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**City**

**Phil Hubbard**

Key Ideas in Geography

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# CITY

City provides an accessible yet critical introduction to one of the key ideas in human geography. Always at the heart of discussions in social theory, the definition and specification of the city nonetheless remains elusive. In this volume, Phil Hubbard locates the concept of the city within current traditions of social thought, providing a basis for understanding its varying usages and meanings through a critical discussion of the contribution of major theories and thinkers. This book thus offers a distinctive and timely intervention in debates in urban theory by suggesting new ways that students and scholars in sociology, geography, urban studies, planning and politics can make sense of the city.

Written in a lively and accessible style, the individual chapters of *City* offer a thematic overview of some important ways of approaching cities, whether as imagined realms, lived-in places, networks of association or spaces of flow. Situating these traditions within the rich heritage of urban studies and urban sociology, the book develops the argument that none of these approaches, when taken alone, helps us grasp the specificity of the urban, but that each is vital for grasping the materiality of cities. The book thus spells out the case for a renewed urban geography, suggesting that it is only by combining these different ways of approaching the city that we can begin to understand the relational materiality of urban life.

**Phil Hubbard** is Reader in Urban Social Geography at Loughborough University.

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# CITY

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Phil Hubbard

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For Brian and Joy



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Given this book provides an overview of a massive literature, it is necessary to begin by acknowledging the enormous number of authors whose work could have been cited here, yet for a variety of reasons – including my own sheer ignorance – I have not referenced. The fact they have not been referenced does not mean they are insignificant to the debates I review, nor that they have not informed the writing of this book, consciously or otherwise. As such, I can only apologise to the many whose work I should have cited, as well as those who will object to my interpretation of their work. This inability to do justice to the rich diversity of scholarship in urban geography is, alas, inescapable in a book of this type where space is finite. Nonetheless, I hope I have given full credit for ideas where credit is due – something not always easy where one is surrounded by colleagues whose work inspires and enthuses. In this context, I would wish to note that certain sections of this book are related to or have emerged from works I have written with Keith Lilley, Marcus Doel, Jon Beaverstock, Peter Taylor, John Short, Rob Kitchin, Lewis Holloway, Brendan Bartley, Duncan Fuller, Tim Brown, Morag Bell and Lucy Faire (among others). Particular thanks is also due to my post-graduate students at Loughborough – Lucy Budd, Clare Blake, Julia Grosspietsch, Ulrike Waellisch – whose research has helped inform some of the material in this book. I would also wish to thank the other colleagues who have, through their own research and writing, helped inspire my work over the last few years: it is invidious to pick out individuals, but Sarah Holloway deserves to be mentioned, given she asked me to write this book in the first place and was so patient in waiting for it to arrive! Andrew and the team at Taylor and Francis have also been patient

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## INTRODUCTION

Despite its title, this is not a book about cities. Rather, it is a book about urban theory, exploring the way that sociologists, planners, architects, economists, urbanists and (particularly) geographers have sought to make sense of the urban condition. As such, the primary aim of this book is to locate the concept of 'the city' within traditions of geographic and social thought, providing a basis for understanding its varying usages and meanings. This is by no means a straightforward task, as the city is many things: a spatial location, a political entity, an administrative unit, a place of work and play, a collection of dreams and nightmares, a mesh of social relations, an agglomeration of economic activity, and so forth. To isolate some characteristic of the city that might distinguish it from its nominal counterpart, the rural, is extremely difficult given this multiplicity of meaning.

To illustrate this, we might briefly consider some definitions of what differentiates urban and rural. For some, what distinguishes cities from the countryside is their size and population density. For example, R. Davis (1973: 1) describes cities as 'concentrations of many people located close together for residential and productive purposes' while Saunders (1986: 7), in addressing this question, points out 'cities are places where large numbers of people live and work'. Yet definitions based on size are problematic given that settlements of the same size may be designated as small towns in some nations, but large villages in others. And it is certainly the



case that some settlements *feel* like cities, while other – more populous – settlements do not. Hence, some propose that questions of population density or heterogeneity may be more crucial in definitions of the city. Others argue that it is the ways of life (or *cultures*) characteristic of cities that distinguish them from rural spaces, or that it is the way nature is excluded from cities that marks them off as being different from the countryside (for an overview of such debates, see Pile 1999).

It is thus possible to make distinctions between the urban and the rural on a number of different criteria (and one should not forget that the country and the city are also morphologically different, in the sense they are characterised by different built forms and layouts). However, there are many commentators who suggest the distinction between rural and urban spaces is becoming irrelevant – or at least less relevant – to the extent that concepts such as ‘the urban’ and ‘the rural’ are no longer useful for making sense of societies characterised by high levels of geographic and social mobility. Successive transport and communications innovation have, they would argue, loosened the ties that bind people to place, to the extent that it no longer makes sense to talk of rural or urban dwellers (indeed, many people cannot even be tied down as citizens of one nation, exhibiting transnational lifestyles and affinities). A related tendency is therefore to emphasise the footloose nature of contemporary life, and to emphasise the stretching of relations of all kinds across both time and space.

An unfortunate by-product of this mode of thinking is that much contemporary writing reduces the city (and, likewise, the countryside) to the status of a container or backdrop for human activities, downplaying (and, at worst, ignoring) its profligate role in shaping economic and social relations. This failure to take the city seriously means that much contemporary urban commentary actually says very little about what Soja (2000) terms the *generative* aspects of urban life. For example, much contemporary writing on cities aims to speak to the problems experienced by those living in cities, identifying ways in which urban processes can be modified, disturbed or corrected to reduce the high levels of crime, disease, fear and poverty that are characteristically associated with cities. However, whether these are problems of the city, or merely social problems that happen to be located in cities is rarely addressed. For instance, at the time of writing, riots rage in the *banlieu* of Paris and other major French cities, yet the academic commentators routinely assembled to pass judgement on these disturbances have tended to fixate on questions of cultural integration,

social stigmatisation and racism. In contrast, little, if anything, has been said about the spatial specificity of the urban spaces where these riots are unfolding – notable exceptions being those newspaper articles where spurious correlations have been made between the unrest and the forms of public housing characteristic of the *banlieu*. While the look and feel of urban spaces do have important effects on behaviour, such design-centred theories offer an impoverished take on the distinctive sociality of cities (Amin et al. 2000): what is needed is urban scholarship that takes the city seriously as an object of study without lapsing into environmental determinism. Without such explorations, it is less than clear as to how we might suggest ways in which the trajectory of urban life might be changed through new ways of living, occupying or imagining cities.

The deficiencies of contemporary urban theory are sharply etched in other ways. For instance, there is an emerging literature on the creativity that is associated with cities, exploring why particular cities are at the ‘cutting edge’ of cultural or economic innovation. The association between particular cities and specific cultures of artistic innovation is widely noted: for example, cubism and impressionism can be traced back to *fin-de-siècle* Paris, jazz to New Orleans in the 1920s and beat poetry to San Francisco in the 1950s (P. Hall 1998). Likewise, certain cities are acknowledged to have acted as centres of economic, industrial or technical innovation (e.g. Manchester was dubbed Cottonopolis because of its centrality in nineteenth-century cotton and textiles industry, while Seattle is world renowned as a centre of high-tech and software design). Common sense thus dictates that cities foster creativity and vitality, and that cutting-edge art, fashion, music, cooking, technology, knowledge, politics and ideas tend to emanate from urban, not rural, locales. But why should this be the case? Is it simply that large cities are more likely than rural areas to be home to creative individuals? Is it that creative individuals are drawn towards big cities? Is there something about particular cities that fosters creativity? As we shall discover in Chapter 6, there is perhaps something in all of these explanations, yet all too often the materiality of the city is overlooked in accounts that emphasise individual genius, collective endeavour or historical happenstance. In essence, the urbanity of urban life is effaced: cities are written of as spaces where innovation happens, for sure, but the city becomes backdrop rather than an active participant in the making of new cultures and economies. Again, to suggest the city plays an active role in innovation is not to imply it has a deterministic influence on the trajectory of economy

or society, but to argue we need to take the city more seriously if we are to articulate the importance of space in social, economic and political life.

The fact that urban theory currently appears unable to provide a useful framework for making sense of cities has been widely noted across a variety of disciplines. For example, Manuel Castells (2000) has publicly mourned the passing of urban sociology, suggesting that the theoretical imagination and vibrancy that once characterised urban studies in the 1960s and 1970s have been lost. In his opinion, there is a need for sociologists to retool with new concepts and ideas, before embarking on the hard work required to understand the changing relationship between the city and society. Simply put, he feels that contemporary sociology is content to say plenty of things about what happens in cities, yet has said little about the specificity of urban process. Mirroring this, May and Perry (2005) suggest this 'crisis' in urban sociology reflects the fragmentation of urban sociology, an

inward collapse and retreat into a series of separate studies that draw on urban sociology but frequently without explicit credit to the discipline . . . for example, in the areas of housing, education, policy and cultural studies, gender and sexuality, crime and ethnicity.

(May and Perry 2005: 343)

Writing as a geographer, Nigel Thrift (1993) likewise proclaimed an urban impasse, manifest in the loss of the urban as both a subject and object of study. In his summation, while geographers have developed a varied and rich lexicon for describing urban phenomena, this cannot overshadow the fact urban geography had, by the 1990s, been 'treading water' in theoretical terms, recycling old ideas for over two decades. Thrift's impasse is arguably still evident in the twenty-first century, and it is no doubt significant that many urban geographers now prefer to identify themselves as cultural geographers, feminist geographers, population geographers, economic geographers, social scientists and so on. Although urban geography remains one of the largest specialty research groups in both the Institute of British Geographers and the Association of American Geographers, it is also one of the most diffuse. As a result, the intellectual developments that have swept over and transformed the discipline since the mid-1990s are usually associated with cultural, economic or feminist geography, even if many of them have been urban in text and context. Contemporary geographic writing on

'fashionable' topics such as spaces of consumption, leisure, music, technology and travel is rarely associated with urban geography, despite the fact that the city is central to so many of them. Sexual geographies, for example, are not thought of as situated centrally within urban geography. Hence, as Johnston (2000: 877) suggests, 'many of the concerns formerly encapsulated within urban geography are now studied under different banners'.

It is thus possible to note a worrying trend for urban studies in general, and urban geography in particular, to be sidelined in intellectual and theoretical discussions about the relation of society and space. Simply put, urban geography is not seen to be at the forefront of innovative theoretical work in the discipline any more (Lees 2001; P. Jackson 2005). Yet at the same time, it is possible to discern a popular resurgence of interest in urbanity and urbanism. For example, there is much contemporary media discussion about the major reinvestment in the heart of cities long regarded as 'no-go' areas. Throughout the urban West, under the aegis of urban policies promoting urban 'renaissance', former manufacturing districts are being repackaged and resold; derelict waterfronts have become a locus for gentrified living and working; mega-malls, multiplexes and mega-casinos seek to capture the dollars of the new urban elite. Western cities, it seems, have gone from strength to strength: hence, there is talk of a 'new' urbanism (Katz 1994; McCann 1995), the new city (Sorkin 1992) and the new urban frontier (N. Smith 1996). The young, trendy and wealthy again clamour to invest in urban property hotspots, reversing a trend of depopulation and out-migration that had persisted for decades. Cities are deemed to be hip and happening again: some may be 'hot', others 'cool', but there is little doubt that cities are currently the 'place to be'. Of course, city living comes replete with dangers as well as pleasures, and this is perhaps part of the appeal of cities for a new generation of gentrifiers and trend-setting urbanites. Indeed, such groups often emphasise the authentic and spontaneous nature of city living, suggesting this is infinitely preferable to the predictable nature of country life. It is surely no coincidence that many of the most popular computer games of our times are urban (such as *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, *Warriors*, *Driver* and *Sim City's* suburban sequel, *The Sims*).

Within the popular and policy-oriented literature on cities, there are undoubtedly many clues to be gleaned about the nature of contemporary urban life. However, rather than providing an overview of these voluminous

literatures, in this book I seek to provide a more parsimonious summary of key ideas in *urban theory*, based chiefly on the work of academic writers in geography, sociology, planning and cultural studies. In broad terms, urban theory constitutes a series of ideas (sometimes presented as laws) about what cities are, what they do and how they work. Commonly, such ideas exist at a high level of abstraction, so that they do not pertain to individual towns or cities, but offer a more general explanation of the role that cities play in shaping socio-spatial process. Nonetheless, such theories typically emerge from particular cities at particular times, to the extent that certain cities become exemplary of particular types of urban theory, and become regarded as laboratories in which theories can be refined or 'tested'. By way of example, some of the most influential urban theories of the twentieth century sought to make generalisations about contemporary urban processes by referring to Chicago, which became both model and mould for theories of urbanism in the 'modern' industrial era. Likewise, much postmodern urban theory took shape in the Los Angeles of the late twentieth century, a city whose landscapes were taken as symptomatic of not only North American urbanisation, but also the wider restructuring of social-spatial relations in postmodern times (see Chapter 2).

Obviously, even in a book focusing on the urban as a concept or idea, there is much ground that could be covered. As such, I do not pretend that the following chapters do anything but offer a very partial overview of the huge body of work that constitutes 'urban theory'. Indeed, I deliberately skim over much of the literature on cities to focus on the ideas which I regard as most useful and making sense of the city. Perhaps inevitably, I tend to focus upon ideas which have emerged in the relatively short time I have been lecturing in higher education (since 1994), including writings by many who might broadly be described as my contemporaries. While I make no apologies for highlighting the distinctive and important contribution of a relatively select band of Anglo-American geographers, it is important that readers are aware of the inevitably partial nature of this text. Like the other books in the series, it cannot be read as the definitive guide to a particular concept; rather, it is a selective, simplified and Anglo-centric review. Notably, it rarely addresses non-Western literatures or theories developed beyond the metropolitan centres of the global north. While this occlusion is problematic – the disjuncture between Western and non-Western urban studies being a major impediment to the development

of a progressive urban theory – my belief is that this overview nonetheless speaks to a general debate about cityness, albeit that this debate needs to be played out differently in particular contexts.

Consequently, I hope that – in spite of its silences and blind spots – this book serves as an informative and interesting overview of the way geographers have thought about the urban. Moreover, I hope that readers will come away appreciating why the city remains such an important concept in the production of geographical theories and knowledges, one that is pivotal in progressing our understanding of the relationship of society and space. Although my own work varies considerably in its approach and empirical specificity, this is an argument I believe in passionately, and I have often been dismayed by the inability of geographers to take the city seriously, both as an object of study and as a theoretical concept. While some might argue that we live in an ubiquitously urban world, and hence that it is time to ‘do away with the urban’ (cf. Hoggart 1991), this book is unequivocally an argument for the *reassertion* of the urban. In essence, this book seeks to demonstrate that the ‘city’ – though a disputed and often chaotic concept – is as central and important to geographical inquiry as concepts such as ‘place’, ‘space’, ‘region’, ‘nature’ or ‘landscape’. In part, it also suggests that the concept of urbanity can be understood only with reference to the concept of ‘rurality’.

In this book, I thus seek to offer a distinctive and timely intervention in debates in human geography by exploring the ways that scholars in sociology, geography, urban studies, planning and politics might make better sense of ‘the city’ by taking its spatiality seriously. Though written from a geographical perspective (and with geography students in mind), I hope that it speaks to an interdisciplinary audience. Throughout, some important concepts associated with urban theory have been highlighted in *italics*: these concepts are explained in boxes, each of which is intended as a free-standing elucidation of an important idea which may be familiar to some readers, but less so to others. Each of these boxes also includes recommendations for further reading, intended to steer readers towards fuller and more detailed explications of the material summarised in these boxes. Additionally, each chapter ends with some recommendations for those wishing to read more widely around the themes and ideas considered. As far as is possible, readers are guided towards widely available and accessible English-language texts (which, in some cases, means works that are extracted or translated in part). Together, these features are intended to

help the reader navigate the text, as well as encourage a broader engagement with work in urban theory.

Though some readers will discern a chronological element, this volume is organised thematically: the intention is not to present a 'history' of urban geography or urban theory. Accordingly, the book unfolds by considering distinctive approaches to understanding the city, placing considerable emphasis on those ideas which I regard as particularly useful for making sense of the city. The book begins in Chapter 1 by delineating some key traditions in urban theory, identifying many of the key ideas that have emerged to explain the role of cities in modern and postmodern times. Detailing theories that stress the economic, social, political or cultural dimensions of city life (as well as some that consider all of these), the chapter concludes by identifying the apparent limitations of such theories in developing a truly urban theory. Chapters 2 to 5 then overview some alternative ways of thinking about cities and theorising their distinctive spatiality. In turn, these deal with ideas concerning the representation of space; the negotiation of the everyday; the blurring of nature and culture and the stretching of social relations. As will be seen, many of the ideas considered in these chapters have not explicitly been developed with the goal of progressing urban theory. Nor can any of them be said to offer a 'grand theory' of how the city works. Hence, in Chapter 6, I consider how these ideas can be worked with to produce new knowledges and understandings of the city by considering one specific issue: the association between cities and creativity. While the book concludes by recognising the impossibility of developing an all-encompassing theory of the city, it ends by restating the case for taking cities seriously in human geography. As I argue in the conclusion – and throughout this book – geographers' persistent failure to clarify what is 'urban' about urban geography seriously impoverishes the discipline's comprehension of the relationship between society and space. As well as shedding light on different strands of urban theory, it is thus hoped that this book inspires geographers to consider new ways of thinking about cities and their endlessly fascinating spaces.

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# 1

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## URBAN THEORY, MODERN AND POSTMODERN

Virtually all theories of the city are true, especially contradictory ones.

(Jencks 1996: 26)

In the introduction, I suggested that cities have frequently been identified by geographers as distinctive spaces. In turn, the distinctive nature of cities is deemed to require the development of specific ideas to describe and explain them. These ideas are collectively termed *urban theory*. However, the notion of theory is a complex one, and much misunderstood. Commonly, it is assumed that theory constitutes a series of big, abstract and grand ideas which help us make sense of the detailed complexity of everyday life. Conventional scientific methodology dictates that such theories can be constructed only on the basis of repeated and verifiable observation of what exists in the world. If these observations and measurements tally with the scientists' ideas of what is going on in the world, then these theories can be framed as 'laws' about how the world works. Urban theory might therefore be characterised as a set of explanations and laws which explain how cities are formed, how they function and how they change. Rather than being concerned with empirical nuance of city life (the daily nitty-gritty of urban existence), we might logically conclude that urban theory is preoccupied with grand themes – and is inevitably more airy-fairy in nature.



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