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Comment on Sharon Zukin/1

From “Strict” Urban Sociology to Relaxed but Engaged Urban Theories

by Alan Harding *and* Talja Blokland

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Sharon Zukin’s “Is there an urban sociology?” is an ambitious attempt to cover a lot of historical, conceptual and biographical ground very quickly. On one hand, the article examines some of the contexts, often tumultuous, which have inspired scholars to practice urban sociology, particularly in France and the US. On the other, it is a personal account of one exemplary, scholarly “pathway” through urban sociology, shaped by the more mundane, chance factors that tend to influence academic career trajectories. At the same time, it makes a contribution to an age-old debate about whether urban sociology, and urban theory more generally, is ‘in crisis’, and whether this is because its practitioners have failed to identify a unique theoretical object to guide their investigations. Much could be said about the relationship between these three themes and the extent to which they are connected within the article. In our short response, however, we concentrate upon three related concerns that Zukin’s thought-provoking piece brought to mind and that we feel bear most directly on the future of urban sociology and urban studies more generally. The first is whether it is time to move away from a search for the theoretical “heart” of urban sociology and embrace a more relaxed approach to what urban theory is and can be. The second, related concern, is whether such a relaxed approach to defining the subject matter of urban theory – and not just urban sociology – necessarily entails the relativism, “fragmentation” and apparent abandonment of any sense of “mission” amongst urbanists that Zukin implicitly mourns. The third is whether urbanism and urbanization, rather than being consigned, as Zukin suggests is increasingly the case in the

US, to social scientific sub-fields of declining importance, can attain a new vitality in an increasingly interdependent and urbanized world.

For a Relaxed Definition of Urban Theory

If we combine dictionary entries regarding what is “urban” and what is “theory,” we generate a definition of urban theory as “a body of ideas explaining one or more aspects of reality within, or of, towns and cities.” By implication – and assuming, for the moment, that “towns and cities” are meaningful units of analysis and that what is “of” them can be delineated – the core concerns of urban sociology are with the social aspects of those realities. In taking Manuel Castells’s essay of the same name as the starting point for her analysis [Castells 1968], Zukin aligns herself with those sociologists, throughout the history of the discipline, who have explicitly or implicitly been dissatisfied with generalized definitions of what urban theory might comprise and set themselves the task of defining what is distinctively “urban” and what the core theoretical object of urbanists should be. Whilst such efforts are not confined to sociology, those who describe themselves or can be considered urban sociologists have nonetheless played a prominent role. Castells was by no means the first of these. For Simmel, the city was the ultimate expression of modern rationality, the site of anonymity and freedom, characterized by the size and heterogeneity that made the modern urbanite *blasé vis-à-vis* urban impulses [Simmel 1950, 412-414]. To Weber, the city was primarily defined economically and politically. Cities have a market and a degree of political autonomy [see Saunders 1986, 34], a definition of the urban that stressed urbanization as the polarization of public and private [see also Bahrtdt 1998, 81-106]. Simmel’s essay (an invited lecture for an architecture exhibition) became a classic for current urban sociologists, partly through Park’s accidental encounter with Simmel and the counter-piece by Wirth [1938]. Weber’s more substantial approach, and one that would fit much better with Zukin’s vision on the subject of urban sociology as the contradiction between freedom and domination, never seemed to have reached the same intellectual popularity in urban sociology.

As Zukin suggests, though, Castells’s initial interventions represent the most substantial, recent attempt to define a distinctive subject matter for urban sociology. The 1968 essay that Zukin refers to briefly was less a conceptual framework and more a critique of what he considered to be the unscientific, even ideological, way in which especially French and American urban sociology had often been formulated and practiced up to that point. Only later [Castells 1977] did he argue for a theoretical focus on “collective consumption” and a central concern, for urban sociology,

with the role of the state in the reproduction of labour power. As many critics pointed out, that focus, whilst it enabled an interesting extension of neo-Marxist work on social change, was no more unambiguously “urban” than those unique theoretical objects that had been identified by Castells’s predecessors. In reviewing the various efforts to provide urban sociology with a distinct theoretical focus, Saunders [1986, 51] concluded that “[t]he result has, in most cases, been conceptual confusion and a series of theoretical dead-ends.” Ironically, Castells himself ultimately agreed. Having developed and applied a conceptual framework to the study of urban social movements that posed open-ended, empirical questions, he took his earlier self and others to task for “the useless construction of abstract grand theories” [Castells 1983, xviii].

If Castells [1968, 56] was correct in arguing, over 40 years ago, that “[a]s the spatial setting of social life becomes almost entirely “urban” the subject matter of urban sociology becomes limitless,” what realistic prospect is there, in “the urban century,” when a majority of the world’s population is urbanized, that an unique theoretical object can be claimed for urban sociology, let alone the more diffuse, inter-disciplinary urban studies that has grown up in the meantime? In our view, very little. In this context, Zukin’s claim (in this issue) that “[t]he theoretical subject of urban sociology is [the] central contradiction between freedom and domination” has the same status as its predecessors: it is an interesting, if diffuse, point of departure for *some*, but by no means all, urban research.

Culture, Relativism, Fragmentation

This point of departure, traceable within Zukin’s own writing, has the advantage of balancing the structural analysis of neo-Marxist and other work on the city with what is often referred to as “the cultural turn.” Zukin’s contributions have been of great importance here. A renewed focus on culture introduced a counterweight to the grand theorizing of the likes of the early Castells and David Harvey and their tendency to neglect social agents; “as for the role of people in the grand narrative, we never know who lives, works, acts and dies in Harvey’s urban spaces since people are seldom represented as anything other than nostalgic romantics or cultural dupes” [Smith 2002, 243]. And Zukin’s concept of symbolic economy reflects, as Reichl [2005, 33] pointed out, how defining features of certain cities such as “Disneyfication” represent ‘a dramatic cultural break from the stark modern forms typical of city-building during the preceding decades.’

But Zukin does not mention that the cultural turn is also closely associated with postmodern urban studies, which we would argue has emphatically not pro-

duced the type of sociology she favours. There are those inspired by Foucault, Derrida and others who argue for “imaginary cities” [Patton 1995, 112; for an overview, see Watson and Gibson, 1995]. Here, the focus is on ways of life, particularly in the developed world, and, importantly, spatial practices and spatial theorizing (for example Nast & Pile 1998) which largely ignore political economy. The city has come to be seen as a text, inspired by metaphors of De Certeau [1984]. Yet little is done to move from text to the lived conditions of urbanites. Indeed, a post-modern approach can mean that “the city can only be known from within, an interpretation that takes on meaning that is created and interpreted by each individual” [Flanagan 2010, 96]. Some scholars have gone so far as to argue that “even the most material elements of any locality are subject to diverse readings” [Smith 2002, 249].

This enables a relativist position on all things urban, including inequalities in access to basic amenities like drinking water, sanitary, or shelter that have traditionally inspired much urban analysis, in sociology and beyond. To claim that the city “as we may imagine it, the soft city of illusion, myth, aspiration, nightmare is as real, may be more real, than the hard city one can locate in maps and statistics” [Raban 1974, 10, quoted in Burns and Novelli 2008, 34] is hardly helpful for those who lack basic resources. The point is not whether the urban is fixed to one place only as if an unproblematic concept of territory or whether statistics are “real.” As Simone [2005] shows, that is certainly *not* the case: urbanism implies movement and dynamic relationships, and much about urbanism is not captured by standard data sources. But to focus just on the imaginary creates a “decorative sociology” [Rojek and Turner 2001, 629] in which the cultural turn has become detached from urban political economy and any appreciation of the broader factors that shape urban economic, social and cultural life.

To Zukin, the question of whether urban sociology possesses its own unique theoretical object is related, in part, to professional concerns, not least to the desire of American urban sociologists to be taken seriously, to the need to educate students in the workings of urban society, and to the weakening of urban sociology degrees in the US over the years. While the new urban sociology that Zukin refers to briefly has made an explicit point of shifting to a global perspective and to include suburbia in the study of the city through a focus on the political economy of urban development [Gottdiener and Hutchison 2011, 13-14], Zukin sees a crisis in urban sociology because less people live in cities: that, however, is the consequence of not counting suburbs as urban, and of not looking at global trends.

In Europe, by contrast, not only do more and more people live in cities; more students are taking “urban” degrees, urban journals mushroom and more “urban”

PhDs are awarded, year on year. Multidisciplinary “urban studies,” more than urban sociology, seem to be very much on the rise, arguably as a result of the acute visibility of inter- and intra-urban inequalities related to deindustrialization, migration and segregation. None of these are new, but under “neoliberal” regimes, their salience has certainly increased on the European side of the Atlantic. In Africa, development studies have long considered many African cities as not truly urbanized [Simone 2005, 2]. But here, we can *definitely* point to a strong growth of urban theorizing, new conceptions of urbanism, and urban studies generally informed by “worlding” [rather than postcolonial theory, see Roy and Ong 2011] and cosmopolitan perspectives that move away from the underlying meta-narrative of modernization found in Global North urban studies [Ferguson 1999, 20, quoted in Nuttal and Mbembe 2008, 5]. To account for this, the point is not, as Zukin states, that there are various modernities. While the capitalist economy and political project of modernity (including functional rationalization and individualization) continue the exploitation and opportunity hoarding that exclude so many urbanites from a decent life in many parts of the worlds, *urbanism* should be seen as a plural, increasingly varied concept [see Robinson 2002].

Theory, the New Modernization, and Urbanisms

A more pluralist view would have benefitted Zukin’s article more generally. She begins with a description of the tumultuous events of 1968, in the US and France, that inspired a new generation of radical urban sociologists to reappraise the direction taken by urban theory and research. She might equally have referred to protests, with substantially different origins, that were taking place elsewhere (e.g. in the former Czechoslovakia) at the same time. As we write, the global economic crisis triggered by the events of 2007 is interacting with a globally interconnected process of spatial economic restructuring that is producing what Glaeser [2011, 247] describes as “a flat world of tall cities.” The results are profound for urban areas in terms of differentiated patterns of growth and restructuring, the stretching of urban hierarchies, the attenuation of intra-urban disparities, growing crises of governability and a new round of global urban protest. Those theorists, with their gazes fixed largely on the west, who were prepared to pronounce the modernization project dead need only look to present-day India or China to understand that contemporary forms of industrialization and urbanization, built upon radically different development models than those that pertained in north America, Europe and the Pacific Rim, continue to be fundamental driving forces in urban social change across the globe. In princi-

ple, therefore, the scene should be set for a further resurgence of inter-disciplinary urban studies capable of relating complex non-local and increasingly extra-national sources of change and instability to the variety of urbanisms found in different space-times.

Whether urban sociology, or urban studies more generally, is capable of rising to that challenge seems to us to be less a case of identifying a unifying theoretical object for urban sociology and more dependent upon (a) greater inter-disciplinary innovation in connecting theoretical perspectives that operate at different levels of generality/specificity, and (b) greater awareness of the globally inter-connected nature of urban fortunes. Zukin acknowledges these challenges to some extent in her piece whilst accepting that her perspective is typically Global North, if not New Yorkish. She makes some reference to work done in the Global South as a “welcome challenge to *our* scientific and political claims” (emphasis added). But her assessment that the Global South has merely produced descriptions, as she feels American scholars did earlier, of how people get by and ahead in sub-optimal conditions, as if they trail behind the Global North in their urban studies, is a very limited reading of the increasing literature on African and South East Asian cities. Here, as Simone [2010] shows, “cityness,” or “the city’s capacity to continuously reshape the ways in which people, places, materials, ideas and affect are intersected” is peripheral in many cities, not just those in the Global South, as well as theoretically developed from peripheral cities that we should all pay more attention to [Simone 2011, 5].

This challenge will, of course, need to be faced within a context in which, as Zukin rightly says, powers of patronage mean that urbanists can access funding for certain research efforts more easily than for others. But it was ever thus, and the constraints do not appear to us to be insuperable. Our experience of operating as urbanists within European contexts gives us confidence that, irrespective of the future of urban sociology as a scholarly sub-field, progress towards better interdisciplinary understandings of urban change, with a more “relaxed” approach to theoretical specificity, is possible. What will matter more than anything is the degree of determination that urban social scientists bring to understanding and addressing key social challenges in “the urban age.” We have no crystal ball to enable us to guess whether another article that might be produced on the development of urban theory in ten or twenty years’ time will come to radically different conclusions than those offered by Zukin, but substantive crises do have a habit of focusing the mind.

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From “Strict” Urban Sociology to Relaxed but Engaged Urban Theories

Abstract: This essay takes up the challenge posed by Manuel Castells in the essay “Is There an Urban Sociology?” (1968) by giving reasons for the persistent lack of a consensus within urban sociology on the theoretical status of space and time and speculating about the loss of esteem within North American sociology for the study of urban life. Despite the rapid increase in urbanization around the world, urban sociology in the U.S. suffers from a specific American dislike of cities and greater growth in suburban and exurban peripheries of metropolitan cores. Moreover, recalling the origins of urban sociology in the U.S. in the study of “problem” populations, urban sociologists find it difficult to distance themselves from grants and careers supported by the state while they often confront abuses of states and markets in their everyday empirical practices. Analyzing the interaction of social, economic, and cultural forces in bounded urban spaces is made more complicated, finally, by the recognition of difference among cities in different regions of the world and the importance of mobility, technology, and struggles for dignity in modern life.

Keywords: Urban theory, postmodernism, Castells, modernization, urbanism, Global South.

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