**How is the City Defined?**

Overall, the scholars in the Urban Political Economy section will push back on the Chicago School as the dominant theoretical framework for thinking of cities. As Logan and Molotch point out in *Urban Fortunes,* the Chicago School of thought was “so deeply immersed in free market reasoning that its practitioners seem not to have been aware that there was even an alternate approach” (5). For this reason, they endeavor to “construct a sociology of cities on the basis of a sociology of urban property relations,” which ultimately brings back in and gives primacy to a Marxist analytical framework. In true Marxist fashion, they re-imagine urban development as a conflict between “use value”—the value that individual users assign to a commodity—and “exchange value”—the utilization of property to generate profit. On one side of the conflict sit *place entrepreneurs,* who arerentiers that live off incomes from investments or property. They form growth machines to harness local government policies designed to increase exchange values and create a demand for place. Threatened by tax policies or freeways schemes that will impact the use value of their property, homeowners and residents sit on the other side of this conflict. As a result, conflict develops between them and local growth machines.

While I appreciate the re-conceptualizing of urban development in terms of property relations, Logan and Molotch do not resolve several contradictions in their analytical framework. First, their vision of who belongs to a growth machine expands over the course of the book. Membership to the “growth machine” morphs from including all rentiers to a more pluralistic view that is differentiated by scale and geographical level. In other words, there can exists competition between growth machines across cities as well as within at varying geographical scales. One’s status as a rentier does not exclusively explain their membership in a growth machine. Second, their framework does not sufficiently consider the multiple ways in which different actors’ exchange values may come into conflict. For example, different local policies or regional development strategies could increase the exchange value for some groups while not for others, causing tensions among rentiers whose interests lie at different geographical scales. Third, they do could do a better job trying to distinguish how use value and exchange value mutually shape each other. Gentrification is an interesting example of how growth machines interested in downtown leverage use value to increase exchange value, by drawing young, hip gentrifiers to city centers. However, what in their framework accounts of cities that are not gentrifying? Is it simply that growth machines have not focused their energy there or is it some other structural issue? While I can appreciate Logan and Molotch’s efforts to displace the predominance of Chicago School’s ecological framework in discourses of urban development, I don’t feel that the conflict between exchange value and use value exclusively explains the development of cities and urban areas. Actors at various levels do not fit neatly into boxes of pro-growth machine and anti-growth machines; their framework gives too much primacy to elite over local actors and miss the role of global actors or symbolic capital (a la Zukin) in shaping urban development dynamics; and their framework does not always account for the historical, political, and socioeconomic particularities of place for which Abu-Lughod advocates.

However, Logan and Molotch’s broad characterization of cities as engines of economic growth and prosperity indeed aligns well with the urban political economy of Florida and Harvey. Interestingly enough, Florida’s *mea culpa* treatise, The *New Urban Crisis,* follows in Engel’s intellectual tradition and sees the city as an engine of economic growth and prosperity that accumulates wealth for a smaller and smaller section of society. He articulates the new urban crisis as constituting a contradiction: while cities are engines of economic growth and progress, they are also zones of increasing inequality and segregation, especially superstar cities—by which he means large, global cities. He creates a bunch of indices to measure inequality, echoes similar sentiments to Sampson and Sharkey’s in regards to segregation and spatial inequality along educational and socioeconomic lines, and argues for the emergence of a new geography of inequality within and among cities that resembles a complex and variegated patchwork metropolis.

In *Rebel* Cities, Harvey[[1]](#footnote-1) describes urbanization as a process of “accumulation by dispossession,” whereby surplus value is invested into a city’s built environment to reap profit and continually probe increasingly profitable terrain for capital surplus production and absorption. Interestingly, like Florida, Harvey views urbanization as increasing inequality through accumulation by dispossession. However, their proposed solutions are vastly different. While Florida argues for pro-growth policies that redistribute the resources, wealth, and opportunities that cities produce (i.e., land value tax, removing restrictive zoning regulations, investment in transit infrastructure, raising of minimum wage, etc.), Harvey argues for a “right to the city,” which he describes as an anti-capitalist movement led by the working classes to transform daily urban life and reclaim a role in the process of urban development. While Harvey would be in favor of some of Florida’s ideas, Harvey wants to fundamentally alter the social relations of classes to capital. He wants to tear it down; Florida just wants to throw on some regulations, albeit some interesting and helpful ones. While Florida see both the problem and the solution as urban, Harvey sees the problem as resulting from social relations of various classes to capital.

Zukin’s work in *The Cultures of Cities* presents an interesting counter focus to those of the aforementioned authors. Instead of focusing on urban property relations as driving urban development, she sees cultural consumption as driving urban development. Specifically, it is the simultaneous production of space and symbols that is at the heart of contemporary urban renewal. She uses examples like Bryant Park, Grand Central Terminal, and So-Ho to demonstrate how cultural space is reshaped according to the mobilization of visually coherent cultural symbols and social codes. In this way, elites have successfully imposed cultural strategies that have fully integrated the cultural sphere with the economic through the public-private relations, new security measures, business improvement districts, the Disney-ification of public space, and the use of national symbols and myths. For example, the case of Byrant Park has yielded a controlled definition of diversity, sociability, and consumptive civility that ironically homogenizes public space and removes the public from the decision making process.

Abu-Lughod’s work is a carefully rigorous documentation of the different pathways of urbanization taken by America’s three global cities—Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York. Her method and historical analysis combats “presentism,” the major trend global cites literature. In light of the other authors considered here, she can be thought of as arguing that cities should be understood not only through a Marxists lens, but also as an artifact of the local and contextual histories of their particular places. Her historical layering gives context and content to an understanding of each city.

Although the historical context is extremely helpful in understanding the city and urban development, her analysis implies that these cities are path dependent, whereby earlier events shape later developments. This makes it very difficult to disentangle global forces from previous local and contextual factors that shape a city’s development. Moreover, while she has attempted to give context to the global nature of these cities, much of what she identifies as defining elements of each of the cities are local in nature. In fact, some of her evidence actually serves to stress the importance of the local over the global. For example, (1) the lack of rent controls in post-WWII Chicago made moving to the suburbs more attractive than in NYC, (2) the local white dominated Democratic machine of Chicago shaped the political culture of that city in very different from those of New York City and Los Angeles, and (3) some of her empirical measures of global forces were often at the state rather than municipal levels (direct foreign investment and shipping and air-freight). In fact, in a footnote about a lecture she once gave to a class of Peter Marcuse, she confesses that she can only ascribe about 10 percent of the variance among global cities as stemming from global forces. In the end, she argues that while “common forces originating at the level of the global economy operate always through local political structures and interact with inherited spatial forms,” they are always manifested in “particular ways that differentiate cities from one another” (417). For me, the thrust of argument seems to be stressing the importance of how forces are locally manifested.

**What are some intersecting themes shared among these authors?**

Growing Inequality: Florida, Harvey, and Zukin all to some extent focus on the role of cities in proliferating growing inequality. Harvey’s anti-capitalist vision of the “right to the city” is by far the most extreme response to this issue. I see Zukin and some of Florida’s propositions as more pragmatic policy suggestions that are more likely to be implemented. However, their suggestions are rooted in a “Harvey-esc right to the city” demand for the democratization of the decision making process in urban development and the greater distribution of urban prosperity.

The Local versus Global: Of all the aforementioned authors, Abu-Lughod most exclusively deals with the tensions between the local and the global. Florida’s concepts of “superstar city” and his global performance indicators are laughable. What was most striking about Abu-Lughod’s work was the emphasis on the local and historical contexts that ultimately shape a city’s development and urban dynamics. If Saskia Sassen views global cities as “the terrain where a multiplicity of globalization processes assumes concrete, localized form,” Abu-Lughod sketches out the political, economic, and cultural histories that makes these “global cities” possible. Ironically, however, much of Abu-Lughod’s work seems to insist that what’s important isn’t the new, global nature of these “global cities,” but rather the historic political, economic, cultural, and spatial contexts out of which these cities have grown. So, I’m not sure that she adequately deals with the “globalness” of these global cities.

For me, Abu-Lughod’s method of historicization is extremely important in thinking about cities and their development, but I think overemphasizes the role of the local context and does not pay enough attention to the ways in which these cities are shaped by global forces, outside capital. For example, I can’t imagine that it was primarily New York City’s unique historical trajectory that has been attached HQ2—Amazon’s new, second headquarters—but also the city’s current position in the global city hierarchy, flows of international capital, and educated surplus labor that was attracted to the city for global reasons. Obviously its history has played an important role in explaining why it sits where it does, but it current “global-ness” does also. Perhaps Logan and Molotch’s concept of the growth machine has more explanatory power in understanding how *place entrepreneurs* were able to attract Amazon. Nevertheless, I think a more dialectical understanding of local and global forces would be helpful here. For example, I think the concept of the “glocalization”—the simultaneous and perhaps paradoxical conceptualization of cities as being fashioned by universal, global forces that are also local particularities—is more helpful in certain instances. In short, the varied and particular economic, political, and cultural histories of Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York should be taken into perspective while considering their impact in shaping the cities’ global relations today.

Privatization and Entrepreneurialism: I think there is a strong connection between Harvey’s work on understanding how neoliberal development policies have shaped city management and Zukin’s work in *Cultures of Cities*. In “From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism,” Harvey argues that there has been a shift in urban governance from a management disposition of providing services to an entrepreneurial one that looks for new and innovative ways to spur economic development. Urban governance now relies on public-private partnership, where the public sector assumes risk and the private sector reaps the benefit of speculation. It also creates a political economy of place rather than territory that does nothing to ameliorate the conditions of those living in those spaces, but rather foster a particular cultural image that is useful in creating profit. *Cultures of Cities* is Zukin’s attempt to understand how the production of space and symbols—through the increasing privatization of public space—is an entrepreneurial effort to commodify culture to bring public space under private control.

**How are the concepts useful?**

As problematic as Florida’s work has been and continues to be with his new publication, I think that his work spoke the most to me (perhaps because there was the most to critique). While the “creative class” is too empirically broad not centrally characterized by “creativity,” I can at least appreciate his attempt to re-categorize or re-frame of the new urban middle class (that David Ley talks about as driving gentrification) in more culturally relative terms that seem to capture the dynamics of new urban crisis better than Zukin or Harvey. While Florida is ambiguous, I never know who Zukin and Harvey are talking about when they talk about “new urban middle class” or gentrifiers. I think there is a dissertation to be written that explores what these authors mean by “new urban middle class.” I can talk more about this when we meet.

In terms of Florida, while I don’t think that this class is expressly creative, I think that the body of college educated professionals to which he (and many other want to refer), but that can be further distilled. In other words, the demographic needs to be refined—who are in the new urban middle class, that are leading gentrification, moving back to the city, and for whom the city is being rebuilt. Marxist language that talks about the proletariat or the working class doesn’t seem to make much sense to me. For example, how can the middle class be gentrifying cities when the inequality literature tells us that the middle class is shrinking? Is the new urban crisis one that is led by young, college educated millennials? How can that be, when they seem to be struggling so much? And who are these people that Florida keeps pointing at?

Lefebvre’s idea of the “right to the city”—as articulated by Harvey—is a conceptually useful tool for arguing for an increased role of the working class in the decision making processes of urban development. Using a Marxist framework, it views the city as a result of urbanization processes that are shaped by elites who unequally distributes resources and benefits to themselves. Assuming the value of democratic frameworks, its demands a democratization of urban development, specifically that the working class have a seat at the table. While anti-capitalist, the “right to the city” can be seen as making a general appeal to capitalist, democratic proponents. Moreover, in contrast to the Chicago School that sees the city as the result of an ecological, natural process, “the right to the city” assumes a Marxist framework that understands the city as a particular social, historical, and economic entities that is shaped by the process of urbanization and guided by the interests and desires of elites. The city is not an ideal type, but rather a social artifact of power and property relations.

1. To be clear, much of the work to re-centralize Marxist critiques in urban studies has been the result of Harvey’s work, something that critics of Logan and Molotch have noted a lack of proper citation and sufficient evaulation of his work. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)