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Speaking From the Global North. A Response to Three Comments

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Speaking From the Global North: A Response to Three Comments

by Sharon Zukin

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Many thanks to the friends and colleagues who graciously read my essay and offered thoughtful comments: Norman Fainstein, Alan Harding and Talja Blokland, and Guido Martinotti. They have met my observations with a great deal of sympathy and without academic pretension. But reading between the lines of their texts or merely acknowledging that they take their role as critics seriously, I sense dissatisfaction. My text may have fallen below the level of their expectations because it is a personal essay, an “experiment,” rather than a comprehensive review or scholarly argument. Delivered as an informal lecture to a small group of professors and students at the University of Torino and revised for presentation now in *Sociologica*, it is an attempt to make sense of the field of social research in which I have made my intellectual career as a researcher, writer, and teacher: urban sociology.

I begin my essay by establishing my positionality in this field, a positionality that is simultaneously determined by my generation and my geographical location, my pedagogical practices, and the political context in which I teach. Guido Martinotti comes closest to the spirit of this effort when he recalls the origins of urban sociology in Italy in law faculties, on the one hand, and in the social movements of the 1960s, on the other. Norman Fainstein affirms this starting point when he recalls how the study of cities in the United States began in research on “problem” populations. This is as true of the founders of the Chicago School of urban sociology in the 1920s as of the founders (I dare to say “founders,” but in all humility I mean “explorers”) of the new urban sociology in the 1970s and 1980s.

My essay also reflects my concern about the low status of urban sociology among all the subfields of the discipline. This may be a particularly – or particularistic – North American view. The concern was born when I served as chair of the community and urban sociology section of the American Sociological Association, during the 1990s. One day while looking through the list of members of the section, I saw that most of them live in a handful of big cities, mostly on the East Coast of the United States. Because this region is losing population to the West, both the Far Northwest of Seattle and Portland and the desert Southwest from Austin to Los Angeles, I began to wonder about the future of urban sociology. If the field is identified only with cities, especially older cities, it risks losing the attention of young scholars who live outside of big metropolitan cores.

European colleagues, including Alan Harding and Talja Blokland, point out that though central cities in the United States may be losing population, metropolitan regions in the United States are growing. I cannot deny this. But it is suburbs and exurbs rather than traditional “urban” areas that are gaining most population and are being most actively developed. Common perceptions in the United States continue to view them as entirely different socio-spatial organizations from central cities. Data show rising poverty levels in older suburbs, especially those close to the urban periphery, and new immigrants are now as likely to live in rural towns and distant suburbs as in the big cities that were their historical “gateways” to the United States. Though these changes may gradually “urbanize” the culture of metropolitan fringes, they have not yet changed the built environment of sprawl, dependence on the automobile, and ideology of individualism that have shaped suburbia in the United States since the 1950s.

The contrast between increasing urbanization and continued denial of its effects is also true of rapidly growing metropolitan areas of the West and Southeast like Phoenix, Las Vegas, and Atlanta. These cities are suffering from problems that only recently have entered urban sociology’s research agenda: environmental sustainability, mortgage foreclosures and loss of homeownership, and citizenship rights for new immigrants. Though the political atmosphere in Sunbelt cities does not support the critical analysis that sociologists usually perform, these huge and growing problems make it necessary to train a new generation of urban sociologists in the very areas of the United States where their critical approach is most necessary and they are least represented in university departments.

Urban sociology has the capacity to integrate social, economic, and environmental problems into a broad, socio-spatial framework that connects human habitat, the built environment, the market economy, and cultural discourse. Unlike sociology in general, or specific topic areas like immigration, urban sociology considers men

and women, institutions, and processes as *emplaced*. Any issue under study has both a spatiality and a temporality – it has a *history* and appears *in this time*; it shapes – and is shaped by – social relations *in this place*.

Yet during the past few years I have become more aware of the need to integrate the study of urbanization in different regions of the world. As Norman Fainstein points out, I do have some experience outside of New York City. I have written about ideology and private lives in socialist former Yugoslavia (*Beyond Marx and Tito*, my first book and PhD thesis, for which Norman served as a faculty advisor) and on industrial and regional restructuring in France (*Industrial Policy*, a book I edited). Now I am working with colleagues (including Talja Blokland) on a transnational research project on the social production of local shopping streets in six global cities: Shanghai, Tokyo, Amsterdam, Berlin, Toronto, and New York.

Within our group of research partners, we know what we mean by “local shopping streets” but not all of our cities are affected, or are not affected in the same way, by the large-scale restructuring processes of globalization, migration, and gentrification. Trying to develop common institutional themes, we find state power very important – but not so important in New York as everywhere else. Migration is a huge issue reshaping local retail store ownership and the cultural identity of local shopping streets in New York, Toronto, and Berlin – though its visibility is limited in Amsterdam. However, migration is practically non-existent in Tokyo and not recognized as an issue in Shanghai despite non-Shanghai migrants’ dominance as retail entrepreneurs.

Our experience supports the need to encourage more transnational research partnerships. Current debates on how we can compare – and how we can even speak about – cities in the Global North and Global South go beyond what we used to think of as “comparative” sociology. But comparison suggests an either-or rather than a shared framework. While we do not yet know where global urban studies are heading, multiplicity, as Alan and Talja say, should be a norm.

So I agree with Norman Fainstein that urban studies must be multidisciplinary as well as multiregional. Most of the brilliant work on cities and spatiality in my lifetime has been written by critical economic and cultural geographers, not sociologists. I would make my intellectual home with them and with the historians who excavate minute incidents and reconstruct broad patterns. Their work provides both a spatiality and a temporality that nurture social theory.

But which theory? In my essay I follow Manuel Castells to try to confront the “theoretical subject” of urban sociology. Castells at the time wanted to confirm Louis Althusser’s approach to social theory, but I am more interested in getting rid of the perpetual quandary of urbanists. If cities are the archetypal modern human habitat,

are we urban sociologists studying cities or modernity, a space or a time? The mobility of people, the interaction of human and non-human, the struggle for dignity and democracy: it is easy to see how these problems are emplaced in cities, and intensified by cities, but it is not so easy, despite the social values I share with those who comment on my essay, to see how they are the theoretical subject of urban sociology.

In practice, mobility, technology, and politics *are* the theoretical subject. The new urban sociology destroyed the simplistic idea imposed by the Chicago School that cities are natural organisms. It also annihilated the idea that studying “communities” where men and women reside is the same as studying cities as complex, networked, but also polarized spaces of power and resistance. Manuel Castells attacked the fixation on “community” in his 1968 essay. His work and that of David Harvey, which laid the foundation for the new urban sociology, showed that cities are the most intense spaces both created by markets for land, labor, and capital and mobilized by struggles against those markets’ worst effects. Today scholars in the Global South tell us that mobility, technology, and the struggle for dignity are key dimensions of “city-ness,” AbdouMaliq Simone’s circular term for what I understand to be the continual process of making a city, uniting humans and non-human forces, spaces and times of different scales, and – if Norman Fainstein, Alan Harding, and Talja Blokland will allow me – domination and freedom.

Alan Harding and Talja Blokland are correct that I am concerned that urban sociologists should be taken seriously. As I have got older and the usual career issues have become less relevant, I have tried to write for a wider audience. But practicing “public sociology,” as American Sociological Association president Michael Burawoy has urged, is not easy. One problem is language, for most people outside of academic life are not comfortable with a rhetoric of theory. Most people prefer to read about the drama of individual lives rather than general social problems.

Another problem is politics. Sociologists are generally seen as left-wing people, more sympathetic to the “ninety-nine percent” than to the rich, more interested in telling people what is wrong with society than telling them how to make money (as economists do) or how to be happy (like psychologists). Often when I am speaking at a forum in New York City where I live, I am introduced as “a sociologist,” but I think that people understand this to mean “a socialist.” This automatically limits their ability to listen carefully to what I say.

In my work I use cultural terms to argue the case for protecting city residents’ right not to be displaced from their homes – as well as not to destroy the unique racial and ethnic identities of many urban spaces. But most New Yorkers immediately see that I am making an economic and a political argument... in favor of rent controls, which happens to be a very unpopular issue. This perception of my politics limits

many non-academic men and women's willingness to take me seriously. David Harvey, Susan Fainstein, and Peter Marcuse can wow students and colleagues with the image of a "just city," but this kind of normative scholarship is just not acceptable to a broad public.

Inevitably I think about the urbanists whose work has won the attention of a broad public outside the universities. Without criticizing them, I should say that most of their work does not stand up to power. It is concerned with the physical structure of cities rather than the complex forces that drive people to exercise power over urban spaces or to seek to exert at least minimal control over the circumstances of their lives.

As Guido Martinotti says, urban sociology is "a field where systematic analysis seems hopelessly out of reach in the highly imbricated worlds of urban realities." Paradoxically, the more bounded the space we study, the more challenging it is to analyze it.

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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.

Sharon Zukin is professor of sociology at Brooklyn College and the City University Graduate Center. She has written a number of books about culture and economy in New York City: *Loft Living*, *The Cultures of Cities* and *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places* (Oxford University Press, 2010). She won the C. Wright Mills Award for her book *Landscapes of Power: From Detroit to Disney World* and has served as chair of the section on community and urban sociology of the American Sociological Association as well as associate editor of the journal *City and Community*. She frequently lectures overseas, most recently at the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism of the University of Chile, and spent 2010-11 as a visiting professor at the University of Amsterdam.