

# POLS 6404/ENVS 6134

## CRITICAL URBAN THEORY: EPISTEMOLOGIES AND POLITICS

### WINTER 2024

York University  
Department of Politics

Time: Thursday at 2:30-5:30 pm  
Location: S801 Ross  
Instructor: Laam Hae  
Contact: [LHAE@yorku.ca](mailto:LHAE@yorku.ca)  
Office hours: Mondays at 12:30-2:00 pm, or by appointment (zoom link info on eClass)

**Note: The assigned readings are tentative and will be finalized in late December 2023**

“The urban” has recently emerged as a central focus in social theory, as it is perceived to have taken on increased significance within the neoliberal political economy and diverse forms of anti-capitalist and anti-oppression politics. This course will examine major paradigms that have emerged within the broad fields of urban studies – e.g., Marxist, feminist, anti-racist, abolitionist, decolonial, anticolonial and postcolonial paradigms – across different disciplines. We will discuss how these paradigms reflect urbanists’ efforts to grapple with the changing dynamics of urbanization and political organizing.

We begin the class with the recent debate on “planetary urbanization.” By examining this debate, we will interrogate the notions of “city” and “the urban,” as well as how different theoretical approaches to them may have different epistemological foundations and political implications. The different vantage points expressed by the interlocutors of this debate provide a snapshot of the broader fault lines existing within the urban studies scholarship, which we will examine in subsequent weeks. Following the examination of this debate, we will move on to a discussion of political economist approaches to neoliberal urbanization, and discuss what “actually existing neoliberalism” looks like in Canada and beyond. This discussion offers a foundation for us to examine various incarnations of neoliberal urbanization that we will study in the following few weeks. These include gentrification, suburbanization, financialization of real estate development, the militarization of urban space and urbanization of infectious disease and disaster, all of which have newly produced (and reproduced the older forms of) uneven development across different urban societies.

We then go on to examine feminist, critical race theorist, abolitionist and decolonialist takes on “the urban,” and discuss their contributions to our understanding of urban processes of uneven development and resistant politics. We study the theoretical and political openings that these studies have triggered, such as efforts for decolonization of knowledge production, challenges to the deeply entrenched white, male, heteronormative and ableist paradigms, and the centring of people and spaces of multiple oppressions in scholarly engagements. After discussing this scholarship, we will examine works by two articulators of Marxist urban thinking – Henri Lefebvre and David Harvey. We will highlight how their works offered remarkable correctives

to the dominant paradigms in the post-World War II period (in the case of the former, structural Marxism; and in the latter, positivist urban geography as well as the Marxist tradition that paid little attention to space). We will also discuss the profound and enduring imprints of their works in the urban studies scholarship, but also look into the intellectual challenges made to them by succeeding scholars. We will discuss the method of engaging in a productive articulation and cross-fertilization of different paradigms of urban studies.

We will also examine other theories that have intersected, and often been contemporaneous with, the above-mentioned epistemological debates at various points. Specifically, we examine theories developed around community empowerment and mutual aid; primitive accumulation and imperialism; and eco-gentrification, among others. Students are expected to develop their faculties of contextualizing, comparing and critically assessing different paradigms, and work towards establishing a foundation for theoretical frameworks that will inform their own research.

### **Evaluations**

- 1) Seminar participation: 20%
- 2) Presentation and discussion facilitation: 20%
- 3) Response papers: 20% (4 response papers x 5 points)
- 4) The term paper: 40%

### **Attendance**

Attendance is required. **After two absences from class**, your final course grade will be lowered by one full grade (e.g., from A- to B+) for each subsequent absence.

### **Participation**

This is a discussion-driven seminar, so students are expected to come to class having done the assigned readings and having prepared for discussion. During the discussion, our commitment will include the understanding of the assigned readings and an assessment of the arguments and intellectual and political significance that these arguments convey.

### **Presentation and Discussion Facilitation**

Every week, one to two students will be responsible for giving a presentation on the readings for that week. The presenters should steer the class through the key concepts, arguments, theories, and/or debates emerging from the week's readings, offer their own analysis of them (if relevant, in relation to the readings assigned in other weeks), pose discussion questions, and facilitate class discussion on these questions. The time for the presentation (not including discussion facilitation) for each student should not exceed 15 minutes.

### **Response Papers**

Students will submit reading response papers for 4 weeks (5 points each). Each paper should be 2-3 pages long, single-spaced with 12 pt font, and in a PDF format. In the response paper, you should articulate your response to all the readings assigned for that week, and formulate at least two questions for class discussion. This is an informal form of writing, and there is no

fixed format in terms of what you write. Response papers for the week are to be uploaded to the course eClass website by 11:30 am on the day of the week's class. I will not provide written feedback on them, but will bring up the analysis and questions raised by some of you for discussion in class.

### **The Term Paper**

Students are required to submit a paper of 4,000-5,000 words (12-pt font, double-spaced, MS DOC) at the end of the semester. The term paper can be on any topic, but it should relate broadly to the themes discussed in the course. The format is also left to your discretion: it might be a critical review of a body of research, a secondary empirical analysis of a chosen topic, or even your own primary research. The important common requirement, regardless of whatever format you choose, is that you effectively marshal relevant works, synthesize and critically evaluate their usefulness, identify tensions or questions that arise from them, analyze them intellectually and tease out compelling arguments from them. Students should draw on course materials for their paper, and are encouraged to reflect on their own contributions to the critical scholarship of urban studies. Students should feel free to consult with me for references, and also for arguments that they wish to develop in their paper.

### **Miscellaneous Rules**

Students should know the basic rules of classroom conduct. For information on academic integrity, plagiarism and related issues, see the followings:

<https://spark.library.yorku.ca/academic-integrity-what-is-academic-integrity/>

<https://www.yorku.ca/gradstudies/students/current-students/regulations/academic-honesty/>

### **Student accommodation**

Students who encounter extenuating circumstances during the term that may interfere with the successful completion of course assignments should discuss the matter with me as soon as possible. I also understand that the current COVID crisis and its repercussions on you and your family could impact the conditions necessary for the quality of your performance in this class. If you require any accommodations, I encourage you to reach out to me as early as possible to discuss options for adjustments that you deem necessary in this course.

Students with physical, psychiatric or learning disabilities may request reasonable accommodations in teaching style or evaluation methods, as outlined in the Senate Policy on the Academic Accommodation for Students with Disabilities. The university encourages students with disabilities to register with [Student Accessibility Services](#) to discuss their accommodation needs as early as possible in the term to establish the recommended academic accommodations that will be communicated to Course Directors through their Letter of Accommodation (LOA). Please let me know as early as possible in the term if you anticipate requiring academic accommodation so that we can discuss how to consider your accommodation needs within the context of this course.

### **Readings**

Course readings are drawn from multiple sources. Unless stated otherwise, all the readings – both books and journal articles – can be downloaded or accessed via the York University library website. For the book chapters that are not available in the form of e-Books on the library website, I will

upload scanned copies of them on the eClass page of the course.

## **Class Schedule**

### **Week 1: Class Introduction**

### **Week 2: Planetary Urbanization**

- Brenner, Neil, and Christian Schmid. 2015. "Towards a new epistemology of the urban?" *City* 19 (2-3):151-182.
- Kipfer, Stefan. 2018. "Pushing the limits of urban research: Urbanization, pipelines and counter-colonial politics." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 36 (3):474-493.
- Ruddick, Sue, Linda Peake, Gökbörü S Tanyildiz, and Darren Patrick. 2018. "Planetary urbanization: An urban theory for our time?" *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 36 (3):387–404.
- Buckley, Michelle, and Kendra Strauss. 2016. "With, against and beyond Lefebvre: Planetary urbanization and epistemic plurality." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 34 (4):617-636.

### **Week 3: Political Economy of Neoliberal Urbanization**

- Albo, Greg, and Carlo Fanelli. 2019. "Fiscal distress and the local state: Neoliberal urbanism in Canada." In *Change and continuity: Canadian political economy in the new millennium*, edited by Mark P Thomas, Leah F Vosko, Carlo Fanelli and Olena Lyubchenko, 265-296. MQUP.
- [excerpt] Harvey, David. 1989. "From managerialism to entrepreneurialism: the transformation in urban governance in late capitalism." *Geografiska Annaler. Series B, Human Geography* 71 (1):3-17.
- Black, Simon. 2020. "Chapter 1. Social Reproduction and the City." in his *Social Reproduction and the City: Welfare Reform, Child Care, and Resistance in Neoliberal New York*. 19-43. University of Georgia Press.

### **Week 4: Urban Development and Dispossession I**

- Rosen, Gillad, and Alan Walks. 2015. "Castles in Toronto's sky: Condo-ism as urban transformation." *Journal of Urban Affairs* 37 (3):289-310.
- Ucoglu, Murat. 2021. "Chapter 5: From Agro-industrial complex to the real estate-financial complex: The suburban-financial nexus in Toronto and Brampton." In his *The Financialization of Housing as a Growth Model: New Property Relations and Massive Suburbanization in Toronto/Brampton and Istanbul/Gktrk*. PhD Dissertation. Faculty of Environmental Studies. York University.
- Kern, Leslie. 2007. "Reshaping the boundaries of public and private life: gender, condominium development, and the neoliberalization of urban living." *Urban Geography* 28 (7):657-681.

If you have time, try to read the following:

Smith, Neil. 2009 [1996]. Chapters 2 & 3. in his *The new urban frontier: Gentrification and the*

*revanchist city*. London; New York: Routledge.

### **Week 5: Urban Development and Dispossession II**

- Brenner, Neil, and Swarnabh Ghosh. 2022. "Between the colossal and the catastrophic: Planetary urbanization and the political ecologies of emergent infectious disease." *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 54 (5): 867-910.
- August, Martine. 2022. "Securitising seniors housing: The financialisation of real estate and social reproduction in retirement and long-term care homes." *Antipode* 54 (3):653-680.
- Safransky, Sara. 2018. "Land Justice as a Historical Diagnostic: Thinking with Detroit." *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 108 (2):499-512.

### **Week 6: Gender and Spaces**

- Pratt, Geraldine. 2005. "Abandoned Women and the Spaces of the Exception." *Antipode* 37 (5):1053-1078.
- Roberts, Adrienne. 2013. "Financing Social Reproduction: The Gendered Relations of Debt and Mortgage Finance in Twenty-first-century America." *New Political Economy* 18 (1):21-42.
- Kern, Leslie. 2021. "Chapter 5: City of Fear." In her *Feminist city: claiming space in a man-made world*: Verso Books (pp. 103-119).
- Wright, Melissa W. 2014. "The Gender, Place and Culture Jan Monk Distinguished Annual Lecture: Gentrification, assassination and forgetting in Mexico: a feminist Marxist tale." *Gender, Place & Culture* 21 (1):1-16.

### **Week 7: Black Geographies and Abolition**

- Taylor, Keeanga-Yamahtta. 2016. "Chapter 4. The double standard of justice." In her *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black liberation*. Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books.
- Maynard, Robyn. 2017. "Chapter 5. Misogynoir in Canada." In her *Policing Black lives: State violence in Canada from slavery to the present*: Fernwood Publishing. [eClass upload]
- Walcott, Rinaldo. 2021. "Chapter 3. Abolition now: From prisons to property." in his *On Property*. Biblioasis.
- Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. 2022. "Chapter 20: Abolition geography and the problem of innocence." In her *Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation* (pp. 471-495). Verso Books.

### **Week 8: Decolonizing Urban Studies**

- Peters, Evelyn J. 1998. "Subversive spaces: First Nations women and the city." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 16 (6):665-685.
- Coulthard, Glen, and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson. 2016. "Grounded normativity/place-based solidarity." *American Quarterly* 68 (2):249-255.
- Tuck, Eve, and K Wayne Yang. 2012. "Decolonization is not a metaphor." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, education & society* 1 (1):1-40.
- Dhamoon, Rita. 2015. "A feminist approach to decolonizing anti-racism: Rethinking transnationalism, intersectionality, and settler colonialism." *Feral Feminisms* 4:20-37.

### **Week 9: Metro-Marxism: Henri Lefebvre and David Harvey**

- Merrifield, Andrew. 2006. Chapters 4, 5 & 6. in his *Henri Lefebvre: A critical introduction*. New York: Routledge.
- Harvey, David. 1978. "The urban process under capitalism: a framework for analysis." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 2 (1-4):101-131.
- Harvey, David. 2012. "The urban roots of financial crises: reclaiming the city for anti-capitalist struggle." *Socialist Register* 48:1-35.
- Glassman, Jim. 2006. "Primitive accumulation, accumulation by dispossession, accumulation by 'extra-economic' means." *Progress in Human Geography* 30 (5):608-625.

If you have time, try to read the following:

- Kipfer, Stefan, Parastou Saberi, and Thorben Wieditz. 2012. "Henri Lefebvre: Debates and controversies." *Progress in Human Geography* 37 (1):115-134.
- Lefebvre, Henri. 1996 [1968]. "14. The right to the city." In *Writings on cities*, edited by Elizabeth LeBas and Eleonore Kofman. Cambridge, Mass, USA: Blackwell Publishers.
- Lefebvre, Henri. 2003 [1970]. Chapters 1 & 9. *The urban revolution*. University of Minnesota Press.<sup>1</sup>
- Mitchell, Don, and Nik Heynen. 2009. "The geography of survival and the right to the city: Speculations on surveillance, legal innovation, and the criminalization of intervention." *Urban Geography* 30 (6):611-632.

### **Week 10: Spontaneous Themes**

**This week's readings will be selected from students' reading wishlists. The four readings that were selected for the previous year are listed below.**

- Robinson, Jennifer. 2016. "Thinking cities through elsewhere: Comparative tactics for a more global urban studies." *Progress in human geography* 40 (1):3-29.
- Roy, Ananya. 2009. "Why India cannot plan its cities: informality, insurgence and the idiom of urbanization." *Planning theory* 8 (1):76-87.
- Bhungalia, Lisa. 2015. "Managing violence: Aid, counterinsurgency, and the humanitarian present in Palestine." *Environment and Planning A* 47 (11):2308-2323.
- Secor, Anna. 2004. "There is an Istanbul that belongs to me": citizenship, space, and identity in the city. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 94, 352-368.

### **Week 11: Communities, the Local and Mutual Aid**

- Illner, Peer. 2021. Chapters 7, 8 & 9. in his *Disasters and Social Reproduction: Crisis Response Between the State and Community* (pp. 92-128). London: Pluto Press.
- Rankin, Katharine N. 2001. "Governing development: neoliberalism, microcredit, and rational economic woman." *Economy and society* 30 (1):18-37.
- Miraftab, Faranak. 2004. "Making neo-liberal governance: the disempowering work of empowerment." *International Planning Studies* 9 (4):239-259.

If you have time, try to read the following:

- Mohan, Giles, and Kristian Stokke. 2000. "Participatory development and empowerment: the dangers of localism." *Third World Quarterly* 21 (2):247-268.

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<sup>1</sup> For an excerpt for chapters 1 and 9, see *The Global Cities reader* (2006), pp. 407-413.



### **Week 12: Resistant Politics**

- Smucker, Jonathan. 2014. "Can Prefigurative Politics Replace Political Strategy?" *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 58 (7). [Available at <http://berkeleyjournal.org/2014/10/can-prefigurative-politics-replace-political-strategy/>]
- Gilmore, Justin. 2020. "Class organization and rupture on the terrain of housing: Base-building beyond advocacy and service. *Spectre Journal*. May 26. [Available at <https://spectrejournal.com/class-organization-and-rupture-on-the-terrain-of-housing/>]
- McNally, David. 2020. "The return of the mass strike: Teachers, students, feminists, and the new wave of popular upheavals." *Spectre Journal*. 1 (1):12-37. [eClass upload]
- Nasr El Hag Ali, Lina and Olena Lyubchenko. 2020. "The Exception as the Rule: Toronto's Social Reproduction Organizing in the Age of COVID-19. *Spectre*. <https://spectrejournal.com/the-exception-as-the-rule/>

An additional reading list for each week will be provided for those who want to delve further into the theme of a particular week.