

## David Harvey, “Contested Cities: Social Processes and Spatial Form,” and Preparing for the Final Examination

David Harvey’s essay is a powerful and eloquent case for studying cities as a way of understanding social, economic, political, and technological change. Harvey tells us that cities are extremely hard to understand with the use of conventional philosophical approaches. Urbanization requires us to adopt entirely new ways of thinking about the “things” we see around us in cities -- the buildings, streets, homes -- and how they came to be. Cities are “palimpsests,” series of layers, of “different historical moments all superimposed upon each other.” Remember how the British elite of the 1850s sought to create a “London on the Pacific” in New Westminster and the rest of the Fraser Valley, and superimposed a colonial structure on the native spaces of the Coast Salish peoples? Remember how Friedrich Engels was so insistent that all the horrifying things he saw in the slums of Manchester were created by the new industrial age?

To understand how important the “palimpsest” of the city is, Harvey outlines three very different ways that space and time have been understood. The first goes back to the philosophers Descartes and Kant: time and space are **absolute**, and serve as containers for social processes that happen. The second is **relative**, as illustrated in Einstein’s theory of relativity. The distance between Vancouver, New York, and Hong Kong, for instance, can be measured in terms of absolute kilometers of separation, but the distance is suddenly very different when measured by time given today’s transportation technologies. There’s a global-circumference flight by Cathay Pacific that brings these cities close together, in terms of only hours of travel time, compared to weeks or months in previous centuries.

Harvey’s third conceptualization of space and time is **relational**. This is when the processes produce certain things at a certain place and time, and then those things -- think of them as congealed processes -- then play a role in influencing subsequent processes. The example Harvey uses for an illustration is nuclear power. Once a certain political and economic agreement in a particular time and place leads to the construction of a certain spatial form -- nuclear power plants -- then those realities constrain future generations of processes. Those physical objects, representing places that represent previous decisions, then influence the kinds of decisions that are possible for thousands of years into the future: “If a nuclear power station goes on the blink, can you imagine calling a town meeting to discuss democratically what to do about it? The answer is no, you can’t. In these realms, we are driven back to the realms of expert knowledge and expert decision-making.”

This relational understanding of space applies to human experience everywhere. But urbanization concentrates the effects of relational space-times. This is why urbanization is so important. Compared to every generation of humans who has lived before, we are living more of our lives in spaces and places (cities) produced by previous generations of concentrated social processes. Once built, the structures of cities play a role in shaping social processes, while also providing opportunities for people to take active roles in shaping the kinds of spaces and places that we will leave for future generations. These spaces and places, moreover, are always a mixture of the “natural environment” and the “built environment” as humans reshape nature. “We have to move the urban, and the urbanizing process,” Harvey concludes, “into a more

central position in our debates and discussions about ecological, social, political, and economic change.”

## Questions

1. Choose any city, town, or neighborhood you know well. Quick, write down three things you know about the history of that place or your past experience there. Now think of how they shape your image of the city. Then think of how your city image relates to what Harvey means when he writes,

The forms and structures we see in the city reflect “social processes at work in particular times and places. The result is an urban environment constituted as a palimpsest, a series of layers constituted and constructed at different historical moments all superimposed upon each other.”

2. In his essay, “Contested Cities,” David Harvey tells us, “We should focus on processes rather than things and we should think of things as products of processes. ... This transformation of thought seems to me absolutely essential if we are going to get to the heart of what the city is about.” At several points in this course, we’ve explored how “things” and categories that are often taken for granted are better understood as processes. Discuss some of these examples, drawing on material presented in lecture, in the readings, or in discussion sections.

Note: Question 2 above will be one of the essay question options for the final examination.

## Preparing for the Final Examination

The exam will include approximately forty multiple choice questions, and a selection of several essay questions. You will be expected to answer all of the multiple-choice questions, and to write an essay in response to one of the essay questions. The multiple-choice questions focus primarily but not exclusively on material discussed in class after the mid-term examination. There will be a few questions, therefore, from the early lectures in the class. The multiple choice questions are based solely on the lecture notes as codified in the powerpoint files made available on the left-hand side of the “schedule” tab of the course website.

The essay choices are drawn from material covered through the entire course. You should prepare for the multiple-choice section of the exam by studying the slides from my class presentations, and then skimming over the required readings from the textbook you’ve been using to prepare for each class, and skimming over the readings from the *City Reader* you’ve been using to prepare for discussion meetings.

Prepare for the essay question by choosing one topic and studying it in depth: go beyond the written lecture notes, consulting relevant sections of the textbook and various chapters of the *City Reader*. Don’t try to memorize stuff for the essay question: to write a truly excellent essay, you need to analyze, synthesize, and critically evaluate the concepts, questions, and debates we’ve studied. For a good essay, the specific facts you remember are not as important as the

logic, interpretation, and thought you use to put them all together. *Think*. Work hard and prepare, but when you sit down to write, you have to trust yourself.

There will be no multiple-choice questions on material presented in guest lectures or films shown in class. To be sure, if you've taken good notes during the guest lectures, then you should study this material and consider integrating it into the essay question you choose to answer. But none of the required multiple choice questions will be based on the guest lectures.

## Essay Questions

1. When and where did the first cities emerge? Why does this simple question matter? What do the disagreements on this question tell us about the ways scholars look for evidence and build knowledge? How are present trends in scholarship, travel, and technology changing our understanding of the urban past?
2. In *Visionary Cities*, Winy Maas writes, "We have now entered an era where poverty tourism (poorism) has become a popular holiday, Favela Chic is a hot nightclub in London, and the words 'slum dog' and 'jai ho' were among the 15 finalists in contention to become the 1 millionth English word." Maas is drawing attention to the fact that urban poverty has become a fashionable topic in the wealthy countries of the Global North -- but often as a media image and social fascination, not as a real, urgent problem to be solved. How does contemporary urbanization differ between wealthy and poor countries? Will poor cities in the Global South follow a path similar to the growth of wealth seen in cities of the Global North over the past century?
3. Today, social networking technologies and practices are fast re-defining what it means to be part of "communities" in a highly-interconnected world that is, for the first time in history, majority urban. How do the "classical" theorists of urban community from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries -- Ferdinand Tönnies, Emile Durkheim, Georg Simmel, and Louis Wirth -- help us understand things that are happening today?
4. The prominent urbanist Saskia Sassen notes that "the city concentrates diversity," but other experts have analyzed the "multidimensional phenomenon of social exclusion" in cities. What are the implications of cities concentrating racial and ethnic diversity? How do encounters with diversity encourage urbanites to learn new ways of living and communicating? How are these learning opportunities undermined by practices of social and spatial exclusion like gated communities or neighborhood segregation?
5. What is specifically urban about immigration? How do urban theories like spatial assimilation or transnational urbanism help us to understand the experiences of immigrants in cities, and the consequences of urban immigration for various societies?
6. What are the relations between cities and nature? How do cities change the way we think about sustainability? What can be done in cities or by cities to achieve more sustainable ways of life?

7. In his essay, "Contested Cities," David Harvey tells us, "We should focus on processes rather than things and we should think of things as products of processes. ... This transformation of thought seems to me absolutely essential if we are going to get to the heart of what the city is about." At several points in this course, we've explored how "things" and categories that are often taken for granted are better understood as processes. Discuss some of these examples, drawing on material presented in lecture, in the readings, or in discussion sections.