

# What is critical urban theory?

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*What is critical urban theory? While this phrase is often used in a descriptive sense, to characterize the tradition of post-1968 leftist or radical urban studies, I argue that it also has determinate social-theoretical content. To this end, building on the work of several Frankfurt School social philosophers, this paper interprets critical theory with reference to four, mutually interconnected elements—its theoretical character; its reflexivity; its critique of instrumental reason; and its emphasis on the disjuncture between the actual and the possible. On this basis, a brief concluding section considers the status of urban questions within critical social theory. In the early 21st century, I argue, each of the four key elements within critical social theory requires sustained engagement with contemporary patterns of capitalist urbanization. Under conditions of increasingly generalized, worldwide urbanization, the project of critical social theory and that of critical urban theory have been intertwined as never before.*

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## Introduction

What is *critical urban theory*? This phrase is generally used as a shorthand reference to the writings of leftist or radical urban scholars during the post-1968 period—for instance, those of Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey, Manuel Castells, Peter Marcuse and a legion of others who have been inspired or influenced by them (Katznelson, 1993; Merrifield, 2002). Critical urban theory rejects inherited disciplinary divisions of labor and statist, technocratic, market-driven and market-oriented forms of urban knowledge. In this sense, critical theory differs fundamentally from what might be termed ‘mainstream’ urban theory—for example, the approaches inherited from the Chicago School of urban sociology, or those deployed within technocratic or neoliberal forms of policy science. Rather than affirming the current condition of cities as the expression of

transhistorical laws of social organization, bureaucratic rationality or economic efficiency, critical urban theory emphasizes the politically and ideologically mediated, socially contested and therefore malleable character of urban space—that is, its continual (re)construction as a site, medium and outcome of historically specific relations of social power. Critical urban theory is thus grounded on an antagonistic relationship not only to inherited urban knowledges, but more generally, to existing urban formations. It insists that another, more democratic, socially just and sustainable form of urbanization is possible, even if such possibilities are currently being suppressed through dominant institutional arrangements, practices and ideologies. In short, critical urban theory involves the critique of ideology (including social-scientific ideologies) *and* the critique of power, inequality, injustice and exploitation, at once within and among cities.

However, the notions of critique, and more specifically of critical theory, are not merely descriptive terms. They have determinate social-theoretical content that is derived from various strands of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment social philosophy, not least within the work of Hegel, Marx and the Western Marxian tradition (Koselleck, 1988; Postone, 1993; Calhoun, 1995). Moreover, the focus of critique in critical social theory has evolved significantly during the course of the last two centuries of capitalist development (Therborn, 1996). Given the intellectual and political agenda of this issue of *CITY*, it is worth revisiting some of the key arguments developed within the aforementioned traditions, particularly that of the Frankfurt School, which arguably provide a crucial, if often largely implicit, reference point for the contemporary work of critical urbanists.

One of the main points to be emphasized below is the historical specificity of any approach to critical social theory, urban or otherwise. The work of Marx and the Frankfurt School emerged during previous phases of capitalism—competitive (mid- to late-19th century) and Fordist–Keynesian (mid-20th century), respectively—that have now been superseded through the restless, creatively destructive forward-motion of capitalist development (Postone, 1992, 1993, 1999). A key contemporary question, therefore, is how the conditions of possibility for critical theory have changed today, in the early 21st century, in the context of an increasingly globalized, neoliberalized and financialized formation of capitalism (Therborn, 2008).

Such considerations also lead directly into the thorny problem of how to position *urban* questions within the broader project of critical social theory. With the significant exception of Walter Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk*, none of the main figures associated with the Frankfurt School devoted much attention to urban questions. For them, critical theory involved the critique of commodification, the state and the

law, including their mediations, for instance, through family structures, cultural forms and social-psychological dynamics (Jay, 1973; Kellner, 1989; Wiggershaus, 1995). This orientation had a certain plausibility during the competitive and Fordist–Keynesian phases of capitalist development, insofar as urbanization processes were then generally viewed as a straightforward spatial expression of other, purportedly more fundamental social forces, such as industrialization, class struggle and state regulation. I argue below, however, that such an orientation is no longer tenable in the early 21st century, as we witness nothing less than an *urbanization of the world*—the ‘urban revolution’ anticipated nearly four decades ago by Henri Lefebvre (2003 [1970]). Under conditions of increasingly generalized, worldwide urbanization (Lefebvre, 2003 [1970]; Schmid, 2005; Soja and Kanai, 2007), the project of critical social theory and that of critical urban theory have been mutually intertwined as never before.

### Critique and critical social theory

The modern idea of critique is derived from the Enlightenment and was developed most systematically in the work of Kant, Hegel and the Left Hegelians (Marcuse, 1954; Habermas, 1973; Jay, 1973; Calhoun, 1995; Therborn, 1996). But it assumed a new significance in Marx's work, with the development of the notion of a critique of political economy (Postone, 1993). For Marx, the critique of political economy entailed, on the one hand, a form of *Ideologiekritik*, an unmasking of the historically specific myths, reifications and antinomies that pervade bourgeois forms of knowledge. Just as importantly, Marx understood the critique of political economy not only as a critique of ideas and discourses about capitalism, but as a critique of capitalism itself, and as a contribution to the effort to transcend it. In this dialectical conception, a key task of critique is to reveal the contradictions within the historically specific social totality formed by capitalism.

This approach to critique is seen to have several important functions. First, it exposes the forms of power, exclusion, injustice and inequality that underpin capitalist social formations. Second, for Marx, the critique of political economy is intended to illuminate the landscape of ongoing and emergent sociopolitical struggles: it connects the ideological discourses of the political sphere to the underlying (class) antagonisms and social forces within bourgeois society. Perhaps most crucially, Marx understood critique as a means to explore, both in theory and in practice, the possibility of forging alternatives to capitalism. A critique of political economy thus served to show how capitalism's contradictions simultaneously undermine the system, and point beyond it, towards other ways of organizing social capacities and society/nature relations.

During the course of the 20th century, Marx's critique of political economy has been appropriated within diverse traditions of critical social analysis, including the traditional Marxism of the Second International (Kolakowski, 1981) and the alternative strands of radical thought associated with Western Marxism (Jay, 1986). It was arguably within the Frankfurt School of critical social theory, however, that the concept of critique was explored most systematically as a methodological, theoretical and political problem. In confronting this issue, the major figures within the Frankfurt School also developed an innovative, intellectually and politically subversive research program on the political economy, social–psychological dynamics, evolutionary trends and inner contradictions of modern capitalism (Bronner and Kellner, 1989; Arato and Gebhardt, 1990; Wiggershaus, 1995).

It was Max Horkheimer (1982 [1937]) who, writing from exile in New York City in 1937, introduced the terminology of 'critical theory'. The concept was subsequently developed and extended by his associates Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, and later, in very different directions, by Jürgen Habermas, up through the 1980s. In the Frankfurt School

conception, critical theory represented a decisive break from the orthodox forms of Marxism that prevailed under the Second International, with its ontology of labor and its invocation of proletarian class struggle as the privileged basis for social transformation under capitalism. Additionally, during the course of the mid-20th century, the Frankfurt School of critical theory was animated by several other contextually specific concerns and preoccupations—including the critique of fascism in Germany and elsewhere; the critique of technology, mass consumerism and the culture industry under postwar capitalism in Europe and the USA; and, particularly in the later work of Herbert Marcuse, the critique of suppressed possibilities for human emancipation latent with present institutional arrangements.

The Frankfurt School notion of critical theory was initially elaborated as an epistemological concept. In Horkheimer's classic 1937 essay 'Traditional and Critical Theory', it served to demarcate an alternative to positivistic and technocratic approaches to social science and bourgeois philosophy (Horkheimer, 1982 [1937], pp. 188–252). This line of analysis was famously continued by Adorno in the 1960s, in the *Positivismusstreit* (positivism dispute) with Karl Popper (Adorno *et al.*, 1976), and again in a totally different form in his philosophical writings on dialectics and aesthetic theory (for a sampling, see O'Connor, 2000). The notion of critical theory was developed in yet another new direction by Habermas in his debate on technocracy with Niklas Luhmann in the early 1970s (Habermas and Luhmann, 1971), and in a still more elaborate, mature form in his magnum opus, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, in the mid-1980s (Habermas, 1985, 1987).

The most politically charged vision of critical theory was arguably presented by Herbert Marcuse in the mid-1960s, above all in his 1964 classic book, *One-Dimensional Man*. For Marcuse, critical theory entailed an immanent critique of capitalist society in its

current form: it is concerned, he insisted, with ‘the *historical alternatives* which haunt the established society as subversive tendencies and forces’ (1964, pp. xi–xii; italics added). There is thus a direct link between Marcuse’s project and a central aspect of Marx’s original critique of political economy—the search for emancipatory alternatives latent within the present, due to the contradictions of existing social relations (as emphasized systematically by Postone, 1993).

### Key elements of critical theory: four propositions

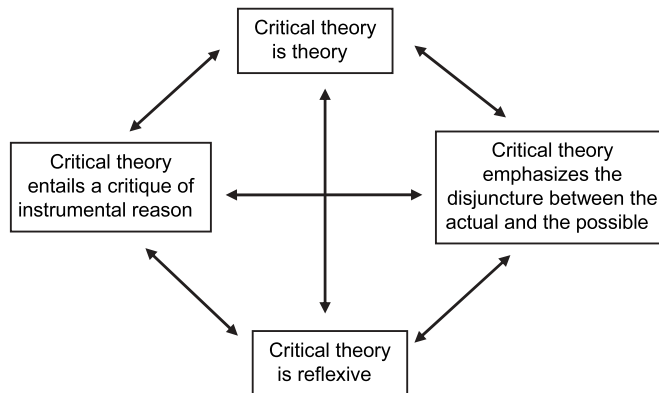
There are, of course, profound epistemological, methodological, political and substantive differences among writers such as Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse and Habermas. Nonetheless, it can be argued that their writings collectively elaborate a core, underlying conception of critical theory (for an alternative but compatible reading, see Calhoun, 1995). This conception can be summarized with reference to four key propositions: critical theory is theory; it is reflexive; it involves a critique of instrumental reason; and it is focused on the disjuncture between the actual and the possible. These propositions should be understood as being inextricably intertwined and mutually constitutive;

the full meaning of each can only be grasped in relation to the others (Figure 1).

### *Critical theory is theory*

In the Frankfurt School, critical theory is unapologetically abstract. It is characterized by epistemological and philosophical reflections; the development of formal concepts, generalizations about historical trends; deductive and inductive modes of argumentation; and diverse forms of historical analysis. It may also build upon concrete research, that is, upon an evidentiary basis, whether organized through traditional or critical methods. As Marcuse (1964, p. xi) writes, ‘In order to identify and define the possibilities for an optimal development, the critical theory must abstract from the actual organization and utilization of society’s resources, and from the results of this organization and utilization.’ It is, in this sense, a *theory*.

Critical theory is thus not intended to serve as a formula for any particular course of social change; it is not a strategic map for social change; and it is not a ‘how to’-style guidebook for social movements. It may—indeed, it *should*—have mediations to the realm of practice, and it is explicitly intended to inform the strategic perspective of progressive, radical or revolutionary social



**Figure 1** Four mutually constitutive propositions on critical theory.

and political actors. But, at the same time, crucially, the Frankfurt School conception of critical theory is focused on a moment of abstraction that is analytically prior to the famous Leninist question of ‘What is to be done?’

*Critical theory is reflexive*

In the Frankfurt School tradition, theory is understood to be at once enabled by, and oriented towards, specific historical conditions and contexts. This conceptualization has at least two key implications. First, critical theory entails a total rejection of any standpoint—positivistic, transcendental, metaphysical or otherwise—that claims to be able to stand ‘outside’ of the contextually specific time/space of history. All social knowledge, including critical theory, is embedded within the dialectics of social and historical change; it is thus intrinsically, endemically contextual. Second, Frankfurt School critical theory transcends a generalized hermeneutic concern with the situatedness of all knowledge. It is focused, more specifically, on the question of how oppositional, antagonistic forms of knowledge, subjectivity and consciousness may emerge within an historical social formation.

Critical theorists confront this issue by emphasizing the fractured, broken or contradictory character of capitalism as a social totality. If the totality were closed, non-contradictory or complete, there could be no critical consciousness of it; there would be no need for critique; and indeed, critique would be structurally impossible. Critique emerges precisely insofar as society is in conflict with itself, that is, because its mode of development is self-contradictory. In this sense, critical theorists are concerned not only to situate themselves and their research agendas within the historical evolution of modern capitalism. Just as crucially, they want to understand what it is about modern capitalism that enables their own and others’ forms of critical consciousness.

*Critical theory entails a critique of instrumental reason*

As is well known, the Frankfurt School critical theorists developed a critique of instrumental reason (analyzed at length in Habermas, 1985, 1987). Building on Max Weber’s writings, they argued against the societal generalization of a means–ends rationality oriented towards the purposive-rational (*Zweckrationale*), an efficient linking of means to ends, without interrogation of the ends themselves. This critique had implications for various realms of industrial organization, technology and administration, but most crucially here, Frankfurt School theorists also applied it to the realm of social science. In this sense, critical theory entails a forceful rejection of instrumental modes of social scientific knowledge—that is, those designed to render existing institutional arrangements more efficient and effective, to manipulate and dominate the social and physical world, and thus to bolster current forms of power. Instead, critical theorists demanded an interrogation of the ends of knowledge, and thus, an explicit engagement with normative questions.

Consistent with their historically reflexive approach to social science, Frankfurt School scholars argued that a critical theory must make explicit its practical–political and normative orientations, rather than embracing a narrow or technocratic vision. Instrumentalist modes of knowledge necessarily presuppose their own separation from their object of investigation. However, once that separation is rejected, and the knower is understood to be embedded within the same practical social context that is being investigated, normative questions are unavoidable. The proposition of reflexivity and the critique of instrumental reason are thus directly interconnected.

Consequently, when critical theorists discuss the so-called theory/practice problem, they are *not* referring to the question of how to ‘apply’ theory to practice. Rather, they are thinking this dialectical relationship

in exactly the opposite direction—namely, how the realm of practice (and thus, normative considerations) always already informs the work of theorists, even when the latter remains on an abstract level. As Habermas wrote in 1971:

‘The dialectical interpretation [associated with critical theory] comprehends the knowing subject in terms of the relations of social praxis, in terms of its position, both within the process of social labor and the process of enlightening the political forces about their goals.’ (Habermas, 1973, pp. 210–211)

*Critical theory emphasizes the disjuncture between the actual and the possible*

As Therborn (2008) argues, the Frankfurt School embraces a dialectical critique of capitalist modernity—that is, one that affirms the possibilities for human liberation that are opened up by this social formation while also criticizing its systemic exclusions, oppressions and injustices. The task of critical theory is therefore not only to investigate the forms of domination associated with modern capitalism, but equally, to excavate the emancipatory possibilities that are embedded within, yet simultaneously suppressed by, this very system.

In much Frankfurt School writing, this orientation involves a ‘search for a revolutionary subject’, that is, the concern to find an agent of radical social change that could realize the possibilities unleashed yet suppressed by capitalism. However, given the Frankfurt School’s abandonment of any hope for a proletarian-style revolution, their search for a revolutionary subject during the postwar period generated a rather gloomy pessimism regarding the possibility for social transformation and, especially in the work of Adorno and Horkheimer, a retreat into relatively abstract philosophical and aesthetic concerns (Postone, 1993).

Marcuse, by contrast, presents a very different position on this matter in the ‘Introduction’ to *One-Dimensional Man*.

Here he agrees with his Frankfurt School colleagues that, in contrast to the formative period of capitalist industrialization, late 20th-century capitalism lacks any clear ‘agents or agencies of social change’; in other words, the proletariat was no longer operating as a class ‘for itself’. Nonetheless, Marcuse (1964, p. xii) insists forcefully that ‘the need for qualitative change is as pressing as ever before [...] by society as a whole, for every one of its members’. Against this background, Marcuse proposes that the rather abstract quality of critical theory, during the time in which he was writing, was organically linked to the absence of an obvious agent of radical, emancipatory social change. He argues, moreover, that the abstractions associated with critical theory could only be blunted or dissolved through concrete-historical struggles: ‘The theoretical concepts’, Marcuse (1964, p. xii) suggests, ‘terminate with social change.’ This powerful proposition thus returns us to the idea of critical theory *as* theory. Just as the *critical* thrust of critical theory is historically conditioned and historically oriented, so too is its *theoretical* orientation continuously shaped and reshaped through ongoing social and political transformations.

Marcuse’s position is reminiscent of Marx’s famous claim in Volume 3 of *Capital* that all science would be superfluous if there were no distinction between reality and appearance. Similarly, Marcuse suggests, in a world in which radical or revolutionary social change were occurring, critical theory would be effectively marginalized or even dissolved—not in its critical orientation, but *as theory*: it would become concrete practice. Or, to put the point differently, it is precisely because revolutionary, transformative, emancipatory social practice remains so tightly circumscribed and constrained under contemporary capitalism that critical theory remains critical *theory*—and not simply everyday social practice. From this point of view, the so-called theory/practice divide is an artifact not of theoretical confusion or epistemological inadequacies, but of the

alienated, contradictory social formation in which critical theory is embedded. There is no theory that can overcome this divide, because, by definition, it cannot be overcome theoretically; it can only be overcome in practice.

### Critical theory and the urbanization question

While Marx's work has exercised a massive influence on the post-1968 field of critical urban studies, few, if any, contributors to this field have engaged directly with the writings of the Frankfurt School. Nonetheless, I believe that most authors who position themselves within the intellectual universe of critical urban studies would endorse, at least in general terms, the conception of critical theory that is articulated through the four propositions summarized above:

- they insist on the need for abstract, theoretical arguments regarding the nature of urban processes under capitalism, while rejecting the conception of theory as a 'handmaiden' to immediate, practical or instrumental concerns;
- they view knowledge of urban questions, including critical perspectives, as being historically specific and mediated through power relations;
- they reject instrumentalist, technocratic and market-driven forms of urban analysis that promote the maintenance and reproduction of extant urban formations; and
- they are concerned to excavate possibilities for alternative, radically emancipatory forms of urbanism that are latent, yet systemically suppressed, within contemporary cities.

Of course, any given contribution to critical urban theory may be more attuned to some of these propositions than to others, but they appear, cumulatively, to constitute an important epistemological foundation for the field as a whole. In this sense, critical urban theory

has developed on an intellectual and political terrain that had already been tilled extensively not only by Marx, but also by the various theoreticians of the Frankfurt School. Given the rather pronounced, even divisive character of methodological, epistemological and substantive debates among critical urbanists since the construction of this field in the early 1970s (see, for instance, Saunders, 1986; Gottdiener, 1985; Soja, 2000; Brenner and Keil, 2005; Robinson, 2006), it is essential not to lose sight of these broad areas of foundational agreement.

However, as the field of critical urban studies continues to evolve and diversify in the early 21st century, its character as a putatively 'critical' theory deserves to be subjected to careful scrutiny and systematic debate. In an incisive feminist critique of Habermas, Fraser (1989) famously asked, 'What's critical about critical theory?' Fraser's question can also be posed of the field of study under discussion in this issue of *CITY*: what's critical about critical *urban* theory? Precisely because the process of capitalist urbanization continues its forward-movement of creative destruction on a world scale, the meanings and modalities of critique can never be held constant; they must, on the contrary, be continually reinvented in relation to the unevenly evolving political-economic geographies of this process and the diverse conflicts it engenders. This is, in my view, one of the major intellectual and political challenges confronting critical urban theorists today, and it is one that several contributors to this issue of *CITY* grapple with quite productively.

As indicated above, the concept of critique developed by Marx and the vision of critical theory elaborated in the Frankfurt School were embedded within historically specific formations of capitalism. Consistent with their requirement for reflexivity, each of these approaches explicitly understood itself to be embedded within such a formation, and was oriented self-consciously towards subjecting the latter to critique. This requirement for reflexivity, as elaborated above,

must also figure centrally in any attempt to appropriate or reinvent critical theory, urban or otherwise, in the early 21st century. However, as Postone (1993, 1999) has argued, the conditions of possibility for critical theory have been thoroughly reconstituted under post-Fordist, post-Keynesian capitalism. The nature of the structural constraints on emancipatory forms of social change, and the associated imagination of alternatives to capitalism, have been qualitatively transformed through the acceleration of geoeconomic integration, the intensified financialization of capital, the crisis of the postwar model of welfare state intervention, the still ongoing neoliberalization of state forms and the deepening of planetary ecological crises (Albritton *et al.*, 2001; Harvey, 2005). The most recent global financial crisis—the end result of a ‘roller coaster’ of catastrophic regional crashes that have been rippling across the world economy for at least a decade (Harvey, 2008)—has generated a new round of worldwide, crisis-induced restructuring that has still further rearticulated the epistemological, political and institutional conditions of possibility for any critical social theory (Brand and Sekler, 2009; Gowan, 2009; Peck *et al.*, 2009). While the four aforementioned elements of critical theory surely remain urgently relevant in the early 21st century, their specific meanings and modalities need to be carefully reconceptualized. The challenge for those committed to the project of critical theory is to do so in a manner that is adequate to the continued forward-motion of capital, its associated crisis-tendencies and contradictions, and the struggles and oppositional impulses it is generating across the variegated landscapes of the world economy.

Confronting this task hinges, I submit, on a much more systematic integration of urban questions into the analytical framework of critical social theory as a whole. As mentioned above, the problematic of urbanization received relatively scant attention within classical Frankfurt School analyses; and it is only relatively recently that

Benjamin’s wide-ranging sketches (2002) on the capitalist transformation of 19th-century Paris have engendered significant scholarly interest (Buck-Morss, 1991). Even during the competitive and Fordist–Keynesian phases of capitalist development, urbanization processes—manifested above all in the formation and expansion of large-scale urban regions—figured crucially in the dynamics of capital accumulation and in the organization of everyday social relations and political struggles. Under present geohistorical conditions, however, the process of urbanization has become increasingly generalized on a world scale. Urbanization no longer refers simply to the expansion of the ‘great towns’ of industrial capitalism, to the sprawling metropolitan production centers, suburban settlement grids and regional infrastructural configurations of Fordist–Keynesian capitalism, or to the anticipated linear expansion of city-based human populations in the world’s ‘mega-cities’. Instead, as Lefebvre (2003 [1970]) anticipated nearly four decades ago, this process now increasingly unfolds through the uneven stretching of an ‘urban fabric’, composed of diverse types of investment patterns, settlement spaces, land use matrices and infrastructural networks, across the entire world economy. Urbanization is, to be sure, still manifested in the continued, massive expansion of cities, city-regions and mega-city-regions, but it equally entails the ongoing sociospatial transformation of diverse, less densely agglomerated settlement spaces that are, through constantly thickening inter-urban and inter-metropolitan infrastructural networks, being ever more tightly interlinked to the major urban centers. We are witnessing, in short, nothing less than the intensification and extension of the urbanization process at all spatial scales and across the entire surface of planetary space (Lefebvre, 2003 [1970]; Schmid, 2005).

As during previous phases of capitalist development, the geographies of urbanization are profoundly uneven—but their parameters are no longer confined to any single type of settlement space, whether



defined as a city, a city-region, a metropolitan region or even a mega-city-region. Consequently, under contemporary circumstances, the urban can no longer be viewed as a distinct, relatively bounded site; it has instead become a generalized, planetary condition in and through which the accumulation of capital, the regulation of political-economic life, the reproduction of everyday social relations and the contestation of the earth and humanity's possible futures are simultaneously organized and fought out. In light of this, it is increasingly untenable to view urban questions as merely one among many specialized sub-topics to which a critical theoretical approach may be applied—alongside, for instance, the family, social psychology, education, culture industries and the like. Instead, each of the key methodological and political orientations associated with critical theory, as discussed above, today requires sustained engagement with contemporary worldwide patterns of capitalist urbanization and their far-reaching consequences for social, political, economic and human/nature relations.

This is an intentionally provocative assertion, and this brief paper has offered no more than a modest attempt to demarcate the need for such an engagement and some of the broad intellectual parameters within which it might occur. Clearly, the effective elaboration of this 'urbanistic' reorientation of critical theory will require further theoretical reflection, extensive concrete and comparative research, as well as creative, collaborative strategizing to nourish the institutional conditions required for an effervescence of critical knowledges about contemporary urbanization. I argued above that critical urbanists must work to clarify and continually redefine the 'critical' character of their theoretical engagements, orientations and commitments in light of early 21st-century processes of urban restructuring. Given the far-reaching transformations associated with such processes, the time seems equally ripe to integrate the problematic of urbanization

more systematically and comprehensively into the intellectual architecture of critical theory as a whole.

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