



Understanding Cities

Humanism and cities

Michael

Well let's take this discussion of globalisation a bit further. If the overall drive seems to be to make cities more competitive, then whose voices are articulating and shaping this agenda and does making a city more competitive make it a better place to live? Nigel Thrift.

Nigel

If you go outside the brute economic facts then it's not necessarily the case that you'd always want to think that just by making a city more competitive you're doing good. It might be, for example, that the kind of jobs you're producing in the city are not always terrific jobs, and all the management-speak in the world will not make them into great jobs so you have that kind of problem. And then you have to really think, and this comes on I think to some of the things in the course that are talked about in terms of relational cities, of whether you can really reduce cities to just being economic forces. And of course the answer is of course you can't. You only have to think back to the original Greek ideas of what cities were and that's clearly not what they were at all; what they were about mainly was about making machines for producing good lives, and the argument in Greek cities was often over whether cities were producing good lives, and to think about it in economic terms only is quite clearly incorrect and indeed rather silly.

Michael

This seems to suggest that there are other possibilities, possibilities for creating other types of economic institutions within cities - those that aren't concerned with state-of-the-art office buildings, consultancy-speak and so on, and also for forging different forms of city-based politics.

Nigel

There are all these alternative economic institutions which are trying to make cities more humane. If you like, for the 25 or 30% of each city's population which will be regarded in many ways as being outside this newer liberal model, they're not employed, or they're employed in jobs which are not particularly good jobs, they're not well paid and so on, these kinds of people have to have to institutions in a sense almost of their own in many ways, especially as the state rolls back from, if you like, helping these kinds of populations.

Michael

It's perhaps in global cities that such alternative economic institutions and new forms of citizenship are beginning to emerge.

Nigel

There are examples of different ways of going on which don't just come down to the fact that people in particular income groups are able to travel more and therefore able to think of themselves as citizens of the world more than was the case in the past. And these kinds of ideas I think probably are found mainly in the larger global cities where basically you have a large and diverse heterogeneous population, many kinds of social and ethnic backgrounds, which allow new ideas to be generated about the kinds of citizenship that it might be possible to have. Does one have to be a citizen just of one place, for example, or could one be a citizen of a whole series of places at once, or you can see in a sense just from the example of many of the groups in London nowadays, that they see themselves actually as citizens of more than one place at once. Maybe we could see this kind of model generalising up to a certain extent in some cities around the world.

Michael

As Nigel Thrift remarked, if new forms of citizenship are to emerge fully, the problem of thinking about cities has to re-address. How does this help us to reappraise cities and recognise the production of spaces for alternative city politics?

Prof. Ash Amin

In relational thinking we begin to think about the social aspects of a city, particularly those which are structured around the relationships in which individuals and groups enter as part of the life of cities. It also allows us to see cities as places, as very much part of a wider world, and in this sense we can avoid a geography of cities which envisages cities as containers, as coherent systems with their own internal logic where all the different parts fit together. We can begin to see cities as places of encounter, mixture, meeting, as particular types of place in a global context of flows of people, goods and information. In other words it's very much about thinking about the connections of cities with the rest of the world, and thinking about connections and disconnections between different parts of the same city without having to come to the conclusion that whichever city you're studying makes up a coherent, self-contained home.

Michael

Viewing cities as places of interconnection and encounter is something that Saskia Sassen sees as opening the potential for re-working what is understood by citizenship.

Saskia

When I talk about cities I am really talking about a particular kind of city and it is a minority of cities, but it is a strategic site, not only for the global corporate effort, but also for what might well be a new kind of politics, a form of politics that on the one hand is not predicated on citizenship – if we take that meaning, that concept in its sort of historical meaning where you have a set of conditions that make you a citizen, and a set of rights and entitlements that come with that – so it's a political project that is not confined to that particular sort of historical notion of citizenship – but at the same time suggests the possibility of a norm concept of citizenship.

Michael

This understanding of citizenship can be imagined by pursuing a relational to cities. Ash Amin again.

Prof. Ash Amin

The point I'm trying to make is that the outcome of one of the key characteristics of cities which is mixture is tension with social tension amongst the participants who co-habit or occupy that common space, but where the outcomes are often very ambivalent, almost unpredictable nature. This real ambivalence of social outcomes in cities is important, it's the property of cities as places which combine diversity that generates this ambivalence, it's the coming together or, if you like, the juxtaposition of diversity – different needs, different cultural mixes, different economic circuits which produces ambivalence, and I think it's therefore good or important to recognise this, instead of looking for order, singularity, or consensus in the city. The city as we know it is a process that results in ambivalent tension, not order or a ready consensus that is shared by most people within that city or observers of that city.