What is Urban History?

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What is Urban History?
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Introduction

Why Urban History?

This book does not purport to offer a history of towns and cities or the city-building process. As the recently published *Oxford Handbook of Cities in World History*, edited by Peter Clark, shows, this in itself is a gargantuan effort demanding the collaborative energy and expertise of fifty-six urban historians. Instead, this book is intended as an introduction to the field of urban history, which, at its heart, is concerned with the study of urban life in the past as well as the history of urbanization (in its broadest understanding as a demographic, legal-institutional and cultural process). It is aimed at students who have already had training in history but have not previously studied urban history, as well as historians who have worked with towns and cities, but never from the perspective of an urban historian. What I mean by this is that urban history is concerned with examining the history of an urban place in the context of its wider economic, social, political, cultural and spatial system, which inevitably locates that place in a wider regional, national, international, and even transnational, network. The book is also aimed at students and other readers who have encountered towns and cities in other fields – such as geography, sociology, anthropology and town planning – and are interested in utilizing an historical approach to their subject.

This book stresses the mutual value of comparative and interdisciplinary approaches to understanding the spatial and
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experiential aspects of urban life. Such an integrated approach enables the systematic gathering of empirical evidence in order to identify what is common to the urban experience, as well as what sets one urban place aside from another. Interdisciplinarity is, as we shall see, essential to urban history because the field has grown up and evolved throughout the twentieth century by drawing upon multiple disciplinary influences from across the humanities as well as the social sciences. There is a tendency amongst some urban historians to interpret the field in largely social scientific terms, yet the truth is that urban history has drawn from a wide range of influences, approaches and traditions prevalent across the arts and humanities as well as the ‘soft’ sciences, including art, literature, photography, archaeology, cultural and film studies, which have injected the field with a critical mass and rich texture of styles and sources. A cursory read of recent studies by scholars working with issues of urban culture and materiality reveals the eclectic source base from which practitioners are working, and the reader’s attention is drawn to the ‘Suggestions for Further Reading’ chapter at the end of this book for examples of these.

Comparative approaches are themselves central to explaining historical continuities as well as change, and have been widely deployed within a range of historical fields that have helped to shape urban history, including economic and social history, historical sociology and the French Annales School. Comparative method helps the historian to discover the similarities as well as the uniqueness of different societies through time and across space. The historical sociologist Charles Tilly contends that comparison, over long periods of time as well as across space, empowers the urban historian to answer the central historical questions in academic scholarship, and to explore the interaction between large global processes as well as the everyday routines and rhythms of urban life. For urban historians, comparison illustrates how all towns and cities share common requirements throughout history: they all need resources (food, water, raw materials and people) to sustain their growth. They also need a viable economic function, access to commercial networks that connect them with a wider region, and organizational stability and security provided by supportive administrative, fiscal and legal
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Frameworks. As Penelope Corfield persuasively argues, these features indicate that towns and cities enjoy ‘deep continuities’ in their location, functionality, topography and social/cultural traditions even if they also expand, contract and redevelop over time. Comparison – in its diachronic as well as its synchronic sense – reveals how ‘becoming globally urban is one of our great collective achievements through time’.2

It is my contention that urban history is of increasing significance in today’s urban world. While there is a growing importance for conducting international comparisons of towns and cities, invariably of a typological kind, the real everyday strengths of the comparative approach – due to the logistical and historical/cultural traditions of urban history – remains most fruitful in a national framework. However, the incentive of international and transnational comparison is significant, especially between the fast-growing megacities and mega-regions in the developing world – from Latin America and the Indian subcontinent to China and the Middle East – and well-established and networked cities in the developed world. This sort of cross-continental research offers benefits for the researcher to situate his or her research into a wider socio-political exchange that could materially benefit the residents of these megacities, but also those in the developed world. Urban history offers valuable lessons if one looks for them, and urban historians invariably do this on a daily basis – in how to govern cities in order to fairly tackle the vast inequalities of urban capitalism; how to identify and minimize the environmental hazards of rapid urbanization if left to the vagaries of the marketplace; and of the importance of culture, nature and planning to make cities attractive places to live and work in or travel to.

The centrality of urbanization to the world today, and its rooting in history, has been summarized in a series of reports from the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat). Whereas only a century ago, two out of every ten people in the world were living in urban areas – and in the least developed regions the proportion of urban dwellers was as low as 5 per cent – in 2011 the majority of the world’s population was living in urban areas for the first time in human history (the proportion stands at 54 per cent in 2014).
Much of this recent growth, since the 1950s, has occurred in developing countries. In 2013, of every ten urban residents in the world more than seven could be found in developing countries. In the past decade alone, the urban population in the developing world grew by an average of 1.2 million people every week (this amounts to slightly less than a full year’s growth across urban Europe). Asia led the way, adding 0.88 million new urban dwellers every week, followed by Africa, with an additional 0.23 million every week, and Latin America and the Caribbean with 0.15 million every week. Latin America is the second most urbanized region in the world today, with 80 per cent of its population living in urban areas; North America remains the most urbanized region (82 per cent), while Europe lies in third place (73 per cent). While Africa and Asia remain predominantly rural continents, with 40 and 48 per cent of their respective populations living in urban areas, they are urbanizing at a faster rate than all other regions and are projected to have urban populations of 56 and 64 per cent respectively by 2050.

These rates of growth have generated a growing ‘urban divide’ between rich and poor. This is discernible through the unequal distribution of wealth and the persistence of socio-spatial segregation, which, comparison shows us, is evident in developed and developing cities alike and has been a constant feature of the urbanization process throughout history. It has also generated huge inequalities in social and environmental justice – for women, the disabled and ethnic, religious and sexual minorities, and so on. Cities are divided between ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ through competition over land, labour and capital, which produces social instability as well as considerable costs for the urban poor and society at large. But this is not a new challenge, as UN-Habitat recognizes; cities have always been subject to extreme levels of inequality and social deprivation: ‘Cities do not become divisive overnight;...exclusion and marginalization build and reproduce over time.’ Nor have cities responded to these challenges through history in the same way: this is because improvements (in infrastructure, governance, social justice and quality of life) are dependent on public demand, civil rights, existing knowledge and a city’s access to institutional and financial resources, all of which vary over time. Urban history thus
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provides an ideal outlet for policymakers to learn from the past because it is a field that is grounded in comparison and interdisciplinarity and has always reflected contemporary concerns about urban society. Indeed, urban historians are naturally ‘present-minded’, pursuing topics that are relevant to the world that we live in and using history as a route into examining contemporary urban problems. 4

History also reveals changes in the ranking of cities according to their size, significance and reach, as documented in Tertius Chandler and Gerald Fox’s historical census of urban growth. In the early eighteenth century, Constantinople and Beijing were the two largest cities in the world, with populations of roughly 700,000; a century later, Beijing and London had both topped 1 million. By the turn of the twentieth century, the era of the Western metropolis had arrived: London was the largest city with 6.48 million residents, followed by New York (4.24 million), Paris (3.33 million), Berlin (2.42 million) and Chicago (1.72 million). Sixteen cities in total had populations of more than 1 million at this time, and the list was dominated by European and American cities. By 1950, although Western cities (New York, London, Paris) still dominated the top end of the table, Tokyo (or the Tokyo-Yokahama agglomeration) was the third largest city region in the world (c.7 million), while a number of developing cities were creeping up the league table (including Shanghai, Buenos Aires, Calcutta, Bombay, Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo). In 2011 there were nearly 500 cities and urban agglomerations (that is, a central city and neighbouring communities linked to it by continuous built-up areas) with populations exceeding 1 million, and twenty-six megacities exceeding 10 million. Tokyo is the largest city with an agglomeration of 38 million inhabitants, followed by Delhi (25 million), Shanghai (23 million), and Mexico City, Mumbai and São Paulo (each with around 21 million inhabitants). By 2030, the United Nations estimates, there will be forty-one megacities in the world, the vast majority of which will be found in developing countries. This shows that cities, and the networks that they constitute, are always changing, which establishes the value of comparison over time in order to understand what motivates people to relocate to urban areas at particular times in their life cycles in order to ride
what Peter Clark has described as the ‘rollercoaster’ of urbanization.5

Cities have even started to merge together to create new spatial configurations, linked by their functional and spatial connections, which are expected to drive this rollercoaster over the next fifty years. These include mega-regions of large cities (Bangalore, Mexico City and Cairo, for example) which amalgamate other cities and towns within their economic orbit; urban corridors that link two or more large cities, sometimes across national borders – examples include Mumbai–Delhi, São Paulo–Rio de Janeiro and Ibadan–Lagos–Accra – and state-sponsored city-regions like Guangdong’s Pearl River Delta mega-region, which includes nine large cities with an aggregate surface area of 40,000 km², or twenty-six times that of Greater London. Such staggering rates of growth obviously attract considerable interest in the past histories of the urban world, particularly in tracing the ways that cities and urban cultures have adapted to major social, economic, political, cultural and environmental change. There is a connection here between regions with fast-urbanizing populations and emerging scholarly interest in urban history. Whereas the origins and early growth of urban history as a scholarly discipline are to be found in Western and Northern Europe, as well as North America, the field continues to grow and develop in emerging regions, notably India, China and Latin America, albeit with their own unique traditions of scholarly practice.6

The book is organized thematically according to the main historiographical debates that have shaped the field over the past generation. Chapter 1 provides a chronological framework for the development of urban history since the turn of the twentieth century, and introduces key historiographical influences in the field. Chapter 2 examines the relationship between space and social identity through the lens of residential segregation, one of the richest subjects within the field. Chapter 3 traces changing approaches to how urban societies are governed, establishing the theoretical influences over the field at large, especially since the 1980s. The theme of environmental history is discussed in Chapter 4, particularly focusing on the value of an urban approach to interrogate the relationship between nature, materiality and the built
environment. Chapter 5 then considers the impact of the cultural turn on urban cultures, specifically through an examination of the rich literature on urban modernity. Chapter 6 discusses the nascent influence of transnational approaches on urban history, which point towards a fruitful future in tracing networked urban histories that traverse the world and are not constrained by nation-state boundaries. Finally, a brief essay provides a guide for further reading and should be read in conjunction with the endnotes to individual chapters.

Unfortunately, it has not proven possible, in the limited space available, to provide a comprehensive treatment of all the themes that entertain urban historians. There are a couple of notable omissions. First, the role played by the urban economy in driving urban change is not treated separately in its own chapter, although, as this introduction argues, economic factors are a driving force throughout the history of urbanization. Having said this, the external forces that shaped the emergence of a global urban-industrial economy – or the more recent process of de-industrialization in the Western world – are not given as much treatment as some readers might like, though the book does take a ‘political economy’ approach to the city and municipal authorities. This decision is itself a reflection of the recent shift in focus from economic to cultural history, which is discernible in the tables of contents for the leading scholarly journals in the field and the conference programmes of the scholarly institutions. However, this should not be misinterpreted as a positive shift, not least because of the continued importance of cities to the global economy in the light of the economic crisis of recent years. Thus, in its 2010–11 report on the world’s cities, UN-Habitat rightly recognizes cities as the key drivers of economic recovery, and their pivotal role in redressing the major inequalities that shape modern cities. Recent studies of the urban economy by David Reeder and Richard Rodger and Ho-Fung Hung and Shaohua Zhan, as well as Paul Bairoch’s statistically rich *longue durée* history, provide excellent overviews of urban economic and demographic change that complement this book because they too examine urban economic processes through a comparative and interdisciplinary framework.
Second, the book is overwhelmingly concerned with the modern city and the majority of examples discussed cover the past three hundred years or thereabouts. There are pedagogical and organizational reasons for this decision. It would be shallow to attempt to provide comprehensive coverage of the ancient, medieval or early modern city when there are far more competent historians able to do this. As Rosemary Sweet and Richard Rodger discuss, the medieval or early modern town was ‘a very different phenomenon’ to its modern counterpart. For instance, there are major definitional disagreements about what actually constitutes urban status and how this changes over time and from country to country. In the pre-modern age, few towns exceeded 10,000 people, and are alien in contrast to those megacities that have mushroomed since the 1950s. It is a challenge in itself to determine what constitutes an urban area in the modern age, especially when variations in rates of urbanization in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were based on different size thresholds, ranging from 2,000 in France to 20,000 in Italy.

Furthermore, most towns in the pre-modern period (outside the capital cities) were essentially part of an agrarian economy and should be treated as such, whereas many modern towns and cities can be studied as part of an urban-industrial economy, albeit one that owes its growth to modernization in agriculture, as well as high rates of rural-to-urban migration. Finally, the value systems of medieval and early modern towns have often clashed with those of the modern period. Whereas issues of kinship, family and religion have been central to the earlier period, the modern period has been dominated by questions of class until recent years. While there has been recent convergence between the early modern and modern period through the scrutiny of alternative forms of social identity (noticeably gender and sexuality), it has been decided to focus on the modern period for reasons of academic coherence as well as convenience.8

To those readers who will now be considering returning the book to their library or to the bookshop for a refund, I ask for forgiveness and understanding. This book does not intend to provide an exhaustive account of urbanization throughout history – nor, come to that, of the field in its vast
temporal, geographical, thematic and methodological reach – for that would demand resources, time, expertise and an additional 700 pages or more that are not at my disposal. Rather more modestly perhaps, but nonetheless of tangible value, I hope, I offer my interpretation of the vast, rich and evolving historiography of the urban world. Finally, I trust that this book will serve as a useful starting point for those beginning their intellectual (and actual) wanderings through the concrete jungle.