

Governance Disorder and Reconstruction of “Urban Village”— Based on Neo-Marxism Spatial Theory Perspective

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Since the 1960s, in order to cope with the urban crisis prevailing in capitalist countries, on the basis of inheriting the spatial perspective embedded in Marx's historical materialism, Lefebvre, Harvey, and others have constructed a Neo-Marxism spatial theory aiming to analyze the spatial production, spatial conflict, and spatial justice under the domination of capital through the phenomena of political economy and other phenomena in the urban space. In the process of modernization in China, urban villages, as a special product under the reorganization of urban-rural spatial relations, are facing a serious dilemma of spatial governance disorder. Based on this, this paper attempts to explore the problem of governance disorder faced by China's urban villages from the perspective of Neo-Marxism spatial theory, and to reflect on and reconstruct the governance mode of China's urban villages in the new era.

Keywords: Neo-Marxism, spatial theory, urban village, governance disorder

As capitalism enters the post-industrial era, the intrinsic drive of capital to pursue unlimited surplus value makes it more and more necessary for it to gather all kinds of factors of production in space in order to form the power to satisfy socialized mass production. In the face of the urban conflict and crisis triggered by capitalists' pursuit of surplus value, some Western scholars have tried to turn to Marxism theory and method to answer this series of questions. It is worth noting that although Marx showed the importance of space and spatial consciousness in his classic discourse on capitalism, he himself did not make a systematic elaboration on the field of urban space. Based on this, since the 1960s, Neo-Marxism urban scholars, mainly represented by Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey, and Edward Soja, in the face of the crisis of the capitalist city, have initiated a “spatial turn” in urban governance and gradually formed a Neo-Marxism spatial theory, which further broadens the potential spatial theoretical connotations of Marxism. Since the new century, in the process of urbanization in China, spatial production and spatial planning have triggered a series of problems and contradictions, and thus many domestic scholars have begun to pay attention to and introduce Neo-Marxism spatial theory and systematically apply them to urban spatial governance at different scales in China.

Specifically, according to the data of the seventh national census published by the National Bureau of Statistics in 2021, China's urban population has reached 901 million, accounting for 63.89% of the country's total population, and the proportion of the urban population has risen by 14.21% compared with that of the sixth national census in 2010. In a certain sense, the process of urbanization is a “suburban village—city” change process. However, due to the uneven development within the space, in the process of accelerated urban development, the “urban village” was gradually formed as the third spatial settlement pattern. In physical space,

most of the “urban villages” are included in or adjacent to the city, but in social space, although the “urban villages” have broken the closed and homogenized social structure of the traditional countryside, they have not been completely “assimilated” by the urban system and its culture (Lin & Wang, 2021). Based on this, the emergence of “urban villages” has inserted a “semi-marginal zone” into the “marginal-core” spatial structure of China’s countryside and cities, thus forming a completely new “edge-semi-edge-core” type of spatial structure.

Research Background: The Construction of Neo-Marxism Spatial Theory

The emergence of the phenomenon of imperialism in the 1870s, when the capitalist countries engaged in a fierce struggle over the redistribution of their spheres of influence abroad, prompted Marxists to examine the question of the relationship between non-capitalist and capitalist economic forms. For example, Luxemburg put forward the theory of capital accumulation, which explained the great significance of spatial expansion for the development of capitalism from the perspective of capital accumulation; Lenin illustrated that the nature of capitalism to occupy and expand space was further strengthened in the age of imperialism; and Bukharin, through the study of the hierarchical structure of the world economic system in the stage of imperialism, came to the conclusion that space was an important feature of the capitalist colonial system. Although Luxemburg, Lenin, Bukharin, and others inherited the path of Marx’s research on spatial theory and developed on its basis, their research on the Marxism spatial problem never managed to become the mainstream of Marxism until the emergence of the Neo-Marxism spatial theory.

On the basis of inheriting the basic position of Marxism, Neo-Marxism spatial theory, relying on Marxism political economy, explains space by analyzing the operation law of capital, social movement phenomena, and political relations between regions, and then extracts the social attributes of space from its material attributes, reflecting the dialectical relationship between space and society (Zhang, 2010). In other words, the theory intends to reach a systematic attempt to study the relationship between space and society by shedding light on the controversies of spatial production, spatial justice, and spatial conflict. Specifically, the discussion mainly involves three aspects: first, an analysis of spatial production and capital accumulation; second, an analysis of the “collusion” between capital and space, which has led to the usurpation phenomenon of freedom by urban alienation; and third, an explanation of how spatial production is the reproduction of social relations.

First, as the “origin of postmodern critical human geography”, French Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre pioneered the theory of “spatial production” in his study of the total alienation of capitalist societies, with the intention of explaining the complex spatial phenomena of advanced industrial society. Specifically, if any given society has its own mode of production and can construct a social space on the basis of its natural space, then there must also be a space and a mode of spatial production affiliated with capitalism. In this light, Lefebvre argues that “space” in the capitalist model is no longer the “container that sustains material production”, as Marx called it, and thus “spatial production” no longer refers to material production within space. Instead, “space” itself becomes an object of production, and the various elements that constitute space are incorporated into the capitalist mode of production as a whole for the production of surplus value. Harvey inherited Lefebvre’s theory of “spatial production” and proposed that in the process of production in capitalist societies, due to the large scale and long cycle of urban architectural production and the difficulty of transferring its own value in a short period of time, those spatial facilities originally produced to overcome the obstacles of urban space soon become obstacles to the accumulation of capital. In view of this, in order to meet the spatial needs of new capital

accumulation, capitalists have to choose between preserving the value of the original built environment and breaking the original architectural landscape to obtain more space for capital accumulation, and thus the spatial configuration of the capitalist city is always in the cycle of being broken and reconstructed. But in fact, this kind of “spatial restoration” can only postpone or transfer the inherent contradiction of capitalist production, and still cannot fundamentally solve the spatial crisis of capitalism.

Secondly, in view of the urban alienation resulting from the long-term cyclical operation of the main process of capital accumulation in urban space, space thus exhibits two main characteristics in contemporary capitalist society: first, the commodification of space. From the moment space is produced, it is not just a field to satisfy people’s productive lives, but actively participates in capitalist production activities as a commodity. However, the result of the commodification of space is the continuous destruction and reconstruction of various fixed buildings, transportation facilities, and material facilities such as urban landscape. Second, the ideologization of space. Under the perspective of capitalist production, space has become a political tool to manipulate social operation while participating in social and economic production, the degree of ideologization of space has become higher and higher, and the pursuit of justice has emerged simultaneously in the process of self-realization and liberation of people in the city. Harvey suggests that justice means socially constituted beliefs, discourses, and institutions that demonstrate the relationship between social relations and competing constructions of power and the material social practices that regulate and organize place at a given time. In short, justice is socially constructed, produced, and embedded in the hegemonic discourse of the ruling class. Within the city, urban spatial production allocates spatial resources according to the needs of capital, and in the process of spatially resetting labor and factors of production, the value-added capacity of capital is irrationally exaggerated, but what makes it possible for people to obtain a quality space to live and thrive is ruthlessly suppressed, and popular resistance to new spatial injustices responds to the quest for a larger movement of social justice (Cao & Zhang, 2011). On this basis, Soja suggests that spatial injustice and the social movement of urbanization for spatial justice can help to reflect on the existing dilemmas with a clear spatial perspective from the existing concepts of citizenship and democracy, social justice, and moral order, so as to get rid of the dehumanized and spatial and temporal loneliness of the individual in the metropolis, which has been caused by the alienation of the urban space.

Thirdly, in fact, the issue of spatial production is to some extent not confined to the discussion of material ontology, but often manifests itself in the reproduction of social relations. Specifically, with the gradual deepening of capitalist urbanization, urban spatial production has enabled a small number of privileged people to easily dominate the high-quality spatial resources that originally belonged to the public as a whole, thus exacerbating the disadvantageous situation of the producers at the bottom of the social ladder in the demarcation and application of urban public space. In this sense, spatial production is essentially the reproduction of social relations, and such social relations are gradually showing the characteristics of urbanization. In the city, the separation of the worker’s workplace from his or her place of residence means that the struggle for social survival faced by the worker is split into two separate types of struggles: the struggle for wages in the workplace and the struggle against the commercial capitalization of space in the place of residence. In the process of synchronizing these two types of struggles, the new material infrastructure of the city, once produced, is once again invested in reinforcing the antagonisms of social relations, and thus exacerbating the class antagonisms of the inner-city population.

Governance Disorder: Important Issues in the Spatial Governance of Urban Villages

Since the 1980s, after a period of “spatial and temporal compression”, many suburban villages in China have been incorporated into the scope of urban planning along with the expansion of the original urban space, thus realizing structural economic and social changes. At the same time, a third type of spatial settlement pattern different from the urban-rural dichotomy has been formed in cities, such as urban villages, which are outside the traditional urban and rural societies. However, the process of generating urban villages has dismantled the original spatial structure, triggered new contradictions and conflicts, and forced the current development of urban villages to face serious risks of governance disorder. In view of this, this paper attempts to use the neo-Marxism spatial theoretical framework to examine the lack of urban rights, the problem of citizenship of urban village residents, the reproduction of social relations and the crisis of social identity that exist in the process of spatial governance in China’s urban villages.

Lack of Urban Rights

At the present stage, an important symptom of spatial production in the process of China’s urbanization is the transformation of rural space into urban space, in which some rural spaces in the outskirts of cities have been incorporated into new urban areas and turned into urban villages, and a large number of villagers in the outskirts of cities have been swept up in the process of urbanization. Under these circumstances, on the one hand, the development needs of the inner regions, especially the hinterland, require “spatial supply” from the outer regions. While the development of the city center needs to draw on and rely on the supply of urban villages, the periphery, while yielding to the needs of the center, is unable to ensure that landless peasants enjoy equal access to employment, education, transport, health care, housing, and other aspects of citizenship. On the other hand, in recent years, many mass incidents have been triggered by the demolition and relocation of urban villages, the transformation of old villages, and environmental improvement, etc. The main factor is that the public has been excluded from the decision-making mechanism, and lacks the necessary right to information, participation, and decision-making. In fact, according to the traditional model of monistic social management, residents of urban villages to be transformed are the objects of education and transformation, and they are more often regarded by policymakers as “ignorant public” who fail to understand positively the connotations of the transformation policy or who are motivated by self-interest. However, this kind of confrontational thinking a priori places the transformer and the transformed in an antagonistic position, so that the people as the main body of life in urban villages have long been restricted to the scope of the object of urban village governance, and they lack smooth channels to express their own rationalized demands and legalized rights, which ultimately leads to the failure to respond to the reasonable concerns of the residents of the urban villages in a timely and effective manner when carrying out urban village regional spatial governance. If such a phenomenon persists for a long time, it will gradually lead to a crisis of trust in the government’s spatial governance.

Citizenship Problems of Urban Village Residents

From the internal viewpoint of the city, production factors such as capital, labor, technology, and other urban space are constantly spreading to the urban villages, but when all kinds of production factors invade the urban villages, the spatial resources of the latter are involved in the city, which makes the flow of spatial resources between “city and urban villages” always present a unidirectional state. Based on this, under the dual role of spatial production and renovation of old cities, cities have started to demolish a large number of urban villages

in order to seek development, and some residents of urban villages are forced to enter the city due to the policy of “removing villages and integrating them into residential areas”. However, at the same time, the current situation of overloaded cost of citizenship cannot fully give the urban village residents equal rights to engage in basic living and production in the city, and the “collusion” between the urban space and the capital has deprived the urban village residents of the necessary living space. In other words, on the premise that the residents of urban villages have not succeeded in realizing the transfer of their identities, the urban villages remain in fact in a backward rural state, and the residents of urban villages have not been truly integrated into the urban space, which makes it even more impossible to ultimately realize the urbanization of the human being. In the long run, the spatial differences within the city continue to widen, and spatial differentiation contributes to the polarization of wealth, thus further deepening the wealth gap between urban centers and urban villages.

Reproduction of Social Relations and Social Identity Crisis

As a kind of public resource, urban space is often subject to imbalance between supply and demand and differences in the use of groups in reality. Specifically, on the one hand, the residents of urban villages are also actively engaged in the production of space to serve urban construction, but their own living space is constantly squeezed under the domination of the logic of capital. In this sense, the original simple vision of the residents of the urban villages to change their own and their children’s living conditions through their own practical efforts to be granted access to high-quality spaces has been continuously shattered by the cruel reality of their predicament, which will further lead to the deterioration of unjust social relations and unequal social status and “intergenerational inheritance” between the “city-urban villages”, and will ultimately affect the overall social mobility and reproduction of social relations. On the other hand, social identity, as the foundation of social order, is also the value of group cohesion (Li, 2007). However, under the premise of social comparison, the residents of urban villages belong to the bottom group in the social structure, and it is difficult to be integrated into the city in terms of culture, psychology, and lifestyle, etc.; coupled with the lack of urban rights and the problem of civicization, they are more likely to be rejected by the urban aborigines, which makes this group easy to produce a sense of alienation and deprivation of urban space, and this kind of simultaneous or co-temporal problem makes the governance of urban villages fall into the dilemma of dilemma again.

Governance Reconstruction: Rethinking the Governance Model of Urban Villages

The Fourth Plenary Session of the 19th Central Committee of the CPC proposed that the modernization of municipal social governance should be accelerated, and that the centre of gravity of social governance and services should be shifted down to the grass-roots level. Against this backdrop, urban villages, as typical grass-roots social entities born in the process of urbanization, urgently need to construct a new model of social governance that is in line with their specificities in the face of governance dilemmas. It is worthwhile to make it clear that the gains of the relevant interest groups, such as the indigenous villagers, the floating population and the government, should not be based on the losses of the interests of other groups. In other words, the ideal outcome of the transformation should be a perfect infrastructure, stable income and in-situ resettlement of the indigenous villagers, and low-cost housing for the floating population. Based on this, under the perspective of neo-Marxism spatial theory, the reconstruction of the governance paradigm of urban villages in the new era should take the conversion of governance goals as the entry point to explore and reconstruct the new model of spatial governance of urban villages.

First, the way in which urban village space is produced should be improved in order to safeguard the right to the city of urban village residents. Any mode of social production always has a corresponding form of social space, and any society must be able to produce social space that is compatible with its own mode of production. The city, as a public product, is a survival space for individuals to protect themselves from the wind and rain on the physical level, and a spiritual space to realize the formation of families, the upbringing of offspring, the communication of emotions, and the comfort of psychology on the social level (Liu & Lu, 2021). Therefore, in the process of urban village governance and transformation, all kinds of physical infrastructure construction and ecological environment transformation should be based on the production and living needs of the residents' groups, and at the same time satisfy the needs of the residents' emotional attachment to the urban space.

Second, the governance of urban villages needs to adhere to the people-centered approach and reshape multidimensional spatial justice. At the present stage, the dilemma of urban village governance is essentially due to the unequal spatial development of “city-urban village”, and the lack of spatial justice has a direct impact on people's mode of production, living conditions, humanistic care, and happiness index. In view of this, in the process of pursuing spatial justice, the arbitration between various confrontational demands through some universal principles of justice is not decisive, but should be transformed by the concepts of justice and rights in a specific environment (Gao, 2011). In the face of the dilemma that the due rights and justice discourse of the residents' groups have been constantly deconstructed in the process of urban village governance, on the one hand, the heterogeneity and difference between the subjects should be emphasized in the process of governance to ensure that the space of urban villages can return to its people-oriented value of use through the improvement of the public housing and the common property rights housing system, etc. On the other hand, the public should be allowed to fully participate in the spatial governance of urban villages and decide on spatial governance affairs, giving the public the right to speak, changing the confrontational thinking in the original governance process into a negotiation and dialog, and alleviating the phenomenon of “aphasia” or even “lack of position” of the public in the original governance process, so as to finally break the “crisis of rationality and legitimacy in the governance of urban villages”.

Thirdly, community building should be strengthened and communal interaction should be promoted. In the face of the differences in the interests of the two polarized groups of residents in the “city-urban village”, urban village governance should clearly see that although the different subjects cannot achieve complete convergence of interests in some aspects, there is also a common interest among the various roles that expects to properly solve the problems of urban village governance. In other words, the governance of urban villages directly reflects a relationship between the various participating subjects, which emphasizes joint collaboration and interdependence rather than malicious competition and fierce confrontation, and thus focuses on the coordination of the relationship between urban residents and the people of urban villages (Zhou, 2006). Through the improvement of community public welfare and cultural facilities, the establishment of public space, cultural and recreational activities, the community can guide the acceptance of residents to carry out the mass organization of the life of the meeting, and thus increase the social acceptance of the residents of the urban villages at the same time, to protect the original urban residents living a sense of well-being.

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