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This paper has been prompted by a journal debate at the start of the new millennium on the future of urban sociology in light of the proliferation of urban studies in many disciplines at a time of increasingly blurred boundaries between cities and the world at large. It was a debate that, inter alia, asked urban sociology to engage seriously with globalization (and contemporary modernity in general) as well as to return to its original concerns with urban social inequality in a new division of inter-disciplinary labour. This paper steers clear of defining a role for urban sociology, principally because it believes urban studies to have become a field of such intense inter-disciplinarity that it makes little sense to demarcate the urban sociology from urban geography, urban planning and politics, and urban anthropology. Instead the debate is used to raise a more basic question of urban ontology relating, firstly, to how cities should be imagined as places, so that due recognition can be given to the radical exteriority that characterizes them and, secondly, to how the urban social should be imagined, so that trans-local influences and non-human associations can be counted as part of the urban social. It is argued that these two ontological inflections imply a different understanding of the geography and sociology of the city to that assumed in the original debate.

Introduction

In September 2005, the Sociology Department at Liverpool University held a conference to commemorate its first 100 years and its founder Eleanor Rathbone, the celebrated urban social reformer and suffragette. I was invited to comment on the future of urban sociology (summarized to me as a sub-discipline uncertain about its identity and future) from the perspective of human geography (perceived as a site of vigorous and innovative urban research in recent years). I accepted the invitation, but also felt uneasy about the premise. First, I felt that neither perception could be taken for granted: there would be those in urban sociology who would not want to defend a specialist role, or would reject the charge of languor and uncertainty, and there would be urban geographers who would argue that the balance has tipped too far towards culture, theory and endless changes in analytical focus at the expense of class, inequality and studies of the lived urban experience. I felt that the risk of a fruitless politics of envy was particularly high. Second, and most importantly, my perception, based on a reading of books and articles as well as engagement with various urban research programmes, was that scholarship in this area was in the midst of forging an inter-disciplinary field, one drawing widely and eclectically from different traditions for theoretical innovation and empirical application. Indeed, the publishing trend in urban studies seemed to be going in the direction of the inter- or post-disciplinary awareness pioneered by this journal (reaching out from the social sciences into Philosophy and the Humanities—Mendieta, 2003; Catterall,
and others such as *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, Environment and Planning (A and D), Public Culture, Social Research* and, more recently, *Urban Studies*.

So, how could a ‘human geographer’ possibly offer a valid view on the state and future of research in ‘urban sociology’? If urban researchers now find themselves foraging in different disciplines to make sense of an increasingly complex urban environment—as cities come to represent more and more of the world and its ways—any perceived impasse in urban sociology could simply be a problem of categorization. Urban sociologists might have simply become part of a wider community of urban researchers, and all that might be required is to label the new field ‘urban studies’, rolled out of different departments. However, this would be no small step, for it could damage discipline-based student recruitment, research and teaching funding allocations, library classification systems, and academic careers and reputations. In this regard, urban sociology, with its long and distinguished history and its iconic status in times gone within and beyond the discipline of Sociology, has much to lose. Indeed, possibly with such concerns in mind, the sub-discipline itself has been reflecting on its future, sparked by two millennial reflections.

The first is Saskia Sassen’s article ‘New Frontiers Facing Urban Sociology at the Millennium’, published in the *British Journal of Sociology* in 2000. In this paper Sassen suggests that urban sociology should focus on the relationship between cities and contemporary globalization by looking at cities as signs and sites of the new in a spatially integrated world order. This requires accepting that cities no longer exist as bounded spaces, only as sites in global social and economic flows and networks, that they express new forms of centrality in transnational business networks as centres of corporate HQs, transnational elites and advanced business services (especially world cities), and that the politics of place increasingly draw on multiplicity of presence (e.g. new claims resulting from the close juxtaposition in cities between the global poor and global rich). Thus, for Sassen, a new urban sociology should provide an understanding of cities as a particular kind of space in a globalized modernity.

The second reflection is offered by Beth Perry and Alan Harding (2002) in the *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, based on two debates on the future of urban sociology at the annual conferences in 2001 of the British Sociological Association and the American Sociological Association. Both debates reiterated the need for urban sociology to recognize the co-constitution of the local and the global as well as the changing spatiality of cities. While some participants recommended post-disciplinarity as a way forward, others proposed a distinctive niche for urban sociology. Mike Savage, for example, suggested using the legacy of work on the structural and contextual determinants of place within urban sociology to make sense of contemporary social inequality, poverty and social division. Indeed in the second edition of his classic text with Alan Warde on urban sociology (Savage *et al.*, 2003), the authors invite urban sociology to rekindle its historic interest, following Simmel and the Chicago School, in seeing cities as a setting of modernity, sociation and political engagement, through studies of urban inequality, public space and the practices of everyday life.

Three injunctions seem to be clear from these reflections. If urban sociology is to have a future, first, it cannot take for granted what the city is, second, it should grasp the city as a symptom of modernity at large, and, third, it should focus on certain dimensions of the social (at least according to some). In this paper, I wish to pick up on two of the injunctions. The first is Sassen’s suggestion—and no more than this—that cities must be seen as sites in larger geographies, rather than as bounded territories. There is much to be added here from recent thinking on space from a relational perspective which, I believe, provides the tools for a non-parochial
urbanism. The second is Savage’s invitation to urban sociology to return to its origins by exploring how the modern social—practiced, differentiated, organized and mobilized—is influenced by the urban experience. This is a challenging proposition, but it immediately raises a concern about what is meant by the social in a modern world that increasingly builds nature and technology into the human experience. As Latour (2005) controversially puts it, the social should not be taken as a pre-given set of human relationships and categories, but as the arena of associative connections and ties that involve all manner of actors and intermediaries, human and non-human. What does this definition imply for the study of the changing urban social order?

These strike me as two fundamental framing questions for a new ‘urban sociology’. I wish to address them through the lens of what might be labelled as a trans-human and trans-local urbanism; one that completely rethinks the city as a spatial formation and as a social entity. My argument is that whatever the role for urban sociology in an inter- or post-disciplinary field of urban studies, some fundamental rethinking of long-held assumptions about the city as a social and spatial formation is necessary. More has come to the fore vying for attention as part of the geographical and social composition of cities. The dialogue with urban sociology which follows, therefore, is a way of exploring a new urban imaginary that includes work in human geography (e.g. Thrift, 1996; Massey et al., 1999; M. P. Smith, 2001; Amin and Thrift, 2002; Whatmore, 2002; Kaika, 2004; Taylor, 2004; Gandy, 2005; Massey, 2005; Pile, 2005; Robinson, 2005; Swyngedouw et al., 2005), urban planning (Graham and Marvin, 2001; Madani, 2003; Sandercock, 2003; Healey, 2006), urban anthropology (Low, 1999; Stoller, 2002), urban ecology and environmental studies (Keil, 2003; Murdoch, 2005), and from sociology itself (Sassen, 2000, 2002, 2003; Castells, 2001; Blokland, 2003; Parker, 2004; Keith, 2005; Savage et al., 2005). The purpose of this paper, therefore, is not to engage in disciplinary competition, but to outline a new urban ontology for an expanded urban sociology.

Thinking space

Let me open with a spatial paradox. With nearly half the world’s population concentrated in urban settlements that, in turn, drive much contemporary world economic, social and cultural change, the urban condition and the human condition are becoming synonymous. Yet, as spatial entities cities have become agglomerations that no longer cohere internally to function as organisms in their own right. Thus, while much of the world can now be read from what goes on in cities, what remains of cities as territorial entities is no longer self-evident. The everyday urban has become part of a world space of many geographies of varying spatial reach and composition, linked to the rise of transnational flows of ideas, information, knowledge, money and people; trans-local networks of organization and influence, including multinational corporations and global financial institutions, international governance regimes and transnational cultural networks; and technologies ensuring the rapid transmission of distant developments such as monetary swings, environmental disasters and the actions of the powerful.

Much of this is well known from the literature on globalization, but perhaps less recognized is the degree to which the changes amount to a radical shift in socio-spatial organization, towards forms of topological organization that no longer correspond to neat scalar or territorial packages (Ong and Collier, 2005). A number of new spatial arrangements have come to the fore. One takes the shape of spatial radiation, marked by the traces of virtual and non-virtual communications networks crossing around, under and above the world. These have become life worlds in their own right (Dodge and Kitchen, 2004), enabling community and connectivity at a distance, frequently at the
expense of links between co-located people and spaces (Graham, 2002). A second spatiality is that of intensified and extended everyday global circulation, typified by the supply chains and corporate networks that tie producers, intermediaries and consumers in the most unexpected places into structured patterns of mutuality and dependence (Dicken, 2003). This space of circulation also includes the well-trodden, but not always visible, tracks of global escape, migration, tourism, business travel, asylum and organized terror, inhabited by increasing numbers of people, and transecting settled communities with new circuits of belonging, fear and suffering (Castles and Miller, 1998; Harris, 2002; Amin, 2004). A third spatiality is the world of affect and attachment forged through global cultural influences and diasporic attachments, and with such intensity that it is now possible to think of the domestication of love and hate beyond the familiar cajolments of face-to-face, nation and other attachments of spatial proximity (Pieterse, 2003; Thrift, 2005a). Fourth, globalization can be read as a force of transhuman seepage, involving the daily flux of viral, digital, animal and plant life, summoning meaning from the bodily to the cosmological scale (Gray, 2002; Whatmore, 2002; Swyngedouw et al., 2005). Finally, new political spaces have arisen associated with globalization, spreading outwards from the traditional sites of community (town hall, parliament, state and nation) into the machinery of virtual public spheres, international organizations, global social movements and planetary politics (Hardt and Negri, 2000; Connolly, 2002; Gilroy, 2004; Slaughter, 2004).

These new spatialities have become decisive for the constitution of place. The varied processes of spatial stretching, inter-dependence and flow, combine with in situ trajectories of socio-spatial evolution and change, to propose place—the city, region or rural area—as a site of intersection between network topologies and territorial legacies. The result is no simple displacement of the local by the global, of place by space, of history by simultaneity and flow, of small scale by big scale, or of the proximate by the remote. Instead, it is a subtle folding together of the distant and the proximate, the virtual and the material, presence and absence, flow and stasis, into a single ontological plane upon which location—a place on the map—has come to be relationally and topologically defined. Grasping the implications of such a definition of place is not easy, given the grip of a cartographic legacy measuring location on the basis of geographical distance and territorial jurisdiction. A helpful visualization has been offered by Michel Serres in conversation with Bruno Latour (1995, p. 60) to describe space as a topology:

> ‘If you take a handkerchief and spread it out in order to iron it, you can see in it certain fixed distances and proximities. If you sketch a circle in one area, you can mark out nearby points and measure far-off distances. Then take the same handkerchief and crumple it, by putting it in your pocket. The two distant points suddenly are close, even superimposed. If, further, you tear it in certain places, two points that were close can become very distant. This science of nearness and rifts is called topology, while the science of stable and well-defined distances is called metrical geometry.’ (cited in R. G. Smith, 2003, p. 566)

Relational or topological readings of space/place, prompted by reflections on globalization, have been maturing for some time now in human geography (Massey, 1993, 2005; Thrift, 1996), anthropology (Appadurai, 1996; Rankin, 2003; Ong and Collier, 2005), landscape studies (Casey, 1997; Malpas, 1999; Ingold, 2000) and sociology (Urry, 2000; Callon and Law, 2004; Latour, 2005). This is a rich body of work that defies easy summarizing, but a common thread is to read spatial formation, differentiation and change through a vitalist or phenomenological lens, close to the world of practices and to the ebb and flow of matter in continual flux. Accordingly, the interest lies in following the
processes of spatial formation, rather than in accepting pre-given orders of spatial arrangement. The spatial is taken as the register of different modes and mobilizations of being and acting in the world; a topography of contours projected by the energies of human and non-human vitality, but always rubbing against historically shaped territorial formations.

This mere hint of a complex literature (see Massey, 2005, for a definitive relational philosophy and politics of space) can be summarized as an approach that emphasizes the agency of spatial practices. To see cities in this way is to recognize a very different spatial formation from the bounded entities that we have got used to in urban studies. In a relational account, the city becomes the sum of its spatial connections, a place where: (a) myriad networks of varying length, speed and duration intersect; (b) many human, technological and biological elements combine; (c) spatial contiguity implies no relational connectivity; and (d) the urban hum is the sum of resonances from the past, the ghostly weight of hidden institutions and symbolic rituals (Pile, 2005), and the reverberation of daily activities and the noise of things from afar circulating in supply chains, transit systems and virtual networks. The city beckons to be read simultaneously as a site of spatial circulation and radiation, and as a site of difference placed in close proximity. What does it mean to recognize such an urban spatiality? It does not mean claiming that cities are disappearing as territorial formations or that there is a seamless transition from political and planning jurisdictions and settlement patterns capture only a small part of city making, leaving out the force of diaspora connections, virtual networks, distant supply chains, remittances, migration, and so on. Third, the constant tension in urban life between fixity and flow, stasis and change, integration and fragmentation, diversity and commonality, has to be acknowledged explicitly as an analytical and political challenge. Finally, the relational perspective invites consideration of the effects of spatial juxtaposition in urban life. If cities have become sites of variety and difference placed in close proximity, but without any necessary linkage between the elements (e.g. between rich and poor neighbourhoods, between local business and local society, between migrant and indigenous cultures), there is a need to consider the consequences of such forms of co-presence in terms of the politics of urban management and citizenship.

Locating urban social inequality

The analysis of urban society, whether it is a concern with social justice or with the challenges of modernity, has to change if the new spatial registers of connectivity, flow and contiguity are taken into consideration. Let us examine the topic of urban inequality, a long-standing, if not defining, topic in urban sociology. The sub-discipline has had plenty to say about how the social inequalities of modernity are inflected in different urban contexts and, how in turn, the urban weaves into the politics of social justice through human experience in local housing and labour markets, public cultures, access to public space, and so on. A striking example of this tradition has been work mapping urban inequality onto spatial patterns within the city. As Savage et al. (2003) reveal in their recent synthesis of the sub-discipline, studies of inequality have focused on socio-spatial segregation (ghettoes, suburbs, housing
estates, ethnic enclaves, gated communities), on social dynamics in settings such as households, neighbourhoods and public spaces, and on the inequalities faced by particular social groups in specific spaces of the city. The result has been a rich tapestry of the sites and complex dynamics of urban inequality, guided by sensitivity to the contribution of the urban condition to social inequality and injustice, as well as the texture of modern political economy.

I would argue, however, that the prevailing spatial imaginary behind this tradition of work has been that of territorial or scalar composition, with urban inequality traced back to place characteristics or relations between spatial scales. Typically, work rooted in political economy has revealed important connections between structural or macro-economic change (e.g. deindustrialization, consumer society, post-industrialism, neo-liberalism, individuation) and particular micro-urban problems (e.g. unemployment among certain groups, discrimination against the globally displaced, various forms of social alienation). It has also linked these and other urban social problems to public policy decisions at different spatial scales (e.g. national welfare reform, urban and regional policy, macro-economic policy, international trade and development policies, lending decisions by international financial organizations). Similarly, the urban problems have been related to unequal relations between cities (and regions), explaining local outcomes as the product of patterns of inter-territorial competition or dependence working to the advantage of the most powerful places (e.g. through their pull on resources, market power and political attention). Over the decades, such work in urban sociology, geography, planning has played an important role in helping to identify economic and social policies at different spatial scales to reduce urban social inequality.

More recently, however, and possibly due to the waning influence in recent years of political economy on public policy, ‘localized’ accounts of urban inequality have come to the fore, at the expense of inter-scalar and inter-territorial explanations. Ironically, the staple themes of inequality in urban sociology (e.g. problems of housing access and segregation, or crime and disorder) and the staple urban sites of study (e.g. neighbourhoods, public spaces, housing estates) are starting to reappear as both symptom and source of the problem. Urban maps of social inequality are now being read as explanations of the phenomenon. This is most evident in current policy-related work on the role of community cohesion in combating urban social exclusion; work that springs directly out of an understanding of social inequality as the problem of particular groups in particular urban locations. For example, practitioners around the world inspired by the insight of communitarian thinkers such as Amitai Etzioni, social capital theorists such as Robert Putnam and capabilities’ theorist Amartya Sen, have begun to see the social pathology of place as a driver of social opportunity. More specifically, social inequality has come to be re-cast as a defect of place, a deficiency of the capacity of local residents to participate and connect, resulting in social breakdown, de-motivation and isolation. Accordingly, and we see this most clearly in New Labour’s policies for urban renewal, the prime task set for policies to tackle inequality is to enable the formation of local community bonds and capabilities. Overcoming inequality has become a matter of community mobilization and bridging social difference (e.g. through mixed housing, ethnic dialogue, multicultural spaces) rather than one of tackling systemic and trans-local sources of injustice.

It would be wrong to blame urban sociology for this elision between social pathology and urban process (Amin, 2005), but it is probably fair to claim that the underlying spatial ontology—cities seen as bounded spaces with distinctive markings of inequality—has allowed policy communities to get away with thinking of urban inequality as a local problem requiring local solutions. This has led to analysis and action related to urban
inequality to become divorced from consideration of trans-local forces. A relational approach to cities cannot escape from attending to these forces, seeing social inequality in all its local guises as the product of multiple geographies of reward and retribution, connection and disconnection, proximate and remote. Meshed in with social exclusions linked to the dynamics of local labour and housing markets, embedded local cultures, local systems of provision, are other long chains of association with a decisive impact on urban inequality. There are other spatialities of inequality at work. Typically, these include the practices of transnational firms and organizations that routinely shift jobs and capacity from place to place and lock the local into a grid of corporate connections that work their own logic. In turn, there are parallel circuits of flow in the restless economy of circulating bodies, knowledge, information, resources and money, each laden with local implications. For example, the trails of particular urban spaces or communities can be linked to the effects of rapid transit and communications systems, global supply networks, virtual financial transactions and global migration patterns, all of which have selective spatial outcomes. Similarly, the proliferation of spaces of social obligation and affiliation can be read as a development that puts into question explanations of social possibility based on the strength or weakness of local ties. For example, some global diaspora connections (e.g. involving remittances among migrant communities) are vital for local survival, while there are others (e.g. transfers among transnational elites) that remain largely disconnected from local obligations. The same can be said about the proliferation of spaces of the political. Crucial to the spatial allocation of reward and opportunity are policy decisions made in remote places such as central government departments, the gatherings of the world’s business and political elite at places like Davos, and the decisions reached at international or inter-ministerial meetings or by global regulatory organizations such as the World Bank.

My argument is that no urban social problem, even in the most remote of places, can be explained without reference to these long chains of connection, which shape the allocation of damage and possibility. In urban studies, including contributions from urban sociology, these connections are increasingly being noted in explaining new dimensions and patterns of urban inequality. This is evident from the growing body of work on the implications of globalization on urban community, belonging and social welfare (M. P. Smith, 2001; Sandercock, 2003; Savage et al., 2005), on local exclusions resulting from tightening links between global cities structured around partnerships between professional elites (Sassen, 2002; Taylor, 2004), and on how the simultaneous privatization and globalization of some of the staples of human survival, such as water, sanitation and basic nutrition is reducing many poor communities in cities of the Global South and the Global North to bare life (Davis, 2004; Kaika, 2004; Swyngedouw, 2004; UN-HABITAT, 2006). But, as the preceding paragraph implies, there are many other spatialities affecting urban inequality that need to be addressed.

This matters politically, in terms of identifying not only the sources of urban inequality, but also new possibilities for tackling them. For example, in the recent ‘localist’ turn, much of the onus on tackling urban problems has come to be placed on cities themselves, read as local societies. Typically, the spatial juxtaposition of difference (e.g. people of different class or ethnic background leading parallel lives in separate parts of the city) is soliciting calls to build mixed communities, bridge difference through dialogue and interaction, and cement local commitments in order to tackle social alienation, resentment and disengagement (Cantle, 2005). Those who live and work in a particular city are called to show an obligation towards each other, including the obligation to reduce social inequality. Clearly it makes little sense to remove local commitment from a politics of social justice and
equality—inclusive cities rely on local redistribution, a shared urban public sphere, access to urban resources and solidarities that bridge difference (Amin et al., 2003). The familiarity of the everyday local and a shared sense of place can potentially spark ‘elective propinquity’ among and between different communities in a city (Blokland, 2003; Bridge, 2005). The point, however, is that these propinquities are inflected by, and additional to, other spaces of affiliation and obligation. It follows that a politics of urban social justice has to work creatively with this multiple connectivity, by allowing local distance and difference, by recognizing plural affiliations, by not expecting too much from spatial juxtaposition, by insisting on the obligations of, and towards, distant strangers, by seeing the achievements as always only temporary and partial. This is to develop a politics of place that draws on disagreement, multiple geographies of attachment and plural political spaces, as the catalyst achieving greater urban social justice. The key is the mobilization of an engaged and demanding public, one that is compelled to draw on all available connections, to crowd out a politics of privilege and self-interest, to respond to new claims and needs, and to keep the city ever attentive to the basics of social justice. In this account of urban politics, the city springs back as a site of vigorous public claim and cosmopolitan mobilization, not local consensus (Amin and Thrift, 2005).

Harnessing exteriority is crucial for a progressive politics of place, all the more so because at present policies along these lines seem to be driven by pro-business and pro-elite choices with scant regard for the needs of the local population, especially those with limited market power. A relational reading of urban society forces the search for a new Gesellschaft politics that works with distributed obligations and connections to secure local social justice. So, for example, in the battle against urban poverty, the potential of remittances, capacity-building at a distance, state policy reforms, selective migration, diaspora ties, global financial, corporate and trade reforms, can all be woven into, or complement, solutions based on local mobilization. Or, in the battle against urban racial and ethnic inequality, local attempts to bridge difference can be folded into broader strategies to de-racialize national pathologies of anxiety towards the stranger, cultures of belonging and citizenship, and a Western geo-politics that increasingly equates civilization and progress with particular ethnic, religious and cultural dispositions. These briefest of illustrations of a trans-local politics of urban social justice can be placed in a long tradition of normative obligation towards distant others. It is not a politics confined to relational thinking alone. However, in the present condition of proliferating moorings of place, a relational approach might help to uncover the ‘hidden wiring’ that connects the urban to the trans-urban in multiple spaces of responsibility.

Towards a trans-human urban sociology

Inasmuch as the spatial configuration of cities cannot be taken for granted, neither can assumptions about what counts as the urban social. Historically, and still today, the study of social differentiation, sociality and everyday social practice has been the bedrock of urban sociology. These three themes have been examined through studies of urban inequality and exclusion, intolerance and prejudice, health and well-being, crime and disorder, consumption, work and employment, alienation and participation, surveillance and segregation, and private and public life. In addition, the studies have looked at different ‘registers’ of the social including the bodily, the inter-personal, the grouped, the lived and the instituted. The social has been largely grasped as the arena of human experience. The non-human—including the built environment, nature, technology, infrastructure, animal and viral life—has not been allowed to feature as part of the social. Accounts of urban social life have tended to engage only marginally with the body of
social theory associated with the work of Deleuze and Guattari, de Landa, Ingold, Law, Latour, Haraway and others who steadfastly refuse to reduce the social to the human. This is work that draws on a vitalist or pragmatist phenomenology, interested in valuing the collisions and combinations of plural actants. The result is a social field considered to be temporary and hybrid, composed of strings of association of more or less coherence, durability and reach, held to produce the social on their own terms. The social is considered to exist as an arena of enactment involving varied human and non-human inputs given life, meaning and purpose through processes of enrolment and alignment, rather than as a purely human field structured and differentiated by abstract rules, hidden essences, de-humanized structures, nature and technology held apart (Latour, 2005). In other words, the social is understood as the differentiated inflection of nature and technology folded inseparably and constitutively into the human (Haraway, 1991; Ingold, 2000).

Such ‘non-representational’ thinking (Thrift, 1996) has stimulated considerable interest in spatial theory offering new understandings of place and space (see Murdoch, 2005, for a synthesis). This includes important work on cities, in which the interest in hybrid associations is leading to new sensings of urban social dynamics as trans-human. Material objects, ghostly presences, nature, technology, biological matter and animal life, are now appearing as parts of, or extensions to, human life in cities (Amin and Thrift, 2002; Latham and McCormack, 2004; Pile, 2005; Robinson, 2005; Kaika and Thielen, 2006; Marvin and Medd, 2006). Work on the technological, for example, is showing how the latter is both on the inside of what counts as human—for example, bodily implants of one sort or another—and as a prosthetic without which much contemporary social life could not be defined as such—for example, software code, automobility, digital communications, surveillance technologies (Graham and Marvin, 2001; Gandy, 2005). Increasingly, this work is moving away from both extremist (celebratory or frightening) and extrinsic treatments of technology as an invasion into an otherwise authentic human experience (i.e. urban modernization as a kind of social taint, Virilio, 2005). Similarly, nature is also coming to be considered on the human inside—through the agency of germs, landscapes, animal impulse, climatic influence, ecological footprint—as well as part of the social—in the form of nature domesticated, clean water, ecosystems and food provision (Whatmore, 2002; Kaika, 2004; Swyngedouw, 2004; Castree, 2005; Hinchliffe and Whatmore, 2006). Uncovering the material geographies of urban provision, and the intricate ways in which nature and culture fold into each other, this kind of work has revealed a considerably expanded urban social space.

This post-human understanding of the social has major implications for urban sociology. It challenges all those who are interested in urban society and its transformations, to reconsider the staple themes in light of indivisible associations between nature, technology, objects, bodies, biology, and human thought and practice. What, for example, might the study of urban sociality (from alienation and anomie to association, participation and community) reveal if it were to take account of the full force of architectural design, everyday technologies of communication and regulation, water and sewage flows, and climate flux? While some of this material does indeed appear in studies of urban social life (e.g. in analysis of the impact of the built form, consumption or communications technologies upon social ties), the studies largely stop short of asking whether this material’s inseparability from the human forces reconsideration of what it is to be human in contemporary urbanism.

The analysis of urban community would certainly alter were this question to be asked. For reasons of space, I will comment only on the implications of seeing technology on the
inside of the urban social (leaving aside a consideration of nature). Proper recognition of the complex ways in which urban dwellers have come to incorporate artefacts such as toys, gadgets, cars, pets, furniture, machinery, medical props, shopping, surfing on the Internet, and so on, into their daily lives forces us to re-think urban community. While the impact of attachment to such artefacts on identity formation and sociation has long been studied in sociological analysis, and frequently in negative terms, a step further would be to explore ‘community’ with these artefacts on the inside of human association. This might help us to move beyond rash judgment of them as a distraction from urban community, taken as consisting of neighbourliness, inter-personal ties and civic engagement (see, however, Bennett, 2001; Miller, 2001; Gregson and Crewe, 2002; Hampton, 2004; Featherstone et al., 2005, for a less doom-laden and more material interpretation of social culture). To note the active agency of material culture is not to glorify it, but simply to note that artefacts rarely stand apart from another sphere that we might call the inter-personal.

Mathew Gandy (2005) has described the melding between the technological and the human as cyborg urbanization, to draw attention to the central role that cities play in bringing into being a ‘physical infrastructure that links the human body to vast technological networks’ (p. 28). Once urban human life in cities is seen as a hybrid of organism and machine, new aspects of social conduct immediately vie for attention. This includes the slow codification of the social as the machinery of capability developed from military systems and other regimes of order come to be implanted, the helplessness and loss that accompanies technological breakdown, especially when the latter involves human prosthetics, the intense emotions that objects arouse, especially when they are engineered to respond to humans (Thrift, 2005a), and the worlds of ties opened up by relationships struck through the virtual media.

A rematerialized urban sociology implies a different politics of urban community. It could be argued that technology, far from threatening human association and obligation, is producing a form of ‘cyborg citizenship’ (Gandy, 2005) that is neither self-serving nor collective, neither agnostic nor agonistic. The change might simply amount to the rearrangement of urban association through the technological everyday, and the redefinition of the public sphere as a telemediated space. Urban association has come to take place in manifold spaces propped up, or even made, by new technological developments. One implication is that these shifts in modalities of political association do not represent the end of a politics of urban community/citizenship. Instead, and perhaps ironically, they remind us that the history of politics has always been the history of technologies that define the political in specific ways (Latour and Weibel, 2005), from the arrangements of agora to software-driven simulations of modern voting behaviour.

This interpretation of technology as both a defining and mobilizing force in politics shifts the focus away from looking for more or less political association in the city, towards asking how the urban political, drawing in more actants, and extending its spatial reach, is modified as a site of contest and association. Such an approach, to return to our example of urban community, might well reveal the city as a site of manifold mobilizations, all with their own dynamics of political formation, interest and spatial expression, involving solidarities and antagonisms that extend well beyond the city, sustained by all manner of affective triggers, from passionate feelings about certain issues, to objects that nourish fandom (Gandy, 2004). This is the city revealed as a community of communities, held together by an extraordinary range of objects of political communion. The result is an urban political field of fragmented and invisible or materialized dispositions, one that requires active effort in constructing a local commons and a local public. There is no ready politics of
local community to draw upon around the classical sites of city hall, public space or facial recognition. Instead, a politics of local attention is obliged to both visualize a specified urban commons (e.g. shared services or a particular urban ethos) and enrol many tools of political communion (from friendship circles to billboards and manifestos).

There is a second important implication for urban sociology arising out of an expanded definition of the social. In our book, *Cities*, Nigel Thrift and I argued that the city should be thought of as a machinic order composed of a multitude of objects-in-relation whose silent rhythm instantiates and regulates all aspects of urban life (Amin and Thrift, 2002). Into this order are woven many mundane objects, from road signals and postcodes to automobiles and bases, that form the delivery systems, protocols and codes of civic and public conduct that regulate the everyday social life of cities. Nigel Thrift (2005b) has described this thick stratum, much of which provides the repair and maintenance infrastructure that keeps cities going, as the urban ‘technological unconscious’, to emphasize the ‘interactional intelligence’ it provides. This is no simple technological infrastructure, but a trans-human material culture bristling with intentionality, without which the urban would cease to function. It makes things work, it facilitates circulation (and indeed it normalizes the condition of automobility—Sheller and Urry, 2000), it guides economic conduct, it channels distribution and reward, it sets the ground rules, it provides orientation and it designates the spaces, activities and people that count (e.g. by demarcating investment zones or the economically undeserving).

Urban sociology, with its traditional interest in power asymmetries in the city, could gainfully reflect on the ambiguous implications of everyday ordering by the city’s technological unconscious. Code, timetables, traffic signals, zoning patterns, lists, databases, grids and the like, have become the indispensable ‘hidden hand’ of everyday organization. They act as the everyday filter through which society reads and accepts social boundaries and demarcations, measures the achievements of modernity, assesses what it is to be modern and naturalizes forms of authority and control that, if made visible in their raw power, would cause considerable concern. The concealment of social power as technological support is in part the result of the real life-sustaining powers associated with the urban technosphere, through dependencies of sanitation, clean water, electricity, telecommunications and transport, medical technologies, and so on. Wedged into this ambiguity between sustenance and control are other powerful social effects of the urban technological unconscious. These include, for example, the vital role that the latter plays in setting standards of urban aspiration and achievement (e.g. through urban ratings of safety, quality of life, accessibility, pollution, mobility), or in directing future possibilities, as the medium through which choices and preferences are articulated (Latham and McCormack, 2004). While urban sociology has always taken an active interest in tracing the sources of social power and control in cities, including those that arise out of the daily infrastructure (typically in studies of technological surveillance), it has tended to treat technological ordering as aberrant and unambiguous, not as formative and contradictory (Coleman, 2004).

Yet a perspective that interprets technology as a social prosthetic and intermediary, suggests a different route. Take the example of software, which is increasingly attracting the attention of urban researchers (Thrift and French, 2002; Dodge and Kitchen, 2004; Graham, 2005). At one level the political economy of software is that of a silent weapon of surveillance and control, as Steve Graham (2005) has argued. Contemporary statecraft and market organization are impregnated with ‘new software-sorted geographies’ (ibid., p. 5) that evaluate the worth of particular zones and sections of urban society. Graham, for example, notes the proliferation of bio-metric technologies
to rapidly sort social desirables from undesirables (e.g. in evaluations of medical, insurance and welfare entitlements). He also shows how sophisticated data classification software is now being used by companies to increase market profiling by differentiating between premium customers and ‘scavengers and surfers’. In turn, he notes how GIS and GDIS technologies are being deployed to survey and simulate the social geographies of the city at postcode level, resulting in new maps of prosperity and poverty for markets to follow, based on detailed household profiles. He also discusses how CCTV surveillance techniques are now experimenting with facial recognition software, to match individuals on the street against facial stereotypes, so that the guilty can be named before the event. There can be no doubt that software is implicated in the extension of centred power, calling forth the need for research that systematically reveals the political economy of ‘values, opinions and rhetoric … frozen into code’ (Bowker and Leigh-Star, 1999, p. 35, cited in Graham, 2005, p. 1).

This said, nested into the urban ubiquity of software (in homes, cars, implants, hospitals, schools, offices, roads, ducts, and so on) are other effects that also need to be explored. Prime among these is the character of software as part of a hidden republic that, once in place becomes generative, inextricably woven into the conduct of human affairs in the city. Cities would shut down or spiral in unanticipated directions if this digital republic were threatened. This is precisely why an entire industry of activity and an elaborate infrastructure works day and night to prevent, or rapidly fix, failure. Here lies the paradox, for woven into the production of inequality by the technological unconscious is the latter’s centrality in supporting the social life of cities. New violations pass unnoticed at the same time as cementing dependence on the systems in place that have a life of their own.

As Nigel Thrift (2005b) notes, the remarkable aspect of cities that needs to be appreciated is how, with the help of the technological unconscious, they manage to avoid the collapse that would face any other complex system of bits that need alignment.

A sociology of urban regulatory power, therefore, has to include work on the complex machinery of maintenance and repair that keeps cities simultaneously controlled and functioning. This is clearly illustrated by the London tube bombings of 7 July 2005. CCTV and various digital databases played a vital role in (mis)identifying threat and in enlisting the public to support a raft of new surveillance measures bordering close to an infringement of civil liberties. The rapid, software-aided, response came with far-reaching and terrifying consequences, as new conditions, including what is thought and professed, the cultural practices of certain ethnic minorities, how anger can be expressed in public, were rolled in by the state in an unsettled moment to define the acceptable face of multicultural Britain. Simultaneously, however, the software behind London’s various logistics systems allowed an uncannily quick response to get help to the injured, secure medical aid for them, facilitate contact between friends and relatives, clear the roads, and generally restore daily life in a vast and sprawling city. London bounced back to ‘normal’ after 7/7 with impressive speed as a machine of movement and livelihood, once the technological unconscious kicked in. And interestingly, what was repaired and maintained was not only the physical infrastructure, but also an everyday confidence of living with difference, risk and uncertainty. In contrast, in New Orleans a few months later, the unravelling of the technological unconscious by the hurricanes and tardy federal response greatly intensified vulnerability and insecurity.

The above illustrations show how a transhuman reading of the social can open new ground for urban sociological analysis, firstly by adding new elements and associations into what counts as urban society, and secondly, by taking seriously the agency of non-humans. The result, I have argued, is a solicitation to re-think staples of urban sociology such as community, inequality and belonging, as well as to imagine a politics of
urban possibility that is in tune with contemporary technological moorings.

Conclusion

In this brief conclusion, I wish to touch on two issues. First, a word on what remains of the city in a relational reading. In mapping the traces of a new urban sociology that is neither reducible to people nor place, my aim has been to show how variegated the spaces-times of cities have become, so that cities need to be grasped as relational entities, and to argue that so intricate are the inter-dependencies between humans and non-humans in urban life, that the social agency of the latter can no longer be ignored. These arguments for a relational and trans-human sociology of the city should not be read as an attempt to write out the ‘urban question’, that is, the placed and unique character of social life in cities. They are simply an exhortation to examine the multiple spatial networks that any city is embroiled in, and to understand the full force of these networks and their juxtaposition in a given city upon local dynamics. Cities are not discounted as spatial formations in this reading, simply questioned as bounded territorial formations, in preference for an account of them as places of nodal connectivity, inflected by the overlaps of historical legacy and spatial contiguity. Accordingly, we can still speak of the social specificity of Bamako, Barcelona, Birmingham and Boston. To argue otherwise would be absurd. All that changes is the terms on which the unique experiences of these cities are conceptualized, and I have argued for an expanded geographical imagination because I believe that new spaces affecting the social life of cities are thrown into view, together with new political possibilities.

Second, a word on the future of urban sociology as a sub-discipline. Increasingly this is likely to become a matter of subtle differences of focus and feel, influenced by disciplinary expertises mingling in a post-disciplinary field. City has become emblematic of this style of working, in bringing together contributions from different disciplines, embracing diverse perspectives in order to expand the meaning and scope of urban analysis, and not allowing disciplinary rivalries to get in the way of addressing specific urban problems. If this kind of ethos spreads to the practices of different academic departments and learned societies—a much more difficult challenge given the reasons discussed at the start of this paper—urban sociology will simply evolve, accommodate other disciplines and, possibly, lose some of its traditional preserve. Whether such hybridization is good or bad depends on how strongly one is committed to urban sociology as a sub-discipline. As someone who inhabits on the outside and frequently rushes to the indiscrimination of Google in gathering research material, I am less anxious about its disciplinary boundary than those on the inside might justifiably be (oddly enough I find myself equally disinterested in the future of ‘urban geography’). The more significant question, it seems to me, is whether the long-standing assumptions of social and spatial ontology within urban sociology can still be held. My response is that they cannot.

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