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## URBANIZATION OF NATURE IN THE PROCESS OF SOCIO-ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE

### Abstract

The attitudes about global problems of the environment and the possibilities of the ‘sustainable future’ mainly ignore the urban origin of many ecological problems. The main objective of this research is to point out the problems of urban concept of the environment and its direct connection to the contradictions of capitalistic urbanization processes. Neo-Marxist thought reminds us that the urban environment has deeply penetrated into the dialectics of urban capitalistic process and the tendency to preserve the environment. Accordingly, it is important not only ideology and practice, but also the environmental protection projects to be viewed through a unique socio- environmental process as integral part of the urbanisation of nature.

**Keywords:** *urbanization, socio-environmental change, commodification of nature, neo-Marxist, nature*

## RELEVANCE OF THE TOPIC

*We live in the world chained to the term 'ecology'. It is one of the most frequent words nowadays and it is impossible to avoid it even in every-day conversation. Everybody talks about ecology, threatens by it or swears by it. It is simultaneously used as the measure for the worth of the present and as the foothold for the future.* (Pušić, 2001, p. 99)

The sustainable development and environmental protection issues, as well as the problems of resource and biotechnological restrictions of the city growth are some of the numerous urbanistic topics that have become relevant or even crucial for the existence and future of every large city. Due to the spatial, demographic, geopolitical, political or proprietary changes, both the spatial and functional transformation of the cities was intensified in the second half of the 20th and the early part of the 21st century. Since physical space belongs to the category of limited and non-renewable resources, the consequences of uncontrolled consumption of space are obvious both in the city centre and on the suburban. The consequences of such transformation are more demanding conditions for the environmental protection. Owing to the exploitation of the non-renewable energy sources and pollution of the environment there are growing number of researches in the field of sustainable development.

Today, when we talk about jeopardized environment, it is obvious that it is a subject broached a long time ago. Ever since man accepted the fact that 'the industrial' became the dominant characteristic of our civilization, the interest and concern for its consequences have simultaneously begun to grow. Although followed by a socio-economical development, the urbanization of nature has also become a generator of a series of critical conditions in every segment of both spiritual and material relations. However, in the increasingly diverse and extensive literature on sustainable development, little attention has been devoted to the urban as the process created by socio-environmental change. It is therefore necessary to reconsider the negative impact of urbanization and social development on the environment. The aim of this research is to gain insight into the questions of destruction and transformation of nature through the processes of industrialization and urbanization rather from the historical-materialistic perspective, than from the contemporary perspective of the environmental justice movement.

## THE PROCESS OF SOCIO-ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE

Both ecologically oriented social theoreticians and socially oriented environmental theoreticians have considered the relationship between the city and nature to be an interesting research topic. Urbanization was long considered to be a process where 'natural' environment is being replaced by 'built' environment. Such approach positions the city as the antithesis to nature. During the last couple of decades, theorization of the man-nature relationship has been considerably improved. Contemporary scientists more and more recognize that both natural and ecological conditions and processes cannot exist apart from the social processes, but also that the existing social and natural conditions are always the result of a complex transformation of the existing configurations that are at the same time natural and social.

Friedrich Engels was the first to point out the complexities of socio-environmental relationships. He maintains that perceiving the nature as a whole we can see the picture of a continuous network of relations and interactions, permutations and combinations, where nothing remains where it was, but keeps moving, changing and vanishing. (Engels, 1940) Furthermore, the idea of 'metabolism' is the central metaphor of the Marx's approach to the analysis of the internal dynamic relations between man and nature. According to Marx, the socionatural metabolism provides the basis and possibility for the existence of socio-environmental history throughout which both nature and man transform. It can therefore be concluded that the materialistic approach insists on 'nature' being an integral part of the social life metabolism.

Following this way of understanding the socio-environmental relationships Henri Lefebvre, a representative of the neo-Marxist thought, claimed that natural space had never really stopped to be the origin of the social process. Ever since the capitalism and the social development showed that their survival depends on the possibility to expand and conquer space (land, resources, energy), theoretical thought has been forced to redefine not only economical, political and cultural, but all the other forms, functions, structures and social needs inherent to urban society:

*Space in the sense of the earth, the ground, has not disappeared, nor has it been incorporated into industrial production; on the contrary, once integrated into capitalism, it only gains in strength as a specific element or function in capitalism's expansion... Not only has capitalism laid hold of pre-existing space, of the Earth, but it also tends to produce a space of its own. How can this be? The answer is: through and by means of urbanization, under the pressure of the world market; and, in accordance with the law of the reproducible and the repetitive, by abolishing spatial and temporal differences, by destroying nature and nature's time. (Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 325-326)*

Social production of urban environments Lefebvre calls 'the second nature'. According to him social production is necessarily socially generated thus opening the way to understanding the complex mixture of political, economic and social processes that shape and reshape the urban landscapes. Both Lefebvre and the rest of neo-Marxists, including David Harvey, considered the urban to implicitly represent the major achievement of the capitalistic (or 'modern') social relations and the broader global, socio-environmental relations whereby the modern life has been created, both materially and culturally.

Within the capitalistic social relationships, permeated by the circulation of capital and mobilization of human resources, the inevitable metabolic transformations and synthetic relations between society and nature occurred. It is therefore important to understand the gradual quality of the capital accumulation functioning through the ecosystem processes (systemic ecology processes) from the ecology viewpoint. Energy flows, raw material balance changes and environmental transformations (some of them irreversible) depict the levels and influences of the metabolic transformations on the ecosystem. Likewise, Harvey in his book *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* claims that there is nothing unnatural about New York:

*The circulation of money and of capital have to be construed as ecological variables every bit as important as the circulation of air and water. (Harvey, 2006, p. 88)*

## COMODIFICATION OF NATURE – THE RELATION BETWEEN THE USE AND EXCHANGE VALUE

*The production of space goes hand in hand with a new emphasis on 'nature' as source of use values (the materiality of things)... For Marx nature was the only true wealth, and he carefully distinguished such wealth from fortunes measurable in terms of exchange value, in terms of money or specie. This idea remains true and profound, provided always that secondary (produced) space is not arbitrarily divorced, as if it embodied some particular significance, from the primary space of nature, which is the raw material and the matrix of production. (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 350)*

Exploitation of the existing non-renewable natural resources has caused the global problem of collision between space and the new raw-material and energy sources. As a consequence of this problem, the increased use value of space and natural raw materials that have long been in the shadow of the exchange value, has gained importance. Lefebvre observes that the relative abundance of industrial products in so-called consumer society of today is followed by the inverse appearance of a new shortage of both space and natural

resources. This dialectics has rarely been chosen as a research topic, since its influence has been diminished by the continuous discussions about pollution, ecosystems and resource exploitation. Such interpretations can be viewed as a mask for socio-political strategies. Commodities that were previously abundant because they occurred ‘naturally’ and had no real value because they were not man made, have become rare and gained greater exchange value. Owing to the exhausting of natural resources and the continuous growth of their exchange value, new demands for the production of the ‘elementary’ raw materials and energy have occurred.<sup>1</sup> The finality of nature, i.e. the exhaustibility of the non-renewable natural resources, has contributed to the fact that, although not man made, the resources, especially those that cannot be gained from a renewable source, are given greater use and exchange values. Owing to the usage of the improved, high-technology applications, most of the modern urbanistic plans are conceived on the production of clean water, air and light – and even on the production of the land itself. With all its components and variants, the mimesis (imitation) of nature enables the establishment of the abstract ‘spatiality’ as a coherent system that is partly artificial and partly real.

Since the beginning of sustainable development initiative in the 1970s, the destruction of nature has been considered not only as a consequence of development and usage of technological devices, but also the consequence of the economic tendency to impose the characteristics and criteria of mutual exchange in relation to the location and its specific qualities. Consequently, space becomes the highest stake in the struggles and actions pointed to one direction – the accumulation of capital and gaining surplus value. Lefebvre claims that space, as the function of searching for the increasingly meager resources, energy, water, light, raw materials of both plant and animal origin, has already been reorganized and that there is a tendency to regain use and to lessen the importance of exchange through space.

## THE CONCLUSION

Both Marxist and neo-Marxist theories on the city offer an integrated approach that helps examining and understanding the synthesis of the economic, political, social and ecological processes that together form very uneven and very unjust urban landscapes. Powerful forces of socio-environmental relations that shape natural environments are constantly being transformed among the groups of participants and spatial scales. Historical-geographical insight into ever changing urban configurations is necessary for the understanding and consideration of the future radical political-ecological urban strategies.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid, pp.329-330

Social production of the urban environments has been well-recognized within the radical and historical-materialistic geography.

One of the main characteristics of urban life is the omnipresent need for socially and materially metabolized nature aimed to achieve a sustainable urban life. In everyday practice urban nature is the basic material and symbolical commodity that intensifies not only social, class and gender conflicts and struggles but also cultural divisions about its exploitation and control. While the traditional history of urban environment shows the tendency to focus on the configuration of objects and events, historical materialism gives priority to the research of networked socio-environmental metabolism and its correlation of forces through which things are constituted and organized.

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