisted in *totalizing* terms – from within this ever-expanding geography, rather than from an ostensible “constitutive outside”.

Finally, and despite these fruitful avenues for future research, it is important to briefly raise two warnings for future readers of *Circulation and Urbanization*. First, it is at times unclear whether in his account Adams is describing historical-epistemological transformations – that is, transformations in urban thought – or material ones. What actually happened “on the ground” is at times obscured, in favor of discussions of transformations in urban ideology and discourse. Second, a thorough engagement with the vast Marxist literature on the relationship between urbanization and circulation is, unfortunately, outside of the purview of this book, which – as noted – is largely concerned with the urban as a “biopolitical apparatus”. Thus, a reader seeking a study that engages with the relationship between urban circulation and the realization of value will be left unsatiated. With that said, there is no doubt that Adams’ provocative work will spark much thought on the urban question; it is agenda setting and politically revolutionary in its implications.

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*William Conroy*  
*Urban Theory Lab*  
*Harvard Graduate School of Design*  
*williamconroy@g.harvard.edu*

*January 2020*