COMMENTARY—THE ACCIDENTAL RELEVANCE OF AMERICAN URBAN GEOGRAPHY

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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)

Crack open 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-precision-mapped lands of the Axis of Evil. You see many contemporary expressions of the Janus-faced American exceptionalism that has intrigued and infuriated so many previous generations of observers, from de Tocqueville all the way to the contrasting portraits of one of America’s central military characters in Vietnam (The Ugly American, coauthored by a U.S. Navy foreign officer and a political scientist, and Graham Greene’s The Quiet American). American urban geography has its own contested history of a self-styled, paradoxical exceptionalism: not long ago, many believed that a perspective forged in the laboratory of the 20th-century U.S. city provided an exceptionally pure form of theory and policy, a reference point for interesting deviations elsewhere. In the last decade this American exceptionalism, born of a remarkable historical-geographic contingency, was steadily undermined by the material and discursive urbanisms of globalization and transnationalism. Yet today we see a resurgence of American militant parochialism, and it is not clear how this shift will affect cities and our approach to urban geography.

I offer this provocation in a tactical maneuver, as a diversion from a more confessional reaction to the valuable papers by Robinson, Thrift, and Imrie (this issue): Ugly and sometimes quiet American that I am, I get it. I was surprised to recognize and fear several recurrent themes in these papers that speak to a distinctive Anglo-American urbanism and to the tortured history of an American urban exceptionalism.

1An extended version with additional references can be found at http://www.geog.ubc.ca/~ewyly/relevance.pdf
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The American city has been remade by globalization, in all the material, discursive, and political senses of his hackneyed term. But as Robinson’s eloquent and incisive analysis demonstrates, Anglo-American theory has been slow to respond: “The diverse urbanisms of different cities have not been allowed to transform the theoretical categories … through which cities are understood” (Robinson, this issue, p. 721). Still, there are encouraging signs from a vibrant flood of research on consumption, scale, transnationalism, and post-colonial work that is often at least implicitly urban. Even the most insular American observer must confront new urban realities, and in this sense America is catching up with the rest of the world. Robinson is right to challenge western urban theory for its narrow conceptualization, static developmentalism, and categorization of “other” cities. But intensified transnationalization is eroding old binaries and categories as well as old borders. New currents of urban theory respond to these empirical shifts, but even conventional theory adapts in order to explain the reassertion or defense of “traditional” modernities and categories in the American city. No matter how flawed they might be, the categorizations of mid-20th-century American urbanism cannot be jettisoned completely without obscuring key facets of city life and politics. It is indeed unfortunate that the best contemporary work “leaps across this period of scholarship as if it were a barren canyon of intellectual endeavor …” as it rapidly moves “blanking out on the journey towards the present” (Robinson, this issue, p. 711).

Thrift’s transurbanism also illuminates the dangers of 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. 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 United States either on an isotropic plain, a suitably fragmented Tieboutian suburban fringe, or a laissez-faire informational city hooking into global circuits. American urbanism has much to learn from the articulation of old and new that marks Thrift’s transurbanism. The accelerating innovation driving the “track and trace” spatial imaginary (Thrift, this issue, p. 728) creates exceedingly complex urban environments, and there is much evidence (from London’s scanscapes, to Poindexter’s ill-fated Total Information Awareness, to Wal-Mart’s move from UPC codes to trackable radio frequency ID chips embedded in individual products) of an emergent postsocial urban system. But the creative vernacular tinkering identified by Thrift is, unfortunately, often a necessary defensive response to track-and-trace. Activism and identity expressed through consumption has become a prominent theme in studies of middle-class and wealthy urbanisms, but as Thrift emphasizes, there is a remarkable durability to the spatial grammar of power that maintains inequalities. These entrenched divisions, traditions, and institutions present formidable (but not always insurmountable) barriers to the affective “micropolitics of the subliminal” (Thrift, this issue, p. 732).

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. 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. Although this shift has encouraged a competitive rescission 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. 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.

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 continues changing, as does the public. Broad currents of urban research are quite relevant to policy; yet as Imrie points out, the politicization of knowledge production redefines the essential nature of research itself. Geography contributes to the large, 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 too often ignore or impoverish urban theory by narrowing methodological choices or evaluating rigor on the basis of the types of conclusions on offer.

Second, policy-relevant research need not be policy-driven research, and one way for us to challenge the narrowly-conceived calls for the “policy turn” is to undertake critical, fundamental research on policy, as well as research on reactions to policy. Current urban political inquiry has enormous policy relevance, and the hollowing-out of the Federal research infrastructure and the subcontracting of once-governmental functions to private firms, quangos, and community groups does create new opportunities for creative engagement with policy.

Third, I want to strengthen Imrie’s (this issue, p. 698) 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. Here I think the American exceptionalism does some damage. The populist stream of American pragmatism has always been 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 benefitted from a backlash that mushroomed into outright hostility to social theory. A 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. Unfortunately, conflating the twin divisions of policy/theory and epistemology/method simply perpetuates old dichotomies that are quite puzzling to those not steeped in the old debates. A new generation of scholars is doing analytically rigorous and policy-relevant urban studies that is deeply informed by contemporary social theory.
A city full of immigrants seeking to enter one civil society, to earn one set of civil rights, for variegated reasons, is precisely not a “global” city; it brings the globe to the metropolis and redefines “the American”—Spivak (2000, p. 21)

America, its cities and its geographers, have been contextualized. American urbanization has been globalized in ways that are only too familiar to the rest of the world. Studying the American city, disrupted by the overlay of newer transnational connections atop deeply-entrenched older divisions, now requires the analytical tools long used to understand the imprint of colonialism and empire on British cities. Nevertheless, the redefined “American” of the American city is contested and uncertain in the face of a revived, re-militarized American exceptionalism. The effect of America’s cosmopolitan form of militant parochialism on cities is surely one of Rumsfeld’s unknown unknowns. But we do know that alternative urban systems are on offer: urban hierarchies shaped by multilateralism and hesitant quasi-liberal attempts to create a more inclusive yet unavoidably polarizing capitalism, or a more confident, aggressive, unilateral New American Century of world cities shaped by surveillance, scapegoating, and shock-and-awe urbanization. American urban geography is suddenly more relevant than we ever could have imagined.

REFERENCES

Spivak, G., 2000, Megacity. Grey Room 01, Fall, 8–25.