Rethinking History and Anthropology in the City

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The new urban history facilitated dialogue about objects, methods and interpretations that subsequently have shaped urban anthropology in important ways. Starting from personal reflections on those convergences, especially with reference to European studies, the article also explores two other dialogues as a triangulation of theory and practice. It first suggests how urban anthropology has been informed by other intersections with studies of space and place and mass media (underscoring differences with regard to history). It also raises questions about ongoing distinctions between anthropological approaches and historical understandings of the city and their implications for the future of both fields. [Europe, history, space, mass media, anthropological theory]

LIKE MY COLLEAGUES, LET ME begin with a note of appreciation. When first asked to respond to Louise Tilly and her reflections on the "New Urban History," my thoughts returned to graduate classes in anthropology and history at the Johns Hopkins University in the 1970s. I realized there how much anthropology, history and the city intersected in important and exciting ways. The sources referred to in the early parts of Tilly's essay constitute some of the primary texts of my professional life. In this sense, like many other urban anthropologists of my generation, I am clearly an offspring of what was going on in urban history at the point where Tilly's discussion begins—a time of dialogues, insights, and challenges in both fields.

These dialogues with history inspired me then and continue to shape me now as an urbanist outside an anthropology department, working with interdisciplinary colleagues and students. Yet, the substance and nature of the dialogues have changed over time—older, more complex, and broader—in terms of what they have meant to both fields. In this essay, I focus on three dialogues from the standpoint of contemporary urban anthropological studies and what I see as the shared heritages—and debates—over his-
stories and methods, over new domains of histories and, in the end, over the nature of urban anthropology itself. My remarks are personal and reflective, yet I would hope that they can also inspire discussion and exchange.

Anthropology and the New Urban History

The intersections of history and anthropology became immediately present as the issues of power and urban transformation that drew me to Barcelona in the 1970s meant that my fieldwork extended into the nineteenth and even the eighteenth century city. This framework for research and analysis grew from the Hopkins program in Atlantic Culture and History of that era—research and training by Sidney Mintz (1976), Richard Price (1973, 1976), Katherine Verdery (1983), Robert Forster (1960, 1976) and Richard Kagan (1974, 1989). Yet, my exposure to anthropology of the city took shape within a discourse still dominated by relatively small-scale studies of non-Western cities or ethnic ghettos in the West, generally viewed in contemporary terms—the ethnographic urban present. While there were important sources in ethnographic methods and comparative issues that guided me, historians offered both historical methods—from paleography to quantitative analyses of archived urban-family documents—and insights into the compelling social and cultural processes that had constituted modern urban Europe (another rather underdeveloped anthropological discourse of the time, where I relied on mentors and colleagues like Edward Hansen (1977), Oriol Pi-Sunyer, Michael Kenny, Susan DiGiacomo, Kit Woolard and others).

In Barcelona, I encountered the remarkable legacy of social historians working in a highly urban region. This was especially influenced by Pierre Vilar (1962) and Jaume Vicens Vives (1958) as well as those in the tradition of Francesc Carreras Candi’s Geografia General de Catalunya (1913). These pioneering historians and their heirs in Barcelona insisted that social structure and cultural meanings over time could be understood through a systematic combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. They also explored in important ways the interplay of past and present that has been a dynamic theme in Barcelona’s political and cultural revitalization and scholarship since the 1970s.
It remains difficult to convey to my students how exciting it was to spend days deciphering notarial scrawls in archives where volumes were literally dusty, calculating values of marriage contracts and corporate partnerships, and then pursuing their meanings in family dynamics through interviews, genealogies, studies of space and observations with scions of elite families. In fact, the new urban history converged with trends in anthropological thought that focussed me, for example, on the dynamics of women’s roles and family relations. Hence, I produced a “classical” anthropological dissertation on kinship while looking at urban economic and political power over time.

At the same time, the new urban history brought me into contact with colleagues from other fields like Jim Amelang (1986, 1998), Pep Fradera and Carles Carreras Verdaguer (1980, 1996). My research in the field was informed by the work of Natalie Davis (1975) and Lawrence Stone (1977) as well as Verena Stolcke (1974), Temma Kaplan (1992), and Mary Nash (1995) among historians from or working in Barcelona. Again, this meshed with the geographic studies of Carreras Verdaguer and Mercé Tatjer (1973) as well as colleagues in geography, anthropology and history.

Indeed, if I would fault the heady euphoria of 1970s explorations it would only be in the opportunity it presented to avoid earlier generations of urban history except as sources. Sometimes, in fact, these texts became important primary sources, as we deconstructed their ideology as much as their data and theory. Yet, the new urban history did not quite prepare many of us for the “old” urban historians and their differences not only of method but also of consciousness.

This does not mean that I did not encounter limits and questions in this first phase of a new interdisciplinary relationship, however. Coming from a more textual background in Castilian, Catalan, and Latin as well as traditions of participant observation, I could never accord numbers quite the primacy that new urban historians tended to give them. At the same time, I was concerned by the varied and changing nature of the individual, family and memory, which quantitative measures coupled with occasional autobiographies did not seem to capture. These pose problems of anthropology and history that I have continued to grapple with in Barcelona and subsequent fieldwork on urban form and conflict (McDonogh 1986, 1993, 1999). It was interesting to see that the new urban history took sociology rather than anthropology as its model, which may explain a cultural divide between some urban anthropology and urban history. Nonetheless, I do not think mine...
an atypical experience for historians and anthropologists in this period of the 1970s and 1980s, which seemed to epitomize an interdisciplinarity of dialogue, not turf wars. It also opened a framework for other dialogues on the city, which shifted urban anthropology toward different grounds.

Place, Form and Representation

LET ME THEN TURN TO my second theme—other urbane dialogues that followed from this relationship with history. One of the important breakthroughs I have witnessed for the field involves the increasing discussions with those who deal with the city as form and place and its visual as well as material culture. Here, for example, I am talking about scholars from the history of architecture, planning, form and culture whose insights are increasingly discussed in urban anthropology. These include my senior colleague Barbara Miller Lane for Germany and Scandinavia (1968), Carl Schorske (1980) and Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin (1973) for Vienna, Andrew Saint on London and architects (1983), Donald Olsen (1986) on multiple cities, David Mackay (1989), Oriol Bohigas (1968) and Manuel Vazquez Montalban (1992), among many others, on Barcelona, Joseba Zulaika on Bilbao (1997) and Gwendolyn Wright (1980, 1991) and Anthony King (1976) on colonial cities and the U.S. In the U.S., the list is even lengthier, including Dolores Hayden (1976, 1995), M. Christine Boyer (1983), Kenneth Jackson (1987), Robert Fishman (1985), John Stilgoe (1988), Michael Sorkin (1992), Paul Groth's work on hotels (1994), Margaret Crawford (1995) and Max Page (1999), among many others.

All of these scholars and colleagues envision places not merely as backdrops but as determinant yet constructed features of the city. For many in anthropology, they have established new bridges to both meaning and action that have framed the social patterns and lives we were examining in another set of continuities. This again has demanded new skills for new resources, ranging from photography, painting and maps to architectural plans and stylistic references inside and outside of design fields that enriched our sense of the people of the city as well as layers of meaning and contestation. This dialogue, nonetheless, underpins a strong continuing vein of work by urban anthropologists on gardens in Vienna (Rotenberg 1995), plazas in Central America (Low 1999) and ide-
ologies of New Urbanism (Rutheiser 1997) among more general issues of the cultural meanings of urban space (Rotenberg and McDonogh 1992; Low 1999). This in turn linked us to other social scientific discussions of space and society from geography, where space takes on a more active role. Here, I recognize the impact of work by David Harvey (1989), Milton Santos (1993) and Allen Scott and Edward Soja (1996). These scholars offered a different sense of quantitative measures mapped out in space in argumentative rather than merely illustrative fashion.

Cultural geography as well as formal studies also have linked some of us to discussions of history of the environment and nature in the city, including works by Harriet Ritvo (1987), Michael Hough (1989), William Cronon (1991, 1996), Eduard Masjoan Bracons (1992), Mike Davis (1997), etc. Here, a fundamental division of anthropology—Nature versus Culture—has been revised for the city by historical and social understandings of how Nature has, in fact, been culturally constructed over time amid conflicts.

These dialogues in anthropology do not seem to have mapped out a parallel course to the development of urban history since the 1970s. It was striking to pull some of the newer urban histories cited in Tilly’s review from my shelves—Rachel Fuchs (1992) on poverty and pregnancy, for example, or Catherine Kudlick’s work on cholera (1996), or Nicholas Papayanis’ work on coachmen (1992), to see a different sense of space and place in urban social history. Fuchs uses maps as reference points for data, but generally presents France rather than Paris. She includes a dozen illustrations, like Papayanis, but for the most part they illustrate rather than argue points. Kudlick includes contemporary maps and bulletins, as well as an analysis of cartoons, but again her interests are in structures of power and knowledge as well as diseases. Obviously, these remain important and illustrative books that we use in both fields. Nevertheless, I am struck by where paths have diverged within and across fields (by contrast to, say, Hayden’s 1976 work on American utopias).

My own recent movement has been interdisciplinary in a different way, veering from physical constructions of arenas of conflict toward structures of mass media, communication and information that have constituted and reconstituted the urban public sphere as real and metaphoric place. Here, I find myself recapturing decades-old excitement with a new way to see and study the city in works like those of Miriam Hansen (1991), Stephen Ross (1994) and Noel Burch (1990) on silent film, or work like that of
Bill Nichols (1991), Eric Michaels (1992), Michael Renov (1993), Trinh T. Minh-Ha (1991) and others on documentary and its meanings—as well as the work of filmmakers like Marlon Riggs and Errol Morris. These challenge ethnographic practices of legitimation and authority as well as the shared questions we envision and analyze in our discourses of sobriety about the city. Indeed, as I tackle the rich literature on *film noir*, I find myself encountering evocative antecedents to the new and sometimes dark visions of the city that both urban history and urban anthropology have often followed. These areas also evoke dialogues between academic and popular culture which are critical for both fields.

Again, these are not meant to judge the new urban history so much as to situate it as the forerunner among many dialogues with other academic fields that have reshaped and continue to reshape urban anthropology. Obviously, we are speaking of diverse trajectories; my personal trajectory might have veered closer to urban history had I chosen economic history or sociology as a guide. Yet within these interdisciplinary pluralities, it is time to conclude by considering one final set of questions in dialogue. What does a thirty-year courtship of urban history and urban anthropology say about anthropology as a field, veering back toward the points my colleagues have raised?

**Dialogues about Self**

In an interdisciplinary age, urban history and anthropology overlap with each other as well as many other fields in methods, resources, readings and discussions. What still sets apart these areas, when historians are looking at street life and anthropologists are examining eighteenth century gardens? In this I propose five central themes of difference as well as intersection for our future discussion: the role of ethnography, the role of culture, the sense of events, the meaning of comparison and the political context and implications of our work on the city.

Ethnography/ethnology—understanding structure and meaning of concrete times and places—remains central to urban anthropology. Our relations with history force us to ask what the links are from people we “know” to people we glimpse partially through documents and memories. I have suggested how form and place have provided a bridge for me. Nonetheless, I wonder how we converge and diverge at this simple level of knowing (partially, we admit)
people who are alive today in their everyday actions, beliefs and crises and searching for similar knowledge in the past as well as linkages. In one way, this is a fundamental divide between anthropology and history yet obviously, in practice, it is not. Yet, it should certainly be a point of comparison and reflection.

The exploration of culture and interpretation—making sense of history and actions—also defines urban anthropology. True, the anthropological sense of cultural complexity is frustratingly elusive and yet basic for many of us. Statistics and structures, for many of us, have meanings which we must elucidate through patterns of culture/interpretation. I see more recognition of this in the “newer” new urban history; yet, like Susan Rogers, I still sense a difference. Perhaps this, too, is linked to the reconstructed rather than the lived experience. In its initial grounding in social science, particularly in sociology, did urban history really make a statement about culture? Has it changed? One sees borrowings from anthropology—the impact of Clifford Geertz, for example—yet more engagement with ongoing debates in anthropology about multiple perspectives and fragmented models would seem fruitful.

Another point of intersection between fields has struck me repeatedly in reading urban social history encompasses “events” and how we deal with them. For urban anthropologists, events are seen as points of intersection and interpretation of cultural and social groups as much as milestones in the city. This may be vague, but it somehow seems that anthropologists have been less concerned about dates and events per se, even as markers in historical process, but have been concerned by the relationships of various peoples and beliefs to these events, however small scale. This means different narrative structures that betray differences of thought and emphases on structure and culture. Alternatively, is this an ethnographer speaking to historians about method and craft?

Fourth, one of the important and invigorating vantage points of urban anthropology has been its comparative focus—asking not only what this city is but also what the city is through study of what cities are. In fact, apart from the juxtapositions we create in classes, panels and edited volumes, I am not sure that comparison is a point urban anthropology always achieves either. Yet the works cited by Tilly are all quite monographic and sometimes make very limited claims beyond that text. This may also be a question of genre—what one says in “the book” may be less dramatic than articles or reflective pieces. Still, it would be interesting to hear
Is saw new thoughts on this in terms of the practice of urban history in the classroom, symposia and even conferences.

Finally, politics. These previous points may have sounded like interrogations from anthropology more than they should. However, I would also like to raise a point for anthropology that struck me forcibly in early new urban social history and raises questions for both fields today—the political content and impact of historical studies outside of the academy. I saw new urban history very much as a product of revindication and contest in the 1960s and 1970s, claiming a place for the poor, marginal and others while decrying orthodox history and policies as based on misunderstandings. I think of forerunners like W.E.B. Du Bois or pioneers like Richard Sennett as public critics as well as social historians, for example. Has this been part of urban anthropology at home and abroad in the same way, despite the work of applied and advocate anthropologists? Reviewing another publication of Louise Tilly on responsibility and public history in the Journal of Social History a few years ago, I realized that public urban history remains a point of debate, whether questions are evoked by the Enola Gay exposition or recent exhibits on slavery. I do not see it as strongly in recent academic writings in history, perhaps, because they can take the existence and meaning of working classes and other “ordinary people” with whom anthropologists have worked as being “naturally” interesting. Again, it would be interesting to talk about how political content and contexts have changed and use them to explore and shape the futures of both fields.

In the end, these dialogues and questions must remain open-ended. For some decades it is obvious that urban history and urban anthropology have shared liberating consciousness and dialogues, to establish shared and individual explorations and delight. One can only hope the next decades of dialogue will be as fruitful and interesting. As an heir and participant in these dialogues, I look forward to further thoughts on these matters from urban historians like Professor Tilly and urban anthropologists alike.

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