RE-IMAGINING THE URBAN

by

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Context

The topic of this conference – ‘the right to the city’ – implies that the city is an important social stake. By association it also suggests that the struggle is between classes. As such it raises all manner of questions about the relation between society and space, class and territory that merit attention, even concern. In understanding events in cities, can one confine oneself to an understanding of social relations within cities, distinctive to cities? Are there in fact social relations distinctive to cities? If not, how are we to understand events, patterned or otherwise, in cities?

These are of course by no means new questions. They were raised just over twenty-five years ago by Peter Saunders in his (1981) book Social Theory and the Urban Question. His conclusion about a distinctive urban question was negative; there were no social processes specific to cities. Rather the city merely interacted with more universal social processes, lending some quantitative expression to their effects – intensifying or weakening – as opposed to any new qualitative form. There followed a spirited response from David Harvey (1985b) who argued for what he called a relatively autonomous urban politics. And then – nothing happened. For the most part it is as if the debate had never occurred. Urban studies continues untroubled. Were there, however, important omissions in the debate that would have led to people shrugging their shoulders, not taking potshots at such big names as Saunders and Harvey but just getting on with it undisturbed in the basic assumptions informing their work? Or were the arguments just too abstract for people focused on the more concrete? We shall never know.

My basic premise in this paper is that the status of the urban remains an important question for us, that it is not cut and dried, dead and buried, and that there are still things
to be said. There have, moreover, been some additional developments since Saunders and Harvey were writing that in my view allow some further progress to be made in getting to the bottom of this vexed question; ‘vexed’ not just because it won’t go away but because its significance extends beyond the urban to include many of the other spatial categories we use in talking about space and politics as in ‘regional studies’, the now forgotten ‘locality studies project’, or, although people don’t talk of it as such, ‘national studies.’

The paper is organized into four major sections. In the first part I briefly outline the contributions of Saunders and Harvey, pointing out at the same time some of the contradictions or omissions in their formulations. I conclude the section by reference to a recent paper by John Allen and Allan Cochrane. Their focus is actually not the city but the region. I think, however, that it opens up some new possibilities for thinking about the city and merits foregrounding as essential background for what will unfold in my ensuing argument.

All three of these contributions raise, implicitly at least, questions about causality. It seems to me important that we get our ideas on this topic straight. What does it mean to talk, as Saunders does, about ‘processes’? Or as Allen and Cochrane do, ‘relations’ and how relations are ‘constitutive’? They clearly have some explanatory intent but there is a lack of clarity here that merits attention. This will be the purpose of the paper’s second section. Having prepared the ground I can then proceed to the third and longest section where I talk about re-imagining the urban. A final section then draws out the implications of these proposals.

**The Urban in Question**

*Peter Saunders*

Saunders’ focus in his book *Social Theory and the Urban Question* was the concept of an urban specificity: whether or not there is something specifically urban – cultural, economic, political – that can be understood in terms of specifically urban processes. In more general terms he is concerned with attempts to fuse theories of social processes with analyses of spatial forms. As far as the great social thinkers of nineteenth century were
concerned – Durkheim, Marx and Weber – the urban only enters in to the degree that it helps illuminate the wider processes associated with modern capitalism: intensifying class conflict, deepening the division of labor, and so forth. For Saunders there are no necessary relations between space and social relations. Accordingly the idea of urban studies, demarcated by a set of processes that urban sociologists / economists / geographers / anthropologists etc., can call their own makes no sense.

His review in his book of the work of people like Castells, Pahl and Harvey is as exhaustive as it is consistent as he tries to show, for example, that the conditions for something like Pahl’s urban managerialism are set elsewhere. Even so, at the end of the book he comes up, paradoxically, with his own definition of the urban question. It revolves, he says, around questions of collective consumption. It is mediated by a competitive politics and it occurs largely at the level of local government. These processes occur in turn in a context constituted by social investment policies undertaken by the central government so as to facilitate capital accumulation; these are defined and implemented largely through a corporatist form of politics insulated from popular pressures. In this way, he establishes the conditions for certain tensions characteristic of the advanced capitalist societies: economic management vs. social provision; planning vs. democratic accountability; centralization vs. local autonomy.

Quite aside from the geohistorical particularity of this vision – it certainly would not have applied to the US, for example – what is interesting about it is the way space creeps back in in the form of the relation between more local institutions, defined here as ‘local government’ rather than the urban, and more global ones in terms of the nation state. So much as Saunders wants to limit the relevance of space to social theory, it seems to be admitted back in, though without granting cities a specificity of their own; in this way it instantiates, whether Saunders intended it or not, a more general conception of space and society to which we will return.
David Harvey

Harvey’s (1985b) ‘Place of Urban Politics’ paper bears a very clear relation to an essay of his that appeared round about the same time entitled ‘The Geopolitics of Capitalism’ (1985a). This in turn reflected ideas first mooted in *Limits to Capitalism* (1982). The latter represented Harvey’s attempt, after a decade of frustrations, to spatialize Marx and remains one of his major contributions to the present day. These are ideas to which I intend to return. Even so there are some interesting omissions in his ‘Place of Urban Politics’ paper.

Central to his vision in the latter is a wider geography of uneven development in which urban class-alliances are crucial agents. He is emphatic on the development of commitments of both workers and capitalists to particular places. For capitalists there are the fixities of physical infrastructure and also those of connections with other firms: networks of relations that are hard to transfer elsewhere. He is less clear on what attaches workers though we know that they do indeed become dependent on the fortunes of a particular place and labor markets for most are extraordinarily localized (Gordon 1995). He also talks about the development of place-specific institutional fixes and gives the term ‘structural coherences’ to them. These are the result of local struggles, hard won, and give both capitalist and worker some stability regarding future expectations. In short, there are a variety of commitments to a particular place which facilitate accumulation for the capitalist or earning a wage for the worker, and which, accordingly will be defended against external challenge. And as Harvey points out, they will have to be defended. This is because of the sheer dynamism of the capitalist space economy and the ever shifting nature of its spatial division of labor, entraining continual challenges to the technological fixes arrived at in particular places, the wage bargains, the ability to pay back loans taken out for investments in the built environment of the city – factories, housing, public works, for example.

The upshot is the emergence of what Harvey calls class alliances seeking a way out of the local crisis though a repositioning of the city or urban region with respect to wider flows of capital and labor power and the changing geographic division of labor. Accordingly
the emphasis may be placed on attracting inward investment or on building up and recapitalizing the existing economic base or both at the same time. But class alliances are inevitably unstable. Agents have different positions with respect to the various strategies and policies proposed. There are internal struggles over who will bear the burden of local devaluation as competition intensifies with urban regions elsewhere. This in turn creates a space for what Harvey calls ‘a relatively autonomous urban politics’ (1985b: 152); a space for ‘fixers’ to exploit, stitching together alliances which have a more consensual vision and doing battle with those that have different views over what should be the right policies. Parenthetically, and as he points out, it is exactly this sort of situation which so discourages people who want to see ‘struggles for the city’ in which ‘struggle’ means ‘class struggle’ rather than the formation of ‘structural coherences’ and the sort of class alliances which emerge to defend them.

This is a fertile and provocative vision and its central claims can be substantiated without much difficulty. But it also has its limits and before proceeding further these need to be noted. One of its more intriguing features is the partiality of its view of what constitutes urban politics. It is a conception that is driven by struggles to compete and accumulate within wider spatial divisions of labor. Urban regions become, in his parlance, geopolitical units struggling with each other over the geographic form of the space economy. Yet we should note that there are conflicts within those geopolitical units that have only limited relevance to those wider struggles. To some degree conflicts between city and suburb, between one neighborhood and another can be subsumed to the sort of politics that Harvey puts at the center. Plans for stoking the fires of local economic development in the urban region as a whole have implications for particular sub-areas and neighborhoods within it and the subsequent conflicts have to be managed if the hoped for urban renaissance or whatever is to come about. But not all of the politics that separates one neighborhood or jurisdiction from another can be reduced to those terms.

Whether a city is growing or not, struggling with redevelopment or not, there will be a politics of neighborhood and of suburbanization, if only because real estate development has its own dynamic. As far as the residential sector is concerned, it is a case of one
'design for living' after another and not just what is offered in the housing unit but also in the surrounding area, as in golf course and gated ‘communities.’ Like the capitalist space economy as a whole, they mean that whatever tendencies to equilibrium that might have existed in an urban housing market, they will be continually upset, sending waves of neighborhood change throughout the urban region. There has been a tendency for urban regions to become single housing markets in which, within the constraints of ability to purchase, housing units are substitutable one for another regardless of where they are located.

This also means that the politics of neighborhood can become charged to a degree that would otherwise not have been the case. People develop commitments to particular neighborhoods as much as to the city as a whole. This can be through various forms of social connection or through home ownership. And just as there are fixities analogous to those Harvey postulates in his vision of an urban politics geared to the competition of cities as geopolitical units, so too, as I have indicated above, the space economy of the urban housing market has an accentuated volatility. New suburban development can have repercussions throughout the rest of the urban region; something to which the prevalence of redlining and abandonment of housing readily testify, but the effects also extend to what is euphemistically called ‘neighborhood change.’

We can pursue the analogy further. Alongside a competition between geopolitical units for positions in the geographic division of labor, there is a struggle within urban regions for positions in the geographic division of consumption. We all know that the residential areas of a metropolitan area vary very substantially in the sort of collective consumption that they offer, as well as in terms of private consumption. Existing residents want to defend their neighborhood or suburb from the challenges posed by the dynamism of the urban housing market. They want to keep out those land uses that would detract from those advantages or, on the other hand, bring in those that would make a positive difference. Accordingly they are willing participants in class alliances that bring together local government with its tax base interests, land owners anxious to cash in, and developers seeking to piggyback on the cachet of a particular school district. But again,
as Harvey pointed out, the alliances are unstable and local politicos have to intervene to bring some sort of coherence to them.

So there are scalar issues here that we are going to have to consider further as we pursue the defensibility of the idea of urban politics. So far we have two distinct versions of it. Of course there are relationships between them. The well paid workers that come along with the successful bid for a research center or corporate headquarters will be eagerly courted by the developers. But the connection is not a necessary one.

*Allen and Cochrane*

In a recent paper Allen and Cochrane make a stimulating argument about regions that can possibly shed light on the notion of the urban. It is a quite simple but powerful argument. Their focus is the use of the term ‘region’ in political discourse. What is of concern is the taken-for-grANTED manner of such designations: how, for example, regions are taken to have a status, typically enduring, that is prior to the particular issues for which they provide an interpretive framework. Rather, they argue, regions can fruitfully be regarded as political constructs. The idea of the region as a coherent whole with interests unique to the people living or working there is something constructed by those who wish to draw on it for their own purposes – to realize interests that often have little or nothing necessarily to do with the region or what transpires there.

There is more. In this construction of the region or of institutions bearing some sort of regional label, not all the relations drawn on are confined to the region being so constructed. Rather relations that extend beyond it can be important. One should add that there can be a similar selectivity with respect to the relations internal to the region that are constitutive of a particular ‘regional’ project as in some structure of regional governance. A useful way of thinking about regions, therefore, is in terms of regional assemblages which bring together agents not just from the region, or particular places within it, but from elsewhere.
The possible implications for the urban should be clear. Like regions, cities might also be regarded as political constructs. Likewise, and contra Harvey, not all the relations important to their constitution as such are necessarily internal to the city or urban region. On the other hand, and contra Saunders some are and some aren’t. So should one be rather talking about ‘urban assemblages’ in the sense in which Allen and Cochrane refer to ‘regional assemblages’? Yet the term ‘relation’ remains vague. What sorts of relations are at issue here? Are they of a contingent or necessary nature? And what do relations have to do with making things happen; in short with causation? Likewise, how might we figure the connection to Saunders’ ‘processes’? Before proceeding further, a brief examination of these issues seems to be in order.

The Question of Causality

Saunders’ idea of processes is certainly relevant to understanding what happens in cities, as are the ‘relations’ of Allen and Cochrane, but they need more specification and placing in a wider understanding of how change gets produced. The idea of process connotes some sequence of events: something happens, which leads to something else, which results in further change, etc. In this regard it is perfectly reasonable to talk about something like the process of capital accumulation: capitalists lay out money for means of production and labor power; they then supervise the labor process through which saleable commodities are produced; the commodities are sold for more money than was laid out; the original money laid out along with this surplus is then used to produce on a larger scale, and so on. What is missing from an account like this, though, are the necessary conditions that have to be in place in order for this sequence of events to occur. The marxist view is that immediate producers have to be separated from the means of production before they can be reunited with them by those with money or the erstwhile capitalists. The subsequent and so-called capital-labor relation then entails competition with other capitals (Weeks 1981: Chapter 6) and a compulsion to accumulation for accumulation’s sake. The important point is that without necessary conditions, none of this happens.
Allen and Cochrane are a little more helpful. This is because they have a sense of conditions for events; of the constitutive role of relations. This is useful as far as it goes but it doesn’t go far enough in shedding light on why things happen. There are certain social relations that are necessary if accumulation is to occur, and which once accumulation is up and running, compel its continuity. So are the relations that Allen and Cochrane have in mind merely empowering? Or are they ones that necessitate some sort of action if essential interests, like that of the capitalist, are to be realized?

In all these regards, Harvey is an improvement. His concept of structured coherence, whatever one might conclude regarding its applicability to cities, is the most promising from the standpoint of understanding why things happen. This is because of the way it incorporates the idea of necessary conditions for subsequent processes. What it points to is the idea of a structure of social relations of the sort advanced by critical realism. This might seem ironic given Harvey’s outspoken rejection of the latter, but incorporating the idea into an argument does not necessarily mean adopting a critical realist view of the world.

One does not have to accept the empiricist modes of abstraction of critical realism or the pluralist ontology that it implies – or sometimes enthusiastically espouses – to recognize that the world is indeed structured and that structures both empower and limit. In abstract terms the relations in a structure of relations are necessary ones. The relata are what they are in virtue of their relations with each other. In the structure of relations that we call capital, there is a necessary relation between capital and wage workers. The existence of a category of people who make money by laying out money for means of production and labor power and then selling the product is inconceivable outside of a class of people who have to work for a wage. Capitalists are empowered by this relation but they are also limited by it; since having laid money out they need to get it back and that is by no means assured. On the other hand, there are other relations that are contingent in character: possible but not necessary. It is certainly necessary that

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1 There is a strong sense of this in Marx, which is why some critical realists have seen Marx as one of their own, but there are also important differences (Roberts 1999) which lie beyond the scope of this paper.
capitalists employ wage workers but they may be indifferent to their gender or nationality. On the other hand, once the accumulation process is underway, structures of relations are invariably constructed, by capitalists and workers alike, in order to advance their (antagonistic) interests in the process of accumulation. This, it seems to me, is essential to the project of re-imagining the urban.

**Re-Imagining the Urban**

I take it as axiomatic that in anything having to do with capitalist society, the accumulation process has to be placed at the center of the analysis. I conceive it not just in terms of its surface form of continual expansion of values through the investment rather than consumption of the surplus along with the values originally laid out but as a class relation. This is its necessary condition and it then reproduces that class relation; workers’ share of the product consists of no more than what is necessary to reproduce them as a working class while capital’s possession of the means of production is both confirmed and deepened. This process of reproduction is itself mediated by struggle; workers press for a larger share of the product while capitalists repel their claims by repeated economies in the use of labor power and so a continual reproduction of the industrial reserve army. Accumulation is a class relation, therefore, both in its origins and in its reproduction.

This, however, is a very abstract presentation. This is because in practice accumulation and the struggles that condition are always mediated by the entry of agents into more concrete structures of social relations that are hard to substitute for. In the abstract the accumulation process is mediated by exchange and by bargaining over the terms of that exchange. In practice, however, those relations are rarely of the one-off sort celebrated by advocates of an unrestrained market. For some positions at least labor turnover will be something that firms want to minimize. In some instances this will extend to virtually the whole workforce such are the advantages of learning on the job. Accordingly practices are put in place, including ones of internal promotion, regular pay raises, designed to attach workers to the firm. From the worker’s standpoint, on the other hand, the social
network of friends and relatives through which the vast majority learns of job possibilities tends to lock them into particular, local labor markets.

Similar logics apply to the relations firms develop with other firms. There is a division of labor into which they slot but it is rare that it can survive purely through market mechanisms; otherwise the vast literature on corporate governance would make little sense. Rather firms discover, through a trial and error process who can be trusted to deliver on time, who has acceptable quality controls and who respects the detail of contracts even though market conditions may change. Even then some mechanism of overall superintendence from outside the firms involved may be required to give them the confidence to make investments tailored to the needs of their clients. In turn that particular structure becomes necessary to the ability of firms to compete in wider markets.² (ref Lorenz).

These necessary relations and structures of social relations have a geography. Firms get locked into particular labor markets in virtue of their dependence on workers with the necessary skills and years of on the job learning. Workers find that the networks on which they rely to find new jobs are not portable. Divisions of labor are always spatial divisions of labor, stretching relations over space and forming some sort of identifiable network. What Andy Wood and I called the local economic development network, mediating inward investment into particular areas, connected the utilities, local chambers of commerce and local governments, each with a particular set of responsibilities and obligated to do so through relations of trust; and if those didn’t work, through the refusal of the utilities to act as gatekeeper for them. In the same way, there is no way in which a developer can operate in a metropolitan housing market without track records with both banks and builders; which is why, again, housing development is typically a very local, as they say ‘hands on’ business.

Accumulation is predicated on production and production is always with respect to particular, geographically defined, markets – local, regional, national, international, etc. –

² For a fascinating example see Lorenz (1993).
in which firms go head to head, competing in terms of cost, product and playing one set of workers off against another. The necessary relations and structures into which firms and workers enter, therefore, are always with respect to what might be called spaces of competition. The space of competition of the London’s financial service area, the City and its offshoot at Canary Wharf, is both national and international; that of many developers is typically a particular urban region, and so on.

These claims now allow us to reach an important interim conclusion. On the one hand we can see how firms and workers get embedded in relatively fixed necessary relations of a highly concrete sort – particular workers, particular lenders, particular suppliers and so on; relations, in other words, which are non-portable or at the very least, not easy to reconstitute elsewhere. On the other hand they compete in spaces of competition the geography of which cannot be assumed to be stable and unvarying over time. Capitals develop at different rates. Some will be able to take advantage of new technologies ahead of their competitors; others may benefit from innovation in the product itself. An entirely new set of industries may emerge in one part of the region pulling investment, workers and markets for non-basic goods towards it and away from others. In short, capital’s geography gets transformed over time. But we should recognize that this variability has a scale specificity; change may be more apparent at some scales than at others.

The subsequent contradiction between agents locked into particular ensembles of relations and the volatility of the space economy is, of course, is at the center of Harvey’s (1985a) geopolitics of capitalism and it is one he draws on in his attempt to define a relatively autonomous urban politics. What needs to be emphasized here, however, is the way in which this contradiction provides a necessary condition for the formation of yet other structures of social relations, bringing together various agents, in order to protect market share, values in place, employment, tax bases or whatever. The ability of workers to sustain wage levels comes to depend on the formation of labor unions covering increasingly large areas with a view to taking wage competition out of firm calculus. The welfare state, on the other hand, provides a means of pooling risks: as employment falls in a region so do taxes while the flow of unemployment benefits increases; elsewhere,
where regions are experiencing growth, taxes increase and central government expenditure goes down. Capital has its own repertoire of coping strategies: spreading risks by entering new markets, price supports, regulated prices, or simply buying out the firms that threaten their pre-eminence.

Harvey emphasizes class alliances though he is clearly aware that this is a highly contingent matter. Nevertheless, the formation of growth coalitions bringing together both representatives of local business and sometimes of labor, is indeed a common strategy. It embeds agents dependent on particular urban markets in wider structures of social relations like the local economic development network I referred to earlier. Stone’s idea of urban regimes and the importance of understandings between different agents also underlines the importance of these new, more defensive forms of structure.

So in a context of contradiction between the structures into which firms and workers enter in order to facilitate the realization of class interests and the unpredictability of the geography of the space economy, new structures come into being. Some are clearly linked to class-specific goals. Still others are more consciously organized around the defense of supposedly common interests in the future of a particular place and come with an appropriate discursive embellishment recalling Allen and Cochrane’s claims about the political construction of regions, though in this instance applying to cities.3

With respect to agents embedded in particular urban regions, however, what are also being constructed are structures of relations at more global scales, often at the scale of the particular space of competition in question. This is clear in the strategies of workers as they attempt to take wages out of inter-firm competition by organizing across relevant spaces of competition, whether it be national, international, or in the interesting case of Justice for Janitors, across particular urban regions. But the same applies to Harvey’s class-alliances. If a growth coalition is to hope to achieve its ends then new connections have to be secured at the national level so as to shift regulatory practices and fiscal flows

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3 Emphatically, I am not arguing that the territorializing and class moments are alternatives of an either-or nature. All class strategies are about realizing interests in particular places, just as territorial ones are inevitably unstable because of the mix of class interests that they are supposed to satisfy.
to its advantage. The so-called struggle between Coldbelt and Sunbelt in the US is a case in point. For it was not so much about regions as it was about the future of particular urban economies in the Northeast and Midwest hard hit by de-industrialization. Through organizing at a regional level, however, and forming a bi-partisan coalition, they were much more likely to secure their ends than otherwise. And of course American state structures, through their radical decentralization of formal power, lend themselves to that sort of construction. The crucial general point, though, is the way in which structures of relations necessary to protecting more local level relations are constructed at larger geographic scales through bottom-up initiatives, often proceeding through some sort of inter-urban or inter-local coalition of forces. But there are structures that always work to the advantage of some agents in some localities at the expense of others elsewhere.

What therefore are the consequences for the urban? Clearly events in a city, whether singular or repetitive, are not necessarily of the city or even of cities in the plural. Rather we should consider conceptualizing them as conditioned by the intersection at particular points in space of diverse necessary relations and structures that exist at very different scales. Some of these will indeed be co-extensive with the urban region, as in Harvey’s structured coherences. Some will be much smaller. They might be formed by the different agents that come together behind agendas aimed at inserting a particular municipality in an improved position in the urban region’s geographic division of consumption: land owners, developers with plans for the area, local government and possibly some resident organizations. Some will be much larger, including new regulatory structures at the level of the central state, like, indeed, the welfare state. Each of them, however, and regardless of geographic scale, can be regarded as empowering agents in some way but unequally and each with very different objectives in mind.

**Implications for Thinking about the Urban**

So how should we think of the urban? In the first place it should be seen as a political construct, a slogan even, a means to securing alliances around a contingent sense of shared interests in the future of a particular urban region or something called ‘the urban’ more generally. Harvey’s idea of class alliances comes close to the case of particular
urban regions: the coalitions put together behind agendas for a Greater this-or-that, but always and emphatically a coalition, and therefore for agents in their class roles and not in fact for a particular ‘city’ as some homogeneous entity, whatever the propaganda might proclaim. There is also the broad category, ‘the urban’ as in ‘the Department of Housing and Urban Development’ or ‘urban problems.’ But again, I’m going to suggest that this is nothing more than a convenience, a seemingly neutral cover for a huge variety of agents that have interests, but only contingently convergent ones, in what happens in cities: fiscally needy central cities, social workers, teachers’ unions, the NAACP, and banks anxious about real estate loans. Cities always need help. Or do they?

Second, and picking up on Allen and Cochrane once again, we can see that this construction depends on the collaboration of agents whose necessary relations may be but are not necessarily confined to a particular city or the urban in general. Rather they can be ones which embrace both cities and what lies outside them and where classifying them as urban serves no useful purpose. Mass transit might seem a quintessentially urban issue; certainly that was the way it was presented when Californian voters went to the polls in 1970 to vote on diverting some portion of the gasoline sales tax away from constructing freeways to support bus and light rail service. Regardless, it was one which raised an intense interest among national corporations with stakes in the low density urban pattern that is so typically American: the banks with their mortgage commitments, real estate developers, and, of course, the gasoline companies.4 Defending the sprawl that is facilitated by urban freeway construction was a matter of defending a necessary condition of their continuing profitability: not a contingent relation, therefore, but a necessary one, and one in which large amounts of money had been tied up in the form of mortgages, oil refineries, automobile plants and the like, still awaiting valorization.

In these regards the urban seems no different from other political constructs like the neighborhood, the local, the region, the nation or the global. Certainly there are collections of buildings and people, which, given a certain density threshold, we recognize as cities, and events occur in them, though the idea of a threshold that can

4 Or much as Walker and Large (1975) would have predicted.
never be anything other than arbitrary raises awkward questions. But we should hesitate to talk about those events as necessarily ‘urban.’ Rather there may be advantages to thinking of them as conjunctures of necessary relations, and having scalar forms that are highly variable. Consider the following cases in more detail:

1. Urban planning: Land use zoning and subdivision regulations are practices which seem to have to do quite thoroughly with cities and with the interests of property owners in neighborhoods. In fact they have a history which is only in part associated with concerns about protecting land values against the externalities so rampant in the relatively high density environments of cities. In the US, their initial weakness came to a head in the late ’twenties and early ’thirties with the emergence of what Weiss has called ‘community builders’: developers who invested considerable amounts of money in providing infrastructure – highways, storm sewers, utility connections – but who then found the values so created threatened not just by ‘inappropriate’ developments nearby but by the so-called ‘curbstoners’ who put virtually no money into their developments but, as a result, could sell their lots very cheaply. Salvation was sought through local government but was not forthcoming. So attention switched to pressing for federal legislation through the activities of the community builders’ lobbying group, the National Association of Real Estate Boards (NAREB).

Their big opportunity came with the creation of a new federal agency in 1934, the Federal Housing Agency or FHA. The FHA’s mission was less that of housing and still less that of urban development. Rather it was more one of boosting domestic demand as a way of dragging the US economy out of the depression. The method was to be federal insurance of mortgage loans so as to stimulate the housing market. NAREB grasped the possibilities. Any insurance program wants to minimize its losses. Demanding beefed up subdivision and zoning regulations from cities was one way of doing that. Without those regulations, it would be harder for local governments to secure new housing development. And NAREB wrote the appropriate clauses into the legislation.
So in this act of what might reasonably be called institutional construction for cities there were certainly necessary relations specific to cities. The community builders were anxious not just about their neighborhoods but also, given their rootedness in particular metropolitan housing markets, the magnitude of that market itself; the curbstoners weren’t helping and had to be eliminated. On the other hand, these weren’t the only necessary relations in play. The FHA had its own agendas and securing the insurability of housing through appropriate zoning and subdivision regulations was one of them.

2. The future of inner suburbs: The intense jurisdictional fragmentation of metropolitan areas in the US is well known. The typical pattern is one of a large central city surrounded by independent suburbs. Some of those suburbs will be contiguous to unincorporated land. This means that they can continue to expand through annexation. Others will be already surrounded by yet other municipalities and so do not have that option. These are the so-called ‘inner’ suburbs, in contrast to the ‘outer’ ones which are not cut off from the possibility of continuing expansion. This latter quality is important. New real estate development, whether in the form of shopping centers, industrial parks or residential development typically requires large expanses of land, preferably in the form of greenfield sites. Inner suburbs lack those sites. Property can be demolished and larger sites created but assembling the land and then getting rid of any contamination can be very expensive. This has important implications for local governments and for professional property owners.

For local governments it is a question of tax base. Revenue needs have soared since they were first created. Resident expectations have expanded to include community centers, arts centers, centers for the aged and superior schools. The advantage of non-residential uses like large shopping centers and industrial parks is that, essentially, they can subsidize the residents; they are taxed but their own requirements in terms of local government expenditures are quite modest. So every local government wants non-residential uses. The situation of the outer suburbs is obviously more favorable to achieving this end. They have these uses on a scale to be envied by inner suburban local governments. Furthermore, the availability of this largesse means that the local school
district can afford facilities and teachers at a level that ups the ante elsewhere in the
metropolitan area, including the inner suburbs, whose revenue needs are therefore
expanded still further. For professional property owners, on the other hand, it is a
question of rents. With the development of the outer suburbs on the back of new forms of
real estate development, including ‘new concepts in living’ promoted by residential
developers, the demand for their property diminishes and so in consequence do their
rents.

These interests in the future of the so-called ‘inner suburbs’ have converged around an
agenda designed to alter the balance of new development in metropolitan areas more in
their direction. They want limits on the ability of the outer suburbs to annex land along
with a shift in the geography of state highway spending: away, in other words, from the
outer suburbs with their outer belts and state highway widenings towards the inner
suburbs where the money can be used to relieve congestion. But clearly these are not
things that can be handled by metropolitan areas. Accordingly state governments have to
be involved.

In Ohio\textsuperscript{5} this has led to the formation of a coalition of inner suburbs across the state’s
major metropolitan areas known as The First Suburbs Consortium. The goal is one of
bringing pressure to bear on the state around the objectives outlined above. Thus far their
success has been limited. What relief they have obtained has come from a very different
direction. Annexation is an issue not just for them but also for the townships from which
the unincorporated land is annexed. Their concern is one of the resultant deletion of
property from their tax rolls. They have their own organization of township trustees (the
Ohio Township Association) and have successfully brought pressure to bear on the state
to alter the rules governing annexation. These make it more expensive for the annexing
municipality and less certain than it used to be.

We can note several things here. First to call the ‘inner suburb’ issue an ‘urban’ issue
hides much of its essence. It is certainly unfolding within metropolitan areas, but the idea

\textsuperscript{5} For a more general discussion of the problem and politics of the inner suburbs, see Orfield (2002).
of some struggle between territorial entities is hardly justified. Rather it is local governments and property owners, both in inner and outer suburbs, who are engaged and it is a struggle around the geography of fiscal resources and rents. Landlords in inner suburbs want to see their rents increased. Those land owners in the outer suburbs and areas to be annexed have bet on future development which, depending on the resolution of the issue, may or may not occur. This does not mean to say that the interested parties have not tried to form cross-class coalitions with a view to building support and to making it something it isn’t. Home owners are told that they have a stake in this through their home values, though apparently apartment dwellers aren’t part of the picture. So it is made to seem about the future of a particular place rather than the stakes of particular agents in an unfolding process of accumulation.

Second, the relations through which the outcome of the struggle will be determined are in no way purely ‘urban’ ones. Some are ‘urban’ in the sense of connecting agents and various conditions within the city, and are necessary in character which accounts for the fact of struggle: a classic case of Harvey’s contradiction between fixity and mobility. Local governments depend on a local tax base and can’t move their boundaries at will. Some professional property owners will be dependent purely on rents from within a particular jurisdiction. Still others, however, are ‘non-urban.’ In order to achieve mitigation the First Suburbs Consortium has to approach the state, since it is the state that has control over state highway spending and annexation law. The state itself might be regarded as having an interest in the outcome through a connection between suburban development and state tax revenues, and this might swing it in favor of the outer suburbs where the land necessary to the creation of new industrial or office parks can be put together both more easily and more cheaply.

3. London’s future as a world city: London is commonly defined as a world or global city and features prominently in the world city literature; a literature that engages enthusiastically with the idea of the city as a defensible analytic and theoretical construct. Its claim to world city status rests on the global significance of its financial services and

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6 In developing this example I am indebted to discussions with Delphine Ancien. See Ancien (2008).
related business service industries. However, of late questions have been raised about the city’s ability to maintain this exalted position in the geographic division of labor. The problem is one of housing costs. The expansion of the financial services industry has, along with housing supply constraints, led to a rapid escalation of housing costs. These in turn threaten to undermine the future prospects of financial service firms. This might be through wage demands to match housing costs that they are not willing to meet. It could also be a result of the so-called ‘key worker’ problem. As a result of high housing costs London’s boroughs have increasing difficulty in hiring the workers who teach, collect the garbage, and provide other essential services like fire protection; which in turn makes London a less desirable place in which to live for many, including those employed in financial services. At any rate this has been seen as a problem by them and they have spearheaded efforts to mitigate it.

This has taken the form of a mobilization of the Greater London Authority behind potential solutions, most of them requiring some central government intervention. Some of these are infrastructural in character: the provision of a major new east-west railway line to widen the city’s employment field; and planning for a major expansion of housing to the east of the city (the so-called Thames Gateway project). Attention has also focused on a major supply constraint: the unwillingness of the individual boroughs that compose the Greater London Authority to approve new housing projects, particularly those aimed at people with lower incomes. The solution there has been central government legislation allowing the Authority to override borough decisions.

So far this seems like an ‘urban’ issue; it has to do with the future viability and growth of a city. But there are also doubts. First, should the future of London be reduced to the success of its banks, securities firms, currency and bond traders, insurance market and the like? Its economic base seems much broader than that. The large numbers of people employed by the government might actually benefit from the decline in housing prices that would surely follow a serious slump in financial services. The same goes for the remnants of a once vigorous industrial sector. So what is this future which the Greater
London Authority, with the prompting of the City of London and its lobbying groups, has pinned to its masthead?

Second, London, or at least ‘London’ as defined by the Greater London Authority and its support base among the banks and so forth, has clearly become a ‘national’ issue. It had to turn to the central government to secure relief and the central government has been responsive. London’s financial services industry is seen as a major contributor to the country’s balance of payments; one of the United Kingdom’s ‘winners’ subsequent to globalization. On the other hand, by involving the national government, the Greater London Authority and its private support base has risked entanglement in a much broader politics of geographically uneven development. London and its surrounding region, the Southeast, is already, and by far, the wealthiest region in the United Kingdom and much has been written about inter-regional inequalities in the press. So should the central government be continuing to support the area in the way that it is when the needs of other parts of the country are equally if not more pressing? The Greater London Authority’s response has been to claim that it is contributing more to the country in the form of taxes than it gets back in central government expenditures. In other words, London is not just an ‘urban’ issue, it is also a ‘national’ issue and it seems a ‘regional’ one too.7

4. The War on Poverty: The War on Poverty ‘waged’ by the federal government of the US in the nineteen-sixties is a very different sort of issue. This is because its ‘urban’ credentials seem to be so much weaker; but arguably it is no less an ‘urban’ politics than that surrounding the future of London or of the inner suburbs of metropolitan areas in the US. But again, it is far more than that.8

Its origins are to be found in postwar agrarian revolution in the Deep South and subsequent movement of African-Americans to Northern cities in search of work. The South was then very different, testifying to the high levels of geographically uneven development in the US at that time. It was much poorer than the rest of the country,

7 Doreen Massey (2007) is very good on these issues and although it is not her objective, the argument in her book supports the claims made in this paper.
8 The essential reference here is Piven and Cloward (1971).
educational standards were very low, particularly for African-Americans and the social safety net much more poorly developed. This meant two things: First, once arrived in the cities of the North they were poorly prepared to compete in job markets there, so unemployment rates were high and they were confined to the worst housing; and second, they were not inclined to go back to the South since levels of income support through programs like Aid to Families with Dependent Children were much more substantial.

Simultaneously, though with more complex roots, the civil rights movement was gathering momentum. It helped de-legitimize racist attitudes and institutions and the ‘place’ to which African-Americans were seemingly confined. In combination with urban living conditions, it prepared the way for the so-called ghetto riots of the early 60s. These gained massive media publicity. The federal response was varied but a major one was the War on Poverty. This comprised various welfare programs aimed for the most part at central city African-Americans: so a national program aimed at what might reasonably be defined as an ‘urban’ issue. Its support base, however, was quite varied. It certainly could not be confined to national pressure groups like the NAACP.

Some central city business interests and local government certainly found it working to their advantage. This is because the War on Poverty was a way of diverting value through central cities, bolstering property values and real estate assessments. At a time when the central city-suburban fiscal disparities problem was being keenly felt this was all the more welcome (ref. USGP publication). There were other calculations, however: notably those of the national Democratic Party which, coincidentally, found itself occupying the Presidency and forming a majority in both houses of Congress. Its problems were electoral and imminent, and the War on Poverty was seen as a salvation.

The rise of the civil rights movement was a threat to the future of the Democratic Party’s support base in the Deep South. Historically the Democratic Party had been an odd sort of coalition. It brought together the urban working class of the major industrial cities with white racist elements in the South. But for whatever reason the more liberatory, left-leaning wing gained the upper hand and this committed it to supporting the civil rights
movement, however tentatively at first. This meant a radical transformation of the country’s electoral geography with the Republican Party attracting white Southern support. This was Nixon’s ‘Southern strategy’ in the 1968 Presidential campaign, but the shift had begun some years before then.

The problem for the Democratic Party, therefore, was how to make up for this loss? Attaching the growing number of African-Americans in Northern cities seemed a promising route. Often they were people who had no previous party identification since over much of the South they had essentially been disenfranchised. Furthermore, the possible electoral gains were magnified by the fact that the Northern states in which they now found themselves were populous and therefore attractive electoral plums in Presidential races. So once again, what might have seemed like an ‘urban’ issue proved to be much more complex in its necessary conditions. Some interests in central cities, including local government and local Democratic parties might gain, though the expansion of the ghetto would generate antagonism on the part of some white voters. But what attracts attention is the role of the federal government and that of a movement which was neither urban nor rural, but national; merely committed to the emancipation of African-Americans wherever they lived.

**Conclusions**

The importance of the debate about the urban question should not be underestimated. It is not just about the status of the concept of the city, its analytic and theoretical defensibility, but about how we should conceptualize any politics of space. Saunders sees the society-space relation as a contingent one; there are, he claims, no urban fusions between spatial form and social process. But ultimately, and having rejected the proposals of others, in his own conception of the urban question he is forced to recognize the unity between space and society: how inevitably social relations are spatial relations and vice versa. In his case this is through placing at the center of his understanding a recognition of the significance of a scalar division of labor of the state and central-local tensions subsequent thereto.
Harvey is far less ambivalent. His mobilization of marxist notions of totality is apparent in his strikingly original arguments about the spatial moments of the accumulation process and how they are a necessary feature of it. Accordingly, the contradictions of the accumulation process have a spatial expression. The necessary fixity of agents, their dependence on local conditions, brings them into conflict with the spatial flux of the wider capitalist space economy generating what he has called a ‘geopolitics of capitalism’ which he subsequently drew on in attempting to define a specifically urban politics.

The errors in the latter move are in my view twofold. First, there is an exaggerated idea of the coherence of social relations within urban regions. There are indeed some relations that are specific to particular cities; something underlined by the literature on growth coalitions and the interests fundamental to their formation. There are still others, however, that cannot be classified as such. For some, so called ‘urban fortunes’ (Logan and Molotch 1987) may be as bound up with the strategies of a particular employer balancing production sites in different locations as with some spurious, universally-shared position in an inter-urban division of labor – as in the claims put forward by London’s financial services industry.

The second problem is the exclusion from his vision of a whole area of what we typically accept as urban politics. This is expressed among other things by the competition among neighborhoods and local governments for positions in an urban region’s geographic division of consumption: a struggle analogous to that which Harvey sees occurring among urban regions, but involving different geopolitical units for which the horizon of constraint and possibility is defined by the urban region itself. On the other hand, perhaps this is a politics of neighborhood? Perhaps there are more generic scalar issues in play here? Local / globals at different absolute scales? And anyway, does it really matter what we call it so long as we recognize the nature of the processes that are generating these labels?
It is the fact of that generation and its political nature which is the starting point for John Allen and Allan Cochrane’s contribution. Their concern is the region as a political construct, but I have argued that their claims apply equally to the construction of cities and to that of the urban tout court. Furthermore, and as they say, there is nothing necessarily regional about the agents doing the constructing and again, this seems applicable to the urban case. All manner of relations are drawn on, some urban and some straddling the boundary between the urban and elsewhere; relations that are, in Martin Vanier’s (2008) words, inter-territorial. However, while Allen and Cochrane point towards a solution to the urban question (and the regional question) they don’t provide it. This is because of the significance of particular sorts of relations that I have defined as necessary: essential to the ability of agents to realize their objectives. When we combine this with Harvey’s insistence on the centrality of the accumulation process and how this unfolds over space, re-imagining the urban and moving on, in effect, beyond the urban becomes possible.

In the first place this is because in the course of the accumulation process firms, workers develop all manner of concrete relations that are hard to substitute for. These relations may be internal to cities, as with those who participate in growth coalitions, but they may not be; the so-called branch plant town is a case in point. These relations become problematic in the context of the dynamism of the space economy, at whatever scale it is defined for particular agents, and lay down the conditions for the construction of new relations. This may pave the way for the construction of class alliances and the elaboration of some concept of the city as having ‘interests.’ As growth coalitions emerge in other cities, so the pressure will be on the developers, the local construction industry and labor unions, locally owned and operated retailers and banks to likewise organize, on pain of seeing the city’s economic base dwindle. Alternatively it may be through structures of a more global character that agents dependent on accumulation in particular places seek to defend themselves against the vagaries of the space economy. Workers may be dependent on a particular labor market, but through the development of the welfare state they acquire some protection against regional downturns.
Yet this is to oversimplify what are often far more complex networks of relations, and far more complex political geographies. London’s housing crisis is seen by the City\textsuperscript{9} and the Greater London Authority as a threat to the future expansion of the financial services industry. Creating new structures of metropolitan governance through which to override the exclusionary policies of the constituent boroughs, however, means that the national government has to get involved. This is because it has to be the source of the enabling legislation. But it too has an interest in London’s financial services, which is the reason it has been sympathetic to the requests of the Greater London Authority. This is because it sees their international activities as essential to the health of the British balance of payments. This is also why it has decided to allocate sums of money to the expansion of the London area’s physical infrastructure, including housing. This has attracted negative attention from elsewhere in the country where defending local economies against the threats of unemployment and devaluation has the same resonance as it does in London. The sheer weight of London in the national economy and the pressures on housing and job markets there mean that government monetary policy is also highly divisive. To reign in inflationary tendencies in London which threaten the country as a whole, interest rates go up; but this means that they are too high for regional economies elsewhere in the country which are far from bumping up against labor and housing limitations. So London becomes a regional issue – ‘the North is being neglected’ – at the same time as it is evidently a national issue (‘the balance of payments’) and an urban issue (‘extraordinary shortages of affordable housing in London’). Whether one adopts the regional or national or urban banner in defining the issue, therefore, seems to depend on the nature of one’s (place-specific) interests.

My conclusion is, therefore, that instead of talking about urban, regional, national, etc., it might be more useful to talk about multiple local / globals, each defined in relative terms. Any event, whether seemingly urban, neighborhood, regional or whatever, can usefully be conceived in terms of conjunctures of various local-globals, as bringing together relations and conditions with very different scalar forms. It may be constructed as ‘urban’ or ‘regional’ but as Allen and Cochrane have urged this is a political process. How it is

\textsuperscript{9} A metaphor for London’s internationally oriented financial services industries.
defined is highly contingent. One could say that the future of the welfare state in Belgium is an urban issue; unemployment is particularly high in the urban labor markets of Southern Belgium. But in a context of regional difference and an intensified impetus towards independence for Flanders, that is not how it is being defined. In other words: All that is ‘urban’ melteth into air.
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