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The Actuality of Theoretical Detour: Reading *The Urban Question* on a Critical Point

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FROM AN URGENT SITUATION

When trying to capture the complexity of reality in our contemporary social world, the most difficult aspect is to find actual problems—in other words, to reach *Problematique*. Particularly at the time of crisis, “real” critical problems take a back seat and are often repressed because of dominant social forces. Pseudo problems with easier solutions or too-simplified oppositional opinions are brought in the foreground quite often, whereas the “critical” nature of the problems remains unattended. As a result, the crisis deepens and intensifies.

For people who wish to understand the symptoms of social structural change and the transitory forms of urban conditions after serious situations such as a financial crisis, great disaster, or the critical conditions of a nuclear energy system, it is critical to find a way to attend actual problems, which are hidden in reality, and to possess an analytical tool for the elucidation of crucial social phenomena. When trying to manage this task, we know that re-reading classic works provides us some lessons and implications because these works often deal with the task of approaching their own *problematique* seriously, and in creating suitable analytical tools for it.¹

The Urban Question is, I believe, one such work, originally published in French in 1972 by Manuel Castells. The basic objective of this book was to communicate with readers certain experiences of work aimed at producing a dynamic research, and to

understand a range of critical situations and structural changes of capitalist urban spaces during the late 1960s through the 1970s. This article will focus on these “experiences of work” and the principles of method-in-use on that work. Here, the principle of method-in-use means understanding the concrete ways that are used to define actual tasks and creating a specific method of research and analysis suitable for them. The principle of method-in-use in *The Urban Question* is, as Castells shows, composed of three moments: the epistemological rupture from urban ideology, theoretical construction of urban structure, and concrete research on urban practice. In the following sections, these moments will initially be briefly described. Then, the actuality of the theoretical movement composed of these moments will be specified.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL RUPTURE FROM URBAN IDEOLOGY

Any social investigation has to begin with a certain situation that is historically socially given, irrespective of the theme it deals with. In case of *The Urban Question*, the “raw” materials of the work were “ideological representation,” “knowledge already acquired,” and “the specificity of the concrete situations studied” about contemporary urban problems. All these aspects are characterized by the dominance of ideological elements; because of which, such an ideological envelope has to be cut up. To escape from an epistemological limit created by

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false questions, a means of mediation must include an attempt to show the contradiction between real observation and the ideological discourses about it. For example, Castells, with his research group, carried out an inquiry on the massive levels of pollution caused by a large food factory in a working class quarter located in a suburb of Paris at a time when no newspaper brought up the critical topic of serious pollution. Through the direct investigation of the factory and local inhabitants, the gap between ideological discourse and the study of “harmful effect” was clearly brought to attention.

However, becoming aware of such a contradiction is not enough to justify further investigation. As Castells said, “once the contours of the ideological discourse on the urban have been established, the supersession of this discourse cannot simply proceed by means of a denunciation; it requires a theoretical analysis of the questions of the social practice it connotes (p. 2).”² An analysis of the housing crisis is one of its examples. On the basis of the analysis of concrete data about a housing problem in Paris, which was called “the housing shortage” in ideological language, it is clearly revealed that “the housing shortage” is not “a matter of the balance between supply and demand.” The problem, therefore, is formulated into “the disparity between the needs—socially defined—of the habitat and the production of housing and residential amenities (p. 146).” To highlight this problem, the structural analysis of this “disparity and its historical singularities” as well as the theoretical tools suitable for the analysis of the production process of housing crisis in a capitalist economy are required.

THEORETICAL CONSTRUCTION OF URBAN STRUCTURE

Space is “not merely an occasion for the deployment

of the social structure but a concrete expression of each historical ensemble in which a society is specified (p. 115).” This is the starting point of theoretical work in *The Urban Question*. To transform the way of understanding space and approaching the actual question, a concept of “mode of production,” which is redefined through Althusser’s *Reading Capital*, was introduced into the work. This “theoretical event” is of significance in supporting a “transition from ideology to science.”³

Using a concept of the mode of production, which basically means “the particular matrix of the combinations of the fundamental instances (systems of practice) of the social structure: essentially the economic, the politico-institutional, and the ideological (p. 125),” enables the reader to grasp the specificity of the form of social space. As Castells wrote, “to analyze space as an expression of the social structure counts, and therefore, to study its shaping by the elements of the economic system, political system, and ideological system, and by these combinations and the social practices derived from them (p. 126).” Building on the above, a new theoretical question arises: what is urban space? In other words, with theoretical precision, what is the specificity of urban space as the expression of the articulation of a social structure within a unit defined in one of the instances of the social structure? As is popularly known, Castells’ theoretical hypothesis states that “the urban” is an economic unit, and relatively speaking, it relates to labor more power than the production. “Urban spaces, thus, become spaces defined by a section of labor force, delimited both by a job market and the (relative) unity of its daily life (p. 236).” Furthermore, the concept of “urban system” is proposed, which essentially means “specific articulation of the instances of a social structure within a (spatial) unit of the process of reproduction of labor force (p. 237).”

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The conjuncture of the urban system, which is constituted by the relationship of element, sub-element, and their roles and levels in social structure, makes it possible to conceive of a social situation. However, mere analysis of such conjunctures does not enable us to grasp the social process of the production of that situation. “An analysis of urban structure while historically elucidating given spatial forms, in which is expressed the internal logic of the reproduction of labor power, regularly comes to a halt whenever it is the matter of apprehending the process of the production of these forms and practices, and whenever one wishes to establish its law of development and transformation. Indeed, because the structures exist only in practice, the specific organization of these practices produces autonomous (though determined) effects that are not all contained simply in the deployment of structural law (p. 244).” Because of that, an additional introduction is required; that is, an analysis of social agency and a specific link between the structural field and the political process, which includes the intervention of the institutional system and social movement.

THE POSITION OF URBAN PRACTICE IN CONCRETE RESEARCH

Castells wrote, “As soon as one approaches the analysis of a concrete situation, the essential axis of its interpretation derives above all from its location in the political process—that is to say, from its relation to power.” Moreover, to study the political process often means making “a detour by the way of a structure analysis of its elements and the law of its social matrix (p. 243)” because, following Castells’ argument, only the construction of the structural matrix of a society enables one to intelligibly

elucidate the society, and only an analysis of the political process makes it possible to understand a concrete situation and its transformation.

Therefore, the “axis” of analysis of the urban question is on “the specific articulation of the processes designated as ‘the urban’ within the field of class struggle and, consequently, with the intervention of the political instance (state apparatuses) (p. 244),” which at that moment, means an analysis of the process of collective consumption. Moreover, to analyze the specific articulation of power and urban process, “urban planning” and “urban social movement” were articulated and proposed as the main objects of the research. These theoretical tools were deconstructed and analyzed in the process to grasp the urban structure in a practical manner and, particularly, to understand the urban practice in structural dimension. In fact, these tools were used in a limited way in the analysis of concrete urban situations. It is important to remember that these tools are only to be used for “cementing a reality,” “testing of the general law,” and “discovery of new relationships” in an advanced capitalist society. Therefore, the usefulness and fruitfulness of these tools is more important than the coherence of them.

Consequently, the field of urban practices was defined as “a system of combination between given combinations of structural elements (p. 266),” and then, a theoretical diagram was proposed. This diagram makes it possible to code the complexity of the urban practice, facilitating the more fruitful collection and the comparison of the results of research. However, that itself does not guarantee the capacity of the theoretical diagram for explaining the urban practice. In order to resolve that, more concrete research with theoretical hypothesis were to be conducted to make rectification possible.⁴

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ACTUALITY OF THEORETICAL DETOUR

The experiences of work in *The Urban Question* are a process to produce scientific knowledge on the urban problem of capitalist society. It can be identified as theoretical practice. As described above, it consists of three moments: epistemological rupture from urban ideology, theoretical construction of urban structure, and concrete research on urban practice. What is really crucial, however, is that these moments are not in a time-sequential order; nor are they the phases of a research practice, because, as a study on crafts of sociology suggested, experimentation is only as good as the theoretical construct that it tests. The heuristic value and proof value of such a construct depends on the extent to which it has enabled a break with ideology (Bourdieu et al. 1991: 58). The moments are not separated, but rather interwoven.

In *The Urban Question*, which correlated these different moments, Castells generated a movement of scientific exploration, which tried to combine its original critique, new concepts, and concrete research for transition from the implicit ideology to urban problematic. On account of the actuality that Castells showed by following this movement, although there remain many and correct critiques against it, this work is still alive and attractive, and especially, the theoretical construction of urban structure is an indispensable detour to bridge the critique of ideology and analysis of concrete situations. When confronting a critical moment in urban conditions, we must again remember the actual importance of such a theoretical detour.

Notes

1 This is one of the tasks for Study Group on Infrastructure and Society, organized in April 2011 at Hitotsubashi University,

Tokyo. In order to tackle this task, especially rethinking the relationship between infrastructure and society, a working group to reconsider theoretical issues is on the move. A first draft of this article is a discussion paper about the concept of collective consumption and Castells' theoretical work in *The Urban Question*, in process as of September 2011.

2 In this article, quotations are from the English edition of *The Urban Question* (Castells 1977).

3 As Balibar wrote, “‘the transformation in the way history is thought’ and ‘a transition from ideology to science’ are merely the effects of a single theoretical event: the introduction of the concept of a mode of production into traditional problematic of periodization” (Balibar 1970: 254, emphasized in original).

4 Empirical research is emphasized by Castells himself in an interview. “My attempt to bring together Marxist theory, urban sociology, a Tourainian knack for social movements and my personal emphasis on empirical research led to the writing of my first book” (Castells and Ince 2003: 15, emphasized by me).

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