



Understanding Cities

Power Relations

Jenny

So in one of the ways in which these power relations are evident is in the way in which people who have power imagine the city should be ordered, so it's very often a response of the powerful, although not always – we might come back to that perhaps – it's very often a response of the powerful to the unruliness of the city, or their perceived unruliness of the city to impose a centre spatial ordering, so one of the things that strikes me in looking again over the tactics that we're talking about here is how prominent various efforts to spatially order the city are. Eugene, would you comment on that?

Eugene

I think picking up from what Gerry was saying that it's undoubtedly the key is that attempts to order spatially or attempts to also order socially and the crucial thing is there is an assumption built in that if you re-order city spaces, wherever they are and whatever they are, that somehow you can change the behaviour of human beings, and the actions of human beings within those spaces, and we can see it in a variety of ways at a micro level if we look at, for example, situational crime prevention, strategies that are targeted in the city. Quite clearly they're premised on the assumption that if you actually target hard on particular properties, particular streets, even cars or your whatever, that somehow you can manage to change the behaviour of predators or criminals, however you define them, or dangerous people, strangers, and that is a running theme that in some sense you will be able to change human behaviour through changing city spaces.

Steve

You seem to have two different ways of talking about that – one is the beat and the other is Humanisation, I mean perhaps you could talk through those two different circumstances. One seems to be about leaving the space intact but changing behaviour by policing people with actual physical policemen, the other seems to be about changing physical space.

Eugene

Yes, Humanisation represents the grand plan, the idea that the only way that you are going to change the social relations and the cultural status of any particular city is through sweeping away the old and bringing in the new, and there is an assumption that you can rationalise the orderly city into being, that somehow you can imagine it through an architectural plan, that you can actually clear out the old and you can bring in the new, and to a degree you can see that in parts, there is no doubt that as a result of Humanisation the beautiful city was created. But at the same time, you know, what happened to the people who were living in the old city? Well they're marginalised but they're defined under the new social relations that are being built in through Humanisation, and that Humanisation has set in motion a whole series of other micro strategies to do something similar in a variety of cities and a variety of geographical locations. But if you look at policing and the response of London to the pressures and the new social relations that were brought in by the Industrial Revolution and urbanisation, then you see a quite different strategy. There's a notion where we can't really do away with the old, London couldn't be Humanised, so therefore you had to have an agency that would regulate relations among the new and the old, and that's what the police were doing, they were clearly ordering the street life, making sure that particular people were in particular places at particular times, and that other people weren't in those places at the same time, so quite clearly there's a very different way of responding to that.

Jenny

So it's still about using space, the police moving around in space, make sure that they can observe people but not re-making the physical spaces of the city in quite the same way as the Haussmann story?

Eugene

Yes, one's based on surveillance and the other one is based on spatial transformation.

Jenny

Gerry.

Gerry

I appreciate that some of this discussion can maybe appear to the student who's listening to somewhat abstract and unconnected to what they think cities are about and their own experiences and images and understandings of cities, but I think one of the things I'd like to encourage students to do is just think for a minute of particular parts of cities or particular cities that they know, these are parts, rural areas, and smaller towns as well that they know, think of a particular place within them, say for example housing estates, think about new towns – don't just see them as some sort of concrete manifestation of certain plans for building houses – think about the visions and ideas that lay actually behind the construction of these places in the first instance. What was the suburb all about? I mean it came out of a particular understanding about the problems of city life, about it being unruly, about being too intense, about classes mixing too close together, so on one level it was an attempt to de-intensify that, and of course we can all visit around most British cities, and indeed some cities in Europe and further afield, lovely suburbs that reflect that way of thinking, you know that's a lovely place, that's tree-lined, there's small cottage-type houses, there's beautiful, you know a beautiful lookout, but what we're encouraging people to do is to think actually behind that – what does that represent in terms of a particular understanding of human life? And go back to Eugene's point that is an attempt to create a particular vision of what human life should be like.

Jenny

Steve.

Steve

In this discussion what I'd like to pick up on is you know you're asking people to reflect on well you know as we look at different parts of the city let's reflect on well why are they there, and I actually think that some of the answers that we actually have for that are actually quite ambiguous. There's an ambiguity around the utopian ideas, I mean are they utopian ideas or not? So in the Haussmann situation then the utopian seems to be in the centre of the city, that's where Utopia is being produced, and anybody who isn't part of that utopian vision is then shocked into a slight sort of peripheral. Some of those estates might physically look very similar to ones that are actually built for people and designed in a way that is actually in order to improve their lives actually, so that in the physical form there can be different kinds of utopian impulses, some of those utopian impulses may actually lie elsewhere or being carried out elsewhere, and they could be dump estates or periphery estates designed to marginalise people, or they might actually be there to improve people's housing. So there is a kind of ambiguity about some of those places that they don't always have one cause or one result, that there may be multiple utopian pulses, or that there may be contradictory elements in the city I think. So it's just to bear in mind the question marks that do hang over urban spaces, and to think carefully about that. It's not that we can't make up our minds about the unruliness of cities, but actually that there are genuinely contradictory or paradoxical things going on in cities.

Jenny

Do you want to pick that up?

Eugene

Yeah, I'm going to pick up on one or two aspects of what Steve has said there and emphasise the importance of understanding and exploring these things historically. For example, if you take, for instance, post-war Paris, well one of the key developments that characterised post-war Paris was the attempt to create on the outskirts of Paris a series of mass state housing developments that were seen to de-intensify, as we would put it, the social relations that were kind of in Paris at that particular time. And those suburban housing developments were, when they were built, seemed to be orderly, they were seen to be very much representing the intensified social life, but of course thirty, forty, fifty years later, they represent very much the intensification of social relations within that particular part of urban France. So what might appear in one instance to be the de-intensification of a particular set of social relations in the urban environment can at another point turn out to be actually rather intensification, those very particular relations in that area.

Gerry

I think one of the reasons for that is actually about the kind of the openness of spaces within a city. By openness that means that it's a question of the connections and disconnections so that when you're creating an estate if it has a set of connections to the city which means that jobs, money, people are kind of flowing through it, and that you have kind of vibrant space, there's certain kinds of connections will actually keep that place alive and make it a good place to live. But actually what's happening to a lot of estates is they actually systematically get cut off from a set of connections that actually enable the vitality of that space, so once money starts to flow away from it, once jobs cease to be there, once improvements in the physical structure start to go away, then the estate becomes less and less desirable. It's the openness of spaces within the city that can lead to questions about the connections and disconnections of those spaces, I think.

Jenny

Eugene.

Eugene

The Paris suburbs also give us another example of how connections work because what's fascinating is how those suburbs have been transformed and in many ways culturally revitalised by connections to North Africa. That could never have been imagined or built in to the original plans, and in many ways what's interesting is that it's also been transformed, some would argue, into sites of resistance against racism being carried out by a variety of state authorities in Paris at the moment, so we can't rule out unintended consequences, and unexpected outcomes from any of these places.

Gerry

So what you're saying, Eugene actually reminds me of Harlem examples and I think it's about the different positions that Harlem occupies. On the one hand it is a disconnected part of the city that actually it's economically marginalised precisely because it doesn't have flows of money and investment, but other parts of Manhattan Island certainly do have some of the predominant images of Manhattan are of its skyscrapers and its vitality, its economic advantage, its central location and flows of money and power, its capacity to influence those flows of money which Harlem apparently doesn't have. Harlem is also a radicalised space within a city, it's clearly somewhere where African-Americans have settled precisely because it is a poor part of town, and because of the racial discrimination that they suffer. Now those are kind of the bad sides of it, but also Harlem itself has become at different points the centre of very vital community activism, this has taken cultural format I think in terms of the Harlem Renaissance, but also we can see a whole set of black politics coming out of Harlem. More than that I think there are also a whole wider range of economic connections which may not look as powerful, or which aren't as powerful maybe, as some of the ones going through the skyscrapers, but they do have a wider set of economic connections. When thinking about sort of estates we need to think about their openness – where are they closed off, who is flowing through them, what kinds of things – to say that a place is marginalised may mean that it might be creatively forming other kinds of connections, and actually constituting itself differently, so we need to kind of think about that openness in terms of connections and disconnections.