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History, Theory & the Metropolis

Thomas Bender

New York University



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The modern city is an obvious fact of contemporary life. Yet the closer one inquires into its workings, the more difficult it is to comprehend. The nature of the beast is difficult to specify. The quest for urban coherence in the study of the city, particularly the historical study of the city, distorts its most fundamental character and obscures social practices characteristic of the everyday life of the city. The field of urban history proper (as distinguished from urban studies attached to disciplines other than history) has been more interesting for its empirical data than for its concepts and theoretical ambitions. Though theory may be too elevated a signifier for what I aim to do here, I use it to suggest my concern to rethink at a conceptual level some of the problems, research strategies, and representational issues in the study of metropolitan life, of cities like New York and Berlin.

Three concerns particularly underlay my reflections: the place of history in urban studies, the conceptualization of urban space, and the issue of actors and agency.

I begin with history. History makes cities; they are a precipitate of history. No other human construct is marked so fundamentally by the artifacts and other evidences of layers of past social life as the sites of cities, ancient and modern. Not only are cities marked by their historicity, but the surviving elements of that history are at once a limiting condition and a multifaceted cultural resource. In other words, history is not, as one commentator famously claimed, a foreign country.¹ It is here and now; it is us.

Any effort to understand metropolitan life thus invites archeological and genealogical investigation or, more broadly, historical inquiry. Whatever else the city is and whatever other analytical strategies may be useful in studying it, it is fundamentally a historical problem and an object of inquiry by the various historical disciplines, ranging from literature to architecture, all of which today emphasize historicism or contingency.

All interventions in the contemporary metropolis must take account of its historical construction and transformations. However, by the use of two words—social life and site—I have already signaled the necessary interdisciplinarity of metropolitan studies. Social life points us toward the social sciences, particularly sociology and anthropology, while any discussion of site invites spatial analysis, or city planning, urban design, and geography. Yet, even here, as Henri Lefebvre has observed, much that we interpret as spatial is but the “inscription of time in the world.”²

The rejection of homogenizing “master narratives” and the language and logic of “multiculturalism” has heightened awareness of the internal differentiation in cities, making them harder to grasp as a whole. The vast extension of urban aggregations and notions of global connection have together made the boundary of cities difficult to define.

The hard part of inquiring into the history and contemporary condition of cities and metropolitan life, then, is the work of clarifying the coordinates of the object of our inquiry. Though we

¹ David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, 1985.

² Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, 1996: 16.

know better, we think of the city or metropolis as “thing.” When we refer to a city we designate a place, a material object and we assume a unified social whole, which implies bounded coherence. In recent years, socio-cultural modes of historical analysis and studies of globalization have undermined both the implied unity of the metropolis and notions of a clear demarcation of an “inside” and an “outside.” If buildings and infrastructure mark the place, we need to pay equal attention to another aspect of the metropolis, its character as a historically specific site marked by complex, conflicting, multi-scaled, and dense processes, relations, and interconnections.

Probably, no one would deny these observations. Yet the classic general histories of cities present them as both things in themselves and as local representations of more extensive civilizations. Rarely do the grand narrative histories of Leonardo Benevolo, Lewis Mumford, and, most recently Peter Hall, explore the process and causes of internal change within an era or in the movement from one era or urban type to another. And they miss both multiple and asymmetric temporalities that inform metropolitan life. Problematically, in an almost Hegelian spirit cities of different eras have their own essence that informs their every aspect. Again, we might recall Lefebvre’s caution: neither modernity nor the metropolis has an “essence”; each is a historically contingent “situation” located in time as well as in a place.³ In recent decades historical writing has moved from the grand narratives of yore to micro-histories. These little narratives, as we might call them, capture complexity and confer agency on historical actors absent in the older and larger narratives. But they share the tendency--perhaps heighten the tendency--to suggest an autochthonous condition as well as a bounded and coherent social system.⁴

The much celebrated Walter Benjamin’s work shares these problems, perhaps even reveals them with exceptional clarity. Probably no writer has been invoked more often by students of urban culture in the past quarter century. His enormously illuminating essays on history, memory, and criticism and his less formal impressions of various cities are filled with insight. But as an urban theorist or historian he is less helpful. The unfinished “arcades” project, outlined in a preliminary way in his essay (really an unfunded grant proposal) “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century” and partly developed in his study of Baudelaire and lyric poetry in the age of high capitalism, was assumed by many, including me, to point the way to studies of metropolitan history and culture. Now the project has been published. It is not the answer, but it brilliantly reveals the problem. In the shadow of this weighty and thick volume, not only the Paris project but the other the cities of his great essays appear insular, and the rhetorical claim for the importance of Paris in the nineteenth century is no more than a literary trope, even if probably true.

His great ambition, as he once put it, was “to conjoin a heightened graphicness to the realization of the Marxist method.” He had a grand theory of causation (Marxism) and from that an explanation (capitalism). But he also had an almost infinite number of images and little narratives that make up the complexity of Paris. He could not connect the small narratives to each other or

³Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, 1996: 12.

⁴There is nothing inherent in micro-histories limiting them in this manner, but this is the way they turn out. For a statement by a key proponent of micro-history to the effect that it may address large-scale historical processes reaching even to global dimensions, see Jacques Revel, “Micro-analyse et construction du social”, 1996: 15-36.

consistently link them to his grand narrative. That is why it was not finished--and never would have been finished, even had he not suffered his tragic death. In the end, the Arcades project is a grand index and filing system. Brilliant though he was, he appears in the many pages of the Arcades files to be much like us: overwhelmed, not able to find the threads to pull it together. No historical narrative seemed adequate; no social theory could comprehend it.

I will not claim to have mastered the difficult challenges I have briefly sketched here. But with them in mind, I want to propose a number of focal issues that warrant rethinking and that might point to at least partial resolutions that will enrich our scholarly search for the metropolis. (I stake out seven focal points here, but I warn you that they were be combined and reduced in number in the discussion and conclusion.) First, we must reconsider our relegation of history to the role of mere background for change or the structural circumstance that enables change. We need to recognize history as a possible actor. It is not just part of the dialectic of past and present that confers local meaning, since it can actively shape the future; second, there is the problem of our implicit notion of normative wholeness, with a consequent concern for fragmentation, or even dissolution; third, we must get past the notion of the interconnection and interdependence of cities, however true this is, for a fuller grasp of this aspect, by which I mean the ordinariness of the “trans-locality” of the metropolis, to take the apt phrase of Michael Peter Smith;⁵ fourth, we need to recognize the importance of imagination and incorporate it into our understanding of the making of metropolitan culture and identity—indeed of the city itself; fifth, we need a heightened awareness, greatly heightened, of infrastructure as a connector of many aspects of urban social life, of infrastructure as a hinge linking the man-made to the natural environment in metropolitan regions; sixth, we need to reconsider our preoccupation with representation and meaning to the near exclusion of closely observed practice, how the city works socially and otherwise, and the array and ad hoc patterns of agents at work in the metropolis; and seventh, we need to address the problematic character of our commonplace reification of “the social” and think more about processes of assemblage and re-assemblage of discrete social institutions, networks of persons, and the elements of material life. I might sum up these various points and explain my concern by saying that in our analysis of the metropolis, which is perhaps the most complex human and material aggregation ever realized on this planet, our analytical tools are too often monoplex or duplex (binaries) when we need multiplex means of grasping the multiform metropolis.

After a brief discussion of this these several issues, I want to suggest importing a theory established outside of urban studies in the hope of opening new space for thinking about the metropolis. I have in mind Actor Network Theory, largely identified with Bruno Latour and his colleague Michel Callon, both at the Ecole des mines de Paris, as well as John Law in Britain, all associated with the “science studies” initiative of the past couple of decades. I would add Peter Galison, the historian of science at Harvard, who is probably not one of this “group,” but whose brilliant studies of physics powerfully support one of the key positions I wish to import to urban studies. It may seem odd to import theories developed in studies of the history, sociology, and philosophy of science into

⁵ Michael Peter Smith, “Transnationalism and the City”, 1999: 119-39.

urban studies, but the test is whether they turn out to be fruitful in better understanding the nature of the metropolis. And I might note that Latour has himself explored the method's usefulness in understanding the complexity of urban life in a large heavily illustrated book undertaken with a collaborator, *Paris, ville invisible*.⁶ The appeal of this set of ideas for me is their openness, especially their capacity to incorporate more urban actors, many of whom we conventionally and routinely exclude from our analysis.

I am going to proceed topically, beginning with:

History's Work. Cities are a product of history. But history's urban work is larger than that. Time is not singular, nor is history. As Fernand Braudel long ago insisted, a historical situation (event or non-event) is the product of many interconnected histories and geographies. His notion of *la longue durée* is now a commonplace of historiographical discussion, but in fact Braudel recognized a potentially infinite number of co-existent temporal scales.⁷ History is made from their interconnection and interplay. Likewise the metropolis: in the flux of urbanism there is always a range of "different chronologies" at work shaping the present.⁸ As Smriti Srinivas has demonstrated in her study of Bangalore, India, ancient mythic religious histories and British imperial histories are a part of hypermodern daily life of India's Silicon Valley. She argues that in the "mnemonics of space" the "various historical and cultural materials" aligned on different timelines are "gathered up," or "recollected," in "novel configurations" that establish the spatial terms of daily life.⁹

History is more than the stage upon which actors will create the future; it is (or can be) itself one of those actors. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* is relevant here. "The *habitus*," he argues, is a "product of history" that "produces individual and collective practices—more history. . . . It ensures the active presence of past experiences." New ideas and actions are not determined by the past, but the past is actively part of the formulation of the new.¹⁰

History can act by its limiting immobility, duration, as well as by being mobilized. As Patrick Joyce, building on Michel Foucault, has argued in the case of cities, resistance precedes and collaborates in the constitution of power.¹¹ Or put differently, without resistance there is no power. Thus the inscriptions of history become facts on the ground, with the potential of resistance—thus making history a potential actor, as it in Bangalore, but more commonly in the United States in the form of pre-existing historical structures or artifacts. History always carries the potential of resistance, and thus becoming an actor.

As the urban heritage industry shows, history can act as an economic resource, aiding the

⁶ Bruno Latour and Emilie Hermant, *Paris, ville invisible*, 1998.

⁷ Fernand Braudel, "Time, History, and the Social Sciences", 1973: 403-29.

⁸ Michael Keith, *After the Cosmopolitan? Multicultural Cities and the Future*, 2005: 5.

⁹ Smriti Srinivas, "Cities of the Past and Cities of the Future: Theorizing the Indian Metropolis of Bangalore, 2002: 272. See also her *Landscapes of Urban Memory: The Sacred and the Civic in Indian's High Tech City*, 2001.

¹⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 1990: 54.

¹¹ Patrick Joyce, *The Rule of Freedom: Liberalism and the Modern City*, 2003: 185-6.

transformation of cities into worlds of consumption for both residents and tourists. As resources historical materials (buildings and landscapes, artifacts reminiscent of famous people or events) as *resources* do not act in a literal or willing sense. But they deserve to be understood as collaborators with those who interpret and deploy them. Or to make the point by reversing the phrasing, we can say that without actual and specific historical materials urban developers and heritage experts would be without a crucial partner. Not only is history a collaborator of developers, but fortunately it is even more often an ally of those wishing to restrain developers, historic preservation (along with environmental preservation) being the only institutionalized means of restraining development-oriented city planning departments in American cities. Thus history is not only domestic rather than foreign, but it is a contemporary participant in the work of defining and making the future.

Wholeness and Imagination. Here I want to combine my discussion of metropolitan wholeness (or the norm of wholeness) and the role of imagination. In an article published a decade ago, the Argentinean anthropologist working in Mexico Nestor Garcia Canclini explored the question of the unity of the city as a scholarly object in the age of megacities, multiculturalism, and globalization. How, he asked, can the partial perspectives of the different social disciplines be brought together to construct an interpretation of contemporary metropolitan life? His answer to this question was inconclusive.

More pertinent to my present concern, however, were his empirical findings concerning the cultural and recreational use of the city, or, broadly considered, its public culture. He found very little public life. More than 40% of those interviewed had not been out to see a movie in a year; more than 60% of those who said they liked the theatre had not been to the theatre in the past year; and 90% said they had not been to a concert during that time. Nor were more than 10% regularly attending popular shows or neighborhood parties. A survey of the 200,000 attending the Second Festival of Mexico City in 1990 revealed the limits of urban culture in a fascinating way; only 12% were aware that the event they attended was part of a larger city festival with more than 300 shows. He draws a conclusion that is both methodological and substantive: while demographers see the millions of Mexico City as a whole, cultural analysis reveals no such thing. Culturally, he writes, Mexico City is a “disassembled jigsaw puzzle.” Like Jorge Luis Borges’s *Aleph*, Mexico City “is everywhere without really being anywhere.”¹²

Yet culturally, there is a Mexico City. The internal fragmentation and its translocality notwithstanding, citizens and visitors know they are in a place and that it is Mexico City. Whether they leave their houses or not, they know that there is a public culture that includes high art, popular activities, and politics, as recent events in the Zocalo reveal. Here the literary critic James Donald is useful:

“To put it polemically, there is no such *thing* as the city. Rather, *the city* designates the space produced by the interaction of historically and geographically specific institutions, social relations of production and reproduction, practices of government, forms of media communication, and so forth. By calling this diversity ‘the city,’ we ascribe to it a coherence or integrity. *The city*, then, is

¹² Nestor Garcia Canclini, “Mexico: Cultural Globalization in a Disintegrating City,” 1995: 745, 747, 748.

above all a representation. But what sort of representation? By analogy with the now familiar idea that the nation provides us with an ‘imagined community,’ I would argue that the city constitutes an “imagined community.”¹³

Donald’s response is both correct—and too easy. “The city is,” as the Chicago sociologist Robert Park long ago in 1915 observed, “a state of mind.”¹⁴ And that, as his colleague W.I. Thomas famously insisted, had consequences.¹⁵ But making that city of the mind is complex. Imagination does not arise arbitrarily or out of nothing. It is built upon history and experience. Here a recent critique (or extension) of Benedict Anderson’s theory of the origins of nationalism as an imagined community is pertinent. Andrés Reséndez, a historian of early nineteenth century Mexican nationalism, has argued that nationalism (and I would say the same is true for metropolitan culture) is made by a combination of partial and scattered but sometimes interconnected social practices of national (or, for me, metropolitan) scope that produce a density of institutions, connections, and local movement. One does not have to go to the movies or a concert to know that there is a metropolitan culture. But some must go to the movies. One’s imagination can fill in the spaces, make the connection, and even insert oneself into it. Various means of communication play a role, including what Anderson characterized as “print capitalism,” but also less formal means of interaction, visual awareness, even a sense of *being there* (and that others were not). Such an imaginary metropolis gives form to what is on the ground only partially interconnected and bounded.

The disarticulated social practice of urban life and the imagined city are at once in tension with each other and collaborators in making the experience of urban culture seem coherent. If, as Lefebvre argues, the gift of the city is the production of itself as an “*oeuvre*,” that work is on-going, the joint product of practice and imagination.¹⁶ The imagination serves as metaphorical glue, ordering social elements, making social elements resemble society, suggesting a whole. The issue here is not one of a correspondence of representation and actual social relations but rather whether the imaginative construction of the city that sustains a sense of social ordering.¹⁷ Imagination thus participates in the real. Put crudely, metropolitan culture is a benign deceit. That said, reification is the danger, for it masks as it unifies, thus misleading our understanding of urban processes and lived experience making us presume the “thingness” of it all, when it is a process.

Translocality. One of the ironies of modern city planning—itsself a product of the global circulation of urban ideas beginning more than a century ago—is that it in its comprehensiveness, internal logic, and cartographic representation it suggests the boundedness and isolation of the city. Whether one examines Cerda’s plan for Barcelona, Haussman’s work in Paris, Wagner’s vision for Vienna, or Burnham’s magnificent plan for Chicago, the clarification of city form suggests closure as well. Opening up the city to movement, even when the scope of that movement is enlarged to the

¹³ James Donald, “Metropolis: The City as Text”, 1992: 422.

¹⁴ Robert Park, “The City: Suggestions for the Investigation of Human Behavior in the Urban Environment”, 1967: 1.

¹⁵ I refer here to Thomas’s famous observation, rooted in Chicago pragmatism: “if a situation is defined as real, it is real in its consequences.” A good example is the brilliant analysis of the public discussion of violence in relation to violence in Sao Paulo in Teresa Caldeira, *City of Walls: Crime, Segregation, and Citizenship in São Paulo*, 2000.

¹⁶ The notion of the city as an *oeuvre* runs through his urban writings. See Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on the City*, 1996.

¹⁷ John Law, *Organizing Modernity*, 1994: 25-26.

region as in Wagner's Vienna and especially Burnham's Chicago, a coherent region is the focus, and translocal connections are shadows at best. That omission is supremely ironic, for it masks the foundation of the metropolitan economy, especially in the case of Chicago, which owed everything to its connections to a hinterland of nearly continental proportions and global trade in the products of that hinterland. Burnham was a master at locating railroad stations in cities, but his plans give no indication of the destinations and importance of the trains.

The 1811 grid plan of New York so effectively orders the island of Manhattan that today the larger part of the city is obscured. Save for a street system that favored access to the piers, there is no suggestion of the continental and global connections upon which New York depended. Conventional historiography credits two developments for the emergence of New York as the American metropolis, both accomplished in the first two decades of the nineteenth century. The first was regular "packet" ship service to Europe, thus establishing New York as a communications center; the second was the Erie Canal, which brought the agricultural commodities of midwestern farms and the Chicago commodity traders to the port of New York and thus a global market. It also opened the interior to the city's merchants and manufacturer. New York was also the shipping, insurance, and financial services center for the American south and thus for a world cotton market.

This metropolitan role had implications for the New York's distinctive pattern of urban development. The massive influx of wholesale buyers from across the nation stimulated the development of the hotel, restaurant, and entertainment industry, including brothels, well beyond the needs of the local population. The same activity prompted one of the most important architectural developments in the history of the city: the cast iron architecture--now identified with Soho--characterized by an early curtain wall construction intended to provide large windows that revealed the goods inside and provided natural light for the display of goods to out-of-town buyers. And the adoption of the Otis elevator--first in a cast iron building that still stands on Broadway--made the fifth floor as accessible to buyers as was the ground floor.

The metropolitan welcome mat that promoted the economy, also raises difficult questions about citizenship and urban justice. Even in the nineteenth century city, but especially in our own time, city governments have devoted resources to non-residents (tourists, business visitors, but also commuters as part-time users); in a finite fiscal world this necessarily reduces resources, like schools, available to resident citizens. Catering to transient users of cities, many of whom export resources from the city in the form of wages and other income, raises a danger, as Gino Martinotti puts it, of "de facto disenfranchising of the urban dwellers."¹⁸

We tend to have an all too clear an image of cities with an interior and an exterior. The place is thus connected to a larger world, to an outside. The boundary and the internal singleness assumed in such thinking are both very weak on the ground. The city, unlike the nation-state, extends into the world, often imperceptively and through many highly particular paths and networks: the larger world not only enters the city but is a constant presence. Hence Michael Peter Smith's very useful notion of "translocality." There is no binary here. The global is not outside; it is both inside and outside, all the

¹⁸ Guido Martinotti, "A City for Whom? Transients and Public Life in the Second-Generation Metropolis," 2002: 169.

time.¹⁹ David Harvey's important concept of the "time-space compression" has been quite pertinently rephrased by Doreen Massey as "the geographical stretching-out of social relations."²⁰

There is a tendency today to impute authenticity to the local, the "everyday." There is even a suggestion that the local is inherently an oppositional condition.²¹ While in particular cases this is surely true, it is not inherent. It depends upon particular circumstances and networks of resources, sometimes global in extent. Here I refer to the fascinating work of Jim Holston on the invigorating convergence of rights discourse promoted by global NGO's and local democracy movements in Brazil and elsewhere.²² Or to reverse "the flow," so to speak, there is the incidence of members of diasporic communities intervening--often in decisive and sometimes reactionary ways--in the national politics of the nation of their family's origin.

Infrastructure and Natural Environment. To the extent that the city is materially unified, one must look at infrastructure. It is more than background. Making it, and making it work, is a remarkable achievement. The "bundles" of "materially networked, mediating infrastructures" of metropolitan areas have been called the "largest and most sophisticated technological artifacts ever devised by humans."²³ The hardly noticed, if all-pervasive, infrastructure not only "serves" (admittedly in varying degrees) the entire populations of cities, but it does more. It shapes experience. From the earliest forms of city life, but especially in the modern metropolis, the material facts of infrastructural networks have been, as Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin claim, "strongly involved in structuring and delineating experiences of urban culture" and thus contributing to the "structure of feeling" characteristic of metropolitan life.²⁴ One can be more definite about this: authority is embedded in the material facts of the city--ranging from street layouts, location of natural features, infrastructure, and the like--that impose structuring on urban lives, offering possibilities as well as constituting constraints.²⁵ Or as David Harvey observed even more concretely: "Can I live in Los Angeles without becoming a frustrated motorist?"²⁶ When infrastructure becomes a concern, it has become an actor. To use another example, take stairs. For most people stairs facilitate movement, but for a person in a wheelchair they are a difficulty, a concern, prompting, even forcing an act of problem-solving.²⁷

Harvey's comment recalls the best analysis of urbanism that has been generated by the materials of Los Angeles's history and form--and one that to the best of my recollection is largely ignored by the so-called Los Angeles School, perhaps because the author was having so much fun. I refer to Reyner Banham's *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, which penetratingly and

¹⁹ Doreen Massey, "Double Articulation: A Place in the World", 1994: 117.

²⁰ Doreen Massey, *Power-Geometries and the Politics of Space-Time*, 1999: 59.

²¹ One sees this even in the work of some exceptionally sophisticated analysts, including David Harvey and Henry Lefebvre, and Michel deCerteau.

²² James Holston and Teresa P.R Caldeira, "Democracy in Brazil", 1999.

²³ Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin, *Splintering Urbanism: Networked Infrastructures, Technological Mobility, and the Urban Condition*, 2001: 10.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁵ John Rennie Short, "Three Urban Discourses", 2000: 19.

²⁶ David Harvey, "The Right to the City," in Loretta Lees", 2004: 237.

²⁷ Susan L. Star, "The Ethnography of Infrastructure", 1999: 380.

amusingly evokes the fusing of the natural environment, infrastructure, architecture, and lifestyle of Los Angeles.²⁸ I want to argue—as Banham insinuates—that nature and infrastructure become active elements of urban life, not mere background. Even if infrastructure is a product of human intention and designed by human actors, once it is on the ground, as we might say, it acquires new contextual meanings and can have unanticipated effects. A result thus becomes a cause.

Surely there is a politics of infrastructure. It used to be the claim of advocates for non-partisan municipal governments in the United States that there is no Republican or Democratic way of building a sewer system. But of course there is, as we see more clearly in the age of neo-liberal privatization of infrastructure.²⁹ But infrastructure can sometimes transcend quite serious politics. The complexity and interconnectivity of the infrastructure of metropolitan regions requires a degree of cooperation by engineers in politically divided cities, as in the case of Jerusalem and Cold War Berlin.

Infrastructure connects the built environment, the social world of the city, and even the individual metropolite to the natural environment of the metropolitan region. A favorite comment of historians of Victorian culture is to remark that the “privy,” that mark of liberal individuation and privacy for bodily functions, actually connected the individual with a network that embraced the collectivity and extended into the natural environment. The privacy of the privy, it turns out, was not entirely a room of one’s own.³⁰

The natural environment is also a collaborator in the making of metropolitan life. Recently, I began a review of a book about the Hudson River with the following four sentences:

The Hudson River, and the valley it defines, is a fact of nature. A region of sometimes astonishing beauty, it is also a site of human action, of history. To press a bit harder, it may fairly be considered an actor as well as a stage for history. Together the river and Governor DeWitt Clinton brought forth the Erie Canal. Completed in 1825, it made New York City the great metropolis of the Americas.³¹

I had pretty much expected the exceedingly rigorous British editors of the TLS to object to this assertion of collaboration between a river and a leading politician, rather than presenting the river as the object of his creative action. But it seems that the assertion passed the test of literary and historiographical rationality.

The power of nature to shape the city’s physical form, social patterns, political alignments was powerfully revealed. Perhaps after Katrina, both the hurricane itself and the year of politics since it, make the importance of this perspective almost self-evident. The devastation of New Orleans showed much human failure and perhaps even political perversity, but it also gives graphic testimony to a point made by Stephen Graham in the wake of Katrina: “the ‘natural’ world mingles inseparably with the urban world. Increasingly it is impossible to separate the natural world from the man-made one of

²⁸ Reyner Banham, *The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, 1971.

²⁹ See Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin, *Splintering Urbanism*, 2001.

³⁰ Patrick Joyce, *The Rule of Freedom*, 2003: 75.

³¹ Thomas Bender, “River of War,” 2006: 32.

cities, infrastructures, and technologies.”³²

Space, too, can be active. Typically, space, like history, is either naively thought of as a stage, or in more critical inquiry as the product of power relations, but we might also understand it, once it is made and recognized, as potentially active. History and space, as already indicated, are not wholly alternative vectors for the lived experience of city life or academic analysis of the city. They are usually entangled with each other. Again, Srinivas’s study of Bangalore is pertinent. She describes what she calls “encrypted spaces” in Bangalore, where the cityscape is rich in “spatial and ritual memories” as history becomes space and space becomes history. Thus, she argues, disenchantment remains incomplete in the development of Bangalore, and re-enchantment is a part of the play of history, space, and social practices.³³

Actor Network Theory. Now I want to describe ways in which Actor Network Theory or ANT offers possibilities for thinking about ordering and causation that could usefully refocus our historical and sociological analysis of the city. My point is not to take the elaborated theory as a template to be used by urbanists; rather my aim explores the highly suggestive cluster of ideas that inform ANT and that might be worth development in relation to the study of the modern city.

The first large--and perhaps most fundamental--idea is the rejection of the “thingness” or necessary coherence of society. This undercuts large theories of society, focusing instead on partial social relations and ordering. Put differently, what conventional social science might call “the social” is a process, a contingent condition, not a thing. Neither is *social order* a thing; it is more accurately understood as a *social ordering*, contingent and always subject to reconfiguration. This theme is heavy in ANT, largely because it is French in origin and has the burden of the long shadow of Emile Durkheim’s core concept of the “social fact.” Latour adopts and adapts Gabriel Tarde, Durkheim’s more senior rival whose ideas were marginalized by Durkheim’s success. While Durkheim’s sociology is concerned with stable social formations, Tarde emphasized that what we call society is always a provisional pattern associations.³⁴ ANT is thus a theory heavy in gerunds. Social causation operates through particular associations, networks, interconnections, and interrelations of potential actors. Moreover, these multiply rapidly and take unexpected directions.

Such an approach is roughly familiar to historians under the rubric and modern mantra of multi-causal explanations or “conjunctural explanations.” In fact, Latour considers William Cronon’s *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*, written without knowledge of ANT, to be a “masterpiece of ANT.”³⁵ As in Cronon’s book, ANT includes forms of agency not common in historiography. In particular the network of causes includes non-human actors. According to Latour, “politics is no longer limited to humans and incorporates the many issues to which they are

³² Stephen Graham, “Cities Under Siege: Katrina and the Politics of Metropolitan America,” at <http://understandingkatrina.ssrc.org/Graham/pf/>.

³³ Smriti Srinivas, “Cities of the Past and Cities of the Future,” 2002: 252-59, 272.

³⁴ See Bruno Latour, “Gabriel Tarde and the End of the Social”, 2002: 125.

³⁵ William Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*, 1991; Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*, 2005: 11.

attached.”³⁶ Cities invite such expansion of notions of agency and contingency.

It is not accidental that this form of explanation comes out of science studies. Thomas Kuhn’s famous book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) legitimated a historicist approach to scientific innovation; more recently Peter Galison, the Harvard historian of science, has demonstrated the contribution of non-human causes in physics, namely the independent importance of instrumentation, which he sees as an actor, shaping the questions and answers in science.³⁷ John Law moves this logic into the workshop of science with a close study of a particular laboratory. “The architecture, the machinery, and the social relations of the Lab all go together.” He insists that “they *all* perform and embody modes of ordering. They’re inextricably entwined.”³⁸ Whatever the French dimensions of this way of thinking, it is edging very close to the classic age of American pragmatism, especially William James but Dewey, too.

Third, I would emphasize that the rethinking of the social inherent in ANT indirectly but importantly undercuts a common rhetoric of history and social theory, modernization theory’s progression from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*, which has long hovered over (or under) American social science as a meta-narrative.³⁹ Urban history, under the influence of the Chicago School, has been especially vulnerable to unthinking incorporations of this metanarrative, with its logic of fragmentation and decline—or, alternatively, of development and progress. Better is the language of ANT, which focuses on assembly and reassembly.

More than most urban histories, ANT is focused on agency and practice; it is less interested in issues of identity and meaning than contemporary history and socio-cultural analysis tends to be. There is instead a focus on practice and an underlying ethnographic impulse, tracking the relations of potential actors—and thus concerning itself with complex causal explanations. This approach not only undercuts the category of “the social,” but it escapes the geographical boundedness that has limited urban history, making “trans-locality” researchable. It leaves open for inspection a wide range of possible “heterogeneous elements” operating on different temporal and spatial scales. Such understandings are easily transferred to the study of cities. The research rule is clear and simple: follow the actors in potentially causal networks—whether people, knowledges, things, or money—till a pattern of explanation either emerges or becomes implausible.

So the main contribution of ANT is at base pretty simple: multicausality and heterogeneous chains of actors, including non-human ones. But there is also a problem, an ethical or moral problem. I refer to the apparent leveling of the power of all participants in the causal network.⁴⁰ The politics of ANT has been attacked, and Latour has recently sought (without success, in my view) to address that challenge to his work.⁴¹ In fact, I am not sure why Latour and his colleagues have such difficulty with

³⁶ Bruno Latour “From Real Politik to Dingpolitik, or How to Make Things Public”: 2005: 41.

³⁷ Peter Galison, *Image and Logic: A Material Culture of Microphysics*, 1997.

³⁸ John Law, *Organizing Modernity*, 1994: 141.

³⁹ Thomas Bender, *Community and Social Change in America*, 1978.

⁴⁰ In its most severe form, this theory tends to merge the human and non-human, declining to acknowledge the autonomous individual as distinct in the chair. I am not going that far.

⁴¹ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 2005.

this criticism. My response may be too simple, but it seems to make sense. First, one might note that commonplace categories of “the social,” or capitalism, or even less grandly class seem no less reductive of specific human responsibility. Closer ethnographic analysis is more likely to reveal specific responsible acts. Second, the multiplication of actors and vectors of causation seems to open more opportunities for political intervention and thus for political responsibility. As Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift point out in their essay, “The Emancipating City?,” the modern city is “so continuously in movement” and so bountiful in “unexpected interactions” that it is rich in “resources for continuing political intervention.”⁴² Actor Network Theory seems to point our analysis and politics in a particular direction, one I believe to be useful as well as humble and ethically sound. It supports an inclusive, practical, incremental approach to scholarship and politics that brings together act, causation, and responsibility.

There is one more thing to be added. Without developing the ideas available there, Latour concludes his political defense of ANT with reference to John Dewey’s *The Public and Its Problem*, Dewey’s only work in political theory.⁴³ As a pragmatist, which is to say a consequentialist, Dewey judged both ideas and politics for their consequences. For him what Latour calls “matters of concern” arise when state or private actions produce harm to third parties. The public in this view comes into being as the *ad hoc* response of victims and their allies. Latour is not far from this when he suggests that parliaments are supplemented by “other assemblages” or provisional publics.⁴⁴ ANT would add non-human responsables (whether hurricanes, environmental degradation, or freeways and other infrastructure that enforces class division and racial segregation) to the capitalists and governments Dewey had in mind. I doubt Dewey would object to this expansion of causation and political judgment. The human consequences were always of greater concern to him than origins and motive. And I think that is a reasonable platform for both scholarship and politics.

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⁴²Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift, “The Emancipatory City?” 2004: 232.

⁴³ John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problem* 1988.

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Editors Ignacio Farias
 ignacio.farias@metropolitanstudies.de

 Pe-Ru Tsen
 pe-ru.tsen@metropolitanstudies.de

 Oliver Schmidt
 oliver.schmidt@metropolitanstudies.de

Center for Metropolitan Studies
Ernst-Reuter-Platz 7 / TEL 3-0
D-10587 Berlin

Tel: +49-30-3142 8400
Fax: +49-30-3142 8403
Web: www.metropolitanstudies.de