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Is There An Urban Sociology? Questions on a Field and a Vision

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Is There An Urban Sociology?

Questions on a Field and a Vision

by Sharon Zukin

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1. Prologue to Crisis

In 1968, a year well known for anti-establishment uprisings, the young sociologist Manuel Castells issued his own provocation. He published an essay, “Is There An Urban Sociology?,” in a new French journal, asking whether urban sociology is, or could ever be, a scientific field of inquiry [Castells 1968, 72-90]. This was a challenge both in France, where urban sociology was then in its infancy, and the United States, where urban sociology was experiencing a rebirth that recalled the early glory of the “Chicago School” during the 1920s.

The social context in both countries was turbulent. Violent urban protests erupted in France because rapid economic modernization brought so many young people to cities who expected to find both white-collar jobs and a radically new way of life. Many felt that they were neither listened to nor represented by the conservative government, and the official opposition parties and labor unions were slow to embrace their rejection of the political process. Instead, young people followed the tradition set during the French Revolution of collectively confronting the center of state power in Paris, and took to the streets.

In the United States, urban protests reflected the concentration of underemployed and underprivileged racial minorities, primarily African Americans and Latinos, in northern cities. During the 1950s and early 1960s the demographic balance in those cities had shifted from middle class and working class whites to working

class blacks. Government subsidies helped to build new, single-family homes in the suburbs and made home ownership possible for young adults, often World War II veterans, who had grown up in the city. Many of these new suburban homeowners were children of European immigrants who had come to the United States in the late Nineteenth century. Opening suburban homeownership to them was a safety valve for rising expectations and a spur to postwar growth, but because of racial barriers suburban living was closed to nonwhites. Confined to the oldest areas of cities and often unable to pay market rents, members of ethnic minorities were swept up in a wave of government-sponsored urban renewal and concentrated in public housing projects with poor public services. Their experience of urban renewal was like that of the working class families who were moved into new *grands ensembles* on the suburban edge of Paris and even more like that of the North African and West African families who later replaced them.

Even after the moral pressure exerted by the civil rights movement in the South forced the U.S. Congress to enact new laws guaranteeing racial equality, segregation continued unchecked in northern cities during the 1960s. Facing poor public schools, harsh treatment by the police, who at that time still had few black or brown officers, and the dual scourge of rising illegal drug addiction and the military draft to fight in Vietnam, residents of majority-black ghettos took to the streets in spontaneous protests that were called “race riots.” These often erupted after police officers made an arrest that onlookers and other community residents deemed unfair. Fanned by rumor and prolonged by local authorities’ resistance to making concessions, the events sustained a form of protest that had begun several decades earlier and spread from city to city under similar circumstances. They generally provoked severe repression by the police.

Though the government’s response varied in different cities, the protests of black and brown people were for the most part confined to ghetto areas. After the assassination of Rev. Martin Luther King in 1968, instead of marching to symbols of power like the city hall or traditional sites for political rallies as protesters would do in Paris, ghetto residents attacked shopping streets in their own neighborhoods. These were “urban” protests in their geography but their target was social justice.

Like young people in France, American youth made a connection between the generational and the political. They related the growing disillusionment of ethnic minority groups to their own alienation from mainstream consumer society. Increasingly aware of the escalating war in Vietnam because they too faced the military draft, college students expressed a lack of belief in the U.S. government which, under presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, both Democrats, had led the country into the war.

The assassination of President Kennedy in 1963, followed by the assassinations of Black Muslim leader Malcolm X in 1965, Rev. King in April 1968, and Senator Robert F. Kennedy in June 1968, made it seem as though opposition by traditional means was destined to fail. Rhetoric and tempers were inflamed, not least by a churning spirit of protest against patriarchy on all sides. During the Democrat Party presidential convention in November 1968, the Chicago police met young people's protests with the same kind of force they used in the ghettos.

In both countries and in others as well, social disenfranchisement and cultural alienation became an urban problem because of cities' potential to spread widespread revolt. A dense population with access to multiple means of communication, whether on television or through social media, and symbolic sites of power can easily threaten national elites. While governments funded urban research to prevent more disorder, studying cities emerged as a way for sociologists to confront deep social inequality on the one hand and the problematic legitimacy of the state, the police, and the military, on the other.

Castells' essay does not address these issues. Instead, he focuses on demolishing the intellectual basis of urban sociology, the idea that it is a distinct field of inquiry with its own theoretical subject. The city, he shows, is shaped by larger forces: industrial society, on the one hand, and family and friendship networks, on the other. Geography is not destiny, for all social spaces reflect practices that are shaped by men and women who try to advance, defend or in any case express their social status.

Nor is community, in Castells' view, a real theoretical subject. Though urban sociologists presume that community is the social space of a hypothetical local autonomy, Castells sees it as an emperor who has no clothes. Like the city, the community is entirely dependent on forces and events outside its geographical boundaries. Today we might say that the city is created by both structure and scale.

At that time Castells' work was influenced by the French Marxist theorist Louis Althusser, who aimed to develop a rigorously structural analysis of society based on a "scientific" understanding of historical materialism. But there's a close relationship between "Is There An Urban Sociology?" and non-marxist methodological exercises, beginning with the epistemological epigraph that Castells takes from Max Weber. Though Castells criticizes the Chicago School as well as French empirical researchers, I think they would feel comfortable with the terms of his critique even if they did not agree with his conclusions.

Why return to this essay now? Despite Castells' eminent reputation, it has never been widely read. The sociologists whom he discusses, and the empirical studies that they did, have not been influential. Most important, however, most sociologists tend not to question the intellectual tradition in which they work. Maybe we're so

busy testing models, or applying for funds to test them, that we don't ask basic questions about why we are doing this work at all. We focus on narrow questions of methodology and forget about broad foundations of epistemology. Above all urban sociologists are empiricists. I won't say that we are all *flâneurs* but most of us do spend a lot of energy in empirical case studies.

Yet the troubling question "Is There an Urban Sociology?" is important. It speaks to our continual concern that urban sociology is always in crisis, a point, as Castells suggests, that seems never to bother sociologists who study the family, the state, or economic firms. And it responds to our nagging fear that we urbanists as a collective intellectual enterprise have not only lost our place at the core of sociology but also our vision of what we want to achieve.

The position of urban sociology in the U.S. mirrors these concerns. U.S. sociologists have developed so many specialized courses of study that "urban," along with gender, race, ethnicity, and social class, is only one field among many "electives" that compete for market share in student enrollments. This share is growing smaller. Most U.S. colleges that are not located in cities do not offer urban sociology courses. Faculty members in top-tier research universities tend to neglect "local" research topics even if they do work in cities. As a result, professors in only a minority of post-graduate departments list urban sociology as one of their specialties. This ensures that the vast majority of students who get a PhD in sociology know nothing about cities or think about doing urban research.

Though urban sociology's low rate of representation in university departments reflects the geographical dispersal of the U.S. population, especially its shift from cities to suburbs and exurbs, it perpetuates North Americans' historical anti-urban bias. In contrast to the rapid expansion of urbanization throughout the world, this is a shortsighted view. Moreover it dramatically contrasts with the origins of North American sociology.

When the discipline of sociology was brought to the United States from Germany in the early Twentieth century it was given an empirical American focus by the social scientists who formed the Chicago School. This group aimed both to document real conditions in Chicago in gritty detail and to assert general rules of social – i.e. human – order. The raw newness of that city gave them a living laboratory of conditions to study and the confidence to generalize about them, though what they called "the City" had a severely limited history. America lacked the long experience with varieties of urbanization that offered Max Weber material to write about the origins of city life in ancient empires and premodern Europe. This country also lacked the historic burden of uneven urban-rural development that so impressed Karl Marx. Americans did not develop the cosmopolitan sophistication that Georg Simmel brought to the

understanding of urban culture (and which Robert Park did not adopt despite having studied with Simmel in Berlin). Alien to their culture was Walter Benjamin's sense of tragic irony.

Maybe if a "New York School" had emerged, it would have taken a different approach. Nevertheless, at their time – the high point of both modernity and urban development of the industrial age – and in Chicago, with the resources of a rich university behind them and philanthropic support for research on urban poverty and immigration, the Chicago School was able to place urban sociology at the core of the sociological discipline. It promised to be a science for social control in the hands of a non-interventionist but seemingly benevolent local state and a progressive upper class.¹

But after the mid-Twentieth century, urban sociology lost its claim to intellectual hegemony. If "the city" had been its center, urban sociology was cast adrift by the steady development of residential and industrial suburbs, a tidal change aided by the increasing influence of automobiles. The interruption of capital investment in cities during the Great Depression and World War II made them seem poor and unattractive. Changing patterns of migration after 1920 – the decline of immigration from overseas coupled with rising migration of African Americans from the South and Puerto Ricans from the island – replaced anxiety about immigration, the trump card of the Chicago School, by a growing concern with race. Suburbanization leaped ahead after the Second World War, with the building of a huge, national infrastructure of industrial plants, office "parks," tract houses, shopping centers, and highways. All this reduced the importance of studying cities.

Cities returned to the research agenda during the 1960s when, as in the 1910s and 1920s, poverty and conflict between ethnic groups aroused public fears and drew government attention. Journalists fed a moral panic about juvenile delinquency, street gangs, and "white flight." Since then, reflecting the general opinion that cities are always "problem areas," U.S. sociologists have marginalized them in the study of race and poverty. They have been more interested in developing new sociological fields than in studying places. There are good reasons for this. The social movements and identity politics of the 1960s, and resulting changes in state policies, demanded research on inequalities of race and gender and a more nuanced understanding of how ethnic and sexual identities are formed. Since the 1960s the fields of social movements, culture, and media and technology have expanded to reflect their increasing

¹ Likewise the Pittsburgh Survey financed by the Russell Sage Foundation in the early 1900s fielded a multidisciplinary and multi-media research team to document the lives of the poor and immigrants and inspire social policies.

importance. With the enormous increase of global migration since the 1980s, immigration has again become one of the most important areas of sociological study.

Because half of the U.S. population now lives in suburbs, urban sociology is to some degree the study of an exotic world. The habitués of this world – immigrants, gentrifiers, hipsters, and artists – are Others, like the hobos, taxi dancers, and Negroes who fascinated the Chicago School. For these reasons as well as for its ability to portray social issues in dramatic, personal terms, urban ethnography attracts more interest than the study of social structure in urban political economy. But what is “urban” about this ethnography? If we write about how people in cities live, we are not describing “urbanism as a way of life” but poverty, modernity, ethnicity, class, and family. This is what Castells wrote, and what Herbert Gans showed in his earlier ethnographic studies of the “urban village” and of suburbia.²

Though many circumstances have changed since he wrote it, Castells’ essay plunges to the heart of what is problematic about urban sociology. If the field is “scientific,” what is its subject? Is it “the City” or capitalist urbanization in which cities just happen to be sites? What is the difference between describing social reality as a journalist, an anthropologist, or an ethnographer and making scientific knowledge about it? And here is an interesting point in light of the contemporary emphasis on cities and social justice: though Castells was engaged in social movements for change throughout the 1960s, the essay does not pose questions about changing society, or changing cities, to make them more egalitarian and more democratic.

2. The Present Crisis

The intellectual limitations of urban sociology were easier to digest in the 1960s. The field is larger now, the factors that must be taken into account are more varied, and the regions of the world that must figure in any analysis – and their interrelations – are no longer divided by material factors like wealth, institutional forms like colonialism, or distinctive qualities of space and the built environment. Abstract factors such as time are fragmented by different forms of movement, subjectivities, and technologies of power. This was already true at the “height” of modernity in Europe and North America in the early Twentieth century, when a visitor to Paris or any other

² Though the United States appears to be a highly urbanized country, most of the “urban” population lives in metropolitan areas that include both core cities and surrounding suburbs. By 1940, an equal share of the population lived in central cities and in suburbs, and since 1960 the suburban population has grown faster than the urban population (<http://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/censr-4.pdf>). On the lack of difference between “urban” and “suburban” ways of life, see Herbert J. Gans 1962a; 1962b; 1967.

modern city would have simultaneously experienced the height of tall buildings and the depths of the metro, the breathtaking speed of railroad trains and the shambling gait of horse-drawn carts. It is even truer now, when the technology of 3D avatars enables us simultaneously both to watch a computer screen and to watch ourselves interacting with others – that is, replicas of other people – *on* the computer screen. Analyzing multiple dimensions of space and time is daunting for anyone, especially for urban sociologists who until recently have thought of modern men and women as singularly *emplaced* in different kinds of social order.

Instead of urbanism and modernity, today we have urbanisms and modernities. To speak concretely, the Internet and its most popular apps (Skype, Facebook, Foursquare and Twitter) dematerialize space and deconstruct the favorite North American urban trope, “community.” Local power structures which at the height of modernity built both the material and symbolic landscapes of urban capitalism – factories, department stores, bourgeois villas and working class slums – are integrated into and dependent upon global institutions to produce the new “iconic” architecture of corporate office centers, shopping malls, and attention-grabbing modern art museums. While wars destroy traditional cities outside of the rich global core of Europe and North America, terrorism and fear of terrorism reach into every city of the world. Both intentionally because of state policies and unintentionally because of migration, cities are unbelievably big, from mega-cities in the Global South to multiplex cities like Dallas-Arlington-Fort Worth in Texas to the much bigger complex Shenzhen-Guangzhou-Hong Kong in China’s Pearl River delta. It no longer makes sense to speak of rural-urban migration but of perpetual migration.

Castells’ own intellectual journey – his moves from Spain to France and then to California, and his subsequent turn to the concepts of flows and network society – has rightly been credited with drawing attention to these processes. But this work drew him away from urban sociology many years ago. Like David Harvey, the economic geographer who has also powerfully shaped inquiries into the urban condition since the late 1960s, Castells has gone on to global subjects. There is little specifically urban in either man’s work. The “network society” or “society of flows” that is described by Castells privileges functional nodes that are not necessarily cities. What could be specifically urban in Harvey’s recent work focuses on the growing impoverishment of the urban poor in all regions of the world by a strategy of capital “accumulation by dispossession.” This includes displacement by gentrification in New York, London and Shanghai and by “slum clearance” in Mumbai and Cairo [Harvey 2003].³

³ It is interesting indication of the divergence between Castells’ and Harvey’s later work that Harvey also wrote an essay criticizing the Chicago School and other “bourgeois empiricists,” but in

Other sociologists have carried on the work that Harvey and Castells began. They have read the social-spatial theorist Henri Lefebvre, who to my amusement today appears in Castells's 1968 essay [Castells 1968, 49] as the author of an empirical research project on "neighborhood," and they look for a grounded "right to the city" in specific struggles over access to housing, to decision making, and to free expression in public space. But more than three decades after Castells and Harvey began to publish their extraordinary work and at least two decades since Lefebvre was recognized as a great theorist of space and society, urban sociology seems to be as much in crisis as it was when Castells challenged it. How can we answer these questions:

- a) Is a city a place or a time?
- b) Do cities have a different structure from other spaces?
- c) Is the city a distinctive subject of research or only a research site?

If "the city" is suspect, why don't sociologists write about space? I am always surprised that despite the "spatial turn" of the previous generation of cultural theorists, U.S. sociologists still reject space as a part of their theoretical project. Some years ago when I gave a lecture at a university in California, a colleague in the sociology department which had invited me kindly told me that I "should talk to the geographers" because I was "interested in space." He didn't understand what is "social" about space.

If we reject models based on space, the economy, or culture, we are forced to rely on concepts that are snapshots that drastically simplify social reality. But how do you convey the complexity of the urban subject when you teach college students and try to write for a broader public? Concepts like "network society" and "global city" have captured the attention of business and political elites, but translating them for most ordinary people remains a problem, and I emphasize *translation* because it is not so easy to explain them, and their correlates like "networked cities," outside the academy. There's too much flux to understand.

Practical examples from everyday life show that we do move in flows and networks, though we may experience them as a part of existing paths and strategies. The "Chinatown buses" that were created in the 1990s by an immigrant entrepreneur to transport passengers from Boston to other cities on the East Coast of the U.S. for much cheaper prices than the corporate-owned intercity bus companies like Greyhound or Trailways soon became so popular even outside the Chinese community – despite their high accident rate, including many fatalities – that they forced the major companies to lower their prices. They are an alternative network between cities that

contrast to Castells' adoption of Althusser's framework, Harvey's critique is grounded in classical Marxist political economy: Harvey 1978 [2001: 68-89].

are already linked in many other ways. Another example is the mutual influences, or translation, of cultural practices that are brought back to a home country by returning, even vacationing migrants. Juan Flores calls these “cultural remittances,” a parallel to the money sent home by migrants employed overseas, and he finds they are an important source of cultural and even social change in the Latino Caribbean [Flores 2009].

If spatial complexities were not enough to confuse us, urban sociologists often wear different hats – and have different goals – at the same time. I have always believed that urbanists even more than other kinds of sociologists are deeply committed to social and cultural diversity, equality, and utopian visions; in other words, they want to work toward progressive social change. Just as U.S. sociology has embraced the idea of “intersectionality” of race, class, and gender, so urban sociology should make explicit the intersectionality of science, empiricism, and ideology, not in the “unscientific” form Castells decried in 1968 but in the desire to contribute to progressive – or even radical – change in the Twenty-first century.⁴

3. Crisis and Career

My path as an urban sociologist intersects directly with the crisis of urban sociology. First I must admit that I became an urban sociologist thirty years ago by chance. Though I studied political sociology in graduate school, as a novice assistant professor I was assigned to teach two urban sociology courses: one the straightforward “urban sociology,” and the other on “the inner city,” a geographically overdetermined term that denoted the entire set of social practices and institutions associated with racial segregation, concentrated poverty, and typologies of deviance and thus signified the urban subject as a social problem.

Like Castells, I saw a field in chaos. Urban sociology had no theoretical subject either within or outside the field. There was no unifying framework; a wide variety of empirical issues were arrayed around the geographical site of “the city” with no analytical coherence. This course assignment plunged me into despair. I feared that I would never pull together a set of organizing concepts to teach an undergraduate course.⁵

Luckily, I soon found *Social Justice and the City*, David Harvey’s own attempt as an economic geographer to find the underlying logic in the contradictory and

⁴ Neil Brenner’s essay “What Is Critical Urban Theory” [Brenner 2009, 198-207] does this very well, but most urban sociology is more mainstream.

⁵ See my efforts in Zukin 1980, 575-601.

confusing loss of economic, social, and cultural value in U.S. industrial cities after World War II. And in a bookstore in Paris I found a series of empirical studies of postwar urban redevelopment in France that were published by Mouton and written by Manuel Castells, Francis Godard, Jean Lojkine, and most important for my future research, Christian Topalov, whose book in this series is a study of real estate developers in Paris. Despite the intellectual clarity of these books and their usefulness for understanding all kinds of state-sponsored urban redevelopment, none of them was ever translated into English. Like *Social Justice and the City*, all began with the task of studying capitalist urban processes, together with, in France, the even heavier role of the state.⁶

The French researchers' crucial finding was that space is produced; it doesn't just appear or develop "naturally." Because it is a social product that requires specific laws like zoning and often serious financial subsidies from the state, and also has the potential to move people around against their will, the production of space always represents forces of capital, always implicates political elites, and sometimes also provokes collective resistance. In those days this concept was a bombshell. I'm not saying sociologists were naïve, but in the United States urban sociology was still dominated by human ecology of the Chicago School and Parsonian functionalism. In either view, space was malleable, but no one discussed how patterns of human settlement, spatial and social mobilization of labor, or even changing land values reflected social and economic motives, namely capital accumulation and control. As Castells points out without mentioning his name, one member of the Chicago School, Homer Hoyt, did write about property values but he and his colleagues saw market forces as a normal reflection of the migration of people and capital, not a flashpoint of social struggle.

In all fairness I should point out that this was before Henri Lefebvre's work was translated into English and most sociologists hadn't yet read any geographers. So talking about the social production of space, especially for reasons of economic profit or even cultural attachment was a radical approach and not really welcome.

⁶ French economists and sociologists developed the overarching concept of state monopoly capitalism (borrowed from Lenin) to deal systematically with what American sociologists somewhat differently understood to be the power elite described by C. Wright Mills. Though state monopoly capitalism was quickly applied to urban developments in France, U.S. sociologists felt they had to work out other models that were appropriate to the American political context, especially local or municipal autonomy from the central state, and that didn't seem so overburdened by a Marxist heritage that they would be rejected immediately by non-marxists. For contrasting approaches see David Harvey 1973, and Harvey Molotch 1976. The French studies were all published by Mouton in Paris; they are available on demand from de Gruyter but rather expensive. Still on my bookshelf today are Manuel Castells, *Monopolville* [Castells 1974], Francis Godard et al., *La rénovation urbaine à Paris* [Godard et al. 1973], Jean Lojkine, *La politique urbaine dans la région parisienne, 1945-1971* [Lojkine 1972], and Christian Topalov, *Les promoteurs immobiliers* [Topalov 1974].

Though a member of the second generation of the Chicago School, Walter Firey [1945, 140-148], published a seminal article on the cultural symbolism of, and ethnic attachment to, homes in central Boston, as early as 1945, it wasn't until the 1980s that the dominance of human ecology was really challenged by political economy on the one hand and cultural analysis on the other. In the U.S. we called these approaches "the *new* urban sociology," to signal the death of the ecological paradigm and the birth of a new way of thinking about space in the social world.

While you begin to grasp the outlines of a field by teaching it, you only become a practitioner of that field by doing research. Again chance determined my path [Zukin 1982; Zukin 1989]. I found the situation that I wrote about in *Loft Living* not because I lived in a loft, which I did, but because one morning I read an article in the *New York Times* about several small manufacturers who were going to be evicted by the owner of their buildings in order to make a residential conversion to living lofts and I was outraged by the injustice of producing residential space in this way.

The building owner in this case had a legal right not to renew the manufacturers' leases, but the individual decision was taken in a disastrous political-economic context of deindustrialization. Loft living meant the loss of livelihood of semi-skilled workers, most of whom were African American and Latino; the unstoppable decline of manufacturing activity in the center of the city; and the nascent power of a new mode of cultural consumption that rejected the bourgeois utopia of the suburbs but imposed a specific kind of educated middle class control over the "wild" spaces of inner cities. Loft living freed those spaces for the production of more expensive, residential space by big and little property entrepreneurs. They literally produced space, very much as Christian Topalov had described the work of real estate developers in Paris.

Though I glimpsed it only dimly at first, the eviction of a few manufacturers from working lofts in Greenwich Village refracted a key moment of economic change and a major shift of cultural power within all cities. Call it deindustrialization or gentrification, or my own ironic term the "Artistic Mode of Production," which later and with a different argument morphed into Richard Florida's "rise of the creative class," the eviction of manufacturing signaled the emerging significance of culture – as aesthetics, cultural consumption, and lifestyle choices – for urban redevelopment. In *Loft Living* I followed Harvey and Topalov by pointing to the crucial importance of control of land in cities and the crucial role of real estate developers in producing urban space over and over again.

But *Loft Living* also emphasizes the importance of aesthetics and artists – or living like an artist – which began to shape demand for, or choice of, urban spaces during the 1970s. In this way it complemented British studies of the "new urban

middle classes” and became a cornerstone of emerging studies of gentrification. In the spirit of Castells, Harvey, and Topalov, I wrote *Loft Living* as a study of an emerging real estate market. To this day, however, most readers see it as a study of SoHo, a place. Whether we talk about markets or places, the key point is that even in this kind of development art galleries and retail stores are more important than artists’ studios. The production of art, regardless of the admiration expressed by politicians, developers, and the media for the creative class, is less significant to them than the production of space.⁷

Translated into English in the 1970s and early 1980s, the work of Walter Benjamin and Pierre Bourdieu influenced my second urban book, *The Cultures of Cities*, which looks at how different forms of culture have been incorporated into urban redevelopment by elite groups since the 1980s [Zukin 1995]. Here I was concerned with cultural capital in various forms and how it shapes space and both elite and public reactions to spatial changes. The rise of the symbolic economy, described by Scott Lash and John Urry [1994], has been very important in New York and London; its circuits of capital crossed between high art, real estate, and financial markets and connected cultural institutions such as museums to their donors on the one hand and to the national state on the other.

The chapter I wrote with Philip Kasinitz on the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MassMoCA) was one of the first analyses of the role of the Guggenheim Museum in diffusing a cultural model of redevelopment for older, deindustrialized towns. This role would later be analyzed in great detail for Bilbao and eventually for many other deindustrialized cities, often in connection with the annual European Capital of Culture designation. The competitive and expansionist pattern of using culture as a base of urban redevelopment is maintained by the current globalization of universities which enter into contracts with foreign governments to set up degree-granting institutions outside their home country as well as by their expansion in their home city, a strategy described by New York University President John Sexton as enriching the city’s “intellectual, cultural, and educational” strengths.⁸

Another chapter, written with my students, examined the roles of artists and immigrants working in different jobs in the front and back, respectively, of restaurants; this study pointed to the importance of these two groups in the new urban economy after the 1980s as well as their different and sometimes contradictory positions in labor and housing markets. *The Cultures of Cities* also looks at public space as

⁷ On both SoHo and SoHo-inspired development, see Zukin et Braslow forthcoming.

⁸ <http://www.nyu.edu/about/leadership-university-administration/office-of-the-president/redirect/speeches-statements/fire-and-ice-the-knowledge-century-and-the-urban-university.html>.

a source and site of fear about living with others in a heightened state of “difference”; this too became an increasingly important topic in urban sociology as well as in the world at large.

So my own path into urban sociology, like the careers of more prominent intellectuals, shows how insight, zeitgeist, and intellectual markets determine a researcher’s choice of subject and approach [Lamont 1987, 584-622]. Castells begins his essay in a similar vein, by pointing out that there are “fashions in sociology, usually produced in response to some demand of society.” He suggests that instead of responding to economic markets, sociologists’ choices respond to demand posed by the state. This is still the situation of urban sociology in Europe, even more than in the United States.

4. The Problem of Relativity

For all states, however, cities are a problem. Whether in the days of anciens régimes or current times of autocrats and human-made disasters, rulers fear the spread of information and discontent through cities’ dense social webs and closely bounded spaces. Social media and the Internet have made communication over vast distances easier and faster, but the size, density, and heterogeneity of cities (Louis Wirth’s formulation) enhance cities’ special power and vulnerability. Sociologists like architects are servants of power. Just as architects depend on the deep pockets of clients, so sociologists depend on the state for research funds, social recognition, and “policy relevance.” Often, therefore, sociologists adopt public officials’ view that urban populations should be “integrated” into a more or less harmonious, well defined urban society.

“Problem” populations are sociologists’ bread and butter whether they are deviants and delinquents, ethnic minorities or immigrants, or the working class and poor. The presence of these populations opens the gates to government intervention in “problem areas” and funds for research. But to qualify for funding sociologists must define these groups at least implicitly as problematic.

During the past few years urbanists from the Global South have challenged this view. They point out, as did U.S. sociologists in the 1960s and 1970s, that poor people struggle to “get over” and “get by,” and that they are endlessly adaptive and creative in assembling resources and jobs. Just as American sociologists discredited the term “ghetto” in the past, so sociologists who study Asia and Africa disown the term “slum,” as in Ananya Roy’s ironic appropriation of the recent popular movie title to

write about “Slumdog Cities” as a continually misrecognized (a term from Bourdieu) “terrain of habitation, livelihood, self-organization and politics” [Roy 2011, 223-238].

This is a welcome challenge to both our scientific and our political claims. But even while we acknowledge that the world is larger and messier than previous generations of sociologists thought, it is useful to return to Castells’ insistence that we should be scientific about our observations and theories. If a city is a problem, we should be able to theorize it, to make concrete observations about it, and to relate our observations back to our theory. Description is not enough. Spinning metaphors to avoid condemning the spaces where poor people live and work, or to say that cities of the Global South are not a problem, does not help us to know conditions or to improve them. We need to know what kinds of social structures are created in one place but not in another, and why.

The science of urban sociology needs to make comparisons. Just as we understand the distinctiveness of forms of habitation in relation to their history on the one hand and to other forms on the other, so we can only understand “slumdog” cities in relation to both earlier forms of expropriation in specific societies and “rich” cities of the Global North with their own forms of uneven development. There are plenty of differences between the Global South and Global North. Institutions may take different paths and follow different sequences. But to understand the production of urban space, we must not reject the study of structural forces that “new” urban sociologists have been exploring since the 1970s. Instead, we must expand it. We need more empirical studies that relate specific social and cultural practices to the same structural forces we see everywhere.⁹

In 1968, the urban site was simple; it was the American ghetto, the metropolitan region of greater Paris, the abstract “city.” Today, it has expanded to the largest imaginable sphere of human action, including nature, technology, and virtual as well as physical and symbolic worlds. The geographer Ash Amin [2007, 100-114] asserts that the “urban” is trans-human and trans-local. For Neil Brenner [2009, 206], the “urban” is “a generalized planetary condition” which is at once economic, social,

⁹ For these reasons I like Michael Herzfeld’s recent book [2009] on gentrification in a working class district in the center of Rome – although, in contrast to what a sociologist would do, this anthropologist condenses the central empirical story of the displacement of residents from a dilapidated palazzo into a few pages in his last chapter instead of making it the subject of a book-length case study. Herzfeld emphasizes Rome’s denigrated status as a slumdog or southern city within Italy and the Global North, and how that status shapes less affluent Romans’ accommodation with the powerful institutions, both formal and informal, that control their lives. Interesting for us sociologists, the only work on gentrification – and the only work outside of anthropology – Herzfeld cites is by my friend and colleague Neil Smith, the economic geographer who has theorized gentrification in relation to both local property owners’ interests and global neoliberal politics.

cultural, and political. We have come a long way from the Chicago School, who thought the city was the world. Today, the world is the city.

But this empirical reach may exceed our analytic grasp. Environmentalism and technology should be taken into account, but is it necessary to say we study the “non-human?” The “social” understanding of nature and technology has always focused on the human application of strategic rationalities. This means, paradoxically, that urban sociology is not about the city, but about space and time in a broader sense. What kind of science does this require?

Like the founders of urban sociology in the early 1900s, urban sociologists today are influenced by natural science models, but these models are quite different from in the past. Their assumptions were simpler than ours:

1900s	2000s
Stability	Mobility
Equilibrium	Asymmetry
Human-centered	Human + nonhuman (technology, nature)
Universality	Multiplicity
Autonomous subjects	Interdependent subjects
Interaction	Co-presence
Influence of biology	Influence of physics
Study institutions and group behavior to develop typologies	Study institutions, behavior, and subjectivities to understand specific developments

Writing about sociology in India, colleague Sujata Patel [2011] of the University of Hyderabad asks: “What is the object and scope of scientific investigations?” Thinking of India, she suggests studying a nation-state with many nations in it, and studying a people both at home and in diaspora, all with varied social locations and subjectivities. If we take this to heart, we urbanists need to make multidimensional, multi-sited analyses. How can we do this if the researcher is just one person? And would the theory that we develop then assert that all cities go through the same process of development? Or that the same underlying structure – whether it is capital accumulation, change and resistance, or struggle for status – is equally influential everywhere?

Though we acknowledge that modern humans are conscious of living in a more intense state of flux than ever before, we should not give up the idea that cities, and individuals’ paths within them, are bounded spaces. But while the materiality of cities is clearly limited – by nature, the state, and technology – the *idea* of cities is boundless. The theoretical subject of urban sociology is this central contradiction

between freedom and domination. Indeed the city is where men and women imagine themselves to be most free in the most physically bounded, economically constraining spaces.

This would be the contribution of a New York School if there was one. For urban sociology must be an ongoing effort to relate the dream of freedom to the bounded space and time of human habitation. We find the underlying structure beneath the variations, and we advocate a city that works to the benefit of all.

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Is There An Urban Sociology?

Questions on a Field and a Vision

Abstract: This essay takes up the challenge posed by Manuel Castells in the essay “Is There an Urban Sociology?” (1968) by giving reasons for the persistent lack of a consensus within urban sociology on the theoretical status of space and time and speculating about the loss of esteem within North American sociology for the study of urban life. Despite the rapid increase in urbanization around the world, urban sociology in the U.S. suffers from a specific American dislike of cities and greater growth in suburban and exurban peripheries of metropolitan cores. Moreover, recalling the origins of urban sociology in the U.S. in the study of “problem” populations, urban sociologists find it difficult to distance themselves from grants and careers supported by the state while they often confront abuses of states and markets in their everyday empirical practices. Analyzing the interaction of social, economic, and cultural forces in bounded urban spaces is made more complicated, finally, by the recognition of difference among cities in different regions of the world and the importance of mobility, technology, and struggles for dignity in modern life.

Keywords: Urban sociology, urbanization, metropolitan areas, social theory, Global North, modernity.

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