The ordinary city

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As debates on globalization have progressed from an earlier phase in which commentators saw the intensification of world-scale flows and processes as the negation of local identities and autonomies, the city has been ‘rediscovered’ as the powerhouse of the globalized economy. Against the view that questions, for example, the continued specificity of the urban in an era increasingly mediated by locationally liberating, advanced telecommunications and rapid transport networks, some strands of urban research assert that cities are becoming more important as the key creative, control and cultural centres within globalizing economic, cultural and social dynamics. Building on these strands, this paper evaluates the assets that cities and metropolitan regions provide in an era of globalization. It attempts to develop an alternative perspective on the city based on the idea that contemporary urban life is founded on the heterogeneity of economic, social, cultural and institutional assets, and concludes by using this perspective to develop implications for urban policy and the quest for social and territorial justice.

key words city assets social complexity public spaces urban citizenship economic creativity social justice

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revised manuscript received 17 February 1997

Introduction

The city has become ‘trendy’ (Jencks 1996). There are growing signs that ideas of the city and urban development are now once again at the top of both social science and policy agendas. Urban studies has experienced a remarkable renaissance in the past fifteen years, fuelled by the replacement of tight, positivistic approaches with structuralist and, more recently, post-structuralist theories. A veritable deluge of newspaper and magazine reports now addresses urban crises and ‘regeneration’ processes. National research programmes like PIR-Villes in France and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) programme in the UK 1 have been set up to explore the new metropolitan dynamics. And international fora, like the UN Habitat II congress and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development’s (OECD) urban affairs conferences, are attempting to address the problems and potential of metropolitan life at the international scale.

And yet, within this ‘rediscovery’ of the city, we would argue that there is much confusion and ambivalence about what the ‘city’ is and what its specific assets are likely to be – as a place and as an arena of representation – within the context of global economic, technological and cultural shifts. Too often, single cities – most recently, Los Angeles – are wheeled out as paradigmatic cases, alleged conveniently to encompass all urban trends everywhere. The bulk of the disparate range of perspectives and approaches toward the city tends to concentrate exclusively on one element of urban life and city development: ‘culture’, social polarization, housing, industrial districts, politics, transport, governance, property development, planning and so on. Thus the very essence of the city – the concentration of diverse relational intersections between and within such activities and
elements – tends to be lost. Oscillations between dire predictions of urban doom and optimistic portrayals of an urban renaissance serve further to confuse.

This paper aims to draw on recent strands of urban research and debate to evaluate the specific assets that cities and metropolitan regions provide in an era of globalization. In the first section, we review the dimensions of the recent ‘urban rediscovery’; we then go on to diagnose some key analytical problems within this burgeoning wave of urban research and commentary. Section three attempts to develop a new perspective on the city based on the idea that contemporary urban life is founded on the ‘multiplexing’ of diverse economic, social, cultural and institutional assets which may not all come together in the city. The implications of this perspective for urban policy and the quest for social and territorial justice are explored in section four, whilst the concluding comments argue briefly that social justice makes economic sense.

The ‘rediscovery’ of the city

Between the early 1960s and early 1980s, many strands of commentary and research, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon world, anticipated a progressive dissolution or erosion of cities as advanced transport and telecommunications infrastructures released economic, social and cultural activities from the need for spatial propinquity and metropolitan concentration (Boden and Molotch 1994). In the scenario of Alvin Toffler’s (1980) influential ‘third wave’, for example, urban inhabitants could escape to the rural idyll to live, work and interact from an ‘electronic cottage’ tied into advanced telecommunications grids. Anthony Pascal (1987, 602) extended this prediction by suggesting that

with the passage of time [will come] spatial regularity; the urban system converges on, even if never quite attains, complete areal uniformity.

To Pascal, cities would progressively ‘vanish’ as their chief raison d’être – face-to-face contact – would become substituted by electronic networks and spaces. New rural societies would emerge as people exercised their new freedom to locate in small, attractive settlements better suited to their needs. ‘If cities did not exist’, wrote the futurists, Naisbitt and Aburdene (1991, 329), ‘it would not now be necessary to invent them ... truly global cities will not be the largest, they will be the smartest’. Even Marshall McLuhan (1964, 366) believed that the emergence of the ‘global village’ meant that the city ‘as a form of major dimensions must inevitably dissolve like a fading shot in a movie’. Some critical theorists too have posited some wholesale evaporation of the city as a ‘special’ place. Paul Virilio (1987, 18), for example, asserts that cities are now ‘overexposed’ to new communications technologies, which effectively serve to evaporate their place-based relational meaning in some pervasive shift to a universal ‘technological space-time’ where ‘elsewhere begins here and vice versa’.

Almost in awe of such doom scenarios, between the early 1960s and early 1980s, the traditional disciplines of urban studies – particularly urban geography and planning – tended to confine themselves largely with mapping and measuring processes of urban economic restructuring – especially deindustrialization – and highlighting the social crises associated with the collapse of inner-city employment (see, for example, Martin and Rowthorn 1986). Urban planning and policy debates became concerned with finding solutions to urban crises (McKay and Cox 1979) but neither tended to move much beyond their boundaries, to question or engage in the broader debates about the future of cities.

And yet, from this position on the intellectual margins just fifteen years ago, the study of the city, the spatiality of metropolitan life and the policy challenges of contemporary urbanism have come to hold a powerful position within contemporary social and policy sciences. A growing range of research is focusing attention on understanding and analysing the ‘urban’. Post-structuralist and postmodern debates within the humanities, cultural studies, geography and sociology have emerged which seek to explore urban landscapes as key sites of representation and symbolization (Westwood and Williams 1996), identity politics (Keith and Pile 1993), collective memory (Boyer 1994) and consumption (Ellin 1995). Writers such as Jim Collins (1995) and Rob Shields (1992) have helped to debunk the absolutist and deterministic scenarios of urban doom and collapse of the urban public realm previously offered by the likes of Michael Sorkin (1992) and Paul Virilio (1987). A wide range of commentaries have reasserted the multi-dimensional nature of the social and cultural
life of the city. Media theorists have stressed that the city is an ‘imaginary signification’ within the visual mediatization of modern life; that the city ‘exists around us and also lives within us’ (Robins 1996, 130). The nature of the city as a clashing point for diverse subjectivities, ethnicities, corporealities and spatialities has been stressed by cultural commentators and geographers (Pile 1996). And urban political economists have explored how the fabric of urban life is deeply imbued with struggles between commodifying property industries and growing portions of disenfranchised urban and immigrant populations (Zukin 1995).

Meanwhile, debates about urban economic development have drawn on regulation theory and notions of flexible specialization to assert the renewed importance of Marshallian milieux at the urban and regional level in supporting competitive, creative production (Amin 1994; Scott 1988). Stressing ‘the extraordinarily social nature of modern economies’, Thrift and Olds (1996, 314–16) argue that, in volatile and globalizing economies, trust and reciprocity, forged through face-to-face relational networks, become centrally important to many economic practices. To them,

it is clear that face-to-face interaction has not died out. Indeed, in some sense it has become more important as reflexivity (including an enhanced ability to see oneself as others see us) has become built into economic conduct. (ibid., 316)

Finally, media commentary on the city has also grown rapidly as the popular mood about cities in many nations has become less dominated by a sense of collapse and crisis, and more open to positive interpretations of change which stress the opportunities, vitality and assets of urban life (Jencks 1996). Such a changing mood is increasingly supported by evidence of (at least patchy) urban ‘revitalisation’, the continued urbanization of many advanced industrial nations and even renewed population growth in many once-declining industrial cities that had been given up as inevitable icons of urban evisceration (Parkinson 1994).

Three strands of urban rediscovery have, we would argue, been especially important in raising the profile of cities: the rediscovery of urban centrality; the stress on cities as economic motors of national development; and the growing debates on the importance of ‘creative cities’, bringing together complex ranges of cultural, learning, education and information milieux for supporting reflexive innovation. It is necessary to look at the central arguments represented within these strands if we are to understand the ways in which they explain the apparent growing importance of what might be termed ‘urban assets’.

Urban nodes in global networks
The first strand of work, deriving from such authors as Saskia Sassen (1991, 1994), Manuel Castells (1989) and John Friedman (1995), has sought to reassess the importance of large metropolises as key command and control centres within the interlocking globalizing dynamics of financial markets, high-level producer services industries, corporate headquarters and other associated service industries (telecommunications, business conferences, media, design and cultural industries, transport, property developments, etc.). A recent survey in Europe, for example, found that since the mid-1980s,

there was no sign that senior decision makers in the control and command sectors of the European economy were willing to use the potential of new telecommunications technologies to transfer their operations to more peripheral locations. Quite the reverse. Major metropolitan areas, situated at the centre of communications networks and offering easy access to national and international institutions, the arts, cultural and media industries, if anything became more attractive to international finance houses, corporate headquarters and producer service companies. (Parkinson 1994, 7)

The key argument here is that the dispersal of the productive capacity of transnational corporations (TNCs) over increasingly global distances requires a parallel territorial concentration of high-level headquarters’ functions at the apex of the global urban hierarchy (notably London, New York and Tokyo) (Sassen 1991, 1994). Advances in telecommunications are being used to enhance the centrality of global cities more than they are being used to support ‘third wave’-style spatial decentralization (see Graham 1997). ‘Cities reflect the economic realities of the 21st century’, writes Tony Fitzpatrick (1997, 9), the Director of Ove Arup:

Remote working from self-sufficient farmsteads via the Internet cannot replace the powerhouses of personal interaction which drives teamwork and creativity. These are the cornerstones of how professional people add value to their work. Besides, you cannot look into someone’s eyes and see that they are trustworthy over the Internet. (ibid.)
Trust, reciprocity, reflexivity and the minimization of risk thus fuel the explosive growth of global cities. As Mitchelson and Wheeler (1994, 88) argue, in times of great uncertainty, select cities acquire strategic importance as command centres and as centralized producers of the highest order economic information.

Liberalization of financial markets and the needs of TNCs to manage global investments have similarly underpinned the explosion of global financial centres, where risk and volatility are managed through intense localization. Cycles of cumulative causation between the concentration of TNC headquarters, high-level financial services, other producer services (accounting, advertising, information technology (IT) and business consultancy, etc.) and the wider urban assets (specialized labour markets and support services, concentrations of cultural and 'soft' social assets, access to world-class property, transport and telecommunications infrastructures) are, in turn, seen to lead to a growing centralization of high-level functions within global cities.

Thus international financial centres and global cities are seen to reassert their locational power and centrality because they combine unmatched concentrations of advanced support services and infrastructure, with the highly reflexive workplace cultures suited to high-level financial and corporate operations in a global and volatile world economy (Thrift 1994). Moreover, the intensification of electronic telecommunications linking such global cities seems to require ever-more intense webs of face-to-face co-presence in tightly concentrated urban districts. This is because such globally interlinked IT and telecommunications systems lead to massive increases in flows of real-time information, requiring skilled and convincing interpretation on a continuous basis (Thrift 1996b).

In contexts such as the City of London, the face-to-face work environment, the personal relations between City analysts and the struggle to improve individual access to powerful new interpretations of complex change all become crucial, so maintaining, or even enhancing, the centrality of global financial capitals.

Cities as national economic motors
The second strand of research has sought to overcome the notion, particularly powerful within the USA and the UK, that cities and metropolitan life are an economic liability - pits into which public subsidy and social support must go to prop up ailing and anachronistic urban areas. The assertion, rather, is that urban economies are critically important motors for supporting the development of national economies (Jacobs 1984). To Sclar (1992, 30), for example, the economic strength of a nation is 'nothing more than the sum of the economic strengths of its metropolitan regions'.

This is a view that is filtering into policy circles. Typical here is the book edited by Henry Cisneros (1993), appointed by the Clinton administration as the secretary of the US Department of Housing and Urban Development. In the introduction, Cisneros asserts that, despite being inadequately reflected in political power structures and debates, US cities are the core of the metropolitan areas which play a pivotal role in the national economy. They provide work for millions and are the home to major private employers, the port of entry for foreign goods, capital, and workers, and the port of exit for American goods, services and tourists. They house many of the world's premier institutions of commerce, culture, and learning (ibid., 21).

He also draws attention to the amounts of financial and physical capital sunk into urban areas and the facts that nearly 80 per cent of the US population live in metropolitan areas anchored by central cities and that such areas contribute over 80 per cent of the US jobs.

There are two sides to this growing assertion of the importance of cities as national economic motors: the idea of the city as a knowledge-base and the debate surrounding the supposed resurgence of agglomeration economies, especially in industries of flexible specialization and volatile demand. The former (Knight 1995; Knight and Gappert 1989; Ryser 1994) stresses that urban economies have not so much declined as undergone a transformation based on the increasingly central importance of reflexive knowledge inputs and services into contemporary urban economies (through science, education, training, information and business support services, and a high-quality cultural and social 'milieux'). Here the emphasis is on the qualitative aspects of urban economies and the increased dominance of urban economics by symbolic and representational flows and outputs rather than commodity flows and outputs (what
Lash and Urry (1994) term 'economies of signs and space'). 'Soft', intangible factors, based on tight propinquity and close relational interweaving within the urban fabric, are seen as the central underpinnings of urban competitiveness and creativity, tying cities, in turn, into globalizing networks of productive, informational and human exchange. Such 'soft', reflexive concentrations are, of course, underpinned by intense material concentrations in the form of grids of advanced telecommunications and telematics infrastructures, massive highway and rail networks within cities and the physical environments and property markets that help support concentrated urban centrality.

The implication of this perspective is that reflexive, knowledge-based urban strategies must tie in to their particular urban arenas, so releasing synergies between the elements of a city's knowledge fabric and the urban built environment and strengthening the knowledge cultures of cities (Knight 1995) through spirals linking headquarter functions, media, cultural and arts industries, education and information services, research and development, and institutions of science and technology. City development and planning, in this approach, needs to be recast as a 'high level collective learning process' (ibid., 259).

The second research strand attempts to relate debates about the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism to the dynamics of urban manufacturing change. The argument here is that certain privileged metropolitan areas, which offer the localization and external economies most appropriate to support flexibly organized industrial districts of small, innovative firms, have managed to re-industrialize successfully since the 1980s (Storper 1996). The rich transactional opportunities of such cities, within the post-Fordist context of shifting production mixes for volatile and fluctuating markets, has allowed districts of specialist small firms to engage in continuous innovation and learning (Scott 1988). Once again, the ability of cities to insulate against risk and uncertainty and to minimize transactions costs for a diverse range of knowledge inputs, labour sources and external suppliers underpins the dynamism of such key Marshallian industrial districts (Amin and Thrift 1992; for a review, see Storper 1995). Indeed, for some commentators (e.g. Malmberg and Maskell 1996), the advantages of proximity, associated with the exchange of information, goods and services, and the advantages of face-to-face contact, associated with incremental innovation, learning and the exchange of tacit knowledge, are the assets of comparative advantage in a global context of increasingly ubiquitous forms of codified, or scientific, knowledge. Thus localization is a source of dynamic learning that reinforces, and is reinforced by, the agglomeration of firms in the same industry. Of course, these localized 'Marshallian' or 'learning' effects are not confined to cities but are a feature of areas of intense entrepreneurial agglomeration - urban and rural. However, the relevant point here is that this rediscovery of the powers of agglomeration is forcing a reappraisal of the comparative assets of cities in economic competition.

'Creative cities'

The third strand reasserts the importance of city centres by stressing how urban culture, the media, entertainment, sport and education may, with appropriate policies, interlace positively within a framework of public space to support the emergence of 'creative cities' (Landry and Bianchini 1995). As with the preceding position, the answer to economic and social crises within cities is seen to be through creative practice, focusing on projects of urban renewal and lived experience that make the most of the diversity, difference and intersection traditionally offered by cities. Certain cities, it is argued, have experienced a renaissance as arenas of symbolization, bases for new, reflexive forms of consumption and cultural production, and sites for intense webs of information and communications flows orientated around their night-time economies (Griffiths 1995; Lash and Urry 1994). But the diagnosis and the vision here also relates powerfully to urban physical space and planning. This approach is more normative, tied in with active policy and planning debates, especially in western Europe (see Bianchini et al. 1988; Montgomery 1995).

Building on the long-standing critique of modernist planning (Jacobs 1961), the central assertion here is that cities can thrive only when strategies recognize that 'the defining characteristics of cities are high density, mixed use, stimulus, transactions and above all diversity' (Montgomery 1995, 102). New shared spaces, new, improved public realms, new mixed-used urban landscapes, new intercultural interactions and an urban time-space fully animated and enlivened with a rich array of social
and cultural activities are seen to be the answer to the problems of decay, alienation, polarization and the crisis in urban public space (Bianchini and Schwengel 1991; Worpole 1992). Density, cultural diversity and vitality, linking and intersecting the whole gamut of urban activities within a fine-grained spatial matrix, are seen as the key to urban renaissance. Such a renaissance is alleged to be underway already in cities across Europe as a result of the growing recognition of the benefits of metropolitan living and culture by west Europeans and because of the success of strategies aimed at promoting cities (especially city centres) with high-density development generating intense stimuli and concentrated transactions amongst and between diverse uses.

Problems of synecdoche in the new urbanism

These strands of what we term the ‘rediscovery’ of cities together reassert the role of city assets in contemporary global change and, in so doing, raise considerable hope for revitalizing urban areas through which so much of human life is now conducted. But how do we reconcile this utopia, likely to be extended to all cities and their parts by urban policy-makers and boosterists, with the variegated, fragmented and incoherent nature of contemporary urban life? The three strands are derived from readings of particular cities or particular parts of cities. They offer specific perspectives and partial representations on the vast, multi-dimensional range of processes of urban change currently underway. Each of the perspectives stresses its particular recipe of ‘ingredients’ as central to the ‘new urbanism’; each thus asserts the primacy of certain social, cultural, economic, physical, environmental or institutional dynamics within contemporary urban life. Key interconnections within and between cities are inevitably privileged whilst others never make it into the theorist’s or practitioner’s analysis at all. As Nigel Thrift and Kris Olds (1996, 312) put it in their commentary on economic geography, these strands of urban discovery illustrate the extraordinary difficulty of separating out something called ‘the economic’ from ‘the social’ or the ‘cultural’ or ‘the political’ or ‘the sexual’ or what have you.

The new urbanism, therefore, poses analytical problems in trying to understand ‘wholeness’ within the contemporary urban, in identifying how the urban varies between different cities and in thinking about what ‘urban assets’ mean for the way we currently conceptualize the ‘urban’. In a review of recent theorizations of the city, Michael Storper (1995, 28) argues that many of the central aspects of contemporary urbanization receive attention [in current urban theory]: the service industries, and especially financial services and advanced business services; flows of information, and the development of technologies that make them possible; the location of big, multilocal firms; the flows of capital, knowledge, and goods administered by those firms; the financialization of capitalism. But none of the [global-dual city, world city, informational city or post-Fordist, flexible city] theories reviewed seems to put these phenomena together in a way which effectively accounts for their role in urbanization.

Two problems of synecdoche, also highlighted recently by Nigel Thrift (1996a), might lie at the source of these problems: the methodological dangers of overgeneralizing from one or a few examples and the danger of overemphasizing particular spaces, senses of time and partial representations within the city.

Turning to the first problem, an inevitable outcome of the rediscovery of the city within so many research strands and discourses has been the elevation of single or small groups of urban examples to be paradigmatic; that is, to offer apparent lessons for all other urban areas. Recently, the notion that ‘it all comes together in Los Angeles’ (City 1996; Soja 1989) has been most influential. But each of the above strands of work has proffered its own set of paradigmatic examples. The new examples of urban centrality in global networks are almost always the three global financial centres (London, New York and Tokyo) plus second-tier global cities like Paris and Hong Kong (Knox and Taylor 1995). The stress on cities as national economic motors has focused attention on the innovative urban industrial districts surrounding Los Angeles (film and television in Hollywood, women’s clothing in Los Angeles, IT in Orange County, etc.) and those developing in the ‘third Italy’ (see Storper 1995). The creative cities debate has focused on cities, or parts of cities, with especially dramatic strategies and apparently successful transformations, such as Curitiba in Brazil, Barcelona in Spain and Covent Garden in London (see Griffiths 1995).
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The problem with paradigmatic examples is that analysis inevitably tends to generalize from very specific cities, both in identifying the changing nature of urban assets and highlighting normative suggestions for policy innovation elsewhere. What should be a debate on variety and specificity quickly reduces to the assumption that some degree of interurban homogeneity can be assumed, either in the nature of the sectors leading urban transformation or in the processes of urban change. The exception, by a process of reduction or totalizing, becomes the norm, applicable to the vast majority of what might be called ‘unexceptional’ cities: that is, cities which cannot be demonstrated to have attained a new centrality, to be arenas of flexible specialization and industrial districts growth, or to be identifiable ‘creative’. If it ‘all comes together’ in Los Angeles, the implication is that all cities are experiencing the trends identifiable in Los Angeles and that we do not really need to understand these processes.

The second problem of generalization is the risk of focusing too much on single, isolated spaces, on specific senses of time and on particular representations within cities. Inevitably, sector-specific and place-specific strands of research make it difficult to build an understanding of what Dematteis (1988) calls the ‘multiple spaces’ that become relationally constructed, interlinked and superimposed within extending ‘urban’ regions (see Healey et al. 1995). Certain senses of ‘space-time’ tend to become privileged from the whole gamut of urban life. Thrift (1996b) notes similarly that contemporary cities display the kind of variegated senses of time – from the intense instantaneity of the financial markets to the new urban mythology and new-age religions – as the eighteenth-century city. And Rob Shields (1995, 245) reminds us that when we analyse the ‘city’, our depiction is itself a representation, a partial perspective with ‘treacherous selective vision’ which, in turn, becomes embroiled in the social production of the ‘urban’. So much is this the case that one might argue, as Charles Jencks (1996, 26) does, that virtually all theories about the city are true, especially contradictory ones. The city works both as a mediaeval village with the equivalent of 13th century inhabitants pottering about, and a global network of 24 hour traders.

Thus, in addressing their key ‘sectors’, sites and processes, the strands of the new urban utopia tend to lead from paradigmatic examples which are not whole cities but specific ‘time-space’ samples of cities. Each offers its own partial and specific representations of the city or the ‘urban’ – the ‘yuppy’ spaces of power and centrality for the global financial centres, the high-tech entrepreneurial spaces of industrial districts and technopolies, the flâneur-like urban strolling of the advocates of urban creativity. Too often, by totalizing from specific space-times and contingent representations, such references to the ‘city’ tend to abstract specific urban sites from their broader interrelationship within larger metropolitan areas.

One consequence is the failure to capture the changing relationships between intraurban areas, which should, arguably, be of central concern given the more general observation that cities tend to be splintering and fragmenting into cellular zones, extended over larger regions, and geared towards specific uses whilst excluding others. It thus becomes problematic to understand the ways in which sites of strategic centrality and exchange relate to areas of ‘high-tech’ innovation and technopolis development (Castells and Hall 1994); how the cultural and social diversity and webs of city centres interrelate with housing areas and ghettos; how processes of mobility and electronic interconnection through telecommunications weave webs through these multiple spaces and tie them into wider systems of communications, transactions and information flow. And, without this understanding of the ways in which the time-space ‘bits’ of cities do or do not interconnect, it becomes difficult to develop an understanding of the wider constitution or fragmentation of an urban asset base. It also becomes difficult to capture what the ‘urban’ means as a superimposed complex of relational webs, a complex of culturally specific representations (Shields 1995) and as a place for the interconnections of diverse circuits linking infrastructure, exchange, institutions and the materially and socially lived world.

The multiplex city

We would argue that the dominance of partial interpretations concentrating on paradigmatic examples, or specific time-space ‘samples’, is making it increasingly problematic to hold sight of the idea of the urban as the co-presence of multiple spaces, multiple times and multiple webs
of relations, tying local sites, subjects and fragments into globalizing networks of economic, social and cultural change (Dematteis 1988). In criticizing partial representations in urban theory, Rob Shields (1995, 245) has argued that we need to construct multi-dimensional analyses which, rather than imposing monological coherence and closure, allow parallel and conflicting representations to coexist in analysis.

We would agree that the ‘city’ now needs to be considered as a set of spaces where diverse ranges of relational webs coalesce, interconnect and fragment.

The contemporary city is a variegated and multiplex entity – a juxtaposition of contradictions and diversities, the theatre of life itself. The city is not a unitary or homogeneous entity and perhaps it never has been. It is both Engels’ (1845, reprinted in LeGates and Stour 1996, 48) site of ‘barbarous indifference, hard egotism on the one hand, and nameless misery on the other’ and Lewis Mumford’s (1937, reprinted in LeGates and Stout 1996, 185) ‘collection of primary groups and purposive associations . . . an aesthetic symbol of collective unity’ that fosters ‘“personal disintegration” and “reintegration” through wider participation in a concrete and visible collective whole’.

This perspective is closer to the tradition, initiated by Louis Wirth and later rekindled by Richard Sennett (1970), stressing the essential contradictions associated with dense urban life: guaranteeing anonymity to individuals (see, especially, Wilson 1991) but also making them more anomic; providing visual contact but lessening social contact; glaringly contrasting squalor and splendour, riches and poverty (see, for example, Mike Davis 1990 on Los Angeles); and juxtaposing individuals with no sentimental or emotional ties with associations of community and alliances of ‘fate’.

The multiplexity of urban life suggested by this perspective needs to be taken seriously by contemporary urban research. At least four interwoven dimensions of multiplexity need proper recognition in order to overcome the risks of resorting to totalizing paradigmatic examples and overgeneralizing from narrow, partial perspectives. As a result, it may become possible to reassert the importance of the notion that the ‘urban’ is both a concentrated complex and a process of diverse relational webs.

First, the city can be seen as a nexus between relational proximity in a world of fast flows and what Paul Adams (1995, 279) has called ‘time-space extensibility’, through which social, economic and cultural relations become ‘stretched’ over increasingly distant (and distantiated) links via the operation of technical networks (primarily telecommunications and transportation infrastructures). We would argue that the spatial essence of urbanity lies in recursive combinations of what Boden and Molotch (1994, 259) called the ‘thickness of copresent interaction’, where intense face-to-face interactions within urban space coexist with mediated flows of communication and contact via technical media to the broader city and beyond (see Thrift 1996b).

The complex interlinkage between place-based relational webs and distantiated ones is a central concern to both contemporary urban theory and policy practice. There are clearly sites where urban propinquity does still matter – the financial districts, the cultural zones, the industrial districts. But, increasingly, there are also zones where fragmentation and splintering between adjacent units can be the norm as exchange and interchange becomes disembedded from the immediate locale through fast transport and advanced telecommunications systems (Giddens 1990). Areas exist where neighbours may not know each other and tend to relate through telematics and automobiles with friends, relatives and entertainment sources stretched across the city and further afield. Adjacent firms in many new business parks – most notably back-offices – may have few interlinkages whilst each remains strongly tied in with distant circuits of corporate, global exchange. And the exchange of cultural symbolization and products in many housing areas may be as much technically mediated as operant through face-to-face interactions in urban places, as satellite, digital and cable TV, the Internet and other communications systems support disembedding from the local. Thus the ‘extensibility’ of interpersonal connections – in the economy and through social interaction, and cultural exchange – ‘both in place and out of place’ (Adams 1995, 279) – makes the city much more than the arena of place-bound or place-mediated relationships.

The important point for our purposes is that this complex interweaving of place-based and wider relational webs, and the ways in which they bring together (or do not, as the case may be) the multiplex space-times of the city, has tended to be ignored by the literature on urban ‘rediscovery’. In
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particular, the balance in a city between integration and fragmentation, and the impact of this balance on economic success, is insufficiently considered. We would suggest that the nature of the balance is likely to be critical in assessing urban creativity, the propensity of cities to innovate and the complex interactions between economic ‘competitiveness’ and social ‘cohesion’.

Secondly, and following from this, we would stress the unique place density and boundedness of the city, perhaps even as a source of comparative advantage in a world of ubiquity and incessant global flow. Underlying all three interpretations of the new urbanism is the emphasis that successful relational proximity tends to be concentrated within dense clusters, quarters and districts of knowledge and knowledgeable people, within agglomerations of specialized firms, or within a critical mass of cultural creativity. In addition, there is a common perception that absolute advantage often derives from a set of immobile or non-tradeable factors, notably tacit knowledge, informal or face-to-face contact and relations of reciprocity and trust.

This raises the key question of the relationship between dense, creative nodes within cities and wider urban spaces. One way of reconciling the two perspectives would be to argue that places of dense creativity, innovation, learning and reciprocity are islands within their multiplex urban contexts insulated, geographically and socially, from everything else that surrounds them. It seems to be the case that clusters of creativity tend to be confined to particular parts of the city, such as inner-city industrial districts, cultural complexes or central business districts. Such an interpretation lends support to the normative desire of observers as different as Jane Jacobs and Lewis Mumford, that the city be composed of clearly defined boundaries, like many villages (Wilson 1995). The idea of enclaves may help us to explain why, for example, Los Angeles is, at once, a city both of vast economic dynamism and devastating social blight: the economically active and the poor are simply kept apart. But this is only a partially correct view, not least because the clusters of prosperity are not hermetic enclaves, ‘uncontaminated’ by the outside. Cultural and creative districts, for example, draw centrally on the cross-fertilization of in-here and out-there influences, not least in order to satisfy the exotic desires of the sought-after professionals and experts who make high demands on their proximate physical and social environment.

The third dimension of the multiplex city, long recognized in urban research, is the importance of urban heterogeneity. With the easy separation between the ‘social’, ‘political’, ‘cultural’ and ‘economic’ becoming more and more problematic, we must clearly emphasize the ways in which contemporary cities tend to be concentrations of multiple rationalities, multiple socio-spatial circuits, diverse complexes of cultural hybridity and the interlinkage of complex ranges of subjectivities and time-spaces. Such heterogeneities are central to the new urbanism and are, as we argue later, essential to the dynamics of the contemporary ‘urban’. These are, simultaneously, sources of economic dynamism and cultural innovation, and pointers to new notions of urban governance and institutional innovation.

Two recent, interlinked, advances in social theory add significant theoretical support to our emphasis on urban heterogeneity within the multiplex city. In so doing, they work to undermine the very idea that we can simply and unproblematically generalize the ‘city’. First, relational rather than absolute theories of time-space are rapidly gaining influence in geography and urban studies (Harvey 1996; Thrift 1996a). The unthinking acceptance within urban studies that time and space act simply as objective, unvariant, external containers for the urban scene is now collapsing. Harvey (1996) draws on Whitehead’s relational theories to suggest that the heterogeneous experience and construction of time within cities is a real phenomenon. ‘Multiple processes’, he writes, ‘generate multiple real as opposed to Leibniz’s ideal differentiation in spatio-temporalities’ (ibid., 259, original emphasis). Crucially for the notion of the multiplex city, it is ‘cogredience’ or ‘the way in which multiple processes flow together to construct a single consistent, coherent, though multifaceted time-space system’ (ibid., 260–1) that is the key concern. The urban becomes an embedded and heterogeneous range of time-space processes; the multiplex city, by implication, ‘cannot be examined independently of the diverse spatio-temporalities such processes contain’ (ibid., 263–4). Similarly, drawing on his long-standing work on time geography (Thrift et al. 1978), Nigel Thrift (1996a, 2) asserts that ‘time is a multiple phenomenon; many times are working themselves out simultaneously in resonant interaction with each other’.
Secondly, new theoretical conceptions of space and place, influenced by the actor-network theories of Michael Callon (1986, 1991) and Bruno Latour (1993), stress the need for fully contingent and relational approaches to social ‘ordering’ and to the configuration of technical artefacts (Bingham 1996; Hinchliffe 1996; Murdoch, forthcoming). A key motivation here is to attack the essentialist technological determinism of writers such as Virilio, Sorkin and the new cyberspace gurus such as Negroponte (1995). Absolute spaces and times are meaningless here. Agency is a purely relational process. Technologies have contingent, and diverse, effects only through the ways they become linked into specific social contexts by human agency. In this perspective, social ordering occurs through the complex efforts of both humans and non-humans to engage other actors through performative actions that are fundamentally heterogeneous and impossible to generalize (Thrift 1996a).

‘Agency’ is defined as a ‘precarious, contingent effect, achieved only by continuous performance and only for the duration of that performance’ (Bingham 1996, 647). Such a view underlines forcefully that, rather than simply being ‘impacted’ by new technologies, ‘living, breathing, corporeal human beings, arrayed in various creatively improvised networks of relation still exist as something more than machine fodder’ (Thrift 1995b, 1466).

Such theories would support our view that multiplex cities are thus complex performative arenas where relational webs weave layers of order between heterogeneous social groups, filières of firms, governance agencies, etc. But such an emphasis on contingent and heterogeneous social practices challenges the very idea that generalization can be made about what the ‘city’ is. It also supports relational perspectives of the heterogeneity of space-time. Thus Nigel Thrift (ibid., 1485) stresses the hybrid outcome of multiple processes of social configuration, processes which are specific to particular differentially extensive actor-networks (made up of people and things holding each other together) and generate their own space and own times, which will sometimes, and sometimes not, be coincident. There is, in other words, no big picture of the modern City to be had but only a set of constantly evolving sketches.

The focus on the heterogeneous ways in which social ‘ordering’ occurs for human actors within the multiplex city allows due recognition of the stark differentiation of the time-space opportunities of different social groups. For the diverse time-space ordering of the city means that social actors and groups have very different abilities to engage in actor-networks that allow personal extensibility and so extend their time-spaces beyond their immediate corporeal environment (Dear 1995; Graham and Marvin 1996). Thrift (1995), for example, contrasts the global time-space extensibility of the electronic securities traders (with their high-band telecommunications networks, their relentless global travel and their critical role in shaping global urban systems) with the ‘network ghettos’ or ‘off line spaces’ (Graham and Aurigi 1997) where few telecommunications penetrate. Here, the ‘space of flows comes to a full stop. Time-space compression means time to spare and the space to go nowhere’ (Thrift 1995, 31).

The fourth and final dimension of the multiplex city that we would stress is the concentrated and complex institutional base within cities. Largely ignored by the research on global cities, we would argue that the growing social complexity of urban governance is a critical aspect of the changing urban asset base within a globalizing society (Judge et al. 1995). Formal, hierarchical urban government gives way to more complex webs of urban governance and, as such, considerably raises the potential of cities as the site of a large number and variety of institutions. Indeed, debates in urban politics, especially the increasingly influential discussions of urban regime theory (Stoker 1995), are beginning to stress the complex interdependencies between formal government and wider ranges of governance (public, private, voluntary and hybrids) in cities. Some argue that these shifts improve the potential for interactive, cooperative styles of governance which are more decentralized and more in keeping with the complex demands of social innovation within contemporary cities (Mayer 1995). Whilst we will return to issues of urban governance in more detail in the next section, we would assert here the crucial importance of centred, integrative and interactive governance styles within the broader dynamics of the multiplex city (Amin and Hausner 1997; Healey 1995).

Understanding the interrelationships between these four dimensions would, we argue, help urban research to overcome the limits of partial perspectives and its tendency to rely on paradigmatic cases. It would enable more subtle perspectives on urban
multiplicity stressing the interconnections between the complex time-space circuits and dimensions of urban life, as well as the diversity and contingency of the urban world. And it might help us to improve our understanding of the circumstances in which the differences and tensions of the multiplex city nourish or, at the very least, do not undermine city assets of the sort emphasized earlier. Thus urban research may be enabled to analyse the complex, virtuous spirals of growth and the circumstances in which the time-space circuits of cities uncoil in spirals of decline so threatening the sites of growth and creativity. Such a perspective might, therefore, help inform considerations of urban policy and planning, as well as broader debates about the complex tensions linking urban economic ‘competitiveness’ and urban ‘social cohesion’.

In the next section, we move in such directions by speculating on the factors that allow virtuous synergies and connectivities to be sustained within contemporary cities. Our thesis is that one central factor may be the existence of projects or senses of social cohesion which serve to provide a genuine sense of collectivity and belonging across the social and spatial divides in a city. This we propose against the idea that creativity stems from the anarchy of urban diversity and conflict (i.e. the properties of the melting pot), or from projects which seek to hegemonize particular social agendas over a city.

The just city

We strongly agree with Sharon Zukin (1995) and other critical readings of the culture of cities that the consumption-based turn in contemporary urban policy does not provide the sort of ‘glue’ or commonality that produces virtuous spirals of growth and dynamism. At worst, efforts to embellish public spaces conceal a design to reclaim them for social groups possessing economic value as consumers or producers and to exclude the less well-off and the hawkers of street life. Indeed, Elizabeth Wilson (1995, 158) sees the politics of this social ghettoization of public spaces as part of a subtle undercurrent in which ‘invisibility is a crucial feature of modern inequality’. At best, the supposedly more inclusive spectacle-based city projects, such as glamorous public works, festivals, exhibitions, ‘themed’ commercial spaces (Gottdeiner 1997) and large reclamation projects, tend to provide only a temporary illusion of urban unity and a populist sense of place. They are generally the products of narrow urban growth coalitions or urban regimes, made up of architects, planners, building and financial speculators, and big corporate interests, for whom urban unity is primarily a matter of papering over real urban social problems and divisions, so that investment, the expert classes and consumer expenditure can return to the city (Judge et al. 1995).

Concentrating, as much of the literature does, on the cultural experience of new consumer spaces can often ignore the larger social contexts in which they are produced and the strengthened socio-spatial segregation, social control and surveillance with which they are often associated. ‘An interactive focus on the phenomenology of environmental experience in consumer spaces’, writes Mark Gottdeiner (1997, 134), ‘can overlook the way these places filter people according to the patterns of class, race, and gender segregation’. Christine Boyer (1995, 1996) has extended this argument to a macro-scale view of urban spatial and social restructuring. She suggests that economic and welfare restructuring and planning practices are forcing hyper-polarization in large US cities. She argues that what she calls the ‘figured city’ (Boyer 1995, 82) – the grids of isolated, imageable, carefully designed and controlled consumption nodes for affluent groups – now overlay the ‘disfigured city’ – the neglected, unimageable, interstitial spaces for the poor. Design and planning, transport and telematics infrastructures, regressive systems of urban politics and taxation and intensive surveillance systems work to keep the two utterly segregated. To Boyer (ibid., 105), a strange sense of urbanism now invades the city, full of inconsistencies, fractures and voids. Homogenized zones valued and protected for their architectural and scenographic effects are juxtaposed and played off against areas of superdevelopment, while monumental architecture containers have turned the urban street inward and established their own set of public spaces and services within privatized layers of shops, restaurants, offices and condominiums. In between to the back and beyond, lie the areas of the city left to decay and to decline, until the day when they too will be recycled and redesigned for new economic and cultural uses.

There is no real urban equity or unity here, only the totalization of one particular urban rhetoric (Beauregard 1996). As John Lovering (1995, 119) observes, this
reconstruction from above of local economic citizenship is shaped by the patronage of the new regulators, rather than by universalistic norms embodied in traditional democratic processes.

There is no attempt to use difference as a source of urban renewal, nor is there any regard for the possibility of creativity in diversity.

Public spaces, urban citizenship and economic creativity

What are the sources of creativity in diversity? How can they challenge an interpretation of urban multiplexity as social and economic degeneration? One simple but important source for Sharon Zukin (1995, 42) is what she describes as the ‘civility, security, tact, and trust’ that is to be found in cities in which the public arena – in whatever shape or form – remains a theatre for ‘mingling with strangers’. The effect is the evolution of a shared citizenship across the urban spectrum – class, gender, ethnic and sexual – constructed around the everyday social confidence that comes from individuals and communities making use of the right of access to a public space shared with others. For Zukin, it is everyday street-life, in bazaars, ordinary shopping streets, markets, cafes and so on that is the mainspring of such a shared public culture, not the new temples of consumerism or privilege, because it is at this level of everyday social practices that social vitality and cultures of socialization, talk, negotiation and understandings are produced. Public spaces, thus defined,

are the primary sites of public culture; they are the window into a city’s soul . . . Public spaces are important because they are places where strangers mingle freely . . . As both site and sight, meeting place and social staging ground, public spaces enable us to conceptualize and represent the city – to make an ideology of its receptivity to strangers, tolerance of difference, and opportunities to enter a fully socialized life, both civic and commercial. (ibid., 260)

The difference between public spaces as a source of threat and fear, and public spaces as an arena of active civic life rests to a considerable degree on whether they, and the general urban social and political milieu enveloping them, are spaces of social interaction. As shared spaces, they can play an important role in helping to develop a civic culture that combines the self-belief and autonomy rooted in the widespread practice of citizenship rights with the potential for tolerance and cultural exchange offered by mingling with strangers. Our interpretation of civic culture should, to be sure, not be confused with the moral and normative demands made by contemporary communitarians3 who envisage renewal through the inculcation – enforced or otherwise – of a civic virtue grounded in good and responsible social behaviour. Apart from not sharing their moral constructivism, we remain unconvinced that ‘good and responsible citizenship’ is a source of urban renewal: it might produce compliance and help to cut down the costs of anti-social behaviour but its links with creativity are, at best, tenuous.

Instead, the dialectic of social interaction and cultural confrontation in shared spaces is a potential source of innovation and creativity. For example, contemporary evolutionary and institutionalist literature on economic innovation makes much of the role of trust and reciprocity as a source of dynamic learning and innovation within the business community. The basic idea is that non-hierarchical relationships within firms and across networks of firms help to sustain continual learning and adaptation, fully exploit tacit knowledge and embedded skills and develop strategic capability based on reflexive and rule-making, rather than rule-following, rationalities of behaviour. Clearly, these properties are drawn in the main from interpersonal links within the business networks of firms. Or, if they draw upon the urban milieu for knowledgeable and creative people or locales enhancing face-to-face contact and epistemic community-building – as postulated by the literature on urban rediscovery – they do so in highly selective ways. These ‘shared’ spaces tend to include people from a similar background and are locales in which cultural intermingling comes in a sanitized form as a pleasurable consumption good for the urban intelligentsia.

However, the city of tolerance for difference, diffuse citizenship and hybrid shared spaces also has a positive economic contribution to make. And it does so in at least three senses. First, and most obviously, the ‘open’ city – not ridden by debilitating spatial and social barriers – can avoid the stigma of an urban dystopia trapped in a permanent spiral of decline linked to capital flight, the loss of initiative and the rising costs associated with the threat of criminality, insecurity and social breakdown.

Secondly, and as a consequence, in fostering a sense of belonging and confidence for a variety of
social groups, such a city can help to encourage a broad pool of economic possibilities in the urban arena. It is becoming increasingly clear that the age of full employment is not likely to return as the formal economy comes to rely on jobless productivity growth and on temporary, part-time and flexible employment contracts. There is, therefore, a need for new and alternative forms of employment and activity, with the multiplex city offering many possibilities. These might include ethnic and other minority enterprises and ventures, drawing on the support mechanisms offered by family and community networks within and beyond the city. Such enterprises may be encouraged in cities of tolerance by accommodative local institutions. These might include the plethora of informal industrial and service activities surviving on the margins of legality but which, in the open city, are less likely to be criminalized and hidden sources of exploitation. They might also include initiatives offered by the third sector and other novel forms of provision such as cooperatives, bringing together the economically marginalized in promising ways able to increase capabilities and self-confidence and to provide socially useful services (e.g. environmental recuperation projects, care for vulnerable social groups, housing and personal security, community services and so on). Finally, they might include the mobilization of community banks (Thrift 1996a) and other highly localized non-monetary exchange networks to enable groups facing financial exclusion or hardship to trade vital services and, at the same time, develop skills, work experience and organizational capabilities for future use.

Thirdly, some cultural theorists, for example Stuart Hall (1995), have come to view cultural diversity and intermingling, perhaps even creolization in the multiplex city of shared spaces, as an important source of social renewal and economic innovation. The hypothesis here is that culturally hybrid cities which actively promote contact between groups are able to explore prospects for economic renewal through radical innovations in ideas and practices resulting from cultural interchange. The interesting idea behind this hypothesis, of clear repugnance to xenophobes and urban purists, is that 'mutant' cultures produce conditions for economic adaptation and evolution.

In summary, all three understandings share the view that urban diversity and difference based on a genuine sense of belonging and intermingling can be a source of economic creativity, rather than a source of intolerance for strangers, fear and other properties of closure and decline. In supporting this view, we are not in any way suggesting that economic renewal is gainsaid in the open city of shared public spaces and active citizenship. Much more is required for urban economic success than a shared sense of place and tolerance for difference; there is no automatic functional link between the two. What we are suggesting, however, is that it is not utopian to think of the possibilities of virtuous relationships between multiplexity thus defined and urban economic renewal.

Urban institutional and civic democratization

But the provision of rights of membership to all sections of the urban community, which is what belonging and intermingling amount to, is no automatic guarantee of urban social solidarity and mutual respect. Urban social and economic life under capitalism, based as it is on interpersonal and intercommunity competition for existence, has no regard for social justice. The modern city, with all its bazaars, street shopping, cafes and other delights for the voyeuristic urban flaneur, is also Engels' city of cut-throat competition, survival, poverty, racism and stark inequalities of wealth, lifestyle, life-chances and living conditions. Naples and Bombay may be vibrant theatres of active public life and, at the same time, their streets and public places may provide, as Elizabeth Wilson (1991) demonstrates in the case of women in the great Victorian cities, a liberating anonymity and education for those who need to escape the oppression and controls placed upon them by their families and communities. But this does not make them any less fearful, insecure or predatory.

Thus against the trendy celebration by some commentators (e.g. Robins 1991) of the unmanaged city of diversity, we do not consider it unnecessary to engage in a discussion of how to enhance urban social justice through practical efforts which might help to empower, materially and otherwise, sections of the urban community working or living in the most precarious of conditions. In invoking positive action, we do not mean top-down urban planning projects or impositions of grand utopian visions of the 'good' city and 'good' citizenship. Instead, as argued below, we mean a combination of two politico-institutional shifts: first, purposeful action on the part of the state to meet basic needs
as well as to encourage open and ‘dialogic’ urban governance; and secondly, a participatory civic democracy centred around creating real opportunities for communities to develop voice and self-determination.

Turning first to the state, one priority at both local and national level surely has to be that of securing the material security of urban dwellers across the social spectrum. Since we do not have the space here to elaborate the details of what this might include, the point we wish to stress is that no talk of social justice through community-building and empowerment can detract from the problem that, without material security, it is enormously difficult to sustain urban solidarity. To stress this is to remind ourselves that the age-old debates on full and meaningful employment, housing conditions, quality of life, health, education and other welfare needs cannot be sacrificed to contestable restrictions such as the fiscal crisis of the state or the efficiency-detracting effects of state expenditure (Mingione 1996). This said, it is clear that a policy discussion restricted to state action is impoverished in failing to acknowledge both real contemporary limits on state reach and the growth in provision by non-governmental organizations.

Particularly in the context of the multiplex city – characterized by diverse economic circuits, formal and informal, as well as a density of different social actors and institutions – there is considerable scope for imaginative and heterodox initiatives (Amin 1996). These might include job-redistribution schemes, such as work-share programmes and reductions in the length of the working week; regeneration schemes at the margins of markets of global competitiveness, including efforts to induce new markets for locally orientated or socially useful products and services; schemes to help firms in the informal economy to gain access to business services, markets and training; and the stimulation of voucher-based exchanges of services, especially among social groups short of money. They might also involve partnerships designed to stimulate private sector, voluntary organizations, community groups and cooperatives, as well as a carefully regulated private sector (to prevent employee- or user-exploitation). It is clear that there is a lot to be done beyond the tired and familiar contemporary urban regeneration projects which, mantra-like, invoke high-tech industries, entrepreneurship, inward investment, shopping malls and consumer services, and various property regeneration projects.

Furthermore, these novel initiatives provide considerable scope for reconciling economic goals with those of recovering social equity and building social capabilities. The latter is potentially a catalyst for change in the practices of the local state itself: a move away from the market-driven or all-providing state. We envisage a flatter and more permeable state, forced to accept pluralism in decision-making and the decentralization of authority to bodies and levels at which policy effectiveness is best secured. Such a development need not result in a ‘hollowed-out’ and procedural or task-specific state, lacking in strategic direction, as emphasized in much recent Anglo-American literature on the post-Fordist state and changing regimes of urban governance (Judge et al. 1995; Lauria 1997). Instead, it is perfectly feasible for the state to continue to provide leadership and coordination across the plural authorities of governance.

What is less likely, however, is provision of these roles through the politics of command, since this would heighten the risk of exit. Leadership has, rather, to be gained through dialogue and the adoption of a processual, dialogic rationality.

In this regard, there is a lot that urban policy practitioners can learn from the growing recognition in the social sciences, stimulated by institutionalist perspectives, of the powers of interactive governance as an antidote to policies based on command or formalized rules. Anthony Giddens (1994) and Ulrich Beck (1997), for example, defend the relevance of ‘dialogic democracy’ in what they claim to be an age of increasingly knowledgeable communities and knowledge-based advancement, both of which imply a wider diffusion of negotiated power than ever before. Others, echoing the work of Hannah Arendt on an active public sphere held together by speech and common action, or the contribution of Jurgen Habermas on communicative rationality, focus on the lasting consensus that results from interactive reasoning (see Healey 1997; Lake 1994; Patomäki 1995). Alongside these examples are other perspectives in the fields of business studies, organizational analysis, political theory and cognitive psychology which have noted the growing salience of decentred and relational mechanisms of organization and governance as a
means of coping with the socio-institutional complexity and multiple rationalities of behaviour and action characteristic of late modernity (see Amin and Hausner 1997 for a fuller review).

A ‘dialogic’ policy framework necessitates new and more democratic state practices. As a minimum, the state can bring together different interest groups and arbitrate between them. At best, it can take a leading role in promoting interactive networking and partnership as a legitimate way of making decisions, resolving disputes, reaching consensus and flushing out novel solutions. Thus the ‘dialogic state’ has to show conviction in transparent and open government (see Leadbeater and Mulgan 1994), and in the powers of voice, deliberation and dialogue. These are not unrealistic expectations. For example, in an inspiring book on the renewal of participatory democracy at the urban level, Dilys Hill (1994) lists a number of concrete initiatives and experiments in different cities to illustrate the real possibilities of active state involvement in setting urban development goals, empowering disadvantaged groups, arbitrating over conflicts, organizing public meetings and policy-scrutinies, and so on (see also Graham and Marvin (1996) for examples of urban electronic democracy).

This brings us to the second aspect of a changed urban politics: civic empowerment. This is a concept with many meanings and understandings in political thought. We use it in a specific sense to couple the principle of decentred governance through plural authorities with that of fostering equity among and between various state, market and civic organizations which could be brought into the mainstream of urban governance. It is a concept close to the thinking of Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers (1992) who propose a reformulation of the project of egalitarian democracy traditionally defended by the left, in terms of a ‘democratic associationism’ explicitly orientated towards securing voice, power and authority among those least in possession of them. Thus defined, the goal is more ambitious than the currently fashionable but nebulous idea of stakeholder democracy which seems to invoke the inclusion of interested or affected parties in a common frame of decision-making rather than the empowerment of autonomous groups. It is also different from Paul Hirst’s (1994) concept of ‘associative democracy’ centred around the decentralization of authority to voluntary associational networks (from business and employee organizations to interest groups, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community groups, clubs and associations) and the defence of libertarian rather than egalitarian goals. In our frame of politics, the aim is deliberately to nudge society towards democracy-enhancing principles. Associations may be regarded as both a more informed and efficient alternative to governance by market or hierarchy, helping members to develop competence, self-confidence and broader societal interests. In turn, the state is forced to better its own practices since it no longer wields exclusive political power.

Our reason for defending a politics of democratization follows from the conviction that stakeholder or associative democracy does not on its own adequately come to grips with the potential for abuse by those possessing structural or positional power, or the exit of the powerful from associative networks. This problem is especially pertinent in the arena of urban governance. There is now a considerable volume of research on novel regimes of urban governance which have mushroomed on both sides of the Atlantic espousing the language of associationism (public–private partnership, civic pride, stakeholder involvement, etc.). Time and again this research has shown that, partly as a result of skewed distributions of power and resources, the experiments have degenerated into undemocratic and unaccountable networks serving highly particularistic or dominant local interests. The same can be said of community-empowerment programmes like those pursued in Britain through urban policy initiatives such as City Challenge, which stop short of building in resources and time for target groups to mature properly into communities with real powers and capabilities. The reduction of urban politics to a question of the organizational architecture of regimes of governance, with little regard for the democratization of urban life, is not likely to dent the ingrained power geometries which serve to impede the potential for creativity in diversity offered by the open multiplex city.

Ultimately, and paradoxically, it may be that the reconstruction of urban civic autonomy belongs to the politics of contesting established urban authority networks beyond the politics of seeking civic consensus (Healey and Vigar 1996) or a neat division of duties, checks and balances between state and civic organizations as implied by Robert Putnam (1993) in his celebrated work on ‘social
capital'. Our sense is that, especially in the city of strangulating divisions and absent social solidari-
ties, the potential for change and innovation lies in what Michael Mann (1986) has described as ‘inter-
stitial’ social spaces: spaces in which the reach of dominant ideologies is weak and which are, poten-
tially, spaces of resistance to dominant cultures. These are the spaces in which so-called new social
movements have fought their struggles against violence towards women, weak or minority
groups, abuses of civil and human rights, and so on. They are constituted in opposition to the main-
stream – very often in the undercurrents of society – and not in any cosy civic relationship with the
state or with established economic and social associations. And, in many instances, some of the
movements are the voice of democracy.

Recognition of the messy politics of the inter-
stices – the politics of ‘subaltern’ projects and alternatives – is, in our view, essential for imagi-
ning social change in societies in which the official circuits of power – state, economic and civic – act
as a constraint. How else, we might ask, is it possible to think of reconfiguring the political
(Walker 1994) in societies strangled by insidious webs of alliance which make up the mainstream?
Who is to say that the new social movements made up of an unholy mixture of women’s groups,
anti-poverty campaigns, urban marginals, squatter organizations, environmental groups, housing
associations, and centres against unemployment do not represent, as Arturo Escobar (1992, 426–7)
indicates in the context of Latin American societies, a new ‘political culture’, one in which struggles are less
mediated by conventional forms and discourses, and which may even make possible the construction of a
new political project based on a different practice of democracy. This practice would be characterised by
a more direct and independent style of participation, and involve the politicisation of everyday individual
and social spheres, the expansion of the realm of the political in general.

The multiplex city in the North is probably no
longer that different from that in the South in terms
of the variety and complexity of its socio-economic
circuitry. As such, it escapes management through
grand projects. It also challenges the underlying
assumption among the now popular decentralized
and pluralist models of urban governance that somehow all the parts can be made to come
together in some simple, overall whole. We have
suggested that the challenge of mobilizing diver-
sity and creativity in the city is perhaps less a
matter of finding the most appropriate model of urban governance than of supporting an active and
participatory urban politics. In this regard, it is
encouraging to note that contemporary research on urban politics is finally beginning to stray beyond
its obsession since the early 1980s with governance
regimes, towards exploring the political effects of other actors such as non-political institutions, grass-
roots movements, self-help groups and voluntary
organizations and, more importantly, towards
treating urban politics more fully as the dialectics of collective representation, consolidation, mobiliz-
ation and contestation within and beyond the
formally constituted local political arena.

Concluding observations

It may seem strange that a paper dealing with the
nature of urban assets in a globalizing political
economy should end up with the just city and
questions of urban citizenship and democracy. This
is due in part to a frustration with the contempora-
ry turn in urban policy towards recognizing the
importance of social partnership and social cohe-
sion in mobilizing the urban assets discussed in the
earlier part of the paper. Such frustration is born of
a scepticism that contemporary policy initiatives
such as City Challenge in the UK which, at best,
espouse the language of partnership and social
empowerment, have a rather rosy ideal type of the
conflict-free city in mind and, at worst, play into
the hands of city leaders and boosterists who
desire social cohesion for the sake of making the
city attractive for investment and for the new
middle classes.

Our claim is that a project seeking unity or soli-
darity across the diverse fragments and complex
relational webs of the contemporary city needs to
do much more than this. It has to be a project of
restoring social justice in the city in such a way
that it responds to genuine social needs and, at the
same time, unlocks social capabilities through the
empowerment of autonomous groups. This makes it
a much more far-reaching project centred around
reforms including the democratization of the state,
an associationism that expects democratic prac-
tice from intermediate organizations, and projects
of civic empowerment that are not confined to
Machiavellian republican ideals.
Is this not just radical politics masquerading as efficiency-enhancing or growth-seeking urban policy? Why not stop short at restoring café life, crime-free public places, derelict city centres and city assets most needed for enhancing economic competitiveness? Why not simply do enough on the margins to contain urban breakdown by offering palliatives that keep the potentially rebellious social groups and city districts satisfied, along with measures to contain the spread of urban unrest? Why not simply let community groups, ‘do-gooders’ and the ‘morally minded’ pick up the pieces of economic decline and social degradation?

Apart from its blatant cynicism, we believe that this kind of argument is also wrong in its economics. It seriously underestimates the economic costs of unemployment, crime, fear of crime, depressed demand and a declining urban fabric. These include the cost of containing such problems, lost potential revenue, high costs of urban circulation and distribution and, above all, lost skills, know-how and creativity. Ultimately, the state of the entire urban collectivity feeds back into the circuit of economic activity. But our case may be strengthened by the argument that a sense of place and belonging taps into hidden potential and the sources of social confidence that lie at the core of risk-taking entrepreneurial activity. The just city, therefore, also makes economic sense.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Tony Champion, Mike Crang, Patsy Healey, Ray Hudson and Roger Lee for their helpful comments on an earlier draft. In addition, Ash Amin would like to thank Patrizio Bianchi, Lee Miller, Silvano Bertini and Sabrina Dubbini at Nomisma in Bologna. Patrizio Bianchi secured the grant provided by the Italian National Research Council which facilitated visits to Bologna, during which some of the ideas for this paper were developed.

Notes

1. The Cities, economic competitiveness and social cohesion programme, which commenced in September 1996.

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