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Reframing urban theory

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Chapter 11

Reframing Urban Theory:

Smaller Towns and Cities, Forms of Life, Embeddedplasticity, and Variegated Urbanism

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All towns and cities are remarkable in their own way. Towns and cities are like regions in that they have their own 'essence' (Isard, 1956: 17) or 'intensity' (Massey, 1999: 159). To Massey a city's intensity is partly derived from "the city as speeded-up interconnections set within an ever spatially-spreading web of external connections" (1999: 159). These concepts of essence and intensity are difficult to grasp and perhaps impossible to measure. Each town or city has an atmosphere or a presence that reflects accumulations of buildings and infrastructures and of the everyday practices or routines of people. This atmosphere or essence is influenced by the narratives or stories that are told of a place that reflect particular readings or interpretations of past and current events. These narratives are distortions that illuminate some aspects of a town or city and throw other aspects into shadow. These narratives are multi-scalar as they reflect the complex webs of interconnections that link a city to other places and pasts.

Essence or intensity or different but related ways of considering the urban. The intensity contributes to the essence. There are three ways of thinking about cities. First, as an agglomeration of people, organisations, ideas, and artefacts – human and non-human - that are co-located creating opportunities for melding and chance encounters to occur. Second, to draw upon the conceptual framing developed by James Joyce to appreciate urban living. Joyce appreciated the complexity of the urban and the challenges this presented for analysis. His solution was to develop 18 different approaches to documenting the complex interrelationships between people and place (Joyce, [1922], 2008). This included the concept of *interpolations* in which there is an apparent suspension of time and space. An interpolation is the insertion into one type of everyday activity of something that has a different essence. These reflect accounts that are interpolated into a narrated experience of events that are going on elsewhere, but at the same time. By 2020, interpolations would also reflect the interruptions to the experience of the now, defined as being present in space and time, with conversations and exchanges with other people located elsewhere

(Bryson *et al*., 2020). Part of the essence of the urban is that it is saturated with opportunities for interpolations that occur at different spatial scales. Third, Žižek (2004) has highlighted the importance of the *parallax dimension* or the way in which people perceive and engage with spaces, people, and artefacts from different perspectives. These differences reflect different stances or points of view that are partly accounted for by intersectionality. But, to Žižek the parallax dimension also presents opportunities for short circuits to occur "when there is a faulty connection in the network – faulty, of course, from the standpoint of the network's smooth functioning" (Perec, 2009: ix). In cities, such short circuiting can occur from the juxtaposition of individuals with very different life experiences. The essence of the urban includes opportunities for innovation to occur and new ways of living and knowing based on this process of short circuiting.

Each town and city will have developed its own intensity and essence, and each is connected in very different ways to other places. The urban overturns the binary of heterogeneous/homogenous as cities are simultaneously heterogeneous and homogenous. Every town/city has similar features, but there are great differences. For urban theory, it is important to engage with these similarities and differences. Nevertheless, the tendency is for urban theory to focus on one country – for example to develop an American perspective (Brenner, 2019: 33), or one type of city – larger cities or global cities (Taylor, 2013). The intrinsic nature of the urban is based on tensions between differences and similarities. The urban is a variegated phenomenon, and this variegation is concurrently endogenous and exogenous. It is endogenous as every city has within it complex layering or conglomerations of many different artefacts and people. It is exogenous as urban differences are revealed from without through comparative experiences with other urban settings. In this account, of variegated urbanism it is important to develop an inclusive approach to urban theory that engages will all types or sizes of towns and cities.

This book emerged from a discussion at a session that was held at the Annual Meeting of Association of American Geographers in New Orleans, Louisiana, in 2018. Part of the discussion revolved around the over-emphasis in existing urban theory on larger cities and the relative neglect of smaller towns and cities. The led to a discussion around the development of a more inclusive approach to exploring the urban effect.

There have been some edited collections that have explored smaller towns and cities. In 1999, for example, an edited book on second tier cities was published (Markusen et al., 1999) that highlighted that these were places with specialised industrial complexes that were creating significant job growth and attracting mobile capital and labour. This collection was positioned around a conceptual framework based around a geographical application of Granovetter's concept of embeddedness, the spatial dimensions of flexible specialisation and the spatial implications of an increase in "externalisation of production via vertical disintegration" (Markusen and DiGionanna; 1999:7). The latter are what are now classified as global production networks. A recent example of a book that explores smaller towns and cities is that written by Matthew Jones (2020). In this he explores how the character and sense of place at the heart of smaller towns and cities has been eroded. The analysis highlights how contemporary architecture, community engagement and urban design can underpin the development of flourishing communities. Nevertheless, there is no question that more books have been published that focus on larger cities, world cities, global cities or extraordinary cities compared to the literature on smaller sized places (Scott and Soja, 1996; Sassen, 2001, Scott, 2002; Massey, 2007; Clark, 2017; Gottlieb and Ng, 2017; Cowen et al., 2020).

The problem that needs to be addressed is the relationship between city size and the importance of place. Size seems to matter. In 1949, Zipf provided the first empirical analysis to support the so-called rank-sized rule which states that "when cities are arrayed from the largest to the smallest, the product or a city's rank and its population are approximately constant" (Alperovich, 1984; 232). Centrality in urban networks continues to fascinate scholars. This can be traced from the rank-sized rule (Zipf, 1949), to central place theory (Christaller, 1966), borrowed size (Alonso, 1973) global cities (Sassen, 2001; Taylor, 2013), the creative class (Florida, 2005), world cities (Massey, 2007), global production networks (GPNs) (Coe and Yeung, 2015), the city-regionalist approach (Harrison, 2010; Harrison & Heley, 2015; Martin & Sunley, 2010) and multi-scaler approaches (Brenner, 2019). Size is equated with importance. In some accounts there is a positive correlation between city size and productivity (Mulligan, 1984; Bettencourt et al., 2007; Meijers and Burger, 2015), with command and control (Sassen, 2001; Taylor, 2013) and with creativity (Florida, 2005).

There is no question that larger cities play very different roles in the international or global economy compared to smaller towns and cities. But then all cities play different roles in the multi-scaler networks within which they are positioned. Nevertheless, it is important not to write-off smaller towns and cities as being of marginal importance. There are organisations located in smaller towns and cities that play important roles in GPNs or enterprise production networks (EPNs) (Williams and Bryson, 2021). The literature on borrowed size was based on the premise that smaller urban centres borrow-size from adjacent larger centres. Nevertheless, this process works in reverse with much larger urban agglomerations borrowing size from adjacent smaller towns and cities (Salder and Bryson, 2019). One famous example of this process comes from Samuel Johnson's infamous comment concerning the relationship between Lichfield (UK), a small town, and Birmingham (UK), a large city. Provoked by James Boswell proclamation that Lichfield had no important industries, Johnson's replied: 'We are a city of philosophers: we work with our heads and make the boobies of Birmingham work for us with their hands' (Boswell, 1830, 105–6). In 2011, Litchfield city had a population of 32,219 and the district of 100,654. In 2011, 6,076 people lived in Litchfield but worked in Birmingham and, in this case, Birmingham was borrowing size from Lichfield (Staffordshire Observatory, 2015). In any case, Lichfield's economy is simultaneously local as well as being detached from the wider regional economy with firms engaged in GPNs (Salder and Bryson, 2019).

In this chapter we contribute to the recent debate regarding reframing urban theory, but from the perspective of variegated urbanism. The chapter identifies themes highlighted in each chapter in this book, but initially positions the argument within a broader conceptual framework. The chapter has six sections. In the second section, the issue of scale and size is reconsidered in the context of variegated capitalism. The focus is on the difficulties associated with identifying patterns. The third section develops an approach to understanding cities based on Wittgenstein's concept of forms of life. In the fourth section, the analysis of forms of life is framed within the literature on embeddedness, but we extend this concept to highlight that embeddedness involves plasticity. The fifth section reflects back on the chapters presented in this collection and the sixth section concludes the chapter.

The challenge of scale and size

Size is a relative concept. A town or city is identified as being smaller compared to some larger settlement. Differences between towns and cities become apparent via comparative experiences and analysis. Nevertheless, size by itself should not be considered as a proxy measure of importance. Size, like distance, is a relative term that requires contextualisation. It also requires some form of analysis to justify relative or comparative differences between different sizes of places. It should never be assumed that cities of a similar size will have different degrees of importance. The issue here is the definition of 'importance'. All towns and cities are equally important as they are the locations for similar life experiences – birth, lifestyles, death, but in economic or political terms some places are more important than others.

Geographic scale sits at the centre of all geographical processes. The problem is that scale defined by distance is an absolute and relative phenomenon. In absolute terms the distance between two points on a planet can be measured using a standard unit of length. Nevertheless. The distance between two points may be measured in physical, temporal or experiential terms. Places located far away from one another may be closer in terms of travelling times than places that are located close to one another. A good example is travelling from a suburban location into the centre of a city compared to travelling via train from a location in a city's hinterland. Travelling within the city might be slower compared to traveling from outside the city to the centre.

Relative distance is a socially, culturally, psychologically, and emotionally inflected measure. It is also an economic relationship given the 'gravitational pull' of one place over another and this may be unrelated to distance, but related to some other variable, for example, quality of life or some form of government intervention. In urban terms, scale should be treated as a concept that is fluid, relative and plastic. The existing urban literature conceptualises scale as multi-scalar (Brenner, 2019). This is too simplistic as multi-scaler is defined around a simple hierarchization of socio-spatial relations – global, supranational, national, regional, and local levels. The reality is much more complex. Any one firm's local is different to another firm's local and any one firm's global is different to another firm's global (Bryson & Rusten, 2008). The same holds true for people – individuals – and for an individual positioned within an urban agglomeration. In Perec's description of those living in a Parisian apartment block every resident has a different experience of Paris and engages with the city in very different ways (Perec, 2003). Scale must be

considered as something that is experienced and the experience for individuals, organisations, and places (towns and cities) is fluid; scale is not multi-scalar but instead is better described as a process with plasticity at its centre. Scale is experiential; the essence of scale as an analytical category is plasticity.

Distance is a complex issue. There are spatial and aspatial processes, but even aspatial process are influenced by place – place matters and context matters. The challenge is to identify the important relationships between process and place. This is challenging. It is too often assumed that size by itself is an important measure of the importance of place – larger agglomerations being considered to be more important than smaller agglomerations. Nevertheless, a larger agglomeration might just have more of the same rather than reflecting locations for activities that are in some way more important than activities located in other places. It is important that no assumptions are made regarding the relationships between size and the role a place plays in regional, national, or international economies. In any case, places play many different roles – some local, regional and national, and some international.

The challenge of conceptualising scale and urban size is related to causality. Urban theorists need to pay much more attention to causality. Richard Feynman, the Nobel prize winning theoretical physicist, noted that it was important never to "verify an idea using the same data that suggested the idea in the first place" (Goodstein and Neugebauer, 2008: xx). He used the example of a car he had walked past on the way to present a lecture. This had the license plate ARW 357. Feynman proclaimed in the lecture that it was amazing that he had walked past this license plate out of all the millions of license plates in this American state. This raised the following question - what was the chance of seeing that particular plate that evening? The point being that this was an arbitrary event and might be a rare event. The danger is that humans have a preference for identifying patterns by focusing their attention on more extraordinary things. We tend to take Perec's world of the infra-ordinary, or of the everyday, the mundane, the habitual or the routine, for granted (Perec, [1973] 1999). In many cases, we do not see or take notice of, or do not remember, the infra-ordinary. This argument appears to apply to smaller towns and cities. These are taken for granted places compared to their much more 'extraordinary' larger urban agglomerations.

Another Nobel prize-winner made a similar point regarding causality and pattern identification. To Kahneman "our predilection for causal thinking exposes us to serious mistakes in evaluating the randomness of truly random events" and that "we are pattern seekers, believers in a coherent world, in which regularities . . . . appear not by accident but as a result of mechanical causality or of someone's intention" (Kahneman, 2011: 115). Furthermore "we do not expect to see regularity produced by a random process, and when we detect what appears to be a rule, we quickly reject the idea that the process is truly random" and that "random processes produce many sequences that convince people that the process is not random at all" (Kahneman, 2011:115). Part of his analysis is based on "the law of small numbers" in which small sample sizes lead to "odd results" which "were actually artifacts of my research design" (Kahneman, 2011:112). This argument is based on the appreciation that "many facts of the world are due to chance, including accidents of sampling" (Kahneman, 2011: 118).

For urban studies, more attention needs to be given to assumptions regarding the importance of size in determining the relative importance of a place or a process. All towns and cities could be defined as world cities or global cities in some way as all will have multiple connections to other places. The important point is to focus on causality but appreciating that many patterns may be the outcome of random processes. This explains why it is impossible to replicate one successful place-based policy in another place. Part of the problem will reflect the serendipitous blend of artefacts, people and connections that exist in one place, but cannot be transferred to another place.

For scholars of the urban, or of place, attention must be given to understanding or unravelling the place- and space-based dimensions of a research problem. It should never be assumed that size is a proxy of relative importance and it should never be assumed that a local process is purely local and that a global process is the outcome of some form of rationale process. Both local and global 'processes' may be the result of random events or some combination of more organised processes with randomness.

Towards an Urban Research Agenda Based on Understanding Forms of Life and Ordinary Cities

Both extraordinary and ordinary cities are the location for many ordinary lives and some extraordinary lives. The extraordinary is unusual. Nevertheless, all lives and places/towns/cities are extraordinary in their own way. Understanding these differences in the life experiences of people is an important part of the problem of understanding life in cities.

An interesting question to consider is "how does a research agenda emerge?" This is a simple question, but the answer is quite complex. On the one hand, the research agenda that has emerged in urban studies represents the accumulation of research interests of urban scholars at any one time. These interests are shaped by context or by the lived experiences and relationship networks of urban scholars. Research interests are also influenced by on-going disciplinary narratives that may have a tendency to produce research interests that reflect academic fashion. On the other hand, societal problems may be identified in the media, by politicians and policymakers and by citizens and these challenges may be reflected in the activities of government and third sector research funding organisations. They are also reflected in the ways in which academic posts are advertised. A research agenda thus emerges from improvisations that occur within a structure. Part of the structure reflects dominant conceptual positions combined with access to research funding and the ability to persuade editors to publish research outputs.

The object of research is critical. Is the focus on large firms, GPNs, small firms, global cities, smaller towns or cities or on firms and/or people? The focus may be on process or organisational structure rather than on people. It is perhaps possible to identify two types of social science. On the one hand, are approaches that highlight process and organisation and decentre people. A good example would be the GPN conceptual framework that highlights the importance of exploring the configuration of networks and the dynamics of interactions between firms in production networks (Coe & Yeung, 2015). The GPN debate is one in which people tend to be taken for granted or rendered invisible. Another example, would the multi-scaler urban literature that has much to say about scale and comparatively little to say about people (Brenner, 2019). On the other hand, there are approaches based on people. These are people-rich forms of analysis (McDowell, 2009). These two approaches are not mutually exclusive, but it is important to consider the purpose behind a research agenda. Should the emphasis be on facilitating better outcomes for people including a focus on addressing intersectionality and inclusion or should the

focus be on enhancing organisational efficiency and effectiveness. The purpose might also be on understanding without any ambition to facilitate or support societal impacts.

All social scientists need to continually reflect on the drivers behind their research and this includes their motivation, but also their object of study. This discussion is partly about identifying and understanding phenotypes. In biology, a phenotype represents the sum of an organism's observable characteristics and this is a reflection of the interactions between an organism's genotype (combination of alleles, or genes that take different forms) and other factors including epigenetic modifications and environmental and lifestyle factors (NCI-NHGRI Working Group on Replication in Association Studies, 2007). These interactions, for example include exposure to stress and different forms of nutrition. The distinction between genotypes and phenotypes is very technical and positioned within debates in biological science rather than the social sciences. Nevertheless, one way of reading this debate is that people are not bodies but instead are lives. This is an important distinction and is one that sits at the centre of all forms of discrimination and inequality. This resonates with the debate on intersectionality which highlights that vulnerability, disadvantage and exclusion are explained by the intersections of multiple factors including gender, ethnicity, and class. These intersections reflect the distinction between bodies versus lives or between genotypes and phenotypes. These intersections produce overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage and advantage (Crenshaw, 2019; Ho and Maddrell, 2020).

This distinction between bodies and lives should be central to urban studies. Thus, different places are implicated in different forms of living or will be the sites for different overlapping and independent systems of inclusion and exclusion. At the centre of the urban research agenda must be a focus on the complex interrelationships between place, lifestyle, and dis/advantage. This includes understanding the interrelationship between size of urban settlement and lifestyle. Is it the case that different forms of dis/advantage exist that are related to settlement size? What is different or distinctive about the lives of people living in smaller towns and cities compared to those living in larger settlements? What is the relationship between companies' position within networks, behaviours and performances and size of urban settlement? These are critical questions. At one level, many aspects of peoples' lives, irrespective of settlement size, will be the same and perhaps this similarity will be founded in Perec's world of the infraordinary. At

another level, there are differences, but what are these differences? In larger settlements, for example, people may be exposed to more environmental pollutants.

The literature that equates creativity and innovation with large urban agglomerations must then be placed in the context of the lived experience of people. One such individual was Ella Adoo-Kissi-Debrah. Ella lived near the South Circular Road in Lewisham, south-east London, and she died in 2013. In December 2020, a two-week inquest into her death concluded that air pollution had made a material contribution to her death. This case is perhaps the first in which air pollution is listed as a cause of death, but it also highlights urban inequality. The most vulnerable and disadvantaged tend to be more exposed to the myriad sources of air pollution compared to those that live more advantaged lives. Air pollution tends to be considered as a problem experienced by larger urban agglomerations, but there are areas within smaller urban settlements that experience high levels of pollutants.

Recently, Didier Fassin, the anthropologist, has highlighted the importance of a concept 'or notion' identified by Ludwig Wittgenstein (Fassin, 2018:19). This notion of 'forms of life' was barely outlined by Wittgenstein in his posthumous writings. This is an important concept that must become central to urban studies. To Fassin, a 'form of life' reflects tensions "between the universal and the particular, biology, biography, law and practice" (2018: 45). The distinction here is between biology and biography. People's lives are constructed through on-going processes based around the configuration of individual biographies. This is an intersectionality process including complex interrelationships between the individual and the environments they inhabit. For Ella, this involved a life curtailed by air pollution. Fassin argues that the concept of forms of life enables reflection on human experiences. This concept highlights dialectical relations between constraints and possibilities and the ability for people to find solutions to problems and these solutions may be improvised. In addition, Fassin argues that this concept also provides two additional benefits. First, the concept of a form of life enables reflection on vulnerability and "ways of being human" (Fassin, 2018: 43). Second, the concept is another entry point to considering precariousness and exploring "how easily human life is annulled" via violence and war (Fassin, 2018: 43) and environmental pollution. Precariousness is a universal experience, but it is also a particular experience with some cohorts experiencing greater degrees of precariousness in their everyday lives.

All individual lives involve a form of life which is the outcome of complex interrelationship between the processes and factors involved in intersectionality with place. Understanding the different forms of life experienced by people in different contexts must play a central role in urban studies. This includes exploring the processes that sit behind advantaged and disadvantaged forms of life and differences between the forms of life of those living in larger and smaller urban agglomerations.

There is another aspect of forms of life that must be explored. Every act of consumption sustains existing jobs or creates or destroys jobs. Cities represent the outcome of accumulations of trillions of decisions. Some of these decisions leave permanent traces (road layouts) and other decisions have transitory outcomes, and some leave no traces. Further research is required to explore the impacts of consumer decision-making on shaping urban agglomerations and outcomes. The decline of the bricks and mortar high street is a direct reflection of alterations in consumer behaviour. The geographical literature tends to highlight the importance of production and to relegate consumer behaviour as being of limited importance. A good example of this is the GPN literature. A GPN is driven by decisions made by consumers and these may be end consumers, or decision-making units, compared to producers who produce and distribute goods and services. Decisions made by end consumers shape urban outcomes. This is a complex process that links production with consumption and with public services.

All cities are the product of a complex production-consumption-taxation nexus. Every act of consumption supports local jobs both directly and indirectly via taxation. Public services are directly associated with decisions made by consumers and producers as both contribute to a city's tax base. Employment in production and public services provides income streams to support consumer behaviour. Decisions made by end users underpin the production and public service base of a city. Conceptually, production should never be separated from consumption. Every act of consumption is also directly related to an act of production. The implication is that the Global Production Networks approach should really be relabelled as the Global Consumption-Production Networks Approach (GCPN) or perhaps this is better defined as the production-consumption-taxation nexus.

Different consumer cohorts, with very different forms of life, have different patterns of consumption. A form of life reflects a form of consumer behaviour. Consumption matters and

the ability to consume in a particular way is part of the construction of a form of life. In the U.S., "consumption by households accounts for 70% of gross product on the expenditure side" (Hewings, 2018: 41). The problem is that analysts have a tendency to collapse the heterogeneity of household expenditure into a single category. Intersectionality plays an important role in the relationship between place and consumption. Thus, "the additional dimension to household heterogeneity is not only centred on the growth in consumption by different age groups but the significance of differences in the ways which households of different ages allocate their income" (Hewings, 2018: 41). The implication being that cities with very different demographic profiles will have very different patterns of consumption and these will shape different urban outcomes. Further research is required to explore the interrelationships between micro and macro decision-making processes and the ways in which these shape forms of life in different types of settlement.

Embeddedplasticity and forms of life

The concept of forms of life is not a concept that has been applied or developed to any great extent in the geographical or urban studies literature. Yet understanding the interrelationships between human action, place and space is an exercise in unravelling how forms of life are constructed and configured. One literature that is important in this context is Hägerstrand's time-geography in which human activity is conceptualised as a social event that occurs within a spatial and temporal setting. One reading of Hägerstrand is that this is an attempt to understand how biographies are shaped by social encounters that occur in spatial and temporal settings (Hägerstrand, 1970). One entry point into this debate is Thrift's paper on the determination of social action in space and time (Thrift, 1983). This paper does not engage with the concept of forms of life, but the analysis is positioned around a discussion of unique events or those events that Fassin describes as representing the 'particular' compared to the 'universal'. Thrift argues that "it is possible to produce general knowledge about unique events" (Thrift, 1983: 24). These unique events occur in regions or locales that "must not be seen as a *place*" but rather a region "must be seen as made up of a number of different but connected *settings for interaction*" (Thrift, 1983: 40). These are settings in which the life paths of individual interact. Regions or localities according to Thrift have five main effects:

1) They structure people's life paths in space and time.

2) They are the setting for institutions that effect other people's life paths as they constrain and enable.
3) Locales are the main arenas in which interactions between people occur.
4) They provide the "activity structure of the day-to-day *routines* that characterize most parts of most people's lives" (Thrift, 1983: 40).

The focus on routines engages with the emphasis Perec places in the infra-ordinary (Perec, 1999). The concept of a life path is another way of accounting for the evolution of individual biographies in space and time. These are 'forms of life'. The appendix to Thrift's paper provides a note on method with a focus on the application and development of a life history approach including oral history, autobiographies and diaries, local histories and the "'reconstruction' of individuals" (Thrift, 1983: 57). One challenge is to place life paths within a wider conceptual framework. This highlights the difficulty of separating or isolating the universal from the particular in the shaping of a form of life. In any one case, the 'particular' might be more important for an individual than the 'universal'. Individual's experience both, but the 'particular' is that which differentiates one life from another.

In historical geography there has been some interest in biographies including a focus on lifepaths and lifespaces (Daniels and Nash, 2004). The argument is that "the arts of geography and biography appear closely connected: life histories are also, to coin a phase, life geographies" (Daniels and Nash, 2004: 450). This emphasis on life histories or biographies must be applied both to individuals and organisations. Towns and cities are the settings for individual and organisational biographies that are enacted in 'lifespaces'. Economic geography needs to pay much more attention to unravelling the complex lifepaths of organisations within the context of place, space, and time. Too often, economic geography severs an organisation from its history. Companies, firms, and organisations of all types evolve, and these alterations represent attempts to make real time adjustments in response to some perceived alteration in the interrelationships between a firm and its setting.

In 2001, Scott Lash published a paper on technological forms of life in which he stated that "we think so naturally in terms of the notion of 'forms of life', that it is difficult to obtain any distance on the notion" (Lash, 2001: 105). He noted that the debate is around 'life-sciences',

'life-course' and 'life-narratives' in which people lead their lives. To Scott "a form of life is a 'way of life', a mode of doing things'. (Lash, 2001: 105). In his analysis, technological innovation has transformed forms of life as individuals "must necessarily navigate through technological forms of social life" and that this reflects "culture *at a distance*" (Lash, 2001: 107). The argument is that Lash now operates "as a man-machine interface – i.e. as a technological form of natural life – because I must necessarily navigate through technological forms of social life" (Lash, 2001: 107). It is interesting to reflect on this statement from 2020. By 2001, the human-machine interface was not nearly as well-developed as it had become by 2020. Nevertheless, there are different levels or depths of engagement that individuals have with the person-machine interface. For some, their form of life is immersed in this interface as their lives are positioned at the interface between the online and the face-to-face. For other people, the person-machine interface has a more indirect influence on shaping their form of life.

For cities, the on-going development of the cyber-energy plexus has altered the dimensions of everyday living for many, but not all. Nevertheless, the direction of travel is towards societies in which everyday living for the majority is an exercise in balancing the tensions between online and face-to-face encounters. The cyber-energy plexus represents the on-going blending of online systems with infrastructure intended to support, monitor, regulate and control everyday living. This is partly about an increase in direct and indirect surveillance and partly about stretching everyday living beyond the immediate confines of being proximate in place with people and artefacts. One implication is that individuals can be engaged with an urban agglomeration, a megacity, without being co-present in place. Thus, co-presence can occur in time rather than in place. The implication is that all individuals have the possibility to step outside the immediate confines of the place they occupy at any one time and to develop a form of life that balances co-presence in place and time with co-presence in time. To Lash, "forms of life become forms of life-at-a-distance" (Lash, 2001:107). This is to overstate "forms of life-at-a-distance" as what is occurring is a new balance between contiguous and noncontagious life encounters.

We began this chapter by noting that all towns and cities have an essence. We can broaden the application of this term to human life. This raises the question regarding "what is the essence of a form of life? or "what is the essence of forms of urban life?". There are many different

approaches to the urban question. On the one hand, there are accounts that focus on process, on linkages between places and between organisations and places. These tend to lead to the production of a 'people-light' based analysis of the urban. This is unfortunate as people and their forms of life are at the centre of the urban problem. A good example is Brenner's book on urban theory and the scale question. Thus,

> ". . . local and contextual conditions are not pregiven or self-evident, but are mediated through supralocal, intercontextual processes, interconnections, and interdependencies. For this reason, the invocation of "specificity", whether with reference to locality, place, region, or context, requires systematic engagement not only with the particularities of a site but with its relational connections, articulations, mediations, across various spatial scales" (Brenner, 2019: 36).

There are many points here. One could argue that much of the urban is pregiven and self-evident and are not mediated through supralocal processes. It is pregiven as it is the outcome of decisions made in the past that have resulted in a "financialisation fix" that "combines a development solution for a specific site with a financial model creating a locally embedded designed structure" (Bryson et al., 2017: 458). This form of spatial fix also fixes site-based interconnections and interdependencies in place. There is a tension between this fixity and opportunities for plasticity in which a site can still be reworked, but within parameters set by the existing financialisation fix. Another point to consider, is the absence of people from this analysis. This is a debate about sites, localities, place, region, and context. The key question here is "context for what?" and the answer is simple – contexts for forms of life. You cannot take people out of the urban and focus just on structures. People are unpredictable compared to structures and this provides opportunities for cultural inflection points to occur that have the potential to transform the trajectory of sociospatial relationships.

Central to understanding forms of life is the concept of embeddedness. Urban living and cities are exercises in applied embeddedness. Embeddedness must be conceptualised as a fluid process. In fact, it is best described as social relationships that take the form of "*embeddedplasticity*". This new concept is informed by the concept of neuroplasticity which describes the ability of neural networks in the brain to change through growth and reorganisation and this reorganisation might be the result of some trauma or brain damage. Embeddedplasticity highlights that

embeddedness is an ongoing process in which there are opportunities for existing place-based relationships to change through growth and reorganisation. This includes processes of creative reconstruction and destruction (Bryson, 1997) as places, and people/organisations in place, experience various forms of trauma.

Embeddedness is central to understanding forms of urban living. Differential or variegated embeddedplasticity will produce different outcomes and different abilities to respond to shock and to change. This is not just about shock, but differences between people as their forms of life are facilitated by embeddedplasticity. Different people have different opportunities and potentials to alter their embeddedness as one part of the process of reconfiguring a form of life. It is important to reflect back on the initial origins of the concept of embeddedness. In 1982, Granovetter's critiqued economics for "the assumption that economic actors make decisions in isolation from one another – independent of their social connections: what I call *the assumptions of atomized decisionmaking*" (Granovetter, 1982: 2, cited in Swedberg, 2003: 36). To Granovetter, all economies and all economic relations are "embedded in concrete, ongoing systems of social relations" (Granovetter, 1985: 487). Networks of social relations play an important role in this concept. People with very different forms of life will have access to very different networks.

Understanding the diversities and varieties of the urban, or of variegated urbanism, is an exercise in understanding the ways in which individuals and groups of individuals (households, firms, organisations) engage in the art of balancing structure with improvisation. Biographies of individuals and firms are improvised but within constraints provided by structures including all types of institutions. There are opportunities for improvisation to be transformational. Different forms of embeddedness play an important role in this process. In a study of manufacturing companies located in smaller towns, Salder and Bryson (2019) identified that the majority of firms in the study "had become increasingly detached from the locality" in terms of inputs into their businesses and also in terms of the location of clients (Salder and Bryson, 2019: 14). Some firms remained locally orientated. This paper highlights that embeddedness involves plasticity as existing connections are destroyed and new connections formed. Three forms of embeddedness are identified in this paper. First, a form of structural embeddedness that represents "embedded

strategic relations" that are local in nature. This are critical relationships that if challenged, or disrupted, will need to be replaced and that inappropriate alterations could lead to the failure of a company. Second, circumstantial embeddedness occurs because an individual or organisation is located in a place. In that place there are opportunities to engage in relationships, but these are not strategic relationship and relationship substitution can occur without impacting on the company's operations. Third, emotional embeddedness represents a tension between business operations and place-based attachment and the stickiness that comes from being deeply locally embedded. It may be that a form of obsolescent logic exists in which a company's location no longer support its current business interests and activities, but emotional embeddedness prevents the company from relocating. At the core of this analysis is the concept of "adaptive embeddedness" in which companies reconcile the tensions between localised and dispersed relationships in the context of endogenous and exogeneous drivers. There is another form of embeddedplasticity to consider based around understanding the complex ways in which organisations are embedded in networks that link one locality with another. This is a dynamic process in which organisations are embedded in networks of relationships that stretch beyond the confines of an immediate locality.

It is impossible to consider economic relationships without people. It is also perhaps impossible to develop approaches to understanding cities that decentre the roles played by people. Forms of life emerge in different urban settings. Variegated urbanism also includes variegated interstices or the structures that enable different forms of relationships to form between people. Interstices facilitate different forms of embeddedness. An interstice is defined as the space that intervenes between things or in soils it is the part of a soil not occupied by solid matter and that which acts as conduits for water. We need to know much more about urban interstices including differences related to intersectionality and variegated urbanism. The key point to remember is that according to Granovetter all social actions are infused by "central human motives" including "sociability, approval, status and power" (1992: 26). At the centre of these human motives is a concern with access to and control of territory – at all scales (personal space, residential units, offices, factories, streets, neighbourhoods, city, region, etc), and a concern with hierarchy or status.

There is no question that scale is important in the ways in which forms of life are configured. But it is important that urban theory is a theory founded upon understanding people. There are many peoples here to consider. These include decisions made by those who have joined the greater majority or those who are no longer living. It also includes decisions made by people located elsewhere and sometimes those that are elsewhere are very distant. These decisions made from elsewhere that impact on a town and city may also reflect decisions made by those who are now dead. There are decisions made by those living that we know and those that are co-located but are strangers. Most of the time lives are lived locally and a form of life develops that reflects a locality. Much of this is about Perec's world of the infra-ordinary or the mundane, but it is the infra-ordinary that plays an important role in shaping an individual's form of life.

In Brenner's urban theory, he rejects "the simplistic opposition between situated knowledge and so-called "general theory" or a rejection of binarism including "local/global, particular/universal, heterogeneity/homogeneity, fragment/whole, inside/outside, exception/norm" (Brenner, 2019: 36). There is a problem here. These simplistic oppositions are rhetorical devices that do hide complexity, but they represent conceptual devices that are entry points into discussions of the complexity of difference. At a simplistic level, these concepts may be considered to be 'simple binaries' when in fact they are 'complex binaries. A complex binary has hidden within its variegation. The universal versus particular binary that Fassin engages with to explore forms of life is a complex binary. In this case, there is not one particular but a multitude of particulars, and similarly, there are a multitude of universals. This is to accept that the concept of a form of life highlights the variegated nature of living. One could go as far as arguing that within the concept of a form of life – a particular – exists variegated mega-complexity. This highlights that any reframing of the urban question must build directly upon exploring the complex interrelationships between place, space, people, technology, organisations, and history and the variegated nature of forms of life including a focus on intersectionality.

Brenner's analysis of the urban includes a "rejection of localist, city-centric approaches to the urban, emphasizing instead the relationally, multi-scaler, variegated, and uneven geographies of the capitalist urban fabric" (2019: 27). This highlights a primary problem with his approach to reframing the urban question. This is that the emphasis is based on the capitalist urban fabric

rather than also embracing or including people. Adding people to the reframing of the urban question highlights that there are both capitalist and non-capitalist dimensions to the urban as people engage with the variegated nature of the urban experience configuring many different varieties of urban forms of life and many different alternative solutions to place-making and place-shaping (Bryson et al., 2018; Andres *et al*., 2019). Any theoretical reframing of the urban question must reflect an inclusive approach that reflects the diversity and variegated nature of the urban. This includes variegation that includes the imprints of different varieties of capitalism (Hall and Soskice, 2003) combined with urban theory that embraces the diversity of the urban.

An inclusive urban theory is not one that renders larger cities visible whilst casting smaller towns and cities into shadow. It cannot be an urban theory that is about the extraordinary rather than the ordinary, and it must be an urban theory that embraces the micro with the meso and the macro. At its centre must be a concern with people and the variegated nature of lived experience or forms of life. Critical to this perhaps is a repositioning of embeddedness to appreciate that embeddedness represents a form of belonging; embeddedness is about understanding how people are included and excluded. This highlights that urban living has within it another complex binary based around inclusion versus exclusion; this is a complex binary as there are a multitude of degrees of inclusion/exclusion.

How are ordinary cities extraordinary?
There is a tension within this book. The argument is based on the premise that extraordinary things happen in 'ordinary' cities. Nevertheless, extraordinary cities are saturated with ordinariness as are ordinary cities. Thus, this book is positioned around a false dichotomy between ordinary/extraordinary. This is another complex binary in which there are many degrees of ordinary/extraordinary.

Each chapter in this book, acts as a lens to explore one town/city or collection of towns/cities. Each is an entry point into a discussion of the urban. Throughout this book, authors have highlighted different aspects of the economies and societies of smaller towns and cities. The intent was to create a variegated collection of chapters focusing on smaller towns and cities that have been overlooked in the existing urban literature. This includes a focus on the progressive

planning movement in the U.S. (Chapter 2) that also includes the role played by anchor institutions (see also Chapter 10). The chapters explore planning, economy, labour markets, renewal and restructuring, globalisation, localisation, heritage and regeneration and the roles played by the state and households and communities in configuring new urban outcomes.

The importance of ordinary towns and cities and their salience to urban geography research can be seen in myriad iterations of population, employment, as well as progressive planning, lifestyles, cultural pride, environmental strategies, resilience, and ease of governance. Through their analyses of the employment-population relationships in smaller metropolitan areas in the southern United States, Kozar and Graves (Chapter 3) identify how global connectivity in smaller metropolitan areas was stimulated by the presence of international firms, high-volume exporters, and globally recognized educational and scientific research institutions (Dijkstra et al., 2013; Parkinson, Meegan, & Karecha, 2014). These findings also align with ordinary city research highlighting the contribution that local amenities and distinct assets make to small city growth (Dellar et al., 2001). In addition, they classified smaller metropolitan areas into three groups: cities with anchor institutions including universities or military installations, cities with a positive narrative or reputation for opportunity, and cities with negative narratives or undesirable reputations. They found place promotion and amenity development appear to be as important (more so in some cases) as actual job creation in smaller metropolitan areas.

In another analysis of Southern States in the US, Kalafsky (Chapter 4) examines the export activities and patterns for smaller metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs) across the southern US. His findings suggest that many of these smaller urban regions are comparatively export intensive, especially in terms of manufactured goods. Furthermore, as far as whether these urban regions benefit from being in the orbit of larger MSAs, the findings indicate that many of the largest export performing cities are not always located adjacent to larger urban regions. This chapter poses an interesting discussion surrounding the concept of 'borrowed size'; smaller cities may exhibit some of the characteristics of larger ones because of accessibility (Alonso 1973). Smaller cities located within the orbit of larger metropolitan areas benefit from spillovers and by their involvement in regional networks (Burger and Meijers 2016). In the case of the southern US, these connections (as measured through CBSA inclusion) with the 'connected' cities do not

seem to be of benefit according to Kalafsky. This suggests that these smaller urban regions may indeed have distinct stories and economic trajectories (Amin and Graham 1997; van Hoer 2010; Parkinson, Meegan, and Karecha 2014; Salder and Bryson 2019). These distinct trajectories and accumulations of forms of life are apparent throughout this book. For example, chapter 9 highlights the interconnections between globalization as a multi-scalar processes and the emergence of ethnic enclaves in a small city located in Korea.

On the other side of the world, an analysis of the composition of employment in the City of Greater Geelong and metropolitan Melbourne between 2006 and 2016 reveals that compared to its larger neighbor, Geelong's deeper loss of manufacturing employment has been offset by stronger growth in health and welfare, education and construction employment. This has created what appears to be a form of 'borrowed size' but this outcome is more related to government interventions (Chapter 5) than connections to larger urban settlements. Chapters across this book highlight that smaller towns and cities make distinct contributions in their own right rather than borrowing size (Chapter 7 on Siem Reap Angkor, Cambodia and Chapter 10 on coastal communities); some larger cities borrow size from smaller urban settlements (Chapter 6 on expertise production networks). All this challenges the concept of borrowed size highlighting that this is a variegated process. This in turn calls for further research on small towns and cities – on ordinary cities around the world. One cross-cutting theme has highlighted the role played by individuals, households and communities in shaping urban outcomes including contributing to resilience (Chapter 8 on Dholpur, India and Chapter 10 on coastal communities). In this context, city government 'borrow size' from citizens and communities to enhance urban outcomes.

While examining ordinary smaller towns and cities around the world, chapters throughout this book engage with the concepts of 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary'. A number of questions are identified: What constitutes the extraordinary? Are all ordinary cities the same? Are all towns and cities extraordinary? Is everyday living saturated with ordinary or habitual experiences? The concept of parallax is important here in that one person's ordinary experiences would be an extraordinary experience for another individual. That which becomes habitual may have its origins in that which was initially considered to be extraordinary; the extraordinary is one pathway to the ordinary. This highlights the importance of three types of context – place-based

context, people and context and context or positionality of the researcher. For the latter, further research is required to unravel differences between what researchers' see compared to the lived experiences of people in place. This is another parallax distortion in that writing about experiences can never reflect the real nature of lived experiences.

The chapters in this book also underscore the role of the state and policy implication. What roles does the state play in supporting smaller or ordinary cities or transforming them? What kinds of policies are suitable for and conducive to growth in ordinary towns and cities around the world? We have been living in challenging times as the Coronavirus pandemic has ravaged cities (and their residents) around the globe. As a result, to what extent has the pandemic impacted on smaller towns and cities? What have been the responses compared to those in major cities?

Conclusions

This chapter has engaged with urban theory to develop a more people-orientated account of the urban question. Our urban question highlights the importance of the urban as a setting for forms of life. The concept of 'forms of life' illuminates the variegated nature of the lived experiences of urban residents. It draws attention to the relationships between forms of life and intersectionality. It also highlights that forms of life are embedded, and this is a process focussed around embeddedplasticity. Throughout the chapter, we draw attention to false binaries or binaries that are in fact not binaries but a form of complex binary. Urban forms of life represent particular experiences, but these experiences are variegated. This diversity highlights that the binary between universal and particular experiences is one saturated with diversity and complexity.

The world cities literature tends to assign certain characteristics to global centers: their size (although even this metric places them in a hierarchy), serving as centers of cultural, creative, and financial industries and as transportation hubs. This literature identifies differences between these larger cities and yet the emphasis is on highlighting similarities. These are the command and control centres of the world economy. In many respects, world/global cities are placed into a

broad grouping, which supposedly differentiates them from the rest of the world's cities and towns. These global cities are important and extraordinary places. Nevertheless, the literature on smaller towns and cities – our ordinary cities – highlights that these more ordinary cities are indeed extraordinary. The chapters in this book have highlighted that smaller towns and cities have different pathways toward the ongoing development of their local economies, different settlement patterns, and have varying strategies toward planning, growth, and urban management.

One of the problems with smaller towns and cities is their diversity. This is a diversity of process and of their position in the plasticity of scales within which they are embedded. This diversity perhaps accounts for their comparative neglect in the urban literature and in urban theory. The challenge is in identifying patterns and developing overarching conclusions from this diversity. Scholars, however, need to be very aware of the dangers of identifying false patterns and in overlooking the role that improvisation, combined with serendipity, plays in the configuration of the urban. The challenge of studying smaller towns and cities must be overcome and new approaches, conceptual frameworks and methodologies developed. At the core of these new approaches, must be a concern with understanding the interrelationships between micro, meso and macro processes. Perhaps too much emphasis has been placed on macro processes whilst Peric's infra-ordinary has been neglected. Urban research needs to develop a research agenda based around understanding the world of the infra-ordinary in the construction and experience of the urban. This is a call for a research agenda that unravels the complex interrelationships between people and place and the shaping of different forms of life. This includes a concern with understanding forms of life as an ongoing process that shapes individual biographies. It also includes a focus on understanding firms in place and space and developing a biographical approach to understanding corporate or organizational embeddedplasticity.

The term 'ordinary' is perhaps 'extraordinary'. This word comes with different connotations. On the one hand, the ordinary can be considered as related to the usual rather than the exceptional. The ordinary is something that is not distinguished and is common. On the other hand, ordinary can be used in a derogatory manner implying something that is inferior as it might be considered as mediocre or commonplace. The extraordinary is the everything that the ordinary

is not – it is unusual and, in some ways, must be exceptional. Smaller towns and cities are often ignored and understudied because of this paradox. Reasons include the fact that the exceptional and the extraordinary are more visible and are often considered to be more interesting. To develop a research agenda based on the ordinary would perhaps be considered as extraordinary. In addition, there is perhaps the paradox of the ordinary – the ordinary is perhaps too commonplace and well-known, and thus harder to observe. And yet, the ordinary is about everyday living and about the day-to-day activities of firms and their employees. Thus, a concern with understanding the ordinary should be central to the social sciences and urban studies research needs to include more ordinary towns and cities.

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