Geography 531: Urban Systems in Developed Countries

Charting and Challenging Urban Hierarchies

2003 Winter, Term 2, 3 credits
Wednesdays, Noon to 3:00 PM, Geography Room 242
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Course Description [boilerplate from the course catalog]

Analysis of changing urban systems, with examples drawn primarily from Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom.

Verbose Course Description [what the course is really about]

The phrase “urban systems” was coined forty years ago to describe the interconnected, interdependent networks of centers that were understood to organize the space-economies of nations and regions. When viewed from the perspective of today’s human geography, the theoretical and methodological lineage of the concept seems rather quaint (central place theory collides with general systems theory, sideswipes multivariate numerical taxonomy, and skids across a thick slab of faith in efficient, self-equilibrating markets). But key assumptions of this heritage resurface in surprising places. In some accounts of today’s globalized neoliberalism, urbanization is portrayed as continuous, irresistible, inevitable, and somehow outside the established framework of nation-states. There is an eerie resemblance to some of the spatial science thinking that was influential at the height of urban geography’s quantitative revolution.
And yet the prominent, integrating questions of a previous generation have been discarded on the battlefield of irreconcilable differences of theory and method, policy and politics. Bob Lake offers a frank and sobering assessment: “Faced with inimical problems and hegemonic forces, there appears to be a retreat into safe topics, arcane analyses, and uncontroversial positions. The force of unyielding structural imperatives has prompted an inward turn,” perhaps because we have lost the spirit of Herbert Gans, Michael Harrington, Gunnar Myrdal, and others who were “prompted by a moral repugnance of observable inequalities and an insistent, unquenchable optimism that society could and would do better if only the facts were placed in evidence.”¹ You may disagree with Lake’s lament, and I hope you do, so that we can respond to his call, challenge disillusionment, and set about the task of mapping, of making, a new kind of transnational urban system.

In this seminar we will examine recent themes of continuity and change in urban inequalities of race, class, and gender. We will explore very different streams of old and new work, drawn from distinct traditions of substantive focus, theoretical emphasis, and analytical methodology. Imagine walking into a room and seeing Marshall Berman, Sharon Zukin, Neil Smith, Brian Berry, Laura Pulido, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Barney Warf, Peter Gould, Dolores Hayden, Michael Peter Smith, Don Mitchell, James Wolfensohn, James Defilippis, and, oh, yes, me too. If you recognize a few of these names you might ask yourself, How many bouncers and metal detectors do I need to keep the debate from getting out of hand? Ultimately, you may decide that this pluralist approach is too eclectic and too risky, and renders the city a truly chaotic conception devoid of coherent expression, meaning, understanding, and action. But my hope is that you will first approach these separate streams of inquiry on their own terms, and then accept the invitation to challenge them, to develop and refine your own synthesis.

The seminar is organized into three sections. First, we will spend a short time rummaging through various histories of urban geography to build a common frame of reference, relying on a few key articles and synthetic reviews to examine shifts in questions, theoretical foundations, and analytical methods. In the second part of the seminar, we will examine specific empirical urban processes to analyze persistence and change in socio-spatial inequality. My goal for this part of the seminar is to allow you to evaluate a particular story line that involves a valuable yet problematic synthesis of quantitative analysis and urban social theory. Case studies include a) the relations among gender, household and family consumption patterns, and suburban spatial structure; b) intersections of land markets, cultural change, and public policy in the gentrification of inner-city neighborhoods; c) the role of space and place in reinforcing and reproducing racial stratification in local housing markets; d) theoretical, methodological, policy, and activist dilemmas in the community reinvestment movement. You do not need any specialized quantitative background for this seminar: our concern is not with the intrinsic merits or technical subtleties of particular methods, but rather with the context and implications of their use to understand and challenge urban inequality. We will also consider the risks and silences of attempts to fuse social theory and the methodologies of what Martin Cadwallader has called ‘analytical urban geography.’ The third section of the seminar is less formally structured, and simply fun. We’ll read several recent, provocative urban books, considering these sorts of questions: have recent years brought fundamental changes in urban inequalities? If so, what new and established methods are required to understand these changes? Are the approaches in

part 2 of the seminar compatible with the goals of the authors in part 3? What kinds of research agenda are needed to achieve or extend the analytical and other goals of the authors in part 3?

**Reading Materials**

Books will be available in the campus bookstore. I have listed the ISBN numbers and price quotes from amazon.ca (in Canadian dollars, as of June, 2003) for our books below, but if the bookstore prices are substantially above these amounts, let me know and we’ll discuss other ways to exercise our utility-maximizing consumer sovereignty to achieve a pareto-optimal outcome. Supplemental items will be made available in class at the beginning of the term.

Smith, ISBN 0631184244, paper, $43.10.

**Evaluation**

Evaluation is based on three components: a short position paper focusing on any of the themes or articles in part 2 of the seminar (20%), a short review of any one of the books (20%), and a final seminar paper (including a proposal and progress report) (60%). Detailed specifications, deadlines, and other bureaucratese will be discussed at the first seminar meeting.

**Schedule and Readings**

Below and on the next pages are a provisional outline and reading lists.

Don’t view this as an intellectual straightjacket: at our first meeting we will share interests, plans, priorities, and preferences, and we may indeed decide to make fairly substantial changes. Those coming from a tradition of textual bulimia may see this reading list as a bit on the lighter side; others accustomed to reading every word of every sentence of every page assigned will see the list as an oppressive long march. The reality is somewhere in between: by throwing an eclectic list of sources at you, I hope to get you angered and frustrated by a few streams of urban research, and passionately, idealistically inspired by a few others. I do not expect you to slog through every single page of every single item.

January

7 Introductions. You. Me. The Course.
14 Cities as systems of...?


21 Paradigm Lost?


28 Past Histories of Future Urban Geographies.


February

4 Gender, Home, Consumption, Family, City: New Urban Ecologies?


11 ‘Race’ in and of the Urban System.


[Reading break, February 16-20 inclusive]

25 New Geographies of Gentrification.


March

3 Cities, Statistical Citizenship, and Strategic Positivism.


10 Transnational Urbanism.


17 An Urban Model of Local Autonomy.


24 Re-Urbanizing Public Space.


31 Post-Nine-Eleven Urbanisms.


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2 We will discuss scheduling alternatives for this date, which conflicts with the 2004 Centennial Meeting of the Association of American Geographers in Philadelphia.


April

7 Paper presentations.

27 Final papers due.