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Urban Theory

A critical introduction to
power, cities and urbanism
in the 21st century



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What is urban theory?

Learning objectives

- To understand the conceptual dilemmas that come with attempts to define 'the urban'
- To see how classical scholars have thought about the urban and rural in the context of modernity
- To understand what 'theory' is and learn about the various epistemological and ontological perspectives that inform theory

Urban studies and urban theory

People are entitled to be confused, even a little intimidated, by the way towns and cities are studied today. Contemporary courses in urban studies cover just about every conceivable aspect of the urban experience. Some approaches are relatively self-contained and coherent, but most tend to shade into each other. In an age in which more than half of the global population is living in urban areas for the first time in human history, there are no easily defined conceptual boundaries that can allow us to designate everything on one side of an imaginary line as urban studies and everything on the other side as something else. Neither are urban studies the property of a single academic discipline. Claims are made for a distinctive urban sociology, an urban politics, geography, economics, planning and so on, but in practice it is hard to distinguish one from another. The 'urban' components of these disciplines are not very self-contained either. It is difficult, for example, to say what differentiates urban geography from human geography, or urban sociology from more general social theory. And it is far from clear which of the standard academic disciplines 'owns' the

more specific subject matter that often surfaces in the literature; urban architecture, conservation, design, ecology, economic development, environment, landscape, management, morphology, policy and so on.

Urban subdisciplines

Urban studies are eclectic; they bring together and build upon knowledge, understandings and approaches from a wide range of subject areas. Recounting his experience of urban sociology as an undergraduate in 1970, Peter Saunders could remember little coherence in his chosen course of study other than the fact that 'if you could find it happening in cities, then you could find it discussed somewhere in the ... literature' (Saunders, 1986: 7). Little has changed since Saunders' undergraduate days in this respect. If anything, urban studies have become still more eclectic and fragmented. So, for example, it has been argued that Saunders' field concerns itself with the following: how the urban experience feels; if and how places acquire distinctive identities; how urban life is affected by a person's gender, class, and ethnic group or the sort of housing he/she lives in; the effect of different urban environments on social relationships and bonds; the history of urbanisation; the 'spatial structures' of cities; the nature of, and solutions to, urban problems; and political participation and local governance (Savage, Warde & Ward, 2003: 2–3). And that is just urban sociology.

A list of issues claimed to be central to urban geography is equally eclectic and shows a fair degree of overlap: the causes of urbanisation; the national and international urban hierarchy; the 'urban system'; the determinants of land use within cities; urban investment patterns; town planning; urban transport; social and residential areas within cities; the role of social class, gender, ethnicity and sexual identity in urban affairs; the problems of inner cities, peripheral urban areas and suburbs; urban policy 'solutions' to urban problems; images of cities; and cities in the developing world and post-communist eastern Europe (Carter, 1995; Short, 1984, 1996; Herbert & Thomas, 1982; Johnston, 1980). Urban politics, on the other hand, spans issues such as the role of elites and regimes in urban development, intergovernmental relations and urban policies, the role of bureaucratic and political leadership in urban change, the autonomy of city governments, citizenship, urban social movements, gender and race relations in cities, and the design and operation of the institutions of urban governance (Judge et al, 1995; Davies & Imbroscio, 2009). A resurgent urban economics, on the other hand, concerns itself with the urbanisation process, alternative approaches to locational analysis, the characteristics of urban markets (housing, transportation, facilities), urban labour markets, the behaviour of urban governments and their implications for urban public economics, and the quality of urban life (Arnott & McMillen, 2006; Mills, 2004).

The fact that urban studies do not have an obvious centre of gravity or an essential and shared core of ideas has occasionally been seen as a source of concern by some scholars, particularly amongst those who argue that they should play a role in underpinning desirable economic, social, environmental, cultural or political change, however defined. For at least the last 40 years there have been sporadic but fierce debates about the nature, status, relevance and usefulness of urban studies. It has been argued, particularly following periods of economic crisis and social and political upheaval, that urban studies, and by implication the conceptual tools on which they draw, are 'in crisis'.

Thus, for example, some of the most noted contributions to the evolution of 'urban theory' (e.g. Castells, 1972; Harvey, 1973) have resolutely rejected what their authors perceived to be the dominant, pre-existing paradigm(s) within urban studies and argued for fresh thinking that could overturn the scholarly status quo and, ideally, help transform the broader conditions that gave rise to them. The (urban) impacts of the global financial crisis in 2008, and the wave of austerity budgeting by national governments that followed in its wake, witnessed a similar outpouring of (self-) criticism along the lines that 'theory', and the work based upon it, no longer seemed to underpin the political action that is necessary to achieving substantive change, even when it aspired to do so (see Swyngedouw, 2009: 603–4). Similarly, as noted in the Foreword, claims have occasionally been made that urban studies are somehow 'captured' by public funding that is only made available for 'practical' research that is unthreatening to policy elites (Forrest, Henderson, & Williams, 1982) and that some of its key exponents are therefore 'neutralised' and incorporated into closed, elite policy circles, thereby providing legitimacy rather than knowledge that may challenge received wisdoms and conventional practices (Boland, 2007).

It must be noted, however, that neither the eclecticism of urban studies nor the concerns that are sometimes expressed as to whether they are effective in fulfilling a perceived 'mission' seem to affect their popularity. Their appeal to students and their importance for academics and policy-makers has, we would argue, continued to grow.

Metaphorical cities

Urban studies do not just cover a broad canvas. They utilise many different concepts in exploring their wide-ranging subject matter. One indication of the sheer variety of approaches upon which they draw is the range of characterisations and metaphors academics have used to understand and describe cities and processes of urban change. Cities are analysed in terms of their size and status. There has been work on global (Sassen, 1991), world (Hall, 1984; Friedmann, 1986) and mega-cities (Gilbert, 1996), as well as regional (Calthorpe & Fulton, 2001),

provincial (Skeldon, 1997), intermediate (Bolay & Rabinovich, 2004), small and medium-sized cities (Erickcek & McKinney, 2006). Cities are seen as characterising different epochs and stages of development. There are old (Ashworth & Tunbridge, 1999), new (Mullins, 1990), modern and postmodern cities (Watson & Gibson, 1995); imperial and postimperial, colonial and postcolonial cities (Driver & Gilbert, 1999; Betts, Ross, & Telkamp, 1985); pre-industrial, industrial and postindustrial cities (Savitch, 1988); yesterday's, today's and tomorrow's cities (Hall, 2002); 'successful' cities in the sunbelt and 'declining' cities in the rustbelt. Cities and their neighbourhoods are distinguished according to location. There are inner cities, outer cities, suburban or edge cities (Garreau, 1991), central and peripheral cities, frontier and border cities. Cities are said to specialise in different functions: there are technopoles (Castells & Hall, 1994); commercial, manufacturing, tourist (Judd & Fainstein, 1999) and service cities; airport, maritime and university cities. Politically and ideologically, cities are characterised as communist or capitalist (Smith & Feagin, 1987), socialist and post-socialist, liberal, progressive (Clavel, 1986), conservative or pluralist. There are public and private cities. On the outer edge of our perceptions there are symbolic or virtual cities and 'the city as text' (Donald, 1992).

The variety of city types described in the urban literature is matched by the range of experiences cities are claimed to undergo. We hear, for example, about urban crisis (Cloward & Piven, 1975), decline, decay and poverty. Cities are said to be divided (Fainstein, Gordon, & Harloe, 1992), unequal (Hamnett, 2003), sick, unfairly structured (Badcock, 1984), heartless, captive (Harloe, 1977), dependent (Kantor & David, 1988; Kantor, 1995), dispossessed, ungovernable (Cannato, 2001), unheavenly (Banfield, 1970) and contested (Mollenkopf, 1983). They are, or have been, in recession, in stress (Gottdiener, 1986), in trouble, in revolt, at risk or under siege (Graham, 2011). At the same time, we hear of urban innovation (Clark, 1994), redevelopment, regeneration, renewal, renaissance and revitalisation. Cities are, or can be, healthy (Ashton, 1992), liveable, intelligent (Komninos, 2012), humane (Short, 1989), just (Fainstein, 2010), ideal (Eaton, 2001), safe, creative (Cooke & Lazzarotti, 2008), accessible, good, free, compact (Jenks & Burgess, 2000) or sustainable (Haughton & Hunter, 2003). There are cities that have shrunk (Glock, 2006; Hannemann, 2003; Galster, 2012a) but refused to die (Keating, 1988), and others that have been reborn (Levitt, 1987), saved or transformed. There are utopian possibilities: cities that are perfect (Gilbert, 1991), heavenly, ideal, magical (Davis, 2001), beautiful, triumphant, radiant or visionary. In between urban heaven and hell, cities have more prosaic attributes: they are ordinary (Robinson, 2006), planned (Corden, 1977), informational (Castells, 1989), cultural, rational, organic, developing, globalising (Marcuse & van Kempen, 2000), emerging or evolving. There are cities in transition, in competition (Brotchie, 1995) or on the move.

This brief illustration of the enormous variety in the way cities and urban processes are characterised is enough to warn us that there is no consensus in urban studies, not just about what is the appropriate focus for analysis but on the broader question of whether towns and cities are ‘good’ for human life. On the one hand, cities are seen as quintessential sites where freedom of lifestyle or subcultures can be practised; as places where multiple ways of being can each find their own niches. On the other, they are also seen, in what Lofland (1998) describes as the anti-urban discourse, as places of problems, of vice and moral decay. Especially in the US, the countryside, with its natural wilderness and its ostensible freedom, provides a pastoral image in contrast to the cold, anonymous, rational city, as is visible in the Hudson River landscape paintings of artists such as Thomas Cole (Figure 1.1).

Partly this can be explained by the different places that the process of urbanisation occupies within distinct national histories. In both the relatively ‘young’ US and the older UK, the city has tended to be associated, rightly or wrongly, with industrialisation and with the ‘shocking’ and socially dislocating aspects of early industrial cities such as Manchester and Chicago. In areas of the world with longer, pre-industrial urban histories – Greece and China are good examples, as are the principle pre-industrial trading centres of Europe – the absence of such a strong association between urbanity and industrialisation encourages a different ‘take’ on the city as a centre, variously, of democracy, enlightenment,



Figure 1.1 *A View of the Mountain Pass Called the Notch of the White Mountains (Crawford Notch)*, Thomas Cole, 1839

Source: Wikimedia Commons:

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/93/Thomas_Cole_-_A_View_of_the_Mountain_Pass_Called_the_Notch_of_the_White_Mountains.jpg

innovation and technological and artistic development. Partly, though, it is about radically different ways of seeing. Storper and Manville (2006: 1269) summarise the persistence of double vision when suggesting that:

Urban studies have always been shot through with a curious mix of pessimism and utopianism. For almost as long as we have had cities, we have had predictions of their decline and, for almost as long as we have had talk of decline, we have had prophecies of resurgence.

In using metaphors to describe the conditions of cities and how they change, urban commentators necessarily draw upon a more or less coherent set of concepts; that is, upon one or more theories. Take the notion of the 'dependent city'. Having invented this label, Paul Kantor (Kantor & David, 1988; Kantor, 1995) naturally had to say what he meant by cities and who or what he considered them dependent upon. In fact Kantor equated cities with city governments. He explained how decision-makers in US city governments cannot do as they please but are dependent in the sense that their choices are constrained by their need to take into account the actions and preferences of other decision-makers in the business community and in state and federal governments. Kantor's argument therefore drew upon theories about the relationship between levels of government ('intergovernmental theory') and between the public and private sectors ('political economy'). In Kantor's case, the choice of theoretical perspectives was made explicit. He made reference to a number of theories he felt could not entirely answer the questions he posed but, in combination, shed helpful conceptual light upon them.

The role of theory in urban studies

Not all commentators within urban studies are as obliging as Kantor when it comes to outlining the theoretical foundations of their work. Indeed urban studies, especially in the UK and Europe, are sometimes saddled with a reputation for occupying a 'theory-free zone' by some critics precisely because their exponents are said not to draw explicitly or fruitfully upon relevant theories and concepts, or at least not enough. It is also argued that literatures which conceptualise the urban form and change on a theoretical level find little resonance with either the literature that studies social problems in the city or those scholars who work outside of academia in policy-oriented professions. Here, research is being used, and this research is increasingly conducted by consultancy firms and semi-commercial university research institutes or foundations. As far as there is urban theory, then, we signal a distance between those who do 'urban theory' and those who draw on empirical studies, often commissioned, for actual practice of urban

policy. This division seems to be on the rise and creates two issues. First, it makes part of urban studies obsolete, and the world would not look any different if their theories did not exist. Second, it creates poor knowledge about the urban world, as nothing is as practical as good theory (Pawson, 2003). Unreflexive data-collection and report-writing may legitimise specific policies, but will not provide much of an understanding of the processes and mechanisms one would need to understand in order to be able to strive for social change to begin with – in policy, but also in non-governmental organisations and activism.

These three key features of the urban studies literature – the limited degree of explicit theorisation, the wide range of subject matter covered and the disconnection between urban theory and empirical research – do not appear to put academic researchers and students off the subject. They nonetheless generate questions about the role of theory in urban studies. Can we even talk of urban theory in any meaningful sense? Can urban theories be distinguished from broader theoretical developments in the social sciences, or do they simply entail the application of general theories to urban phenomena? Are there even such things as distinctively urban phenomena? If not, what objects do urban theories focus upon? How have urban theories developed and how do they relate to one another? Is there such a thing as *contemporary* urban theory and, if so, what differentiates it from previous approaches? How are urban theories used, by whom and for what purpose? Do they have any impact upon popular debates about cities? These are the central questions this book grapples with. Before proceeding to them, however, we need to elaborate a little on the term ‘urban’ and on the general nature of theory, whether or not it is described as urban. This discussion helps clarify what is and can be meant by ‘urban theory’.

What is urban?

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *urban* as ‘of, living in, or situated in, city or town’. For everyday purposes that is a perfectly adequate definition. Like most dictionary entries, however, it only begs further questions. In this case the first obvious question is what is meant by a city or town, and how do they differ from other sorts of place? Whilst the average Briton might intuitively know when he or she passes through Loughborough or Mansfield that they are towns, not cities, and that Liverpool (Figure 1.2) or Manchester certainly do qualify as ‘cities’, what exactly makes him or her *know* that this is the case? A related but more searching question concerns what ‘of’ means in the above definition. How do we define what is ‘of’ cities and towns? What is specifically urban? What is urban different from? All of these questions cause problems for social scientists, but the difficulties presented by the first are overcome rather more easily than the latter.



Figure 1.2 Liverpool Skyline with HMS Ark Royal docked at cruise terminal

Source: Wikimedia Commons

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Liverpool_Skyline_with_HMS_Ark_Royal.jpg



Figure 1.3 Plauen skyline

Plauen, Germany. Picture taken from the Bärensteinturm., Christopher Voitus, 2006.

Source: Wikimedia Commons: <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Plauen-Overview.JPG>.

If the (Anglo-Saxon) meanings of city and town are probed further, they are found to depend upon arbitrary categorisations that only make sense relative to other, equally arbitrary ones. A town, for example, is defined as a collection of dwellings bigger than a village that, in turn, is bigger than a hamlet. A city, meanwhile, is either an important town or a town awarded privileged status by charter, especially if it also contains a cathedral (although, just to confuse matters, not all cities have cathedrals, nor have all towns with cathedrals become cities!). Different definitions apply in different countries. In Dutch and German, no linguistic distinction is drawn between city and town (with *stad* and *Stadt*

meaning both town and city, and defined by rights of government and tax-collection of the feudal times, so that the contract between *land* and *stad* is derived from the power division between the European gentry and merchant citizens). German and Dutch added *Großstadt* and *grote stad* when the industrial revolution and accompanying demographic growth of cities started to set them apart from other towns. In some cases, Australia being one example, messy conceptual dilemmas are sidestepped through conventions whereby a minimum population size or density is defined, above which a settlement is automatically classified as a town or city (Carter, 1995: 10–12). As with most ‘technical’ methods of designating towns or cities, this convention provides the categorical clarity needed by national states, but it does not always make sense in people’s daily experiences.

The way social scientists have dealt with issues concerning the definition of cities and towns is a good example of how empirical work often proceeds in the absence of precise concepts. Academics have not let the fact that there are no universally agreed, watertight definitions of city and town prevent them from undertaking urban research. For the most part they have simply lived with a particular society’s conventional labels, drawing attention to their limitations as necessary. Political scientists, for example, have tended to proceed on the basis that cities can be defined, however imperfectly, by the boundaries that are relevant to political decision-making; that is, by areas covered by a local or metropolitan government. Studies that required a broader focus have embraced other definitions such as a ‘travel-to-work area’, a ‘standard metropolitan statistical area’, a conurbation, a ‘functional urban region’ or other territories defined for the purposes of statistics.

Urban sociologists have tended to eschew geographical definitions of cities and often taken the city as a container of other sociological phenomena and questions studied within the city, contributing to the common understanding that cities pose ‘urban problems’. In US English, ‘urban’ and especially ‘inner city’ have taken on the connotation of referring to minorities, especially African-Americans and Latinos, and refer to crime, drugs, pregnancies out of wedlock among teenagers and other forms of behaviour labelled in mainstream discourse as ‘deviant’, if not ‘immoral’. ‘Urban music’, usually referring to one or other form of hip-hop, and ‘urban clothing’ associated with this subculture spring from an understanding of ‘urban’ as linked to certain types of neighbourhoods in cities which are seen as both the stage and the site that generates an ‘urban’ subculture.

The second set of questions, about what is urban and how it differs from the ‘non-urban’, goes to the heart of what urban studies and urban theory are and can be about. The answers, again, are disappointing for those who prefer clear definitions and solid conceptual platforms on which to build. The simplest answer to the question ‘what is urban?’ is ‘that which is not rural’.

Rural and urban

The urban–rural distinction has a long tradition within social science and there is no doubt that at one time it drew attention to some crucial differences between town and country. Most leading social theorists recognise the critical place of towns and cities in the process of industrialisation and the transition from the largely agrarian feudal system to the largely urbanised capitalist one (Saunders, 1986: 13–51). Weber (1958), for example, argued that the characteristics of certain medieval European cities stood in stark contrast to those of rural population centres in that they contained concentrations of alternative political and economic power and had very different social structures based on comparatively complex divisions of labour. Moreover, Weber identified the market place as the crucial element that differentiates the city from other forms of settlements. In his view, the social action of exchange created an equality among partially integrated actors based on accidental and superficial contacts and hence organised the earliest form of ‘public space’, sociologically meant (see also Bahrtdt, 1998).

Marx agreed on the importance of the division of labour. Indeed, he positively welcomed the destructive effect urbanisation had on pre-existing social structures and the fact that it freed the labouring classes from ‘the idiocy of rural life’. Marx and Weber saw conceptual benefits in the use of the terms ‘urban’ and ‘rural’ in the period before the industrial age, a time when the city was a relatively distinctive and fruitful unit for analysis.

The usefulness of the urban–rural distinction for social scientists, however, declined steadily with increasing industrialisation. Sociologists became increasingly critical of the bipolar juxtaposition of the urban and the rural, not least because ‘the rural’, as discussed in the work of Ferdinand Tönnies and others, was associated with a romanticised vision of social life that sociologists wanted to move away from (e.g. Mazlish, 1989). Urbanisation in the Global North came to be seen as synonymous with, but dependent upon, industrialisation so it was the latter concept that dominated explanations of social change.

An everyday distinction between urban and rural persisted because the two terms still conjure up contrasting visions of the way space is used; dense, built-up, ‘man-made’ areas on the one hand, sparsely populated, ‘natural’ countryside on the other. But the utility of ‘urban’ as an everyday term has been devalued too. Urbanisation does not just mean that the great majority of people come to live in or near towns and cities whilst ‘ruralism’ is concentrated into ever-smaller geographical areas inhabited by proportionately fewer people. It affects rural life in much more profound ways. The countryside is fundamentally shaped by and managed for the benefit of urban populations,

be it through servicing their demand for food through intensive agricultural production methods or the provision of homes or retail and leisure opportunities for city workers and residents. Whatever happens in cities also happens outside them and it has become virtually impossible to isolate urban from rural ways of life. Ray Pahl's (1970: 209) comment that 'in an urbanised world, "urban" is everywhere and nowhere; the city cannot be defined' summarises the conventional wisdom about the universal nature of 'the urban' and the redundancy of the urban-rural distinction, at least in the 'developed' world.

Two important consequences flow from the doubts that have been cast on the importance of the urban-rural dichotomy. One is that it has become very difficult to define 'urban' in a way that is sufficiently distinctive for it to be useful for social scientists. If 'urban' is everywhere, isn't 'urban geography' simply 'geography', 'urban politics' just 'politics' and so on across subject areas? The line advocated by the likes of Pahl is now accepted by most academics, even if they are convinced of the importance of urban studies. Savage, Warde and Ward, for example, felt motivated to write an urban sociology textbook but had to concede that 'there is no solid definition of the urban. ... The label "urban" sociology is mostly a flag of convenience' (Savage et al., 2003: 2). Similarly, Carter accepted that urban geography 'cannot claim to be a systematic study' but simply 'considers [economic, socio-cultural and political] processes in relation to one phenomenon, the city' (Carter, 1995: 1). Dunleavy, on the other hand, opted for a relatively arbitrary 'content definition' of the urban field, based upon particular social and political processes, because he adjudged as failures alternative attempts to define it geographically or institutionally (Dunleavy, 1980: 21-55).

The other implication is that the town or city, as an entity, long ago ceased to be particularly distinctive for social scientists. As Saunders (1986: ii) argued:

[t]he city is not a theoretically significant unit of analysis in advanced capitalist societies ... Marx and Engels, Weber and Durkheim ... saw the city as important historically in the development of industrial capitalist society, but none of them saw it as significant for an analysis of such societies once they had become established.

Evidence for this argument can be found in a curious contemporary paradox. Whereas the more general concepts developed by those path-breaking social theorists in their analyses of industrialised societies continue to exert an important influence on many aspects of urban studies, those parts of their work that dealt specifically with cities are ignored by all but a few commentators (e.g. Elliott & McCrone, 1982, on Weber), with the exception of Georg

Simmel (1950), whose essay on the ‘mental life’ of cities has seen a revival especially since what we will later discuss as the cultural turn in urban studies. What is left is, first, a rather abstract discussion on space, including arguments that space is produced and therefore not a container concept (Gottdiener & Hutchison, 2011), which has consequences for defining ‘city’, and second, a large field of studies called ‘urban’ that focuses on social questions located in cities, but not addressing the specificity of the urban of these questions in any great theoretical depth.

What is theory?

Dictionaries generally define *theory* as a body or system of ideas that explains one or more aspects of reality. This conjures up a picture of the theorist as someone with throbbing temples who spends his or her time dreaming up and applying formalised sets of rules through disciplined, abstract thought. Social science theory would, however, stop being social science the moment it lost all connection to the empirical, that is, to the realm of experienced reality (in contrast to metaphysics).

We are all theorists at some level. We use theory routinely and flexibly, even if we are not always aware of it. As Charles Lemert (1995: 14–15) writes, ‘everyone knows, beyond much reasonable doubt, that there is a sphere of social things out there that affects human life in powerful ways’, and theory in its everyday sense is little more than the stories we tell about what we have figured out about our experiences in social life. In order to analyse or to act, we need to process large amounts of information such that the focus for our analysis or our practical options are simplified and made manageable, and in order to do so, we draw, often though not always, on theories of what matters, how things work and what causes what.

Not just in academia, but also in the fields of policy and practice, nothing is as practical as a good theory (Zijderveld, 1991: 15). Theory is derived from the Greek *theorein*, meaning ‘observing’ or ‘considering’ (ibid.). Theories, then, are the outcomes of reflection that sharpen our understanding of the world. They use relatively coherent, connected concepts and statements about the social that help us understand what matters, how things work and what causes what. In philosophical parlance, we make use of two tools that help us impose order on our experiences: an ontology and an epistemology.

Ontology and epistemology

An ontology is a view about ‘essences’; about what are the basic, indivisible building blocks from which our understanding of ourselves and the world we

inhabit is constructed, about what is 'real'. 'Humans are naturally co-operative' is an ontological position that makes a substantial difference to the way people who share it see the world. It leads to particular ways of behaving or interpreting events that contrast in potentially fundamental ways with those of people who believe humans are essentially competitive. An epistemology, by contrast, is a view about the nature of knowledge; about how we know what we know and what counts as evidence in confirming or refuting claims to knowledge. One simple epistemological position is that we can only truly know that which we experience through our physical senses, whereas the interpretations of such experiences, for example how we make sense of them, are assumed to be more or less similar to different individuals. This position has very different implications from one which has it that the same physical sensations mean completely different things to different people, depending upon the way they have come to understand and conceptualise them. Within the social sciences, more than in the natural sciences, different ontological and epistemological positions have given rise to a great variety of theoretical approaches.

These different approaches can be reconciled with one another to some extent, depending on what sort of questions we want to pose, utilising a particular theory. If we are mainly concerned with 'what' questions, for example, we will be drawn to exploratory, descriptive and evaluative approaches that present the fullest possible picture of the issue we are interested in. Such approaches, however, do little to help understand how and why things work. If 'why' questions are uppermost, then we will more likely look to explanatory approaches that grapple with the issue of causation in some, possibly mild, form. It can be argued that as nobody can describe everything social, description involves theories about what matters and what does not, behind which lie ideas about how things work. Interpretations of the social, however, imply a more visible, stronger presence of theory. If 'how' is the primary question, we will gravitate toward normative and prescriptive approaches, that is, those dealing with the way things should be and the best ways of ensuring they are as we would want them. The degree to which theoretical perspectives can be combined and integrated, however, is strictly limited. Whilst some theories are readily acknowledged to perform better than others, for example in answering 'what' as opposed to 'why' questions, by their very nature theories claim that their particular knowledge is universally true. Even the claim that 'no truth is universal' is itself universal; it is true everywhere, at all times, or it is meaningless. It is 'truth claims', and the evidence upon which they rest, that fuel the many internal disputes within social science.

Urban studies, for all their eclecticism, concentrate upon analysing various aspects of a particular historical form of *human* settlement. They therefore fall

squarely within the *social* sciences. As a result, urban theory has inevitably been touched by the major controversies within social science more generally about its epistemological status.

Epistemological questions include whether social sciences can legitimately draw upon the ideas and methods of the natural sciences or must develop their own; what counts as knowledge and how it is gained; whether the main aim of inquiry should be understanding or prediction; whether objectivity is possible; what, if anything, is the difference between facts and values and which are the more 'real'; what is the relationship between researcher and researched, and so on. To enumerate all the possible approaches to these issues would mean trawling through a huge variety of 'isms' – from Althusserianism, through materialism, to Weberianism – which might claim the status of theory. To simplify, however, let us start from the observation that the key schools of social science since the beginning of the twentieth century have stemmed from, or can roughly be linked to, three overarching approaches; positivism, hermeneutics and realism (Bhaskar, 1993). These approaches make different claims about what is real and about the nature of knowledge and how it should be gained.

Positivism

Positivism draws most directly on the natural sciences. It has traditionally formed the basis of most social science, although its pre-eminence has declined over time as its relevance to the study of human affairs – and even its dominance within the natural sciences – has increasingly come under attack. For positivists, theories are laws that accurately describe regularities in events and phenomena. They explain things in that they might show, for example, that event B always follows event A but never happens when A does not. They also facilitate predictions; positivists would expect B to follow A in the future just as it has in the past. Positivist theories therefore suggest causation, but A could be said to 'cause' B only in so far as B's relation to A is regular and predictable. Positivist theories do not involve an understanding of *how* A causes B, only a demonstration that it appears to do so. If A were not followed by B under certain circumstances, the theory would fall and another would be needed. It comes as no surprise that the attempts to create a social science modelled after the natural sciences came up during the high days of industrialisation and the expansion of industrial capitalism, in turn related to modernity with its core element of rationalisation: the turn towards a world of *Entzauberung* (disenchantment: Weber, 1988: 594) opened up the possibility of seeing the world as having a rational rather than divine order to it, an order that humans hence could understand and explain thoroughly without having to draw on the metaphysical. While this stream of thought of course as an intellectual project found

its basis in the Enlightenment, its social consequences became most pronounced in the times of rapid urbanisation in the Global North, to which industrial capitalism was closely related. The belief in a rational social science was based on the positivist premise that scientific knowledge about the world is possible and can be based on the non-normative, rational registration of facts.

For positivists, the only phenomena about which scientific knowledge is possible are those that can be observed directly. Such phenomena are ‘facts’, whereas those that cannot be observed are ‘values’ or abstractions that can have no scientific status. Consequently, positivists have no scientific interest in the motivations underlying human actions or in abstract concepts – God, justice, love, and so on – that have no observable form. They are only concerned with the actions themselves and the effects that abstract concepts have on observable behaviour. In principle, positivist theories should be based only upon ‘value-free’ observations gathered from experiments or comparisons by objective and disinterested observers. Strictly speaking, they should also rely upon inductive research methods; that is, they should start with the particular (empirical observations) and move to the general (theoretical statements).

The commitment to inductive methods reflected positivism’s original mission to avoid two perceived weaknesses in pre-existing social inquiry. One was the tendency to ‘prove’ pet theories with reference only to a few examples. The other was reliance upon non-verifiable religious or metaphysical arguments. However, critiques of early positivism resulted in the role of abstractions in theory-building being recognised even within broadly positivist schools of thought. As a result, the commitment to base everything upon empirical facts, however defined, softened over time. The critical rationalist school inspired by Popper, for example, provided a powerful case for using deductive rather than inductive research methods. Deduction – the move from the general (theory) to the particular (evidence) – demands that researchers put forward hypotheses and see whether ‘facts’ corroborate them. It allows researchers to guess what they might find before they look for it and to amend their hypotheses if they do not find it. All that is required for scientific truths to emerge deductively, Popper argued, is that theoretical statements can be proven wrong by empirical evidence – that they are falsifiable. If we agree with Popper, however, we must accept that all ‘truths’ are tentative since all scientific ‘laws’ are simply hypotheses that have yet to be falsified (Popper, 1934).

Positivist-inspired approaches within social science are many, varied and by no means mutually compatible. However, all attribute great importance to objectivity on the part of researchers and their methods, a distinction between facts and values, and a central role for observable empirical evidence in the development of theory. For positivists, a social ‘science’ that lacks these characteristics is not truly scientific. Ranged against this view are alternatives that insist that social science is only possible if it is based

upon a different view of science than that borrowed by positivism from the natural sciences.

Hermeneutics

Positivism has long been counterposed to hermeneutics, whose principal characteristics are in many respects the negation of the fundamentals of positivism. Whereas positivists attempt to explain and predict human action by observing behavioural outcomes, hermeneutic approaches look to understand human actions and events with reference to the interpretations people apply to them; that is, by looking at the reasons underlying behaviour. Rather than assuming, as do positivists, that the vagaries of human consciousness can safely be ignored when formulating theories, hermeneutics puts it at the very centre of its concerns.

The hermeneutic theorist/researcher does not merely observe and record 'external' events. He/she must understand both the meanings of actions and events for those involved – as influenced by their desires, beliefs and intentions as well as their memories from previous, similar experiences that provide the scripts for interpreting new encounters – and the context within which participants act and the way this affects their desires, beliefs and intentions. The role of theory, then, is to make sense of events and processes by developing a full understanding of how the meanings that underpin them come to be attributed within particular contexts. Theories developed from such a perspective put much more emphasis upon interpretation and understanding than upon explanation and prediction. Prediction, in particular, is seen as virtually impossible in the social sciences because people are part of 'open systems', where change is constant and the combination of circumstances leading to particular actions and events is rarely repeated, rather than the 'closed systems' of the natural sciences where many fundamental factors do not vary.

Hermeneutics sees no sense in a distinction between facts and values because the meaning of all things, whether they are directly observable or not, is necessarily a matter of interpretation. People do not simply receive raw sensory data; they experience things and interpret them simultaneously. 'Reality', within hermeneutics, is therefore inseparable from subjective human perceptions. It is not something independent of human experience. The importance of subjectivity and interpretation within hermeneutics helps explain its strong focus upon issues of communication, be it through language, texts or behaviour. More important to this discussion, it also raises questions about whether objective knowledge is possible. Can one person or group's subjectivity be 'right', scientifically, and another's 'wrong'? If not, what distinguishes 'theory' from 'opinion' and how can we adjudicate between theories that are based upon subjective meanings but contradict one another? There are two schools of thought, here.

Both concede that theorists are no more objective than those they observe and that their prejudices will always inform their observations. Both suggest, though, that the choice of research methods can minimise any theoretical bias that results from this fact.

Both strands within hermeneutics tend to subscribe to what have been called abductive research strategies (Blaikie, 1993: 176–90). Abduction involves four stages. First, so as not to impose their own view of reality on their task, researchers ask ‘how are things perceived?’ and try to understand the everyday concepts and meanings that are attached to the particular issue or phenomenon they are interested in. Second, they ask ‘so what?’ and examine the actions and interactions to which these meanings give rise. Third, they ask ‘what does this mean for participants?’ and gather subjective accounts of how perceptions and actions are linked in everyday life. It is at the fourth stage – that of theory-building, when the observer stands back and attempts to impose order upon the results of the first three stages – that the two strands diverge. The first believes that the hermeneutic method, because it encourages the theorist to resolve the creative tension between the subjective accounts of those he/she observes and his/her own prejudices, results in understandings which transcend both and can therefore claim to be objective. The other argues that ‘truth’ can only lie in a clear, codified and intelligible rendering of subjective views. The latter is a *relativist* position which forces the theorist to accept there are no universal criteria that can adjudicate between different ‘truths’ and alternative ‘realities’.

Realism

Realism is a relatively new rival to positivism and hermeneutics. It tries to marry positivism’s commitment to causal explanation and the possibility of prediction with the hermeneutic principle that much of what is important within the social sciences cannot be directly observed. Realists agree with positivists that there is a reality that is independent of human perceptions. Proceeding from this position, they have to argue that objective knowledge of that reality is possible; otherwise their position would be meaningless. (Scientifically speaking, it would be less than helpful to suggest that something other than our subjective perceptions exists but we cannot know what it is.) Realists therefore challenge at least one strand within hermeneutics in arguing that subjective perceptions might not only fail to grasp reality, but also grasp ‘realities’ that do not exist; in other words, they can be wrong. At the same time, realism also challenges the positivist view that only that which can be observed is real. Realists therefore have to come up with a way of knowing and understanding reality that is not just based on empirical observations.

The realist approach to ‘facts and values’ that emerges from this basic position is a complex one. On the one hand, realists insist that empirical observation has

an important role to play in developing and testing theories. On the other hand, they accept that abstract concepts are fundamental to the way we all view the external world. This circle is squared in two ways. First, it is argued that the realist theorist/researcher's job is to link empirical observations with abstract arguments in such a way that he/she gains privileged insights that are denied to those who rely upon empirical observation or subjective interpretation alone. Second, the rather indeterminate status of facts and values is linked to the argument that there are different levels of reality that are perceived in different ways and provide different elements of 'truth'. On the surface there is the *empirical* domain of observable experiences. At a deeper level is the *actual* domain consisting of events, whether or not they are observed. At the deepest level is the *real* domain that is made up of the structures and mechanisms that cause events.

The primary job that realist theory sets itself is to identify the unobservable but nonetheless 'necessary' and 'real' mechanisms which underlie and cause events in particular circumstances. Realist explanation therefore attempts to go a stage further than positivism. It aims to show *how* A causes B and not just to describe patterns that indicate there are causal relations between the two. This goal is achieved, realists argue, through the use of retroductive research strategies that combine empirical and theoretical forms of inquiry. Retroduction proceeds in three stages. In the first, empirical observations are made, as in positivist approaches, which identify patterns in the particular events or actions that require explanation. In the second, theory-building stage, the theorist/researcher asks 'what sort of mechanisms would be necessary to bring about these patterns?'. He/she then comes up with conjectures about these mechanisms that stand as a tentative theory. In the third stage, an attempt is made to establish the validity of the theory by checking whether a larger body of evidence, conceptual and empirical, is consistent with the existence of the theoretical mechanism(s).

There is enormous controversy within the social sciences as to the strengths and weaknesses of these three approaches. There is no agreement about which, if any, is most consistent, has superior methods, or is most useful. The picture is complicated still further by the fact that different theoretical traditions and the schools of thought that develop around particular theorists do not necessarily fall entirely within any one of the three overall approaches. For instance, Weberianism – the concepts and theories associated with the sociologist Max Weber – draws upon hermeneutic and positivist approaches. By contrast, critical theory – an approach associated with the 'Frankfurt School' in general and with Jürgen Habermas in particular – draws upon insights and methods from hermeneutics and realism. Variants of Marxism, on the other hand, would be 'claimed' by positivists and realists. Boundary disputes within social theory represent a fascinating field of study in themselves, but they need not detain us. All we need

note here is that there are some fundamental differences within the social sciences when it comes to defining what theory is and how it should be constructed and used, and that these differences are inevitably reflected in urban theory.

And so what on earth is urban theory?

Combining the definitions we have unearthed so far, we might describe urban theory as ‘a body of ideas explaining one or more aspects of reality within, or of, towns and cities’. We have seen, however, that towns and cities in themselves are no longer seen as particularly useful units for social scientific analysis. It is also apparent that ‘urban’ is defined in such general terms that it is difficult to contrast it with anything. It therefore cannot help us greatly in isolating a field of study. What, then, does this simple definition of urban theory mean? The history of the last hundred years of social science provides two answers to that question. The more relaxed view is that it is perfectly permissible to say there are theories on the one hand and urban areas on the other and that urban theory is simply the first applied to or deduced from aspects of the second. The alternative view takes the much stricter line that each school within social science must clarify its core concepts and define its field of study carefully. If ‘the urban’ is not specific enough to define such a field then the theorist must come up with definitions that identify the ‘theoretical object’ of urban studies more precisely.

Nowadays the relaxed position is by far the most common. It is typified by Savage et al. (2003: 2) who claim that ‘the fact that the urban cannot be defined in a general way does not mean that important things cannot be said about specific processes in particular cities!’ The implication of this position is that urban theories are generated in one of two ways. In the first, theories that concern themselves with general social processes are applied – by the original theorists or others – to (or within) towns and cities. In the alternative, theories grow out of specific and consciously chosen ‘urban’ observations. There is no reason to believe, though, that theories derived from this second route will necessarily be any more ‘urban’ than those generated by the first. As we shall see, cities are sometimes seen as microcosms of societies, and there are examples of theoretical debates that had their origins in urban observations becoming more general and universal in scope.

No distinction is generally made between these two forms of urban theory. Michael Peter Smith’s (1980) review of urban social theory, for example, discusses theorists such as Wirth, who devoted much of his time to urban analysis and research, and Simmel, who wrote specifically (but only in one of his many publications) on cities as the ultimate expression of modernity, where his main interests lay, in a relatively minor part of his contribution to the development of

sociological theory more generally. But it also includes Freud, whose work made very few references to cities and towns or to urbanism. Smith justifies the latter choice by arguing that when Freud talks of civilisation, he is not just referring to an advanced state of social development but is dealing specifically with *urban* civilisation: 'Freud treats as indicators of "civilization" a variety of different ... socio-economic developments that originated or occurred almost exclusively in cities' (Smith, 1980: 50).

If Freud can be considered an urban theorist, or if Freudian psychoanalytic theory can at least be considered 'urban' when refocused and adapted by the likes of Smith, it is clear that the relaxed approach to the definition of urban theory – that it encompasses any application of concepts to urban phenomena – results in it covering a very broad canvas indeed. If we adopt this first position, though, such an eventuality cannot be avoided. The decision not to impose a tighter, limiting definition on 'the urban' means the range of issues that might be covered by urban theory is huge. The field expands every time there is a novel meeting between theory and urban phenomena and there are no conceptual boundaries other than those that theorists as a group effectively choose, through their work, to accept. Judge, Stoker and Wolman found this to be the case even within the single subdiscipline of urban politics: '[t]here are now *so many* theories that it is increasingly difficult for scholar and student alike to keep pace with them' (Judge et al., 1995: 1; emphasis in original).

The second, less relaxed position offers the prospect of a more restrictive and, arguably, more manageable focus for urban theory. Saunders (1985; 1986: 52–182) identifies a number of attempts to provide urban studies with a distinct theoretical focus. Each of them is reviewed briefly in the next chapter. Saunders concludes (1986: 51), however, that '[t]he result has, in most cases, been conceptual confusion and a series of theoretical dead-ends'. Not everyone would agree with this conclusion. Nor would it be fair to argue that conceptual confusion and theoretical dead-ends are limited to explorations within urban theory. For the purposes of this book, though, we will accept the view of Saunders and others that urban theory is not adequately defined by those attempts to provide urban studies with its own distinctive theoretical object. Such a focus would be too restrictive. In particular, it would exclude many recent theoretical debates that have important implications for cities but were not designed primarily as contributions to urban theory.

Accepting the relaxed position on the nature of urban theory, however, means a choice has to be made about which theories the book should cover and which should be excluded. Ultimately, this choice has to be based upon personal values and preferences about what is important. Nonetheless, it is easier to make with regard to older, more established theoretical approaches than it is with recent contributions. Previous reviews of the various urban subdisciplines impose a

semblance of order upon theoretical debates that occurred up until the early 1980s. History has not pronounced so conclusively on more recent debates, however. The choice here will therefore need to be justified on the basis of some key propositions about what separates recent debates from previous ones. We return to this issue in the latter part of Chapter 2. In the first sections of that chapter, though, a brief review of the historical development of urban theory helps put the choice made here into perspective.

Questions for discussion

- Urban sociologists have tended to avoid geographical definitions of the city. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of doing this.
- This chapter has identified a gap between urban theory and applied urban studies. What elements should theory include, in your view, to overcome this gap?
- Some scholars have argued that the urban is everywhere and that the rural or country has become obsolete as a concept. What arguments can you think of in favour or against this position?

Further reading

The philosophy of science/social science

The literature in this area is notoriously hard going. Blaikie's *Approaches to Social Enquiry* (1993) is an unusually lucid and readable introduction to the field and would be a good starting point for the uninitiated. Outhwaite's *New Philosophies of Social Science* (1987) offers a good overview of recent developments but is less user-friendly. Delanty's *Social Science* (1997), similarly, is up to date and includes useful sections on positivism and hermeneutics. Readers interested in learning more about one of the three approaches outlined above might start with Bryant's *Positivism in Social Theory and Research* (1985), Bauman's *Hermeneutics and Social Science* (1978) or, on realism, Sayer's *Method in Social Science* (1992).

Overviews of urban theory

As reported in the text, the better contributions tend to focus upon a single academic subject area rather than present an interdisciplinary picture. Saunders' *Social Theory and the Urban Question* (1986) is comprehensive and clearly written, but concentrates upon urban sociology and is now somewhat out of date. For those interested in the way individual theorists' understandings evolve over time, the 1981 version of that book provides interesting reading. Saunders' work might usefully be read in conjunction with Savage and

Warde's *Urban Sociology, Capitalism and Modernity* (2003) which is more eclectic but covers more recent material. Judge, Stoker, and Wolman's *Theories of Urban Politics* (1995) is a comprehensive, more up-to-date, edited volume covering the urban politics subfield. The early chapters of Dunleavy's *Urban Political Analysis* (1980) also contain a good, if dated, review of theoretical literature and discuss the validity of the urban' from a political science perspective. Theoretical approaches within urban geography can be covered by a selective reading of Carter's *The Study of Urban Geography* (1995), Herbert and Thomas' *Urban Geography* (1982), Hall's *Urban Geography* (2007), Johnston's *City and Society* (1980) and two books by Short, *An Introduction to Urban Geography* (1984) and *The Urban Order* (1996). Various recent readers assemble diverse writings from different disciplines. LeGates and Stout's *The City Reader* (2011) is a collection of twentieth-century writings on cities, grouped thematically, that includes some key theoretical contributions. Fainstein and Campbell's *Readings in Urban Theory* (2011) is more contemporary and explicitly theory-based but narrower in its coverage and dominated by US writers and has a focus on urban planning.