

**THE NATURE OF CITIES:
The Scope and Limits of Urban Theory**

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Abstract

There has been a growing debate in recent decades about the range and substance of urban theory. This debate has been marked by many different claims about the nature of cities, including declarations that the urban is an incoherent concept, that urban society is nothing less than modern society as a whole, or that urban theory hitherto has been deeply vitiated by its almost exclusive concentration on the cities of the Global North. This paper offers some points of clarification of this debate. All cities can be understood in terms of a theoretical framework that combines two main processes, namely, the dynamics of agglomeration/polarization, and the unfolding of an associated nexus of locations, land uses and human interactions. But this same framework can be used to distinguish many different varieties of cities, and to distinguish intrinsically urban phenomena from the rest of social reality. The discussion thus identifies the common dimensions of all cities without, on the one hand, exaggerating the scope of urban theory, or on the other hand, asserting that every individual city is an irreducible special case

“Ne pas essayer trop vite de trouver une définition de la ville; c’est beaucoup trop gros, on a toutes les chances de se tromper.”
(Don’t be too hasty in trying to define the city ; it is much too big, and there is every likelihood that you will get it wrong)
Georges Perec (1974, p.119)

1. A Disputed Concept

The quotation above echoes a widespread view, namely, that cities are so big, so complicated, and so lacking in easily identifiable boundaries that any attempt to define their essential characteristics is doomed to failure. The same problem haunts urban studies generally, where a plethora of diverging claims about the nature of cities compete for attention. Despite this confusion, most of us have little hesitation in dealing with everyday propositions to the effect, say, that cities are now growing rapidly at locations all over the globe or that urbanization is moving ahead more forcefully than at any other time in human history. Indeed, urbanization is so prominent a feature of our world that scholarly agendas attuned to this issue continue to proliferate, even as disagreements multiply as to how exactly cities should be conceptualized and studied. How can we understand, and, we hope, point the way to a resolution of these tensions? And what might any such resolution mean for currently prevailing approaches to urban analysis? These are difficult questions, and any attempt to answer them must entail a number of complex theoretical and empirical (historical and geographical) maneuvers. In the section that now follows, we set the scene for this attempt by highlighting a number of ideas

that have been the focus of debate at different stages in the development of urban studies over the last several decades

2. Trends in Urban Theory

In the early and middle decades of the 20th century, a sort of orthodoxy, based on the work of the Chicago School of Urban Sociology, could be said to reign in urban analysis. Classic statements of scholars like Park, Burgess and McKenzie (1925), Wirth (1938), and Zorbaugh (1929) dealt with the city above all as a congeries of socially differentiated neighborhoods caught up in a dynamic of ecological advance and succession and forms of mental life. By the late 1960s, however, the ideas of this school of thought were coming under increasing critical scrutiny, especially by Castells (1968) who suggested that there is nothing especially urban about the questions studied under the banner of urban sociology because in the end they are simply questions about society at large. Castells (1972) later dismissed the work of the Chicago School *tout court* as nothing but an ideology that obfuscates the more fundamental nature of capitalism as a framework of social organization. By the early 1970s, then, the main traces of the Chicago School were being swept away by a powerful stream of Marxist and *marxisant* approaches pioneered not only by Castells, but also by scholars such as Lefebvre (1970) and Harvey (1973) who insisted on a concept of the city as a theater of class struggle and a domain of political claims about rights to urban space and resources. In addition, an echo of Castells' arguments about the city

as a purely ideological construct can be found in the work of Saunders (1981) who goes so far as to suggest that the city is not itself a meaningful object of analysis, but only an arbitrary geographic container of diverse economic, social and political phenomena.

The 1980s brought several additional conceptual strands to bear on cities. Special importance should be accorded here to three main lines of investigation. First, feminist scholars like Massey (1991) and McDowell (1983) helped to establish a strong analytical framework focused on the gender dimensions of cities, and this in turn helped to revitalize an older set of concerns about ethnicity, race, and class in cities, especially in relation to neighborhood development and displacement (see, for example, Jackson (1989), Waldinger and Bozorgmehr (1996)). Second, a rapidly growing research thrust developed out of the work of authors like Friedmann and Wolff (1982) and Sassen (1991) about the effects of globalization on city-forming processes. Third, we must also acknowledge the steady flow of research on urban politics and governance that has been produced over the last decade or two, by Brenner (1999), Cochrane (2006), Jessop (1997), and others. All of these different lines of urban investigation continue to develop and grow at the present time.

By the turn of the millenium, some further important shifts in theoretical sensibilities about cities could be detected and some of these are currently very influential. One of these shifts involves a strong post-colonial critique of urban theory and an associated plea for a more inclusive urban

studies that is resolute about taking cities of the Global South into account. In particular, Robinson (2006) and Roy (2011a) argue that much 20th century urban theory, with its roots lying overwhelmingly in the Global North, suffers from intellectual parochialism, and hence its claims to universality must be called into question. In this regard, Robinson (2011) provides a spirited defense of what she calls “the comparative gesture” as a basis for constructing knowledge about cities and for avoiding the hazards of *a priori* theorization. This reference to the comparative gesture sits well with what we might call a “new urban particularism” that has entered into the recent literature and that celebrates thick description and the multiple contingent outcomes of urban life. The latter trend has been driven by a series of intellectual commitments revolving around the alleged irreducibility of the substantive diversity of cities and emphasizing grounded complexity as an essential entry point into urban inquiry. Many scholars in this vein have invoked methodologies like actor-network approaches and assemblage theory as ways of grasping and taming the rebarbative character of reality. As such, work by these scholars tends to impart a radical sense of the singularity of cities by privileging kaleidoscopic combinations of discrete events at the expense of recurrent underlying structures and processes (see, for example, Farías and Bender 2010; McFarlane 2010, 2011; Rankin 2011; Robinson 2004).

Among other things, this brief review suggests that endless fragmentation seems to be an endemic and ever-deepening condition in urban

studies so that the field appears constantly to be going in and out of focus. This point is further emphasized by the numerous and ongoing claims and counter-claims about the nature of cities as captured in watchwords such as captive cities, postmodern cities, insurgent cities, cities as entertainment machines, the carceral city, the neoliberal city, the fragmented city, the dual city, the creative city, and the “ordinary city” of variety and specificity as described by Amin and Graham (1997). Equally, the status of the unitary city is once more in question. Thus, Amin and Thrift (2002) state that the city “is not a place of meaningful proximate links” (p. 27), and they assert that there are no specific economic and social effects that flow from “agglomeration, density, proximity” (p. 53). More recently, Brenner (2013) has suggested that in the current conjuncture cities dissolve away into a sort of planetary amalgam that he calls “extended urbanization” identifiable in terms of world-encircling relational webs.

We will return to some of these ideas at later stages in this paper. Our objective, however, is not to engage in detailed evaluation of the individual contributions mentioned above, and certainly not to deny that cities exhibit considerable empirical variation over time and space or that cities can be profitably studied as unique cases. Rather, we are concerned here with an attempt to clarify some of the evident confusion that exists within the field via an attempt to show how the foundations of a general and stable concept of the urban can be identified. Any such concept will also help with the important task of sharpening investigation of cities by allowing us to demarcate the

inner logic of urbanization from other social processes. As such, our approach actually helps to illuminate rather than distort the particularities of individual cities and groups of cities. At least some of the cacophony in the urban studies literature can in part be traced back to the failure of researchers to be clear about these matters of definition and demarcation.

3. Historical Origins of Cities

All cities consist of dense agglomerations of people and economic activities, even though there are strong ambiguities about where and how a lower size limit should be drawn. That said, recognizing density and agglomeration as general characteristics of cities takes us only so far in explaining the process of urbanization or addressing the questions identified above. Any attempt to build a general concept of the city is further vitiated by the fact that cities also typically contain an enormous diversity of empirical phenomena. Urban theory is hence faced with the task of how to take in hand a complex array of similarities and differences. Can we group all cities together as a common class of phenomena? Or must we divide them into several different and incommensurable classes, and, in the extreme case, into as many classes as there are individual cities? The initial step in response to these questions is to establish some features of urbanization over time and around the world that seem to be open to possibilities of a first round of generalization.

Early historical forms of urbanization. Cities emerge historically only where a food surplus can be extracted, though right from the start, as Jacobs (1969) has argued, cities appear to have had deeply reflexive impacts on the development of agriculture. When the countryside generates an excess of production over subsistence needs, a cohort of non-agricultural consumers of the surplus can be maintained. The members of this cohort, who frequently hold some combination of political, military, religious and economic power, will often congregate together in geographic space (Childe, 1950; Pirenne 1952; Braudel, 1995; Bairoch, 1988). Even in the very earliest cities, agglomerations of activities such as political administration, ceremonial and religious pursuits, craft production (e.g. for luxury goods or military hardware), and market trading almost always constituted the core of the urban process. Agglomeration occurs because activities like these entail divisions of labor giving rise to transactional relationships whose costs are distance-dependent and because they can reap functional synergies by clustering together in geographic space. Various types of infrastructure help to consolidate the resulting dynamic process of agglomeration. In other words, one of the central features of urbanization has always been its efficiency-generating qualities via agglomeration.

By some accounts, the first distinctively urban center was Çatalhöyük which emerged in Anatolia some time around 7500 BC (Taylor 2012). Jericho, with a population of some 2,500 also developed at about the same time or shortly thereafter. Around 3500 BC, agricultural surpluses were growing,

and many other cities formed in the geographic area ranging from Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean coast and Egypt, as well as in India. Childe (1950) characterizes these early cities as dense permanent settlements, containing non-agricultural specialists, involving wealth accumulation, exhibiting monumental public buildings, and marked by class relationships. Waves of urbanization that exhibit these characteristics include the Mycenaean and Minoan cities of ancient Greece, around 2000 BC, Chinese cities along the Yellow River in the 2000-1500 BC period, ancient Rome around 700 BC, and the cities of Mesoamerica about 200BC. Complementing these changes were advances in transport technologies for moving people and goods. Indeed, cities have *always* functioned as nodes in systems of long-distance trade, as exemplified above all by Rome in the time of Augustus, with its population of over one million (Ward-Perkins, 2005). These inter-city trading activities frequently resulted in marked economic specialization of individual urban centers (McCormick, 2001).

If urbanization achieved impressive gains in various regions of the world in the five thousand years prior to 1500, urban growth was still generally subject to severe constraints. Even in areas where urbanization was relatively robust, it did not advance in a continuous, linear way, since most cities were caught in a Malthusian trap stemming from uncertain agricultural surpluses. Over the European Age of Exploration in the 16th and 17th centuries, however, some of these constraints started to loosen (Mann, 2011). Long-distance trade costs began to decline sharply, and this allowed for

tighter interconnections between far-flung and often highly specialized urban centers. Despite these developments, it was not until after the late 18th century, principally in Western Europe, that the Malthusian trap was decisively overcome. The key to this development was the unprecedented increase in levels of economic productivity unleashed by the Industrial Revolution (Maddison, 2001, Bourguignon and Morrison, 2002). This not only made it possible to produce manufactured goods in hitherto unheard of quantities and variety, but also – by means of mechanization -- to surmount the limitations and vagaries of agriculture. The Industrial Revolution ushers in the modern era when urbanization begins in earnest . This is an era where the fundamental relationship between economic development and urbanization becomes especially clear.

Industrialization and its aftermath. As the industrial revolution gathered pace in the more advanced capitalist countries in the 19th century, it was accompanied by rounds of urban growth, culminating in the large industrial cities of the American and Western European Manufacturing Belts. The 19th century also saw the growth of entrepôt, resource processing, administrative, and trading centers in Asia, Latin America and parts of Africa, often under the sway of colonial rulers. Later, especially after the mid-20th century, selected cities in the developing world expanded under the auspices of government-sponsored industrialization programs. Cities continued to grow in the main capitalist countries over the 20th century on the basis of manufacturing, but, starting in the 1970s, many of them went through a

period of deindustrialization as jobs dispersed to low-wage regions and countries, leading in many cases to severe crisis conditions in the core. After a transitional period of slow growth in the 1970s and early 1980s, large cities in the core again experienced a strong resurgence as the 1980s wore on. Cities now found themselves at the focal point of a new “post-fordist” economy, characterized by a decisive shift away from materials-intensive manufacturing to various kinds of high-technology, management, logistical, service, design and cultural sectors. Intensifying globalization and the emergence of a new international division of labor since the late 1970s also promoted a major wave of urbanization in the developing countries, where many cities started to function as significant producers of manufactured exports (McKinsey, 2010). More recently, a number of cities in former Third World countries (especially very large cities such as Hong Kong, Seoul, Shanghai, Singapore, Mexico City, and São Paulo) are now also beginning to shed manufacturing jobs and to participate actively in the new economy (Scott, 2011).

In the last two hundred years, world population and world urbanization have grown continuously, and at a higher rate than at any time in the past. In the contemporary era, urbanization has attained new heights of development, both in the more economically advanced parts of the world and in many less advanced parts too, and more of humanity is currently urbanized than ever before. The critical point for present purposes, however, is that throughout the course of history, urbanization has been fundamentally

engendered by a complex interaction between economic development, divisions of labor, agglomeration, specialization, and external commerce. Accordingly, we can say that the most basic *raison d'être* for cities, certainly in the modern era, resides in their role as centers of economic production and exchange within wider systems of regional, national, and international trade. Cities are always more than this, of course, for, as we shall see, they are also marked by additional social, political and cultural characteristics, many of which have deep effects on the shape of production and exchange. However, it is only by means of an analysis that begins with the complex spatial dynamics of economic activity that we can arrive at an account of the common agglomeration dynamics that lie at the heart of urbanization processes across the world's landscapes.

4. Agglomeration: Production, Trade, and Urbanization

As noted, rising levels of economic development in any country have strong causal impacts on urban growth via agglomeration and specialization processes. This relationship is manifest in a consistently positive empirical relationship between national rates of urbanization (i.e. city dwellers as a percent of total population) and GDP per capita (cf. Renaud 1979). However, a two-way relationship is also at work here, namely, one in which cities constitute the critical foundations for continued economic growth and development (World Bank, 2009; Henderson, 2010). Economic expansion and urbanization should therefore properly be understood as being intertwined in

a recursive path-dependent relationship over time with its critical hinge point focused on processes of agglomeration.

There is now an enormous literature on the technicalities of agglomeration, as such, and hence little or no rehearsal of this theme is called for here, except perhaps to note that in the terms expressed by Duranton and Puga (2004) agglomeration can be generally understood as a mechanism of sharing, matching and learning. Sharing refers to dense local linkages within production systems as well as to indivisibilities that make it necessary to supply some kinds of urban services as public goods. Matching refers to the process of pairing people and jobs, which is greatly facilitated where large local pools of firms and workers exist. Learning refers to the dense formal and informal information flows (with their stimulus to innovation) that are made possible by agglomeration. Taken together, these properties of agglomeration give rise to powerful and measurable economic synergies (see also, Fujita and Thisse 2002; Scott 1988; Storper 1997).

The above remarks alone cast doubt on the claim by Amin and Thrift (2002) to the effect that agglomeration, density, and proximity are without significance. These dimensions of urban reality are fundamental and defining features of cities everywhere, even in a world where cities are increasingly interconnected. But, in addition, agglomeration as both process and outcome goes far beyond the narrow question of the technical foundations of economic geography; it is a quasi-universal feature of human existence. Agglomeration touches many social, cultural and political/administrative, dimensions of

human life; and as a result, it has powerful feed-back effects not only on economic development, but also on society as a whole. At no time has this been more the case than today. Agglomeration is the basic glue that holds the city together as a complex congeries of human activities, and that generates, in relation to its endemic common pool resources and social conflicts, a highly distinctive form of urban politics (see below). In addition, we must once more pay attention to the fact that the economic functions of cities are deeply molded by external trade. Cities do not develop and grow just on the basis of their internal relationships; they are also shaped by locational sorting across geographic space. Trade enables cities to specialize and sell their outputs in exchange for the specialized outputs of other places. The economic viability of cities and the growth of long-distance trade are therefore complementary and mutually reinforcing phenomena. In capitalism, in particular, the basic dynamic of agglomeration of capital and labor combined with inter-regional sorting lead to systems of inter-linked but specialized cities, at various scales of resolution, from the national to the global (Henderson and Venables, 2009; Black and Henderson, 2003).

This emphasis on agglomeration points directly to a related question that has long been the subject of considerable debate, for if the notion of agglomeration has any meaning, should we not also be able to circumscribe individual agglomerations in geographic space, and certainly, in the limit, to distinguish one agglomeration from another? This question has taken on renewed importance in view of the forceful claims by Brenner (2013) to the

effect that modern cities have effectively lost their identity as meaningful spatial units. In fact, we have already noted that all cities, from ancient times onward, have functioned as systems of dense local interactions imbricated in complex long-distance interactions of people, goods, and information. In view of this observation, we concede at once that there can be no rigid and absolute boundary between the city and the rest of geographic space. At the same time, the city exists concretely as a localized or scalar articulation within the space-economy as a whole, identifiable by reason of its polarization, its specialized land uses, its relatively dense networks of interaction (including its daily and weekly rhythms of life), and the ways in which it shapes socialization processes and cultures. We might say that the city is to the space-economy as a mountain is to the wider topography in which it is contained. In neither the case of the city nor the mountain can a definite line be drawn that separates it from its wider context, but in both instances, certain differences of intensity and form make it reasonable and pragmatically meaningful to treat each of them as separable entities. Moreover, the specificity of the urban depends not so much on the crude ratio of its internal to external transactions, but on the contrasting qualities of these two sets of transactions and their locational effects. In fact, intra-urban transactions are usually quite different from long-distance transactions in that they are marked by high costs per unit of distance and dense information content (whence the frequent need for face-to-face contact), and these kinds of

interpersonal transactions are one of the mainstays of urban agglomeration (Storper and Venables, 2004; see also Scott 2001).

In any case, even as globalization intensifies, there is much empirical evidence to suggest that the urban scale of interaction remains extremely vibrant, indeed, increasingly so (Duranton and Storper, 2008). In his examination of American urbanization Pred (1973) pointed out that already in the 18th century there was a tendency for local transactions to expand along with the growth of long distance trade. Hummels (2008) has indicated that the vast majority of trade at the present time occurs within a purely local ambit, and other analysts such as Charlot and Duranton (2006), Reades (2010), and Storper and Venables (2004), show that both local face-to-face interaction and long-distance business travel grow as complements to one another. Similarly, localized scientific interactions increase in tandem with long-distance scientific and knowledge exchanges (Zucker and Darby, 2006; Sonn and Storper, 2008). More to the point, the rise of a globalizing world system has, thus far at least, been associated, not with the demise of the city, but rather with intensifying agglomeration/urbanization processes across all five continents.

5. The Urban Land Nexus

The discussion thus far identifies a major aspect of the urbanization process as being rooted in the spatial concentration of production and a multifaceted, circular, cumulative dynamic of clustering and sorting. We now

build on this foundation to identify a related feature that is equally critical to any account of the nature of the city. We refer to this feature as the *urban land nexus*, meaning an interacting set of land uses expressing the ways in which the social and economic activities of the city condense out into a differentiated, polarized, locational mosaic (Roweis and Scott 1978; Scott 1980). The urban land nexus, in other words, corresponds to the essential fabric of intra-urban space. This phenomenon emerges as the extensive expression of agglomeration, and is molded to significant degree by the behavior of firms seeking locations for production and households seeking living space. These forms of behavior today are typically structured by market mechanisms generating land prices that arbitrate uses and that sustain distinctive patterns of spatial allocation. In addition, owners and users of land (both firms and households) demand selected kinds of proximity to one another while simultaneously seeking to avoid locations where they might experience negative spillovers and other damaging effects on their activities. However, the outcomes of this activity are inherently problematic. This is because the supply of space at any given location is always strongly inelastic so that preferences in regard to proximity and avoidance (or, alternatively, access and separation) can almost never be adequately satisfied, a predicament that is magnified by differences in ability to pay and the rigidities built into the urban land nexus.

Firms and households represent the foundational elements of two broad divisions of the urban land nexus, respectively identifiable as the

production space of the city where work and employment are concentrated, and the social space of the city as manifest in residential neighborhoods, typically differentiated by variables such as income, race, and class. In addition, a third space can be detected, namely, the circulation space of the city as represented by the infrastructures and arterial connections that facilitate intra-urban flows of goods, people, and information. These three major components of the urban land nexus are marked by endless empirical diversity and interpenetration, giving rise, in turn to the high levels of idiosyncrasy that characterize individual cities. Nonetheless, they can also be described in theoretical terms by reason of their roots in generalizable processes of agglomeration/polarization and their spatial integration within the city as a whole. Furthermore, and even though much of the internal space of the city is divided into units of land that can be individually owned and exchanged, the urban land nexus is very much more than a simple aggregation of independent private locations. Units of urban land – in the sense of individual locations in intra-urban space, as well as entire neighborhoods or districts, serviced by infrastructure, and with features shaped by proximity to and separation from other land uses – reflect the many individual, communal and political actions that invariably impinge upon them. This remark includes, but goes beyond, the standard notion that private land use generates externality effects or that its production is the result of public interventions in the face of market failures. The essential nature of urban land is that it is simultaneously private and public, individual and collective, and that its shape

and form express the intertwined dynamics of the individual actions of firms and households and collective action on the part of institutions of governance.

As a corollary, the urban land nexus is the site of extensive common pool assets and liabilities, a point that signifies, in the absence of effective institutions of collective coordination, that it is subject to numerous kinds of dysfunctionalities ranging from infrastructure breakdowns to land use conflicts, and from deteriorating neighborhoods to environmental pollution. Without institutions able to implement relevant planning and policy measures, these dysfunctionalities would unquestionably undermine the viability and efficiency of urban existence, for market logic alone is congenitally incapable of regulating the urban commons in the interests of economic efficiency and social well-being. Thus, non-market agencies of collective action typically emerge in order to keep the urban land nexus in some sort of functional workable order. Sometimes these agencies are purely local in character, and sometimes they exist at higher levels in the overall hierarchy of governance. Land use regulation, for example, is mostly (but not necessarily exclusively) initiated by *local* institutions, including both formal governmental agencies and various kinds of civil associations. Financial support for transport construction projects, by contrast, is frequently provided by higher-level agencies. At the same time, agencies of collective action, both urban and supra-urban, are often engaged in forms of intervention that are directed to issues that exist within the city but that have at best only indirect connection to the urban land nexus, as such. Examples of

this kind of intervention might include the regulation of hospital administrative activities or the formulation of airport safety rules. In this latter regard, moreover, local collectivities frequently act as agencies for relaying higher-level mandates down to urban constituencies. As a consequence of these different cross-currents detectable in urban governmental institutions there is a real sense in which we can say that they play a hybrid role, one that is both purely local (and an intrinsic element of the dynamics of the urban land nexus) and one that is driven by very much wider socio-economic pressures. It may well be that at least some of the widespread perplexity concerning the purpose and functions of urban government (as expressed, for example, by Cochrane, 2006) is due to a failure to recognize this essential interpenetration of scales and functions in the sphere of governance.

6. The Scope and Limits of the Urban

This mass of urban *relata* must now be set in the wider context of society as a whole, without, however, conflating the two so that the distinctiveness of the city is lost. At the present moment in history, urbanization processes are profoundly shaped by the social relations of capitalism, but cannot be reduced to those relations. Equally, cities today provide essential bases for capitalism to function, but do not automatically fulfill this role in any optimal way. To the contrary, cities often generate

conditions that have negative impacts on the viability of wider economic, political or social arrangements.

One point of departure for dealing with these matters is to pick up on arguments made in the previous section and to insist on the distinction between issues that are to be found *in* cities but that are not intrinsically urban in character, and questions that deal with issues *of* cities in the strict sense as identified here, , i.e. that revolve around processes of agglomeration-*cum*-polarization and associated interactions within the urban land nexus. For example, there are usually many poor people in cities, but it does not necessarily follow that all aspects of poverty are inherently urban in character or that poverty is caused principally by urbanization (Slater 2013). Poverty is primarily engendered within a set of macro-social processes related to the level of economic development, the structure of overall employment opportunities, and the availability of education and training. That being said, certain urban conditions can unquestionably aggravate or ameliorate levels of poverty, as for example, where concentrated neighborhood problems, such as a prevalent gang culture, influence levels of educational performance by children (Sampson, 2012). Policy attention to these specifically urban issues may produce adjustments in overall levels of poverty, but they will not eliminate poverty once and for all. The housing boom and bust in the United States over the first decade of the 21st century provides another example of the analytical difference between problems in cities and problems of cities. The sub-prime real estate boom was not principally caused by urbanization

but rather by a number of innovations in the finance industry related to the extension of mortgage credit to risky households. The concomitant excess capital supply generated an asset price bubble in the real estate sector, and when the returns on investments in this sector collapsed, the result was a spiral of falling real estate values and housing abandonment. As a consequence, a crisis that was not at the outset fundamentally urban, was subsequently translated into specifically urban terms as manifest in deteriorating neighborhoods and related chains of negative externalities. These remarks help us to pinpoint the urban as a domain of analysis and especially to salvage at least some its essential features from the eclecticism (and concomitant failures of policy targeting) that currently haunts the field of urban studies.

7. Generality and Difference in Urban Analysis

Cities are always embedded in wider systems of social and political relationships at many different scales. These contextual circumstances stamp individual urban centers with diverse distinguishing features, and give rise to numerous variations in their form and function across time and space. Hence, some cities have entered into a post-industrial phase, others are dominated by manufacturing employment; some are located in relatively prosperous countries, others are in countries where rampant poverty prevails; some are embedded in societies that are relatively homogeneous in terms of their racial

and ethnic makeup, others in societies that are characterized by enormous diversity in these respects; some are overlain by authoritarian social and political frameworks, others by more open and democratic kinds of relationships; some are in the Global North, others are in the Global South; and so on, virtually *ad infinitum*. We may ask, do the admittedly enormous variations in the empirical make-up of cities that result from these differing contextual circumstances warrant a plurality of different concepts of the urban? Or can we cut through this Gordian knot to reveal a coherent concept of the city as an object of theoretical inquiry?

We have argued for a positive answer to the latter question by insisting that the essence of the urbanization process resides in the twofold status of cities as clusters of productive activity and human life that then unfold into dense, internally-variegated webs of interacting land uses, locations, and allied institutional/political arrangements. Even so, it would be a major error to discount the empirical variation that exists from city to city or to overlook the contextual variables that mold the individuality of particular cities. Five such variables would appear to be of special significance, without, however, negating the general nature of urbanization as a mode of spatial integration and interaction. They can be summarized as follows:

1. Overall levels of economic development vary enormously across time and space. As a consequence, cities in contrasting developmental contexts display widely contrasting profiles in such matters as their

economic bases, their infrastructural endowments, their complements of rich and poor people, and so on.

2. The rules that govern resource allocation have major impacts on urban development. A society that allocates resources through markets will generally do so differently from one that deals with resource allocation through non-market rules or through some hybrid arrangement such as a market system combined with robust urban planning regulations.
3. We must also take into account prevailing structures of social stratification, including racial and ethnic variations, which have a particularly powerful relationship to neighborhood formation.
4. An additional important source of difference stems from what we will call, with some reservation, cultural norms and traditions. These affect a multitude of practices and ways of life that affect the urban landscape including the formation, evolution and persistence of neighborhoods.
5. The overarching conditions of political authority and power leave deep traces on urban development in any given society. These conditions typically define the scope of local government and urban planning authority, and hence influence the detailed spatial functioning of the urban land nexus, just as they almost always have strong implications for the dynamics of local political contestation.

In relation to this last point, the wider conditions of political authority and power frequently show up in mediated form in the skyline of individual cities, as in the case of the imperial monumentality that can be observed in London

and Paris, the Soviet gigantism that continues to loom over Moscow, the feudal relics that abound in Asian cities from Bangkok to Beijing, and the colonial vestiges that characterize many Latin American cities.

Given the peculiarities of the empirical phenomena that occur in cities and the ways in which the contextual variables enumerated above compound the sense of diversity, cities invariably present on first view a bewildering degree of individuality. The confusion stemming from this state of affairs is intensified by the fact that the urban question, *qua* a circle of scientific investigations linked to specifically political goals seems to change its spots with every new generation of urban scholars. Small wonder, then, that so many analysts are tempted to treat every city as a special case and to insist on the futility and dangers of conceptual abstraction. This wariness is compounded by a number of currently fashionable conceits like assemblage theory, actor-network theory, and descriptive comparativism, which privilege empirical complexity over theoretical generalization in urban analysis (Wachsmuth, Madden, and Brenner 2011). Our claim here is not that empirical idiosyncrasies are inherently uninteresting or valueless, far from it. Notice, however, that these idiosyncrasies only become meaningfully urban through their incorporation into the dense, interacting and polarized spaces that constitute the urban land nexus. In this context, we offer the obvious and time-worn point that in any scientific endeavor, conceptual abstraction actually helps the researcher to reveal diversity and difference in basic observational data, just as it is an essential prerequisite for the construction of

useful empirical taxonomies. At one level of analysis, for example, the brown and black suburbs of Paris differ sharply from the racially and ethnically distinctive communities of South Central Los Angeles or from the barrios of Caracas. Similarly, the upper class neighborhoods of London are very different in texture from those of Tokyo, just these two cases are quite unlike the privileged communities of Gávea or São Conrado in Rio de Janeiro. Yet once we look below the obvious empirical differences between these examples, we encounter widely observable mechanisms of social segregation resulting from the ways in which land and housing markets work in intra-urban space. In the same manner, precise policy responses to problems and predicaments in any individual instance of urban development will almost always differ, but again, in ways that can usually be related to the dynamics of the urban land nexus with its generic forms of breakdown and collective disorder including negative spillover effects, jobs-housing imbalances, derelict property, congestion, pollution, deteriorated infrastructure, conflicts over access to urban space and public goods, socially dysfunctional neighborhoods, sprawl, and all the rest.

The tensions between the general and the specific in urban analysis have recently come to a head in the the burgeoning literature on post-colonial urbanism with its claim that cities of the Global South gainsay much of urban theory as it has hitherto been formulated. Roy (2009) has invoked this claim as the basis of her statement that it is time “to blast open theoretical geographies.” Such iconoclasm cannot be justified, however, simply on the

grounds that existing geographies are founded on a limited “repertoire of cities” that excludes this or that form of empirical variation. We are, of course, entirely open to the idea that examination of the cities of the Global South might necessitate a radical reformulation of urban theory, but the reformulation will come not from the fact that these cities exhibit empirical differences from those of the Global North. Rather, it will come from whatever new and hitherto unsuspected insights that the study of urbanization in the Global South may provide about the logic and inner workings of urban agglomeration processes and associated dynamics of the urban land nexus as we currently understand these matters. In a similar vein, the call for a new kind of urban theory that is “cosmopolitan” (Robinson 2006) and that emphasizes the “worlding” of cities (Roy 2011b) has an essentially gestural quality in view of its lack of specificity about how it will generate insights into the genesis and basic workings of *urbanization* processes. This absence of specificity is underlined by Robinson’s (2011, p.13) remark that the city can be seen as “a site of assemblage, multiplicity, and connectivity,” a description that excludes very little of historical or geographical reality.

8. Implications for Urban Research and Policy

We argued earlier that a viable urban theory should enable us to distinguish between those dynamics of social life that are intrinsically urban from those that are more properly seen as lying outside the strict sphere of the urban, even when they can be detected as a matter of empirical

occurrence inside cities. The task is not an easy one, but in the previous discussion we have provided a number of criteria for any attempt to deal with it.

Our approach emphasizes the commonalities across all types of cities and the organizational processes that shape them. This manner of proceeding helps to guard against over-hasty impulses to take certain dramatic or peculiar instances of urban development (e.g. the crumbling infrastructure and violence of Kinshasa, the extensive slums of Mumbai, or the current financial collapse of Southern European cities) as *prima facie* evidence that a reformulation of theory is required (Roy, 2011a; compare to Boo, 2011). At the same time, and this is surely an important part of its power, our approach undercuts another kind of unwarranted temptation (prominently on display in Dick and Rimmer 1998) to the effect that cities around the world are all converging to a common empirical template. None of these propositions, by the way, is intended to justify or promote any of the theories of the urban that have come and gone over the last century and more. Many defective theories have been formulated over the years and we can identify many instances where ideas developed in one urban context are inappropriately applied in others. One striking example of this misapplication, as Robinson (2006) justly remarks, can be found in mid-20th century attempts to interpret urban life in the Zambian Copperbelt through the lens of Chicago School theory.¹

¹ We might add that Chicago School theory was also seriously flawed even in its application to Chicago.

These concerns spill over directly to any consideration of the relationship between urban theory and policy intervention. The urban policy literature has already opened up a fruitful debate on this matter by making a distinction between “place policies” that target particular cities or parts of cities, and “people policies” that target particular socio-economic categories irrespective of location (Freedman, 2012; Glaeser and Gyourko, 2005; Glickman, 1981). Urban poverty analysts, in particular, have vigorously debated this distinction, and have made much progress in identifying the potentialities and limits of policies focused on place (such as interventions that seek to moderate the spatial concentration or isolation of poor people in certain neighborhoods) versus those focused on people (such as interventions directed to correcting factors like family breakdown or educational failure). The issues here are certainly far from being cut and dried, and the debate remains open as research continues to develop new results about both the urban and the socio-economic roots of poverty and inequality.

There are also many clearly exaggerated claims in the literature about the power of cities to transform social life. For example, an abundant literature at the present time sees the urban as a principal fountainhead of emancipatory political trends and movements (e.g. Harvey, 2012; Soja, 2010). There can be little doubt about the role of cities, by reason precisely of their size and density, as centers of political debate and flashpoints of popular protest and political mobilization, and these issues must figure prominently in any general urban theory. So must specifically urban conflicts over such

matters as, for example, access to items of collective consumption in the city or unfair differentials in public spending on neighborhood development. However, the basic etiology of political contestation in contemporary society extends far beyond the domain of the city in the strict sense, for it reaches down into the very core of social life where the basic mechanisms of injustice, inequality, political oppression, and other major causes of inequality and unrest reside. Accordingly, we have no hesitation in characterizing those currently widespread claims that tend to assimilate all forms of social and political action into an urban totality as cases of severe conceptual over-reach (cf. Cox 2001; Purcell 2006). Even in the 21st century, when, for the first time in human history, the majority of social existence is geographically located in cities, not all or even the greater part of this existence can be described as being *intrinsically* urban in the senses that we have laid out above.

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