



Urban revolutions: urbanisation and (neo-)colonialism in transatlantic context

by Stefan Kipfer, Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2022, 324 pp., £112.00 (hbk), ISBN: 9789004524903

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To cite this article: Giovanni Picker (22 May 2024): Urban revolutions: urbanisation and (neo-)colonialism in transatlantic context, Ethnic and Racial Studies, DOI: [10.1080/01419870.2024.2348719](https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2024.2348719)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2024.2348719>



Published online: 22 May 2024.



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BOOK REVIEW

Urban revolutions: urbanisation and (neo-)colonialism in transatlantic context, by Stefan Kipfer, Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2022, 324 pp., £112.00 (hbk), ISBN: 9789004524903

The *force* of Kipfer's *tour* is evident not only in the longest bibliography I have ever seen in a monograph – 59 out of a total of 306 pages – but also and above all in its revolutionary breath. I have been reading and teaching Kipfer's work since my grad school days, and have always sensed an internationalist heart pulsing beneath his meticulous exegeses of Paris; in *Urban Revolutions*, that pulse is loud, and accompanies the reader from beginning to end.

The book is firmly anchored in a historical materialist standpoint, and while it contributes primarily to urban research, it incorporates political philosophy, literary criticism, and the critical study of race to stage analytical dialogues between radical geography and counter-colonial politics. This is done primarily through an unprecedentedly in-depth linking of a dialogue between Henri Lefebvre and Frantz Fanon on the one hand, and counter-colonial perspectives and historical struggles on the other. The two sides of the intersection are constantly kept in view and treated as equals, which is also reflected in the structure of the book – chapter 1 is devoted to Lefebvre, chapter 2 to Fanon, and the remaining chapters are invitations to think through Lefebvre-Fanon in relation to (neo-)colonial and counter-colonial manifestations in Martinique (chapter 3), Canada (chapter 4) and France (chapter 5).

Chapter 1 examines the meaning of *colonisation* in Lefebvre. *Colonisation* rather than *colonialisme* is the point Kipfer emphasises and unpacks further in chapter 3. This is a valuable contribution. While Lefebvre's humanism has already been related to anti-colonial sensibilities, Kipfer's decidedly materialist perspective considers Lefebvre's comments on *colonisation* - i.e. the occupation of a given sovereign territory, whether inside or outside that of the occupier - as valuable entry points for the analysis of domination in the colonies, in situ, through various exploitative, productive and alienating moves going from centralities to peripheries. Provided we apply Lefebvre's "correction" offered in Chapter 2.

Fanon's work here proves to be the central "switch point" of the book, enabling counter-colonial humanism to drive historical- materialist analysis, and Marxism to function as a key horizon of counter-colonial struggles. What I have called a "correction" is rather a thorough conceptual tie between Lefebvre and Fanon, primarily carried out by foregrounding the urban. The urban is understood as the typically tension-fraught, spatio-temporal articulation of materiality and lived experience, the political economy of space and psyche/affect, the tangible and the imagined. While in Lefebvre such a multidimensional lens captures

the urban primarily as a platform for both capitalist and revolutionary praxis and desires, Fanon describes in a not dissimilar way “the war of movement of national liberation as a *claim to the city*” (9), so powerfully rendered in Pontecorvo’s 1966 masterpiece *La bataille d’Alger*. Kipfer’s exegesis of Fanon’s analysis of the spatio-temporal here conceptually extends his by now classic readings of colonial continuities through race and gender in 21st-century Paris which are discussed in Chapter 5.

Chapter 3 illustrates the heuristic validity of the conceptual link between Lefebvre and Fanon in the Caribbean through a reading of Chamoiseau’s novel *Texaco*. This, and more generally literary criticism through a radical- geography lens, allows the author to bridge the debates on planetary urbanisation and those on postcolonial urbanism by casting a sharp gaze on the “unevenness of the urban revolution [...] in different spatio-temporal contexts under modern imperial capitalism” (124). Such urban unevenness, *Texaco* as a story of “creole urbanism” teaches us, should be seen as both internal (urban centrality vs urban periphery - Lefebvre) and external/international (metropole vs colony - Fanon). This is Kipfer’s main point here, which is preceded by a detailed discussion of the novel in its own literary and political context.

Chapter 4 uses the cases of Indigenous resistance to infrastructure and pipeline projects in Canada to argue that neo-Lefebvrian debates on planetary urbanisation need to be reframed by the critical scholarship on settler colonialism in three main ways - by giving central importance to political struggles, uneven spatio-temporalities, and the very tenets of urban research. The last point deserves particular attention. The scholarship of planetary urbanisation and its counterarguments fail to acknowledge the relativity of the city. Kipfer suggests to see the dynamics of urbanism “in non-linear ways, as uneven and combined processes” in which the city emerges as “the medium of (neo)colonial capitalism” (197-198), rather than as a spatio-temporally encapsulated totality of global capitalism. Only in this way can the counter-urbanisation claims of Indigenous resistance be seen as “not drowned out by ‘stories of colonisation’, even critical ones” (*ibidem*) –which is tantamount to attributing central importance to (and acknowledging the epistemological authority of) political struggles in urban research.

Chapter 5 rehearses the Lefebvre-Fanon duet’s motives in Parisian mixed neighbourhoods. The post-WWII urban policy transfers from the colony to the metropole - especially “regeneration” and “desegregation” policies - are the focus of the historical part of the chapter. A key question here is “can desegregation still promise emancipation on the terms of the segregated, as both Lefebvre and Fanon thought it would?” (235). One answer emerges in the last pages which are devoted to the 21st-century resistance to neo-colonial policies: while urban change from above has devastating consequences for political struggles due to dispersal and atomisation resulting from urban displacement, anti-racist/anti-colonial thought and actions merge “mixity” (*mixité*) and autonomy in original ways, in order to build alliances “against a contradictory combination of forces: neoliberalism and neo-fascism” (239).

This last point, increasingly pressing, introduces what I see as two limitations. The rationale of the book is a critique of the “schisms between materialist and


cultural approaches" (3) in academic circles. The "*congiuntura*" (Gramsci), or what may be viewed as such, systematically emerges only in the Conclusion Chapter, where a concise yet in-depth analysis of COVID-induced dynamics of oppression is offered. While fragments of *congiuntura* emerge earlier on - in the need to acknowledge the autonomy of Indigenous struggles (Chapter 4) and indeed in the opposition to neo-liberal and neo-fascist urban projects (Chapter 5) - I would have found it more consistent with the historical-materialism framework if these political conditions had been foregrounded as drivers of the analysis.

The second limitation relates, conversely, to the criticism of these identified "schisms". Since one of their consequences is "to minimise the weight of colonial and imperial history, while pushing those with the laudable intent to 'provincia-lise Europe' [...] to hypostatise 'Europe' and its 'others' as overly coherent figures" (3), it was surprising not to see an in-depth, critical engagement with these works; not least because one may have the impression that the author, for his part, hypostatizes these very works.

This is not only an insightful book but also a very generous one – the author carefully guides the reader through each step of the analysis, providing an extraordinary wealth of further readings. On my bookshelf, it sits between Harvey's *Rebel Cities* and Bhandar's *Colonial Lives of Property– Urban Revolutions* claims the right to that in-between, contentious and generative space.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2024.2348719>

