

# **The Accidental Relevance of American Urban Geography<sup>1</sup>**

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*March, 2003*

It is hard to believe that the West's now-contented young will not some day hunger again for the "exalted notions" that Aristotle described more than 2,000 years ago. Yet when they do, America will still have an ideological vision, the individualist, achievement-oriented American Creed, with which to motivate its young to challenge reality.

Lipset (2000, p. 45)

Flip through the pages of your brand-new world atlas to find maps of the newly-secured American Homeland, the border zones of Old and New Europe, and the terra-incognita-but-satellite-mapped lands of the Axis of Evil. You see many contemporary expressions of the Janus-faced American exceptionalism that has intrigued or infuriated generations of observers, from de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* to Gramsci's "Americanism and Fordism" to the Graham Greene novel read by most of the architects of America's war in Vietnam, *The Ugly American*. American geography, and in particular American *urban* geography, has its own contested history of a self-styled and paradoxical exceptionalism: not long ago, many of us believed that an urban perspective forged in the laboratory of the twentieth-century U.S. city provided an exceptionally pure form of theory and theoretically-informed policy, a framework for the exploration of interesting contextual variations and deviations in other places, at other times. In the last decade this American exceptionalism, born of an intersection of historical and geographical contingency, was steadily undermined by the material and discursive urbanisms of globalization and transnationalism (Harvey, 2000; M.P. Smith, 2001). And yet today we see the birth of a new militant parochialism in and by the United States, and it is not yet clear how this shift will affect cities and our approach to urban geography.

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<sup>1</sup> I am extremely grateful to Rob Imrie, Jenny Robinson, and Nigel Thrift for the opportunity to engage with their important contributions, and to Loretta Lees and Judith Kenny for organizing the joint AAG-IBG forum on Urban Geography at the New Orleans Annual AAG Meeting.

I offer this provocation because I want to challenge the obvious, convenient, and altogether unsatisfying interpretation of these valuable papers. It is only too easy to conclude that these very different essays, with their plurality of theoretical, empirical, and policy concerns, reflect the broader disciplinary unease over the *urban* itself. It now seems mandatory to note that urban geography is too large and too diffuse to maintain its identity, or at least an identity visible at the forefront of the field (see Berry, 2002; Johnston, 2000; Lees, 2002; Massey, 2001; Peck, 1999; Thrift, 1993). I sympathize with the need to define the urban and to give it theoretical coherence, methodological rigor, empirical richness, and policy relevance. These are the words our (sub) disciplinary ambassadors must use to describe (to others) how we are working very hard to enhance the excellence of our field. But most of us are too busy *doing urban geography* -- many different urban geographies -- to worry about the appropriate bibliographic taxonomies or labels.<sup>2</sup>

### *The new new urban reality*

These papers take us beyond such narrow concerns, and challenge our thinking in fundamentally different ways. Nevertheless, I am struck by several recurrent themes that speak to a distinctive Anglo-American urbanism and to the tortured history of an American urban exceptionalism. The American city has been remade by globalization, in all the material, discursive, and political senses of this hackneyed term. And so much of American urban geography has changed as well, with a vibrant outpouring of research on consumption, spatiality and scale, transnationalism, and postcolonial work that is often at least implicitly urban. Even the most insular American observer must confront the *new new urban reality* (cf. Peterson, 1985), and in this sense America has finally caught up with the rest of the world. Clearly, American urbanism is deeply implicated in the modernity and developmentalism challenged by Robinson, with urban theory leaving "cities in poorer countries, in former colonies, or in areas outside of western culture, to be apprehended through a static, non-dialectical lens of categorization as other (non-western, African, third world)." (Robinson, 2003, p. 9). And yet American urban theory is changing, with immigration and transnational connections undermining old binaries and categories as well as old borders. Much of the effort to fashion new urban theory is refracted through the lens of the American dilemma of black-white racial inequalities, an obsession with categorization, and an inability to talk about class (Boger and Wegner, 1996; Frey, 1996; cf. Ellis and Wright, 1998 and Ley, 2003; Anderson and Fienberg, 2000). But other work on American transnationalism is more fruitful, yielding insights on how the British urban postcolonialism of Commonwealth migration is reflected in

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<sup>2</sup> My concerns over the impulse to classify should not be mistaken for a refusal to participate in collective judgments and to advocate priorities (cf. Berry, 2001; Lake, 1999). Rather I suggest that we spend our energy debating substantive questions ("What kinds of urban research should we do?") instead of taxonomic questions ("Does it count as urban geography?").

American cities by the waves of refugees from countries torn by the "global reach' of U.S. foreign policy in the era of bi-polarity" of the Cold War (M.P. Smith, 2001, p. 79; see also Guarnizo, 1998; Smith and Guarnizo, 1998). Some currents of Anglo-American urban theory are challenging the old dichotomies and mapping the urban systems created by our distinctive but shared legacies of colonialism and empire.

### *American vernacular tinkering*

Thrift's reflections on the passions and problems of cities also shed light on the old American exceptionalism. The traditional urban theory challenged by Robinson was born of economic and technological determinism, largely in mid-century and mid-western U.S. universities (Barnes, 2002). Too often, we assumed that the new cities created by new technologies, ways of tinkering, and structures of power were best studied in the *tabula rasa* of the U.S., either on an isotropic plain, a suitably fragmented Tieboutian suburban fringe, or a laissez-faire informational city hooking into global circuits. American urban studies has much to learn from the articulation of the old and new that is a mainstay of British geography. The acceleration of innovations driving the "track and trace' spatial imaginary" (Thrift, 2003, p. 1), thus creates exceedingly complex urban environments, and for a time London seemed ready to become the planetary exemplar of the surveillant city (Rosen, 2001; cf. Berry, 2001).<sup>3</sup> Since September, 2001, of course, practice has caught up with theory in the U.S., with advanced biometrics, data-mining and profiling techniques, and risk modeling approaches creating all sorts of scansapes in a new geography of cities and border zones (Kunreuther, 2002; Rosen, 2001; Woo, 2002). Even earlier, however, some of the changes of recent years have found particularly vivid expression in American landscapes and scholarship. The "vernacular tinkering" Thrift (2003) identifies in contemporary consumption practices became a prominent theme in American attempts to understand the full range of our irrational exuberance (e.g., Frank, 2000; Goss, 1999; Schor, 1999). And America has a metropolitan talk machine as well, although its connection to the rest of the country has changed quite rapidly -- in contrast to "the modern British city system" where the spatial grammar of political talk has "really not changed all that much over many hundreds of years" (Thrift, 2003, p. 3). Only a generation ago, American urbanism was in the midst of a struggle between centripetal and centrifugal, and a few years before that the urban significance of Federal power and going to Washington was unmistakable (Glickman, 1980, 1981). Thirty years of successive rounds of "new federalisms" by Congresses and Nixon, Reagan, Bush, Clinton, and

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<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey Rosen happened to be in London in September, 2001: "I had gone to Britain to answer a question that seems far more pertinent today than it did early last month: why would a free and flourishing western democracy wire itself up with so many closed-circuit television cameras that it resembles the set of "The Real World" or "The Truman Show"? The answer, I discovered, was fear of terrorism." (Rosen, 2001).

Bush have replaced a tentative progressive centralization with what at first appears to be a simple, reactionary devolution and decentralization (Peterson, 1985; Waste, 1998).

*What kind of relevance for what kind of policy?*

But the anatomy and spatiality of American political realignments are actually quite complex, as are the implications for how we do urban geography. And these relations are behind the calls for the "policy turn" as diagnosed by Imrie (2003). Privatization and devolution in the United States have been selective, partial, and sometimes contradictory, with pronounced currents of recentralization of fiscal and (de)regulatory authority alongside decentralization and block-grant flexibility for most types of collective consumption (Peck, 1996; Sellers, 2002; Staeheli et al., 1997). Although this shift has encouraged a "competitive downgrading" (Peck, 1996, p. 252) in many domains of social policy, it has also opened new opportunities for regulation and state intervention, as well as urban research, litigation, and activism (Holston, 2001; Squires, 1992; Squires and O'Connor, 2001). What goes unquestioned, however, are the principles of competition and market discipline, and thus any urban research that is to attract funding or an audience in policy circles must accept these axioms. Imrie's account gives a chillingly accurate portrait of the state of American urban geography, although most of us are quite accustomed to playing the role of victim to a widespread ignorance of geography, only to be castigated (by other geographers!) for not contributing anything useful to public policy.

I concur with Imrie's careful and cautious assessment, and with his calls for a vigilant consideration of relevance and the role of the scholar. I would add three things from the American exceptionalist perspective. First, the meaning of *policy* itself is changing, as is the idea of *public* (witness the sometimes annoying mantra of the business-management faction of the new regionalists that "governance" is much more than "government" [e.g., Keating, 2001]). Broad currents of urban research are indeed quite relevant to policy, and do seem to have some influence; yet as Imrie points out, the politicization of knowledge production redefines the essential nature of research itself. Geography is contributing to the large and interdisciplinary body of research on cities as "new markets," homeownership, regionalism and industrial clusters, smart growth, the now-suddenly-old "new economy," and many other areas. Unfortunately, the market-driven concerns of today's reinvented government often ignore or impoverish urban theory: the standards for evidence and methodological rigor are surprisingly flexible so long as one arrives at certain types of conclusions.<sup>4</sup> American urban geography learned

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<sup>4</sup> Thinking outside the box of management-guru paradigms, I would suggest that the market efficiencies of the knowledge economy threaten to destroy our core competencies and strategic synergies.

this lesson a long time ago, during the Reagan years. And with a very few exceptions, American geographers have always struggled to get into the General Assembly of the urban policy forum, and have never been permanent members of the Security Council like economics. In the last decade the hollowing-out of the Federal research infrastructure and the subcontracting out of all manner of "governmental" functions to private firms, quangos, and community groups has created new opportunities to interact with policy in new ways. There are many troubling examples, but for an encouraging one I think of the Community Outreach Partnership Centers supported by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, and particularly the one co-directed by Bob Lake and Kathe Newman at Rutgers University.

My second point, in fact, is borrowed from Bob Lake (1997, 2002). Policy-relevant research need not be policy-driven research, and one way for us to challenge the narrowly-conceived calls for the "policy turn" identified by Imrie is to undertake critical, fundamental research *on* policy and policy formulation, as well as research on reactions *to* policy. Current urban political inquiry has enormous policy relevance: think of the work on the social and political construction of scale, or the studies of the effects of neoliberal governance on urban regimes, local autonomy, and conflicts among different levels of the state (Antipode, 2002; Hackworth, 2002; Lake, 2002; N. Smith, 2002; Staeheli et al., 1997). I would go farther than Imrie: American urban geography is producing plenty of policy relevant work; if the advocates of the policy turn are unsatisfied with its reception and use by policy-makers (whoever *they* are), then it is reasonable to ask for further clarification: are we being asked to quit our academic jobs to go work for the Urban Institute, Brookings, Cato, or the American Enterprise Institute?

Third, I want to strengthen Imrie's (2003, p. 5) effort to "guard against diminution of the intellectual integrity of the subject [of urban geography], or, what I perceive to be, the belittling of particular epistemological positions, modes of inquiry, and forms of expression and writing." Too often, the debate over "pure theory" as opposed to policy-relevant research is conducted amidst the violent chaos of -- get ready for this shocking revelation! -- the good old battles over the Quantitative Revolution versus social theory. These debates are healthy, but we must disentangle them before responding to Imrie's concerns over the risks of the policy turn. Here I think the American exceptionalism does some damage. There has always been a stream of American pragmatism and populism that was suspicious of social theory, or perhaps it was just *European* social theory. I do not think we can blame this state of affairs on the quantitative revolution (which of course had its own European social-theoretical roots), but the revolution certainly benefited from a backlash that mushroomed into active resistance to social theory. Thus an entire generation of spatial analysts saw their own quantitative and policy-relevant work in opposition to qualitative social theory that supposedly had no practical use for policy. I'm too old and jaded to accept these historical claims

at face value, but I'm too young to have witnessed the revolution first-hand. But I am convinced that when we conflate these two issues today -- policy versus epistemology/method -- we revive old dichotomies that are less than helpful. And these binaries are actually quite puzzling to those outside the disciplinary fold. Imrie is right to draw our attention to Ann Markusen's (1999) calls for policy relevance, but we should remember that she was also speaking on behalf of *critical* regional studies, and she challenged Wheeler's (2000) "Have We Lost a Generation of Urban Geographers?" by introducing several members of that generation who are doing rigorous and policy-relevant critical urban studies informed and enriched by contemporary social theory (Markusen, 2000).

## **Conclusions**

We have been contextualized. America, its cities and its urban geographers, have been globalized in ways that are only too familiar to the rest of the world. Studying the American city, disrupted by the overlay of new transnational connections atop deeply-entrenched older inequalities, now demands many of the analytical tools long used to understand the legacy of colonialism and empire on London. But American exceptionalism has been renewed in the last two years, and there is no doubt that this new new world order, with its cosmopolitan form of militant parochialism, will have an urban geography. We may not yet be able to map it, but alternative urban systems are on offer. Johnson (2002) recommends one kind of map, based on aggressive multilateralism and public-private cooperation to build a perimeter security strategy, an amnesty program for undocumented migrants, a national identity card, and "a more inclusive capitalism" to eliminate "the persistent poverty that plagues nearly 4 billion people in developing countries around the world" (p. 210).<sup>5</sup> Harvey et al. (2001, p. 901) fear that another kind of urban system will be created by "distinctively American brands of zealotry and fanaticism, of ethnic scapegoating, of authoritarianism." What is quite clear is that American urban geography is suddenly more relevant than we ever could have imagined.

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<sup>5</sup> And capitalism does seem to be responding, to judge by the fortunes of companies specializing in products and services as diverse as facial recognition algorithms, urban terrorism risk models (Woo, 2002), or ... duct tape. The Palladin Group has just launched the "Homeland Security Fund," a mutual fund investing in companies specializing in detection, defense, and response to risks of terrorist attacks (NPR, 2003).

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