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A Short Historiography of Urban Geography
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If we're concerned with the details of birthdays, the field of urban geography is usually understood to have been born with the 1959 publication of *Readings in Urban Geography*, a collection of papers edited by Harold M. Mayer and Clyde F. Kohn.[1] It should come as no surprise, then, that middle age has brought quite a bit of soul-searching. Consider a few recent commentaries:

> "Such transformations challenge the modernist principles at the heart of urban planning that tend to favour acting in a definable singular 'public interest,' with rational 'coherence' and urban public order imposed on the city 'from above' through the expert powers of the usually White, middle-class, middle-aged and

[1] Harold M. Mayer and Clyde F. Kohn, eds. (1959). *Readings in Urban Geography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. But this is the North American birthday. Truman Hartshorn points out that it was a bit earlier in Britain. R.E. Dickinson (1947). *City, Region, and Regionalism*. London: Kegan Paul. Griffith Taylor (1951). *Urban Geography*. New York: Dutton. See Truman Hartshorn (1992). *Interpreting the City: An Urban Geography*. Second Edition. New York: John Wiley & Sons, p. 9.

heterosexual men who, invariably, were the planning 'experts' [Holston 1998]. Such traditions of modern city planning tended to favour

> rationality, comprehensiveness, planning hierarchy, positivist science with its propensity for quantitative modeling and analysis, belief in state-directed futures and in the existence of a single 'public interest' that can be identified by planners and is gender and race neutral [Baeten 2001: 57]."[2]

"The change was based in science.... There was a continuing interplay between speculation and empirical investigation.... The research was broadly based and multidisciplinary.... There was a continuing concern to keep one foot in theory and the other in practice.... These are qualities that I still value, despite the ascendancy of armchair socialism in the 1980s and its replacement by a combination of environmental activism and dreamtime postmodernism in the 1990s as the reds became green and the dialecticians switched from Marx to Foucault."[3]

"Why not celebrate the vibrant research being done to understand geographies ... today? ... This wave of new research is a vibrant, exciting spatial analysis that fuses the very best of the quantitative revolution with rigorous, challenging social theory. It is serious scholarship and serious science. Its practitioners ... are busy doing geography while vast swaths of their own discipline are dismissed as 'armchair socialism' or 'dreamtime postmodernism' or social-science versions of 'cold fusion' ... I am not convinced that their work is made any easier by repeated assertions of the old dichotomies, which only risk continued intellectual violence."[4]

In the journal *Urban Geography*, "One can find articles on urban transformations around the world, feminist urban geography and queer theory, homelessness and welfare reform, urban identity and citizenship, racial segregation and environmental justice, patterns of e-commerce as well as traditional manufacturing, transportation and land use, urban governance regimes, implications of globalization and transnational immigration flows. The list goes on and on, speaking to the rich tapestry of the field as it has been woven throughout its recent history, nourished by the quantitative revolution, the rise of Marxian and humanistic geographies, and the effervescence of feminist, postmodern, and post-Colonial thought."[5]

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[2] Geoff Vigar, Stephen Graham, and Patsy Healy (2005). "In Search of the City in Spatial Strategies: Past Legacies, Future Imaginings." *Urban Studies* 42(80, 1391-1410, quote from p. 1395.
[3] Brian J.L. Berry (2001). "The Chicago School in Retrospect and Prospect." *Urban Geography* 22(6), 559-561, quote from p. 561.
[4] Elvin K. Wyly (2004). "Geographies of the United States in the Year 2004." *Professional Geographer* 56(1), 91-95, quote from p. 94.
[5] Jennifer R. Wolch (2003). "Radical Openness as Method in Urban Geography." *Urban Geography* 24(8), 645-646, quote from p. 645.

"...we should practice a radical openness because it constitutes a critical method in urban geography. Such openness acknowledges that data and methods are incomplete ..., that we are typically unable to replicate results of social scientific research because of the situatedness of their social and historical context, that triangulations among methods often provides a richer understanding of a phenomenon, ... and that there are usually no definitive answers, just more or less convincing interpretations."[6]

This is just a small sample, of course, and we could find quotes with similar sentiments for almost any field of study. Academics are notoriously independent: trying to organize scholars is like trying to herd cats, and as soon as you get two academics in the room you have at least three or four opinions. All of a sudden those labels we use to describe what Kant in 1798 could casually describe as "the main branches of knowledge"[7] look messy and confusing. The main branches of knowledge have fragmented into subfields -- we are here concerned with *human* geography as opposed to *physical* geography, and the *urban* subfield of human geography -- and even at this level of specialization, we walk right into a schoolyard brawl. It might seem a bit frustrating.

Disagreement is a sign of health, vibrancy, and relevance.

But disagreement, confusing as it may be at first, is a sign of health, vibrancy, and relevance. We learn very little by sitting around and agreeing with one another, and this is particularly important in academic settings. Sharp disagreements over what to study, how to study it, how to use theory and apply the results in policy -- all of these disputes are signs of life. It's dangerous when specialists in a particular field all start to agree with one another too much: if the objects of study are not in dispute, if there is no disagreement on methods or approaches, and if there are no fights over interpretation and explanation, then we might even make the case that such areas of study do not really belong in an institution of higher education.[8] Just as newspaper editors describe their job as emphasizing the unusual -- 'we don't report the planes that land safely, we report the planes that crash' -- many academic scholars view their mission as raising new questions, identifying new kinds of societal problems, testing out new approaches for gaining insights, and so on. The enterprise thrives on discussion, debate, and disagreement, and it is inescapably inefficient.[9]

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[6] Wolch, "Radical Openness," p. 646.

[7] Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, 1979 edition (original 1798); cited in Michael Peters (1999). "Introduction: Disciplinarity and the Emergence of Cultural Studies." In Peters, ed., *After the Disciplines*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1-35, quote on p. 19.

[8] Education is not the same as *training*. Institutions devoted to training are expanding quite rapidly, thanks to privatization trends as well as the proliferation of constantly-evolving technological innovations that require each of us to devote a certain portion of our attention span to the unceasing stream of new software applications and updates. Training is extremely valuable and necessary. But it is quite distinct from fundamental scholarly inquiry. John Sperling, the Chief Executive of the University of Phoenix, put it best when he described their mission: "This is a corporation, not a social entity. Coming here is not a rite of passage. We are not trying to develop [students'] value systems or go in for that 'expand their mind' bullshit." Quoted in Terri A. Hasseler (2006). "Fomenting Dissent on Campus." *Academe*, May-June, 20-23, quote on p. 21.

[9] If we already know how to define the question, choose the method, perform the analysis, interpret the results, and then put the results into applied practice, then there's no reason for university academics to be involved -- and the

A Chronology

But if we were to try to make some sense of the path from Mayer and Kohn's 1959 collection to today's middle-class angst, it might identify a chronology with eight main streams:

1900- The Regional-Cultural Tradition. Early studies of cities, including many that predated Mayer and Kohn's collection, focused on rich case studies documenting the evolution of particular urban areas. Often these studies focused on human-environment relations, drawing theoretical inspiration from Carl Sauer's influence in cultural geography,[10] and there were many studies that tried to define trade hinterlands or site and situation conditions for particular cities.

1960- Analytical Urban Geography. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, several trends came together to precipitate a major change in the field. The digital computer was developed, and several research universities acquired the technology (often devoting a large room or sometimes an entire building to house the large 'mainframes.') Numerical data about urban places became more common, especially in the U.S., Canada, and Britain. And a new crowd of graduate students at several universities began to challenge the very descriptive stuff produced by the old regional-cultural urban geographers. Brian Berry was one of these upstarts, but there was also Ronald Abler, John S. Adams, Peter Haggett, Peter Gould, William Bunge, and several others. The primary goal of this new generation was to uncover regularities in spatial organization, in the hopes of developing general "laws" of spatial structure, spatial relations, and urban processes. This approach came to be described variously as "locational analysis," or as an urban branch of the "quantitative revolution," but it is crucial to recognize that it was also a positivist revolution -- based on an epistemology that emphasized the development of causal theories on the basis of empirical observation, measurement, and scientific testing. Moreover, many of the foundational works of the quantitative revolution in the 1960s drew inspiration from the urban community studies and perspectives on urban structure that dominated urban sociology, as part of the "Chicago School" that first emerged in the 1920s. For many years, urban work at the intersection of quantitative urban geography and Chicago-School urban sociology dominated the entire field of interdisciplinary urban studies. Over the years, some of the hardcore quantitative urbanists have gone into a distinct subfield called *regional science*, and many others continue to publish in *Geographical Analysis*, widely recognized as the pre-eminent journal of quantitative-revolution era geography.

1970- Behavioral Urban Studies. In the late 1960s, many scholars began to raise serious questions about the assumptions and practices of quantitative, analytical urban geography. Oftentimes the analyses were quite abstract, representing people and social processes as mathematical symbols or equations. Several geographers began to draw from psychology and other fields, drawing attention to the perceptual and behavioral aspects of spatial decision-making; it's one thing to calibrate equations and display maps of spatial interaction, for instance, but what about the "mental maps" each of us has about particular cities, regions, and

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entire enterprise can be distilled into a software package, protected with patents and trademarks, and sold as a stand-alone application to generate a lucrative income stream.

[10] Anyone working in this tradition was required to dutifully cite (genuflect) to Carl, and here is mine: Carl O. Sauer (1925). *The Morphology of Landscape*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

neighborhoods? How do these affect our decisions as we go about living our lives in the city? Reginald Golledge, Peter Gould, Susan Hanson, Gerard Rushton, and many other behavioralist urbanists undertook valuable studies of individual perceptions and behavior. Despite its differences in approach, though, behavioral urban studies shared the goal (with analytical urban geography) of developing *generalizable*, objective knowledge about cities and spatial processes.

Eight major "eras" define urban geography. The ***four dominant*** *ones are*
1) Analytical urban geography (1960-)
2) GIS, planning, and policy (1970-)
3) Structuralist political economy (1973-), and
4) Poststructuralist, postmodern urbanism (1990-).

1970- Geographic Information Systems, Urban Planning, and Policy. Policy-oriented specialists began to build a logical extension to the analytical urban tradition, building bridges between an expanding body of urban theory and the practical needs of government agencies and private companies. Although the initial development of mainframe computers and their use in research universities helped the growth of the analytical tradition in the 1960s, it was not until years later that the *diffusion* and increasing *affordability* of personal computers really encouraged GIS to spread rapidly from universities to city planning offices, private consultants, and the specialized locational analysis divisions of more and more large multinational companies. Today, no major company will put a new store anywhere, or make any other kind of spatial decision, without first doing (or commissioning) a carefully-designed spatial market analysis.

But it's not only applied stuff. Some of the most rigorous new theoretical work on geographical information systems is Luc Anselin's work on "spatial econometrics," which essentially argues the entire framework of neoclassical economic modeling must be reworked to incorporate spatial autocorrelation and interdependency.

1973- Urban Political Economy and Structuralist Urbanism. In 1979, David Harvey published *Explanation in Geography*, one of the two most influential volumes of the quantitative revolution. In 1973, after having moved to Johns Hopkins in Baltimore amidst turmoil unleashed by racial and class oppression in deindustrializing U.S. cities, Harvey published *Social Justice and the City*. Its appearance began to transform urban geography, as well as geography more generally, and parts of other fields. For Harvey, "urban problems" were the product of systematic inequalities of class-divided society under capitalism, and thus required the theoretical tools of Marx, Gramsci, Lefebvre, and other figures. Harvey saw the analytical urban tradition as giving us little more than complicated *descriptions* of the geographies produced by injustice, and he has spent a career theorizing the dynamics of capitalist urbanization, and charting alternative, non-capitalist urban futures.[11] *Social Justice in the City* inspired an entire generation of scholars to pursue political economy as a way of approaching urban issues, and

[11] Compare David Harvey (1973). *Social Justice and the City*. London: Edward Arnold; with David Harvey (2000). *Spaces of Hope*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

many drew inspiration from *structuralist epistemologies* -- theories of knowledge that emphasize the importance of underlying, unobserved rules and social relations that give rise to surface, observable phenomena.

1980- Feminist Urban Research. A growing number of scholars began to draw inspiration from feminist perspectives in the 1970s, and the result was a challenge to the implicit masculinism of analytical urban geography as well as the rigid class focus of urban political economy. Cities are deeply shaped by gender relations, in both explicit and subtle ways; key facets of urban life simply cannot be understood without attention to gender relations. Much of the early feminist urban research sought to modify some of the dominant approaches in order to include gender -- such as revising urban-analytical models so that, for instance, a commuting model included not just the travel patterns of male "heads of household," but also women employed in the paid labor force or working at home. But then new questions and theoretical issues were raised: in a stream of socialist-feminist urban research, for example, women working at home were seen in terms of broader processes of "social reproduction," and women in the paid labor force were described in terms of evolving capitalist class relations. Subsequent work has examined the ways that cities and urban processes interact with the social construction of gender relations. Some of the key figures in this area include Susan Hanson, Linda McDowell, Julie Graham, Ann Markusen, and Geraldine Pratt.

1990- Poststructural and Postmodern Urbanism. In architecture and urban design, postmodernism is often dated to the precise moment in 1972 when the failed high-modernist public housing project complex named Pruitt-Igoe was destroyed by controlled demolition. But it was not until the 1980s when postmodernism really spread through the humanities and social sciences in a major way, and some scholars suggest that geography was a bit late following the trend -- and in any event before too long the entire movement inspired a backlash, leading some to declare it dead. But the post-structuralist emphasis of the movement remains vibrant today, and challenges both the observable measurement fetishes of positivist urbanism as well as the determinist (and usually class-obsessed) perspectives of structuralism. Poststructuralist and postmodernist urbanists argue for the study of cities as the product and site of difference, identity, contingency, and processes with multiple and even contradictory causes and consequences. Postructuralist urbanists reject what they see as a flawed effort to build grand theories of cities or urban processes, and they are deeply suspicious of attempts to generalize from one city to another, or from one group of urbanites to another, given the extraordinary complexity of individual standpoints, discourses, interpretations, and meanings. Two of the key figures in postmodern urbanism are Michael Dear and Ed Soja.

1995- Transnational Urbanism. In the 1990s, nearly every field of the humanities and social sciences that engaged with contemporary social change began to focus on globalization. Urban geography did the same, and now bookshelves across the world groan under the collective weight of books and journals devoted to the question of how globalization is killing or reviving cities, or whether city x, y, or z is or is not a "global city."[12] But one contribution in this area

[12] An alternative metaphor: keyboards the world over strain at the frustrated pounding of the page-down key as readers page through hundreds and thousands of articles and web pages devoted to the topic of globalization, technology and the death of cities, and the hard-fought question of whether your city or mine is more of a global city.

does seem to stand out as a particularly valuable new way of approaching cities that builds on (instead of ignoring or simply dismissing) previous accomplishments. Michael Peter Smith, building on the work of David Harvey, Manuel Castells, Saskia Sassen, John Friedmann, and several others, offers a theory of "transnational urbanism" that seeks to integrate insights from political economy, poststructuralist urbanism, and some parts of feminist urban research.[13] All the details of this approach need not delay us here; but a key part of Smith's work is to challenge the dichotomy between "local" processes in cities and the seemingly spaceless, placeless "space of flows" that are often associated with Manuel Castells' influential perspective on globalization. Instead, we need to understand contemporary cities as the temporary and dynamic -- but not entirely chaotic -- intersection of transnational networks of economic and political power and cultural meaning.

Radical Openness and the Problems with Timelines

This, then, is how we arrive at the situation Jennifer Wolch describes in her "Radical Openness" essay, to "the rich tapestry of the field as it has been woven throughout its recent history, nourished by the quantitative revolution, the rise of Marxian and humanistic geographies, and the effervescence of feminist, postmodern, and post-Colonial thought."[14] The chronology above is one way of entering the conversation and understanding how geographers have studied cities over the years. But keep five crucial points in mind.

Disciplinary timelines are problematic, because 1) each movement has no clear end date, 2) many people have moved between different traditions, 3) all good work involves a mixture of various approaches, 4) new urban processes are always forcing us to revise old categories and approaches, and 5) many urban questions are tackled by scholars from different disciplines, combining different methodological traditions.

First, note that each of these chronologies has no end date: the regional-cultural tradition of today isn't the same as it was in the Sauerian era of the early twentieth century, but you can still find books and articles inspired by this approach to try to understand the distinctive regional circumstances of particular urban places. Indeed, not long ago many began to describe a "new regional geography" devoted to resuscitating some of the old regional-cultural questions. Moreover, many experts in economic development are now convinced that the way to understand how particular places deal with global competition is through a concept that revives at least some of the ideas of the regional-cultural tradition: the "global city-region."[15]

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[13] Michael Peter Smith (2001). *Transnational Urbanism: Locating Globalization*. Oxford: Blackwell.
[14] Wolch, "Radical Openness," p. 645.
[15] Gordon MacLeod (2001). "New Regionalism Reconsidered: Globalization and the Remaking of Political Economic Space." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 25(4), 804-829. "Amid the near frenzied exaltation of economic globalization and a purported decline of the nation state, a range of subnational regional

Second, we must always avoid the temptation to pigeon-hole particular individuals into specific boxes: many influential scholars have made important contributions to multiple traditions. Although it is helpful to have some grasp of some of the major figures associated with different streams of thought, what really matters is whether you find a particular account of a city or urban process useful, compelling, and insightful. Many of the best urban books are impossible to categorize.

Third, all good scholarship reflects the interplay of old and new traditions, methods, approaches, and styles. This does not mean that we can simply mix everything into the pot and stir up a magic stew. As Knox and McCarthy put it: "Although it is neither possible nor desirable to merge them all into some kind of all-encompassing model or theory of urbanization, it is possible to gain insights from each."[16] In practice, this means aligning your questions, purposes, and methods drawn from the different streams of urban geography. When you're interesting in documenting changes in urban conditions that can be observed, measured and modeled -- then it's logical to work with the kinds of tools developed in the analytical urban geography tradition. On the other hand, if you're interested in understanding why particular cites or neighborhoods are repeatedly portrayed as dystopian nightmares in movies and television, then it would make sense to use the approaches of poststructuralist urban research.

Fourth, new urban processes often emerge to defy old categories and methods. How are we to make sense of the strange new worlds that were created in Mesopotamia after the U.S. invasion of 2003? Mesopotamia has long been known in historical and urban archaeological circles as "the cradle of civilization," but parts of Iraq began to take on a strange new appearance in 2004 when it became clear that the U.S. war effort was going to take longer than first anticipated. Massive investment in a network of bases across Iraq inscribed a sort of fortified American military luxury amidst the surrounding Iraqi violence and poverty:

> "Almost all troops, except those out at patrol bases and other outposts, slept in air-conditioned rooms and had ready access to the Internet. Forward Operating Base Falcon was in a rough area of southwest Baghdad called the Triangle of Death, but inside its high blast walls it was a different world, with a cafe, a mess hall serving abundant food, and even a pseudo nightclub, the Velvet Camel, that served alcohol-free beer and advertised that 'every Friday night is Hip-Hop Night,' featuring the Desert Pimps.
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> At Mosul, where one mess hall featured a particularly artful pastry chef, a cynical Air Force sergeant watched a convoy of heavily armored military trucks roll into the base, and then commented, 'This place is a cross of Road Warrior and Las Vegas -- it's catered, well lighted, and with good movies, and then there is this barren desert and a fight over oil. Also like Las Vegas, most people lose.'"[17]

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economies and urban metropoles are increasingly being canonized as the paradigmatic exemplars of wealth creation." (p. 804).

[16] Paul Knox and Linda McCarthy (2005). *Urbanizatio*n, Second Edition. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, p. 6.

[17] Thomas E. Ricks (2006). *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq.* New York: Penguin, pp. 416-417

It is also important to recognize that many scholars are working to use new methods to revisit old questions or urban processes.

Fifth, disciplinary boundaries are often confining; many important urban questions are tackled by scholars from many different fields, combining different methodological traditions and theoretical inspirations.