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Comment on Sharon Zukin/2

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by Norman Fainstein

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Sharon Zukin dishes out a rich *meza* of ideas in responding to Manuel Castells 1968 question as to whether there was an urban sociology in the sense formulated by sociologists at the University of Chicago earlier in the Twentieth century. His initial answer was in the negative. He thus threw out the babies of cultural and spatial analysis along with the bathwater of the Chicago School. Yet as the agitation and disorder of the 1960s evolved into the fiscal crises of capitalism in the 1970s, Castells¹ and a host of other French and European scholars developed a substantial literature on urban development in a range of overlapping and sometimes arbitrary disciplinary categories: sociology, political science, political economy, geography, urban and regional planning, and most universally, simply urban studies.

In the Unites States, where urban violence was most acutely felt at the time, the Chicago School lived on, while neo-Marxian approaches established footholds; but the dominant trend was to define the urban arena in terms of “social problems.” These “problems” were then approached in a typically American, pragmatic way. Professor Zukin rightly notes that regardless of the approach, *urban* (and its close relatives *city*, *inner city*, and *ghetto*) was to be found everywhere, in the academy, in research supported by foundations and government, in the media, and in political discourse. Students lined up to take urban sociology, urban politics, urban anthropology. What exactly defined any of these fields mattered much less that their obvi-

¹ Castells by then defined urban sociology in terms of collective consumption.

ous relevance to transformations of the built environment (urban renewal in the US), the decline of central cities and the rise of the suburbs, racial subordination, urban violence, fiscal distress, in short, “the urban crisis.” With the suppression of that crisis, the rise of neoliberalism (starting with Thatcher and Reagan), and the emergence of a global political economy, the focus on “urban” was first blurred and then faded (most of all in the US; much less elsewhere). This story is told well in the Zukin essay and need not be elaborated here.

There is more on Professor Zukin’s platter, however. She goes beyond claiming that urban-this and urban-that have lost popularity in the academy. She argues that there is an intellectual crisis in the study of “the city,” such that we do not now know if 1) a city “is a place or time,” 2) whether “cities have a different structure from other spaces,” and 3) whether the city is “a distinctive subject of research or only a research site.” Professor Zukin offers interesting comments on all of these questions, but her essay does not provide a systematic answer.

Instead, as in a real *meza*, she provides us with numerous dishes and flavors: first an abbreviated history of her academic career (which, incidentally, fails to disclose her extraordinary breadth of capabilities, including her important scholarship on Yugoslavia), and then her thoughts about deindustrialization, gentrification, and the loss of “traditional” cities in the face of intense global urbanization. Next, in a discussion that covers ground at lightning speed, Professor Zukin calls for an urban sociology that is “scientific” in its observations and its theories, that makes comparisons and focuses on “the production of urban space.”

The essay then ends in a most surprising way. Instead of pursuing this “scientific” (or perhaps simply systematic or rigorous) approach to “urban sociology,” we are informed, that “today, the world is the city,” and that while “the materiality of cities is clearly limited . . . the idea of cities is boundless.” She goes on to say – in apparent contradiction to her previous emphasis on “the production of urban space” – that “the theoretical subject of urban sociology is the central contradiction between freedom and domination.”

Urban sociology must be an ongoing effort to relate the dream of freedom to the bounded space and time of human habitation. We (urban sociologists) find the underlying structure beneath the variations, and we advocate a city that works to the benefit of all.

However worthy these concerns (which do, indeed, form a subset of the general dilemmas of the human condition revolving around freedom and necessity), they do not move us closer to answering the question Professor Zukin poses initially, namely whether there is an urban sociology. In fact, by the conclusion of this essay,

a university curriculum committee worth half its salt might well decide that there is actually no such thing as “sociology,” much less “urban sociology.”

So – to steal a phrase from that “non-sociologist” Lenin – what is to be done? Lenin and other Marxists give us a good clue. They argue quite correctly that the *obvious* division of the world into ostensibly separate spheres that we call polity, economy and society is the central element, perhaps the essence, of the ideology of capitalism. This ideology reflects the institutional arrangements of the capitalist political economy, just as it reinforces the naturalism and inevitability of capitalist institutions.

Nowhere is this combination of institutional and ideational division more evident than in the academy itself, in its organization according to the “disciplines” that evolved in late Nineteenth century German universities and became reified in professional organizations, university departments, the Nobel Prize and other vehicles for defining prestige hierarchies, and, of course, in academic careers. Like capitalism overall, the political economy of academia is marked by entrepreneurialism, competition and monopoly.

In this world, “sociology” has always been an also-ran (the joke being that it got the leftovers after the study of what really mattered got parceled off into political science and economics). As Professor Zukin shows, some of the most interesting work on “the city” has long been carried out in other “disciplines”: after all Lewis Mumford was an historian, David Harvey is a geographer, Marx and Engels were what, “undisciplined”?! Even the great “sociologist” Max Weber would probably have never been identified as such had not – again as Zukin notes – Talcott Parsons claimed him for American functionalism. Thus, the so-called crisis in urban sociology is in part nothing more than the accelerated failure of the business model of sociology. (Of course, if you are an employee in that industry, you might be rightly worried.)²

A second aspect of the problem of “urban sociology” is epistemological; it is rooted precisely in Lenin’s question of what is to be done. The answer of positivistic social scientists (with whom Professor Zukin seems to ally herself when she calls for a “science” of the city) is that our job is to study the world, not to evaluate it, much less to change it. Yet Professor Zukin and perhaps a majority of urban sociologists know better than to believe that theories are value-neutral, that the facts speak for

² We do not have the time here to consider other ways around the “disciplinary” monopoly problem. They mainly include “area” studies (including the study of urban places and populations) and knowledge organized around problems (e.g., racial conflict, inequality, environmental degradation, economic development). While these answers to disciplinary reification allow for the actual study of phenomena that matter, they undermine disciplinary monopolies. The obvious solution of replacing urban sociology with urban studies thus occurs to Professor Zukin, just as she sees that this solution places courses and resources in the hands of scholars nominally in non-sociological disciplines.

themselves, or that the social sciences are not subject to the very social forces they study.³ Moreover, in the essay under review Professor Zukin readily resorts to making value judgments, lamenting for example the demise of what she calls “the traditional city” in Asia and elsewhere even while urban development is as robust as it has ever been in world history.

What is to be done, therefore, is to break the fetters of “sociology” in the phrase “urban sociology,” to recognize the *unimportance* in the order of things as to whether or not there is an urban *sociology*. But what of the “urban” part? Here we might return to Professor Zukin’s three questions. In whatever way we were to answer them, we must begin by ridding ourselves of the confusing terminology centered on “the city,” a reification of the medieval, northwest European places that combined physical form, legal-political regulation, economic organization, and bourgeois culture, all in contrast to a feudal countryside. (Hence the aphorism, “Stadtluft macht mann frei,” and the still extant appellations like banlieues and faubourgs.) Equally, we cannot be locked into a more modern conception of a “real” city where industrial workers and their culture prevailed, or at least were in rivalry with bourgeois and aristocratic populations and quarters. We must, as Professor Zukin herself at times argues in her essay, stick with “urban,” understanding that urbanism embodies the multiple dimensions of the built environment (and its interface with “nature”) and the pattern of human settlement. Urbanism always involves a dialectic relationship among social life, space and material form.

In short, then, to answer question one: a “city” is how some of us characterize certain urban places; it is not a time.

To answer question two: (Do “cities” have “a different structure from other spaces?”) Professor Zukin attributes to “cities” (or perhaps “authentic cities” or “traditional cities”) characteristics she likes that differentiate them from “other urban spaces.” Are these the “structures” of which she speaks? If so, she merely creates a tautology. If not, the “different structures” must be specified in a way distinct from those that define the places (spaces?) she calls “cities.”

To answer question three: urbanism⁴ is not just a research site; it includes dimensions of process (e.g. production of the built environment; migration) and social organization (e.g., settlement patterns, the household, the workplace) that exist universally, but are expressed spatially in different ways. Whatever the contortions and

³ Professor Zukin correctly notes that the taming of the urban crisis killed off a lot of interest in urban sociology, narrowly defined, while current problems like the real estate crisis, or hyper-urbanization and global warming are better understood outside the professional domain not just of urban sociology, but of sociology itself.

⁴ For the reasons previously adumbrated, we use “urbanism” instead of her confusing term “city.”

distortions that plague the “sociology” of “the city,” the study of urbanism is thriving and intellectually productive, Professor Zukin should be relieved to know.

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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 sociology, space, disciplines, neoliberalism.

Norman Fainstein has published numerous articles and several books in the areas of urban sociology, town planning, and economic history; social movements; and public policy. He has also had a long career as an academic administrator, most recently at Vassar College as Dean of the Faculty and Connecticut College as its president. In 2011 he was a visiting professor at the LKY School, National University of Singapore, where he will teach again in 2012.