1. Ordinary cities, extraordinary geographies: parallax dimensions, interpolations and the scale question

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INTRODUCTION

All settlements combine the extraordinary with the ordinary. There is a paradox in the social sciences regarding the extraordinary in that the balance of social science research tends to be towards the extraordinary rather than the ordinary. This is surprising. Most people live in smaller towns and cities and yet urban theory tends to be based around understanding cities that can be defined as metropolises or extraordinary places – London, Los Angeles, New York, Shanghai, and Tokyo (Scott and Soja, 1996; Soja, 1996; Massey, 2007; Taylor, 2013; Brenner, 2019). This edited book is based on the premise that more ordinary towns and cities are also involved in extraordinary geographies and that these extraordinary aspects of ordinary towns and cities are too often overlooked by social scientists and by urban theory.

There are hundreds and thousands of settlements that have been ignored by social scientists and many of these are exceptional. One example is the town of Ledbury, Herefordshire, UK. This is a market town with a population of 9,290 (2011) and it is one that has seen astonishing growth and resiliency since the settlement began to form around 690AD (Pinches, 2010). Ledbury is a growth town as its population has more than doubled since 1971 (3,911). This small town's demographics reflects wider shifts towards an ageing population with more people living alone (Pinches, 2009: 160). It is also a town that has been "meshed in a web of connections, economic, legal and cultural" since it was founded (Pinches, 2010: 73). Understanding Ledbury requires an appreciation of the role towns played during medieval times. The presence of a market differentiated villages from towns, and it was these markets that provided a district with a socio-economic rhythm. In medieval times, market towns were distributed around every eight to ten miles or within a day's travel. It is

possible to argue that “it could be said of Ledbury, as has been said of other small market towns, that it was ‘only a town on Tuesday’” (Pinches, 2009: 43) – on market day.

A settlement can be explored through many different lenses. The emphasis might be placed on national or international importance and the relative reach of one settlement over another. There is no question that London has had, and continues to have, a greater reach than Ledbury. Nevertheless, people living and working in Ledbury will have different and similar challenges to those living and working in London. The question revolves around these differences and one challenge is that urban theory tends to be theory based around understanding metropolises rather than smaller towns and cities. An alternative approach is to focus on classifying settlements by the contributions they make. This is part of a research tradition that focuses on identifying or defining urban hierarchies. Such hierarchies can be defined by reach, function, or just size. Nevertheless, this form of classification is misleading. New York, for example, plays a very extraordinary role in configuring globalisation, but this is a city that is saturated with mundane or ordinary experiences that reflect everyday urban living. Much of the activity that is undertaken in New York is orientated towards the local and regional rather than the global. It is important to remember that much smaller urban settlements contribute to configuring globalisation. Perhaps the issue is one of relative importance? Relative importance is difficult to measure; a small town’s economy may be more engaged with and exposed to activities related to globalisation than, for example, New York. This is to highlight that some more ordinary smaller towns and cities play extraordinary roles in the ongoing configuration of globalisation.

In 2006, Jennifer Robinson published a book under the title *Ordinary Cities: Between Modernity and Development*. Her argument was that for too long urban theory has been too concerned with innovative “global cities” located in developed market economies and has overlooked cities in emerging economies. This argument was based on the assumption that theoretical insights should emerge from all types of cities and that differences between and within cities should be considered as examples of diversity rather than representing some form of global urban hierarchy. The central point here is that all types of cities should be central to academic debate and policy analysis. This is a critique based initially on the world cities or global cities literature with the argument being that this adopts an exclusionary rather than inclusive approach to understanding the urban. This account of ordinary cities highlights the importance for urban theory to develop a more inclusive approach. Such an approach must acknowledge, explore, and celebrate the diverse ways in which approaches to social welfare and economic activities emerge in all types of cities.

Our starting point is similar to Robinson's. We agree that the focus of urban theory must embrace the diversity, complexity, and peculiarity of all cities. In this account all cities should be included and considered as "ordinary". Yet we want to extend Robinson's approach in two ways. First, by focusing on all types of urban settlement including informal settlements, towns, and cities. We are concerned that urban theory, for example, is based in the US on understanding cities like New York, Chicago, San Francisco, and Los Angeles and ignores the diversity of urban experiences in smaller towns and cities. We are also concerned that cities of all types tend to be overlooked in many different national contexts. Thus, in his review of Robinson's book, Schuermans noted that:

... very rarely, a scholar from the Anglo-Saxon heartland would be expected to cite a Belgian case study for the sake of the originality of the theory, and not just to embellish the list of references with a publication from an exotic country imitating and confirming the theories produced in London, Los Angeles or New York. In addition, it must be noted that the examples Robinson elaborates, originate largely in big cities. The silencing of smaller cities, towns, villages and other settlement forms is problematic. (2009: 3)

This silencing of countries is an important point. Nevertheless, our key point here is to agree with Schuermans' critique of Robinson regarding the silencing of all types of smaller urban settlement. This cannot be justified conceptually or in policy terms.

Second, the term 'ordinary' refers to something that is 'normal' or common that has no distinctive or unusual feature. The ordinary is defined in relation to the 'extraordinary', the very unusual or remarkable. Our argument is similar to that presented by Tolstoy in the first sentence of his novel *Anna Karenina* in which he noted that "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." We paraphrase this famous sentence by arguing that "All ordinary towns and cities are alike; each ordinary town or city is extraordinary in its own way." Urban theory, and theoretically informed empirical research, must focus on understanding the tensions that exist between the ordinary and the extraordinary. There is a major complication. Urban theory must acknowledge diversity and put aside any attempt to develop a unified approach to understanding the urban. In the case of Africa, for example, "the Sub-Saharan continent is highly varied, and that reference to it as an entity borders on dangerous over-generalization" (Watson, 2002: 29). There are commonalities between some countries and cities that can be identified, but it is also important to be aware of exceptionalism. Too much urban theory is constructed around exceptionalism rather than on understanding the ordinary and the everyday.

This chapter is divided into six sections. In the second section, we explore the neglect of ordinary towns and cities in social science accounts of the urban. Section three develops this further by exploring confirmation bias and the dangers of seeing what is expected rather than that which is actual. The fourth section explores urban theory and the question of scale, highlighting that scale is relative and experiential. The fifth section begins to identify some elements of an alternative approach to urban theory. This is informed by the work of Georges Perec, James Joyce, and Slavoj Žižek. This alternative approach highlights the importance of focusing on the infra-ordinary and the extra-ordinary and that living in cities as well as researching cities is an exercise in appreciating the importance of parallax dimensions and interpolations. The final section concludes the chapter and introduces the chapters included in this edited collection.

THE NEGLECT OF THE ORDINARY

This book is intended to challenge existing approaches to understanding urbanisation. Our initial concern was with the overdominance of studies based on large agglomerations. There was something fascinating to urban analysts about cities like Toronto, New York, and London compared to much smaller urban agglomerations. Part of this fascination is based on size and part on complexity. Larger cities are perhaps also overrepresented in the literature as they tend to be the location for well-established global universities. We have two concerns with the existing urban literature.

The first concern was an appreciation that most people live in small to medium-sized settlements. The West Midlands, UK, is an interesting example. This is centred on a complex conurbation that includes the cities of Birmingham and Wolverhampton, and seven towns. The Annual Population Survey provides an estimate of employment across the West Midlands. For the year ending March 2020, 2.7 million were employed by the private and public sectors. Of these, 483,400 were employed in Birmingham, 179,600 in Coventry, and 114,300 in Wolverhampton. Nevertheless, most of the employed population of the West Midlands is located in smaller market towns and cathedral cities. There is a well-developed literature on the conurbation (Bryson et al., 1996; Chinn and Dick, 2016), but smaller towns and cities have been largely ignored in the academic literature and yet employment and the residential population is predominantly located outside the West Midlands conurbation.

The second concern is that perhaps smaller towns and cities are considered to have economies that are predominantly linked to local consumption. This is not the case; some of these smaller settlements are the locations for economic activities that are of national and international importance. A good example to

consider is Rochester, Minnesota. This city has a population of 118,935 (2019) and is ranked at 242 in an analysis of the 317 US cities with populations of over 100,000 (2019). Rochester is an extraordinary, American ordinary city. It is an extraordinary city as it is home to the Mayo Clinic, a not-for-profit academic medical centre, whose origins can be traced back to January 1864 when Dr William Mayo opened a private medical practice in Rochester. On a whole series of measures, the Mayo Clinic is America's premier hospital. It dominates Rochester's economy, employing 36,330, with the next most important employer being IBM (2,791) and then employment in Rochester Public Schools (2,873) (Rochester Area Economic Development, 2020).

The Mayo Clinic's location in Rochester rather challenges approaches to ranking cities. The problem is that innovations in information communication technologies (ICT) have led to the formation of a cyber-energy plexus. Within this plexus there is ongoing convergence between ICT and energy systems including, for example, electric cars and autonomous vehicles and the ongoing development of the internet of things. Developments in ICT and the widescale adoption of internet-based communications has altered the relationship between everyday living and place. For smaller towns and cities, the cyber-energy plexus has severed or altered the links with their immediate hinterlands and also with distant places. The implication is that all settlements have the potential to sever their relationships with their immediate hinterland and to develop a local economy that is based on a complex melding together of many different local and translocal interactions. One approach to understanding smaller towns and cities is based on identifying and understanding processes of disconnection or decoupling from their city-regions combined with processes of coupling and recoupling with other places (Salder and Bryson, 2019). This approach must include a focus on firms and non-firm-based interactions (Markusen, 1994; Markusen et al., 1999).

An alternative approach comes from Hudson's account of processes of town development in America's Great Plains. He argued that a town should not be conceptualised as an indivisible entry, but as consisting of "a threefold division of variables – *people*, *activities*, and *structures* – that are set in the relevant *context* of time and place" (Hudson, 1985: 13, italics in the original). The 'people' variable must now include an appreciation of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2019). 'Activities' include all types and forms of socio-economic, cultural, and political activities including those that link the settlement to other places. 'Structures' include the layout, buildings, natural environment, and the infrastructures that support flows of all types within and between a settlement. These include flows enabled by satellites and fibre-optic cables. These three variables are interrelated, and all reflect the "peculiarity of circumstances (context)" (Hudson, 1985: 13). Hudson notes that "geographers are more inclined to measure success by enumerating town activities" and tend to ignore

personal entrepreneurship (Hudson, 1985: 13). This is an important point; Robinson's critique of the global cities' literature is of an approach to ranking cities by measuring relative quantities of producer service activities. This type of exercise tends to hide more than it reveals as the key metric is not about quantity but should be more about qualitative impacts.

What one sees from the above discussions and much of the city-related research in general, is that there is a tendency for social science to focus on exploring a small number of core large, often global, cities. It could be argued that these are extraordinary cities or special places that might be the command and control cities of the developing global economy. Certainly, these are cities that are well connected within the global economic hierarchy. However, this book argues that the focus of too much social science research has been on these special, extraordinary, or global cities. This is not to suggest that research on extraordinary cities is not required, but rather that a more inclusive urban economic research agenda should emerge that acknowledges urban heterogeneity. Recently, a number of papers have argued that the emphasis placed on large cities "... has ensured that a large number of cities are essentially labelled as 'lesser' or irrelevant" (Bell and Jayne, 2009: 684). But, in many accounts these smaller cities are not considered to be irrelevant but simply ignored. The difficulty is smaller cities have local economies and processes providing settings for urban lifestyles that may be very distinctive or different compared to those found in larger or more extraordinary cities. Moreover, the drivers of economic growth within ordinary cities are also different in myriad ways (Erickcek and McKinney, 2006).

It is possible to argue that all cities are extraordinary in some way, but it is also critical to underscore that extraordinary things happen in ordinary cities and ordinary things also happen in extraordinary cities. By bringing together a collection of chapters from across the world this book goes some way to identifying some of the processes, practices, lifestyles, and livelihoods that are grounded in smaller and less well-known places. This approach is in line with earlier suggestions for taking a more encompassing approach to cities of various sizes, both inside and outside core economic regions (Robinson, 2002). When seen in this light, treating cities and city systems as a set of standardised entities poses risks (Thrift, 2000). It is, therefore, timely for scholars to look beyond core cities and city-regions to understand how place and economy interact and to establish frameworks or models through which production systems, economic transactions, and everyday living can be interpreted across the heterogeneity of urban settlements. In this sense, it was important to bring together a collection of research on ordinary, smaller cities – places in which the majority of people live, but which have been largely overlooked by urban and economic geographers.

CONFORMATION AND COGNITIVE BIAS AND THE NEGLECT OF SMALLER TOWNS AND CITIES

One of the challenges facing urban theorists is with understanding the complexity of cities and their environments. There are two dangers. First, social scientists must cope with being bounded by place and by time. Urban theory tends to reflect the everyday experiences of theorists. This chapter has been written from the West Midlands (UK), Western New York State (US), and East Tennessee (US), rather than from London, New York, or Singapore. Our settings imply that some aspects of the urban are more visible to us and some we tend to overlook. We see that which we can understand and comprehend (Gregory, 1994) and tend to overlook experiences that are not our experiences. Second, perhaps there has been too much attention placed on larger cities. Scale or size seems to matter. In 2013, Taylor published a book entitled *Extraordinary Cities*. This book engages with and develops approaches to world-systems theory and the global cities debate. It is perhaps surprising that it fails to engage with Robinson's critique of the world cities literature (2006). This is unfortunate as Robinson argued that the focus of the global cities' literature on advanced business and producer services ignored cities with different economic structures and defined them, by default, as playing a local or national rather than a global role. There are many problems with this approach, including the assumption that all business and professional service expertise lies within independent providers of producer services. Thus, the global cities literature ignored services provided by manufacturing companies (Daniels and Bryson, 2002; Bryson and Daniels, 2010; Lightfoot et al., 2013; Mastrogiacomo, et al., 2019). It also ignored all the other dimensions that define the role played by a city in regional, national, and international flows of all kinds.

The title of Peter Taylor's book was misleading, and the book commences with the interesting admission that "the main title of this book is a *non sequitur*" (Taylor, 2013: 3) as the analysis is not one based around a few exceptional cities, or global cities, but that "*every city is extraordinary*". We concur. But the next sentence is surprising as this proclaims that "unlike 'simple towns', cities are astonishing in their economic growth potential and cultural vitality, and amazing in their societal resilience." All cities are thus extraordinary and there are these other places called 'simple towns'. This raises a series of questions regarding the definition of 'simple' cities and related measures of urban simplicity. All towns and cities are complex in their own way. We have major conceptual problems with the assumption that smaller towns and cities are less extraordinary or resilient compared to cities or smaller and larger urban

agglomerations. This statement reflects a series of conceptual assumptions, based on a limited appreciation of the complexity of smaller towns and cities.

One could argue that the expression ‘simple towns’ represents a form of confirmation bias, with social scientists seeing what they want to see rather than exploring the diversity or variegated nature of the ‘urban’. There is danger that social science experiences different forms of confirmation bias or the tendency to interpret and recall information that supports or confirms existing beliefs and values. This tendency is reflected in accounts of science framed around the development of paradigms and paradigm shifts (Kuhn, 1962). The dominant paradigm tends to influence what is seen, how it is seen, and how it is interpreted. Confirmation bias is a form of ‘cognitive bias’. There needs to be more of an informed discussion regarding the evolution of social science and the impacts of the many types of cognitive bias that influence individuals’ judgement and decision-making. In 2002, the Nobel Prize in Economics went to Daniel Kahneman for having integrated insights from psychology into economics with a focus on understanding human judgement and decision-making under uncertainty. Kahneman worked with Amos Tversky, but Tversky was not eligible for the Nobel Prize as he died in 1996. One of their contributions was the “identification of choices and cognitive biases that are systematic and significant” (Shefrin and Statman, 2003: 57). This work focuses on risk, return, and finance, but there is much to consider in relationship to the evolution of social science and research approaches to understanding the urban. Social scientists need to be aware of systematic and significant confirmation bias. One such bias is perhaps reflected in the research attention given to larger urban agglomerations and the relative neglect of smaller towns and cities.

A key issue is to be aware of dominant accounts that emerge in the social sciences. Such accounts result in reviewers and editors shaping contributions to fit with existing approaches. This process includes rejecting papers that do not fit the accepted theory or empirical focus and the ways in which a debate is developing in a specific journal. The peer-review process in the social sciences can never be objective as the reviewers and editors tend to search for the predictable and to ignore or underplay the unpredictable. In an analysis of the publication process in American sociology, Ritzer noted that “virtually all research articles have a predictable format” and that the review process contributes to this predictability as:

reviewers tend to be leading contributors to the area with which the submission is concerned; in fact, they are often chosen because their own work is cited in the article under consideration. Reviewers tend to have a clear sense that a new submission should build upon their work as well as the “intellectual” tradition of which they are part. Works that do not flow out of that tradition, that do not add a slight increment to what is already known about a subject, are likely to be seen as being “off the wall” and rejected out of hand. Truly original pieces of work, those that are

“unpredictable”, have a hard time finding their way into the journals. (Ritzer, 1999: 40)

Exploring how arguments emerge and develop is an important process, including which arguments are included and which are excluded. The social sciences are very different to the natural or physical sciences in that academic debates tend to fade away rather than be replaced as part of an active process of critical engagement. Thus, a dominant or fashionable approach tends to lose momentum as academics retire and the research focus switches to other areas. A key issue is that science must be based on a process that encourages practitioners to argue from opposite positions (Jones, 2018; Horton, 2020), but this is unusual within the social sciences.

There is an odd tension in urban studies between dominant approaches to understanding all that is urban and the appreciation that context matters (Brenner, 2019). This tension reflects an implicit concern with generalisability and representativeness. Thus, a study of a small American town must resonate with the academic interests of international scholars. This means that purely local processes are less important than processes that can be explored in other settings. The common reaction by an editor or reviewers regarding a detailed single town case study is that it needs to contribute to the existing debates and that the details of the local situation are less important than a contribution to theory. This type of argument suggests that theory can be applied in similar ways, but in different political, cultural, socio-economic, and national settings. This goes against approaches that have highlighted alterity (Leyshon et al., 2003; Bryson and Taylor, 2010), variegated capitalism (Hall and Soskice, 2001), and the importance of context (Massey, 2005).

For American sociology, Ritzer noted that “research that is likely to be published in the major journals is apt to involve large rather than small samples” (Ritzer, 1999: 38). This is very much a methodological issue. An alternative approach is to highlight the emphasis in the urban literature on large cities, on global cities, and on agglomerations. We know much about places like New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Toronto, Paris, Berlin, London, Singapore, and Hong Kong. There is no question that these are important and interesting places, but what about all the other smaller towns and cities? For urban studies, size does appear to matter, with smaller settlements ignored, discounted or considered as uninteresting or too ‘simple’.

URBAN THEORY AND THE QUESTION OF SCALE

An alternative approach to the urban question is developed in Brenner’s recent exploration of urban theory with a focus on the scale question. This approach is positioned around one guiding question: “*Is the urban question a scale*

question?” (Brenner, 2019: 20). The analysis of this question “mutates into *Has urbanization become planetary?*” The latter question becomes increasingly problematic with the COVID-19 pandemic. Planetary urbanisation involving millions of flows of individuals between places represents millions of opportunities for disease transmission and for the emergence of many more pandemics.

Scale is an important parameter for understanding the urban, but scale is a relative concept and also one that is experiential. Every company will have a different understanding of scale and how this relates to their business and every individual engages with and defines scale in their own terms. One person’s experience of scale will reflect their form of life and the ways in which they are embedded in networks, but also information flows from other places – near and far. One company’s local/regional/global will be very different to another company’s local/regional/global and the same holds for individuals. An urban area is the outcome of an incremental accumulation of millions of real-time interactions between people, organisations, place, and space. These interactions occur across geographic space – they are multi-scalar. The danger is that these interactions are compartmentalised by urban analysts into those that are local, regional, national, and international and yet individuals and companies have a much more fluid and experiential engagement with scale.

Scale is multi-scalar, but the analysis of scale and the urban question must focus on unravelling the social construction of scale as it is experienced, constructed, and enacted by people and organisations. The problem is that urban theorists have a frame of vision that seeks to identify patterns that might not be experienced by people or organisations. A good example is the identification of a network. Network-orientated approaches in the social sciences tend to overlook the fact that people or companies involved in ‘networks’ do not experience these as networks. Individuals experience dyadic encounters. Thus, “individuals do not experience networks, but rather networks are something that are observed from above with social scientists looking down from on high at economic and social relationships” (Andres and Bryson, 2018: 10). Any one individual will be involved in enacting some of the dyadic encounters that contribute to network configuration, but no one individual will engage with the complete network. Dyadic encounters are the fundamental building blocks that lie behind the configuration of urban spaces as occupied or inhabited spaces.

The problem with Brenner’s scale analysis is that it largely decentres the individual, the household, and the organisation. Brenner’s research engages with Robinson’s call for a collective approach to “destabilize the terms of the urban and set in motion conversations towards its on-going reinvention” (Robinson, 2014: 67). The difficulty with this project is that the urban is in a continual process of reinvention or becoming and the primary drivers behind this process are the everyday activities of people and organisations.

The urban in January 2021 is very different to the urban of January 2020 as individuals and organisations have experienced and responded to the impacts of COVID-19 on urban living and activities.

Developing a new approach to the urban requires understanding the complex intersections between people, place, space, technology in the context of path dependency and path configuration and attempts to shape outcomes by organisations, individuals, communities, and policymakers. Brenner is correct to focus on scale, but perhaps he overlooks the importance of micro-scale activities that shape the everyday experience of the urban. Thus, the urban is the outcome of incremental improvisations, or a process of place-making involving a combination of citizen-led activities and formal planning or citizen-led place-making (Andres et al., 2019). Perhaps the most important urban question revolves around the development of an approach that acknowledges the complexity and diversity of the urban or the variegated nature of the urban. Such an approach must acknowledge that which is more ordinary and that which is perhaps more extraordinary. This is to move away from treating a framing based on ‘ordinary’ versus ‘extraordinary’ as a binary, but as something that is more akin to a continuum.

TOWARDS AN ALTERNATIVE URBAN THEORY – PARALLAX DIMENSIONS, INTERPOLATIONS AND SCALE

How do we understand towns and cities? This is a rather ill-defined question. An alternative question would focus on how cities are created, produced, and reproduced and then inhabited. What role does the city play as a setting, a place, and a set of interactions or flows between people, households, groups, firms, and organisations? Should the focus be on structures and the creation and financing/funding of structures or the flows that are enabled by structures? Again, this is to distinguish between objects, structures, and uses.

In Doreen Massey’s account of space, she highlighted the importance of appreciating the “intimately tiny” interrelations and interactions that shape space (2005: 9). These interactions include individual decisions that also represent trade-offs and processes of explicit and implicit negotiation. A city is the outcome of trillions of accumulated decisions that are made in real time. Some decisions leave legacies that are imprinted on the city in terms of investments in the built environment, but the majority of these decisions have transient impacts that may only be reflected in memories of that which has been. This type of analysis has much in common with Perec, who distinguished between the emphasis placed in the media on crisis and scandal and the neglect of everyday activity. Thus, the media’s focus is on “everything except the daily” (Perec, [1973] 1999: 209) ignoring Massey’s intimately tiny interac-

tions or what Perec terms the ‘infra-ordinary’. To Perec, “what speaks to us, seemingly, is always the big event, the untoward, the extra-ordinary”; social problems only become a matter of concern when something extra-ordinary happens, but “they are intolerable twenty-four hours out of twenty-four, three hundred and sixty-five days a year” (Perec, [1973] 1999: 209). This concept of the infra-ordinary highlights the importance of the accumulation of everyday activities and encounters in the creation of urban living, lifestyles, and economies. These infra-ordinary activities and encounters reflect the diversity of people living within a place and linked to other places. It is these everyday activities that shape urban routines and the ways in which people negotiate the interrelationships between liveability, livelihoods, and place.

Perec’s approach to highlighting the importance of the infra-ordinary in everyday living is clearly developed in Gallen’s fictional account of living in a small town in Northern Ireland (Gallen, 2020). This account follows the day-by-day, rather mundane experiences of people living in this small town but focusing on the everyday. There are no chapters, only a narrative that is divided by the days of the week and then further sub-divided by time periods. This is an account that highlights the role of routines in everyday living combined with events that are specific to people living in a place. This includes the ways in which people relate to place via local dialect.

The diversity that exists within and between towns and cities is difficult to capture. In *Ulysses*, James Joyce developed an approach that is akin to ‘seeing like a city’ but adopts a very different scale. This is a very different approach to that developed by Amin and Thrift (2017) to ‘seeing like a city’ or to ‘reading cities’ (Leach et al., 2019). In *Ulysses*, the emphasis is placed on capturing the infra-ordinary and the complexity of experiencing a city. James Joyce’s modernist novel chronicles Dublin as it was experienced through the encounters of Leopold Bloom during an ordinary day – 16 June 1904. This account of experiencing Dublin is informed by detailed research into the everyday infra-ordinary experiences of Bloom, his friends, and acquaintances. This is an account of a city, and everyday lived experiences, that is informed by 18 different approaches to documenting the complex interrelationships between people and place. These include short vignettes reflecting the wanderings of characters, a play script within the novel, a 309 question-and-answer section, and a stream-of-consciousness developed over eight paragraphs without punctuation.

In one part of this novel, Bloom reflects on time in the following way:

After one. Time ball on the ballast office is down. Dunsink time. Fascinating little book that is of Sir Robert Ball’s. Parallax. I never exactly understood. There’s a priest. Could ask him. (Joyce, [1922] 2008: 147)

There is much detail here. The reference to the time ball was to a large ball on a pole that was part of a clock on the Ballast Office, Aston's Quay, that dropped at a specific time each day. This was Dublin's equivalent to Big Ben. The reference to Dunsink time is to the location of the Royal Observatory of Ireland that set Dublin time. Sir Robert Ball was the former Astronomer Royal and director of the Cambridge observatory. The word 'Parallax' is perhaps the critical word in this extract. Jeri Johnson's notes to the 1922 edition of *Ulysses* published by Oxford University Press explains this term as follows: "the apparent difference in the position or direction of an object caused when the observer's position or direction of an object is changed (OED); a principle with more than physical repercussions in *Ulysses*" (Joyce, [1922] 2008: 820).

Joyce's *Ulysses* is an exercise in parallax as he applied 18 different approaches to explore Dublin on 16 June 1904. This includes rapid narrative shifts and a complex set of *interpolations* in the Wandering Works section in which there is an apparent suspension of narrative time with some of these interpolations trying to present an appearance of simultaneity. In this account of Dublin, the complexity of urban living becomes apparent as the primary narrative or discourse of the urban is disturbed by interpolations that highlight other processes and activities that are simultaneously enacted. Some of these processes have no direct or even indirect relevance for the narrative and some highlight events that are being enacted elsewhere that are related to an ongoing activity. Urban living and livelihoods are perhaps best conceptualised as an ongoing weaving together of multiple interpolations including the insertion into one type of everyday activity of other activities that have different essences and even different geographies or scales. Writing this sentence links this laptop with the outputs of a solar panel array that sits on the roof of this building. Nevertheless, writing this during the evening links this laptop to a very different set of geographies and relationships. These other geographies are critical but can be ignored for the time being in the same way that an interpolation can be overlooked. Nevertheless, this process of overlooking does not mean that interpolations that are critical for supporting urban living can be neglected. Joyce deploys interpolations to highlight the complexity of urban living and it is important that social science tries to capture some of this complexity and diversity.

Ulysses is one of the great urban novels. It is an account of the infra-ordinary and of the intimately tiny encounters that shape the interactive interactions between people and place. It is very much an extraordinary novel about the very ordinary. The concept of a parallax can be used as one approach to engaging with *Ulysses* in which Dublin is understood in many different ways through the eyes and consciousness of different people and the same people at different times and in different places over the course of one day. Much that is within this novel are the mundane interactions that shape urban experiences.

Joyce's reading of Dublin can be used to justify the application of innovative approaches to writing to unlock the complexity and diversity of understanding ordinary cities and their extraordinary geographies. Urban theorists need to embrace Joyce and try to break away from the constraints imposed on urban analysis by the types of predictability identified by Ritzer (1999).

The challenge for social scientists is to develop a parallax informed approach to urban theory. Here it is important to engage with the work of Kojin Karatani, the Japanese literary critic, and Slavoj Žižek, the Slovenian philosopher. Karatani's transcritique approach is based on reading one text through the lens of another and vice versa. In this reading of Kant, Karatani realises that Kant sees things "neither from his own viewpoint, now from the viewpoint of others, but to face the reality that is exposed through difference (parallax)" (Karatani, 2003: 3). In *Transcritique*, Karatani develops the concept of the *parallax dimension* to highlight the ways in which different people engage with the same objects and places (Žižek, 2004).

The concept of a *parallax shift* is developed by Žižek as a "philosophical twist" to the standard definition of a parallax. Thus,

the standard definition of parallax is: the apparent displacement of an object (the shift of its position against a background), caused by a change in observational position that provides a new line of sight. The philosophical twist to be added, of course, is that the observed difference is not simply "subjective", due to the fact that the same object which exists "out there" is seen from two different stances, or points of view. It is rather that, as Hegel would have put it, subject and object are inherently "mediated". (Žižek, 2009: 17)

Applying this to reading cities implies that everyone sees and engages with a slightly different city and these differences reflect "different stances, or points of view" (Žižek, 2009: 17). These differences cannot be reconciled as they are incompatible and irreducible ways of seeing or engaging with objects, artefacts, and places (Žižek, 2004). These reflect differences in the ways in which people living within an urban environment engage with the artefacts and people connected to a city as well as differences between theorists and analysts. These can reflect different experiences of intra- and inter-urban connections. Joyce, Karatani, and Žižek all have something to contribute to understanding the diversity and complexity of understanding towns and cities and urban experiences.

A parallax shift highlights that the frame of vision for urban theorists focusing on global cities or larger cities might be very different to those researching smaller towns and cities and that these differences might be irreducible. It also highlights that everyone living and working in an urban environment will engage with and read that space in very different ways, and these differences matter. This is to highlight the social construction of the relationship between

people, organisations, place, and scale. Scale is simultaneously multi-scalar and experiential and should be conceptualised through the application of a parallax shift informed approach. One implication is that the same individual will experience a city differently as they shift position. This type of shift will also be experienced by urban theorists and researchers.

All social science theory is socially embedded reflecting different approaches to engaging with society and is also infused by politics. In Brenner's approach to urban theory, he reflects on whether there could or should be a more "general theorization of the urban question" (2019: 33). The context of this question is the statement that his work reflects ideas that have emerged from exploring the "regionally specific (North Atlantic) research context" (Brenner, 2019: 33). The key question that needs to be addressed is related to theorisation for what purpose? Is this theorisation as an end in itself or theorisation for some purpose? There is also the key question regarding the object of study. Is this the 'urban' or 'planetary urbanism' or is the focus on people, organisations, governance, and place with a focus on cities? The application of a parallax shift to the discussion of urban theory reinforces the emphasis placed on the socially embedded nature of urban theory, but it also highlights the multiple ways in which those living and working in urban areas engage with place and space. Brenner concludes his discussion of urban theory by noting that:

a reflexively situated urban theory requires attention not only to an immense variety of locations around the world as potentially generative sources of theoretical innovative and comparative insight, but equally, a continued critical interrogation of the relentlessly churning, multiscalar geographies – economic, political, cultural, ecological – that underpin, animate, and result from the planetary metabolism(s) of capitalist urbanism. (Brenner, 2019: 45)

There are three points to make about this statement. First, this approach ignores non-capitalist forms of urbanism. It fails to engage with the alterity or diversity debate (Bryson et al., 2018) that recognises that capitalist urbanism has within itself non-capitalist processes. These alternative ways of place-making and place-shaping should not be marginalised or ignored. Second, the focus on scale is influenced by a concern with planetary urbanism and its metabolism(s). There is a tension here between the everyday lived experiences of the urban and an urban theory that is framed at the scale of the city rather than of urban residents, organisations, and related processes. A multi-scalar approach to urban theory must acknowledge that scale is relative and experiential. Third, comparative insights are important based on an appreciation of the variegated nature of the urban. This variegation reflects inter-country differences including different cultures, histories, forms of life, and modes of governance. It also reflects intra-country and intra-city differences. In the North American context, urban theory must engage with cities as different as De Smet, South

Dakota (population of 998 in 2020), Brookings, South Dakota (population 24,108 in 2019) and Chicago or New York.

Joyce, Karatani, and Žižek all highlight the importance of understanding different ways in which individuals engage with the world. What is perhaps surprising is the lengths to which social scientists remove the parallax dimension from their analysis and writing. Urban theory has been perhaps too focused on simplifying the complexity of urban spaces and ignoring the variegation of the urban. A global city is a variegated place, and this variation is reflected in differential forms of inclusion and exclusion. These intra- and inter-urban variations are too often ignored in urban theory. The concepts of parallax shift and interpolations highlight the simultaneous configurations of many processes in place and across space and the different ways in which people and organisations engage with these processes. A parallax shift also highlights the potential for very different readings of the urban to emerge in co-authored papers. The current approach to co-authoring papers is to reconcile differences and to develop a single reading of urban space. One example is the recent paper written by Salder and Bryson (2019) on small and medium-sized towns (SMST) and communities. This paper is co-authored, but the analysis and the writing have been sanitised so that it is impossible to identify the different readings of SMSTs that are held by each author. The paper hides or removes the parallax dimension whilst Joyce in *Ulysses* embraces multiple, but imaginary, perspectives.

This edited book has many origins. One of these includes a book written by two American authors – James Fallows and Deborah Fallows (2018). James was national correspondent for *The Atlantic* for over 35 years and Deborah is a linguist and author. Between 2012 and 2017, the Fallows have been engaged in an important exercise in applied urban geography but based on the parallax dimension. This book should be included in all undergraduate and taught postgraduate urban courses taught across America for two reasons. First, the project involves flying over 100,000 miles in a small plane piloted by Jim with Deb in the right seat. They landed in dozens of small towns and cities throughout America. Part of the challenge was:

... anticipating in each of them local stories that would organise themselves into some kind of compound narrative about the backbone and character of the region and maybe beyond that, to help explain the character of the country. We began by looking for towns with positive energy, with signs of rebound from some kind of shock or shift, like a mine or factory that had closed or waves of people who'd departed or newcomers who'd arrived. We ended up adding towns with down-and-out reputations where we truly feared for what we might find. Life upon landing was never quite what we'd planned. (Fallows and Fallows, 2018: 3–4)

This exercise involved staying in towns for weeks at a time, revisiting them and following threads from one town to the next. This involved attending town plays and musicals, civic meetings, hanging out in coffee shops and brewpubs, and days in libraries, schools, attending ball games, and visiting community colleges, factories, start-ups, staying in hotels, motels, private homes, and swimming in local pools, and taking boat and bike rides. Second, the book is unusual in that “alternating sections of the book are written by James and Deborah ... [and] a small symbol at the beginning of each section indicates its author” (2018: x). Thus, this book presents two different readings of the same American towns. This is an implicit acknowledgement of the parallax shift and its application to understanding ‘ordinary’ American cities.

One can critique this approach as not following a rigorous research design and methodology, but here are two individuals who have spent four years trying to come to terms with small towns and cities across America. The Fallows and Fallows project has much in common with the aims and objectives of this edited book. Jim’s reflections on their project were that: “an important part of the face of modern America has slipped from people’s view”, and that:

we wanted to look at parts of the country generally missed by the media spotlight. That would mean reporting in the places often considered as “flyover country”. Such cities, medium-sized or below, and rural areas usually made their way to national attention only after a tornado or a mass shooting. (Fallows and Fallows, 2018: 12)

One can only agree with this statement and the need to develop a more inclusive approach to understanding urbanisation.

CONCLUSIONS AND THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The urban is the site for everyday living based on established routines. It is also the site for serendipitous encounters. The urban is also a core site for reproduction. This involves consumption to support reproduction and everyday living and sites linked directly or indirectly to production. The urban is both a site for predictable and unpredictable behaviour. Every town or city will have a different set of connections to other places. The COVID-19 pandemic has also highlighted that the urban is the site for rapid disease transmission linked to density and human behaviour. Connections between towns and cities represent opportunities for flows of money, ideas, services, and products as well as diseases. All this highlights the tensions between the predictability of everyday living, or the predictability of the world of the infra-ordinary, and the unexpected or the different. It also highlights the variegated nature of the urban and the need to develop a more inclusive approach to urban theory.

This edited collection adopts an eclectic approach to advancing the study of ordinary cities. Each chapter varies in terms of the scale at which these cities are examined and the ways they are observed and analysed. These varied approaches then offer those interested in the geographies of ordinary cities various ways, or lenses, in which to approach this topic. While indeed eclectic, this range of approaches to an important topic illustrates the many ways in which ordinary cities can be viewed and, in turn, the salience of their geographies to those who study urban landscapes.

George Frantz's chapter explores a smaller city in New York State. The focus is on planning practices and development trajectories. The chapter highlights the ways in which race and class interests drive planning and policymaking in a smaller city. This is followed by Jonathan Kozar and William Graves' chapter, which evaluates changes in employment across smaller (less than one million population) metropolitan areas in the US South. The analysis focuses on understanding the ways in which smaller metropolitan labour markets are frequently inefficient and irrational. This chapter is then followed by Ronald Kalafsky's chapter, which develops a regional approach to ordinary cities with a focus on the southern United States. This is a region with a distinct political economy that is very different to the rest of America. The chapter examines smaller cities across the region in terms of their export performance (and, perhaps, dependence) and its potential role in economic development. This is then followed by research from Louise Johnson, Sally Weller, and Tom Barnes which explores how the city of Geelong, Australia, has emerged from the devastating loss of its once-central motor vehicle industry. This chapter, in a sense, illustrates how ordinary cities can indeed reinvent themselves much like their larger counterparts that have been discussed exhaustively in the urban literature. In this context, it is important to appreciate that all towns and cities are in a continual state of reinvention that takes two forms. There is radical or disruptive change, for example the closure of a major employer or some infrastructure enhancement that is transformational. Or, there is gradual or incremental change. Towns and cities are also involved in planned change combined with improvisation that is embedded in existing structures. Urban theory needs to include a focus on understanding urban outcomes that are shaped by improvisations enacted by individuals, organisations, and policymakers.

The analysis then transitions to an industry-centred approach, as seen in the work of Stephen Williams and John Bryson. Their chapter explores how advanced business services firms can emerge and even thrive outside of what are thought of as core command-and-control centres. This is positioned within an account of the configuration of expertise production networks (EPN) rather than the more dominant account of global production networks (GPN). While continuing within the industry-focused approach – in this case, tourism – the next chapter by Vida Vanchan highlights how sustainable development can be

at the core of planning for ordinary cities. This contrasts with earlier studies that explore the ways in which smaller urban centres are dependent on, or certainly within the orbit of larger urban agglomerations. This chapter explores an ancient city, Siem Reap in Cambodia, by further examining the notion of ordinary as extraordinary and the ways in which these concepts are combined into an amalgam. COVID-19 impacts on the country and city, including economic strategies and resilience, are also discussed.

The theme of development and resilience continues in Suparna Soni's chapter with a focus on a smaller city in India. This chapter also explores the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic by highlighting the impacts of lockdowns on the most vulnerable, but also identifying community-based resilience. Then Kamyoun Kim and Ju-Hyun Bae offer some further analyses and yet another line of enquiry, showing the unique intersections between smaller cities, immigration, and globalisation within the South Korean milieu. The context is based on the analysis of policies intended to alleviate shortages of low-wage labour. The final chapter by Jacob Salder explores the readjustments and evolution of smaller coastal cities in the UK. This chapter highlights enduring structural challenges including disinvestment by key employers and the rapid emergence of an ageing population.

The book then concludes with some final thoughts on ordinary cities, endeavouring to find commonality between the situations in each of the somewhat extraordinary cases explored in each of the chapters. Each chapter has highlighted that 'ordinary' towns and cities, or 'simple' towns and cities, combine the ordinary with the extraordinary. This argument can be turned on its head in that every 'extraordinary' city is a site for the ordinary and the mundane. The challenge is to develop a more inclusive approach to urban theory and one that recognises the variegated nature of the urban. Thus, this contributes to the recent debate regarding reframing urban theory, but from the perspective of variegated urbanism (Brenner, 2019). However, rather than just providing concrete conclusions it is hoped that this book instead offers avenues for additional research and reflections on ordinary cities, thus acting as a catalyst for further discussion and future research on a topic that has been, to date, under-researched.

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