

An abstract painting of a city at night, featuring a dense cluster of buildings and streets. The color palette is dominated by warm, fiery tones of orange, red, and yellow, suggesting a sunset or a city illuminated by streetlights and building lights. Darker, cooler tones of blue and purple are used to define the silhouettes of the buildings and the shadows on the streets. The brushwork is visible and expressive, giving the painting a textured, almost impasto quality. The overall mood is one of urban energy and complexity.

# Explorations in Urban Theory

**Michael Peter Smith**

## EXPLORATIONS IN URBAN THEORY

For over three decades, urban theorist Michael Peter Smith has engaged in constructing innovative theories on central research questions in urban studies. This book brings together his views on the state of urban theory, sorting out the changing strengths and weaknesses in the field.

Smith refocuses attention on the cultural, social, and political practices of urban inhabitants, particularly the way in which their everyday activities have contributed to the social construction of new ethnic identities and new meanings of urban citizenship. Combining the methods of political economy and transnational ethnography, he encourages us to think about new political spaces for practicing "urban citizenship" by analyzing the connections linking cities to the web of relations to other localities in which they are embedded.

Smith systematically analyzes the dynamics of "community power" and "urban change" under new globalizing trends and increased transnational mobility. Expanding on his original conceptualization of "transnational urbanism," he frames urban political life within a wider transnational context of political practice, in which an endless interplay of distinctly situated networks, social practices, and power relations are fought out at multiple scales, in an inexorable politics of inclusion and exclusion.

**Michael Peter Smith** is distinguished research professor in community studies at the University of California, Davis. Over the past three decades, he has published twenty-five books and more than eighty-five academic articles. Smith is co-author of the award-winning book *Citizenship across Borders*, and is the editor of Transaction's Comparative Urban and Community Research book series.



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Smith

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# Part I

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## Introduction



# Explorations in Urban Theory: A Critical Overview

Cities throughout history have been made, reimagined, and transformed through the political interplay of capital flows, state policies, and the complex initiatives of both settled and mobile populations. Expressed in terms of human agency, cities are made and changed by the practices of powerful sets of actors including: diverse land-based business interests and developers and various other commercial, industrial, and postindustrial business firms; the actions and policies of state-centered actors, especially agents of the local state; and the sociospatial practices of neighborhood residents, immigrants, and transnational migrant networks across nations, regions, and localities. The interplay of these driving forces has occupied attention in urban social theory and research for over three decades.

Methodologically and epistemologically, most urban theorists have found it necessary, when thinking theoretically about urban change, to embed their changing conceptualizations of “the urban,” political-economic, and sociocultural “transformations” and the voices of neighborhood activists and social movement actors within a decidedly interdisciplinary frame of reference encompassing urban sociology, politics, anthropology, geography, history, and planning. My own interdisciplinary ideas, theories, concepts, and modes of gathering evidence on such urban questions are brought together in this book. They span the long period from 1979 to 2015 and represent a sustained effort to hold a mirror up to the theoretical literature in urban studies in order to consider the changing strengths, and, more often, the weaknesses, that I have seen in that mirror.

Urban social theory from the early twentieth century until the 1970s may be regarded as a contested period of debate by social theorists on the impacts of *modernity* (particularly through industrialization and the expansion of large-scale urban settlements) upon the social psychology of urban life. For example, an excellent assemblage of social theory writings in this genre, edited by Richard Sennett (1969), includes classical essays on urbanism and urban culture by Max Weber, Louis Wirth, Robert Park, Georg Simmel, Robert Redfield, and Oswald Spengler. The 1960s and 1970s were decades in which



the specific subtheme of “urban alienation” gained attention in the social sciences. My initial effort to contribute to urban social theory was approached through the lens of various classical theoretical writings on urbanism and alienation. In *The City and Social Theory* (1979, 1980), I offered a detailed critique of alternative theories on the urban condition and the alienating aspects of city life offered by two of the classical urban social theorists Georg Simmel and Louis Wirth as well as the discourses on civilization and its discontents found in the work of Sigmund Freud, and the contemporary reflections on urban alienation found in the social theory writings of Richard Sennett and Theodore Roszak. My critique of the urban social theories of these five thinkers is synthesized in Chapter 2 of this book, “Social Theory and Social Reality: A Critique.”

### **The Structuralist Moment in Urban Political Economy**

Throughout the 1980s and well into the 1990s, critical attention in urban theory shifted from the kinds of social-psychological questions that had preoccupied the field in previous generations to key questions in urban political economy, formed largely by debates between neo-Marxist inspired and neo-Weberian informed urban researchers. The interest in the structuring and restructuring of cities by various segments of capital (e.g., industrial, commercial, and financial capital) and/or by state-centric institutions and urban public policies was the major focus of this debate, especially throughout the 1980s. During this period, neo-Marxist views on urban political economy were especially pronounced. My engagement in this “structuralist moment” in urban theory is best positioned within debates on the advantages and limitations of structural Marxist urban theory in the social sciences. In the late 1980s, I brought my evolving theoretical perspective together in two book length contributions. The first was an edited book, *The Capitalist City: Global Restructuring and Community Politics* (1987), coedited with sociologist Joe R. Feagin. This book was an early contribution to the “global cities” discourse in urban studies initially developed by John Friedmann (1986; see also Friedmann and Goetz Wolf, 1982) and further advanced by Saskia Sassen (1991). The global cities problematic became a central dimension of a wider body of literature on the interplay of global and local forces in the restructuring of cities (on the latter, e.g., see Massey, 1991; Sayer, 1989, 1991).

My coauthored essay from *The Capitalist City*, “Cities and the New International Division of Labor,” (Feagin and Smith, 1987) offered a detailed theoretical framework on “urban restructuring” in order to analyze the globalization of cities and the accompanying patterns of urban growth and decline. This framework explored several types of restructuring that, taken together, constituted the late twentieth-century restructuring of cities. These included urban and regional economic restructuring, state institutional

and policy restructuring in cities, the restructuring of urban households, neighborhoods, and political practices “from below,” and the resulting reconfiguration of urban space produced by the first three types of restructuring. (For an alternative influential framework on urban restructuring, see Fainstein et al., 1983.)

While recognizing a central role played by economic forces in the global transformation of cities, Feagin and I also focused on *microstructures* and *processes* and showed that, at the micro-level, economic and state restructuring were intrinsically associated with *household* and *community* restructuring, and thus with spatial transformation. In short, we argued that household and community restructuring were not mere by-products of global economic and state restructuring because the *everyday activities* of people living in households and communities, such as informal economic practices, migration, immigration, the formation of networks, and political action, were constitutive elements in processes of urban transformation that *shaped* as well as *reflected* global economic flows and state policies.

The culmination of my thinking in urban political economy was reached with the publication of *City, State, & Market* (1988, 1991). This book critiqued both neo-Marxist and neo-liberal theories of urban development. The latter included an extended critique of the political-economic reasoning and the urban policy agenda of neo-liberal economist Milton Friedman. Each of these perspectives, from the left and right were faulted for their excessive economism. The welfare state capitalist/social democratic moment in the history of twentieth century capitalism was challenged by neo-Marxist critiques theoretically, but was actually being displaced politically by neo-liberal ideology and practices, that have now come together under the rubric “market fundamentalism.”

In Chapter 3 of *Explorations in Urban Theory*, “Structural Marxist Urban Theory: Class Power, the State, and Urban Crisis,” I reexamine welfare state capitalism historically, critically, and comparatively, to emphasize the actual impacts of social and political factors and state policy transformations on the global restructuring of cities. My critique of neo-Marxist urban theories, particularly structural Marxism, was an element in a more general turn in urban theory away from Marxist inspired urban political economy to other forms of critical and eventually poststructuralist urban theory.

Structural Marxist urban theory had sought to develop a general theory of society that accounted for the relationships among the economic, political, cultural, and ideological dimensions of urban life. This theoretical approach laid claim to the status of a general theory—one that tied together the general crisis of the advanced capitalist welfare state and general tendencies toward urban crisis under advanced capitalism. In the last instance, structural Marxism regarded economic relations as the central driving force of the sociocultural and political relations producing an urban fiscal and social crisis.



Chapter 3 focuses on the early works of Manuel Castells (1976a and b, 1977, 1978, 1983) and David Harvey (1973, 1976, 1985), and compares them to the writings of other critical urbanists like Ira Katznelson (1976a, 1976b, 1981) and John Mollenkopf (1975, 1983). Despite their nuanced theoretical differences, these analysts stressed several key dimensions of “advanced capitalism,” including the speedy circulation of capital across the globe, the weaknesses and limitations of workplace-based forms of class struggle, and the role of the state, particularly the “local state,” in creating new modes of “community-based” urban political conflict.

While operating to reproduce capitalist social relations in general, the “local state” under welfare state capitalism, was represented in structural Marxism as generating highly visible public policies (e.g., public housing and antipoverty policies) that channeled the discontents of everyday life into “community-based” political struggles. I argued that this perception of the high *visibility* of urban policies, as expressions of “collective consumption,” (Castells, 1983) ignored the development, first in the United States, and subsequently in Europe, of the much less visible and less easily politicized benefit structures of the “fiscal welfare” state. Indeed, the highly influential tax policies of the U.S. fiscal welfare state (e.g., mortgage interest deductions and tax subsidies promoting suburban development) did as much if not more to produce the fiscal crisis of the state in the United States than the partially redistributive urban collective consumption policies, like public housing, publicly financed higher education, and mass transportation, that have characterized some European countries, particularly France.

Given such crucial differences, I concluded that comparative historical analysis was required between the United States and European welfare states as well as across different European state systems (e.g., the British vs. French vs. Scandinavian welfare states) to understand such historically specific political processes as: (a) the different degrees of engagement of urban citizens in the social production of urban politics and policies; (b) the role of different national and urban welfare states as mediators or harbingers of urban political conflict; and (c) the differences in the extent to which state structures and policies are capable or not of managing the political fallout of the capitalist state’s own contradictory functions.

Not surprisingly, the 1980s was also a period in urban social theory when the impacts of urban social movements on both public policies and capitalist social relations in the reproductive sphere of everyday life came into special prominence. The field began to turn from urban economic restructuring to the resistance to it and to state policies supporting or modifying it. Debates in urban theory began to examine the changes in city life wrought by urban social movements. This represented a sharpened focus on a key “agency” beyond capital and the state. This discourse was used to tell a more complexly layered story of urban transformation than the works that preceded it.