

Urban History in Britain: Some Reflections on the State of the Field

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In this article I reflect on some of the key developments in the field of urban history since its emergence as a subdiscipline in the 1960s and consider some of the recent and current developments in the study of cities and their pasts from a largely, but not exclusively, British perspective. This article does not pretend to be a comprehensive survey of the field, nor does it have a particular chronological or thematic focus. It is simply reflective of my own interests as a British historian of the eighteenth century and as one of the editors of the *Urban History* journal published by Cambridge University Press.

Until around the 1960s, most urban history in Britain, such as it was, concentrated upon studies of individual towns – urban biographies, as they are sometimes called, that were often exercises in uncritical civic boosterism and generally parochial in outlook (although it should also be noted that many contained substantial amounts of detailed archival research).¹ In Britain as in most of Western Europe there is a long tradition of city-centred narratives, which as a published genre first rose to prominence in the eighteenth century, and this shaped the production of most urban histories until the post-war era.² The city provided framework within which to imagine community and construct a narrative – or more recently to explore social, political, economic or cultural change.

But in the 1960s there was something of a watershed in urban historical writing. An approach to the study of towns began to be posited that was based heavily on social science methods – it was an approach that engaged with social science theory and with the aim of refining hypotheses, but also one which was also heavily empirical and reliant on building up large datasets which could be subjected to statistical analysis.³ There are three important contexts that have to be recognised here: one is institutional, technological and ideological:

¹ Arguably urban history emerged rather earlier in the United States under the influence of the Chicago School of sociologists: see Z.L. Miller, C. Griffin and G. Stelter, 'Urban history in North America', *Urban History Yearbook* (1977), pp. 6-29.

² Rosemary Sweet, *The Writing of Urban Histories in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1997). See also Charles Gross, *Bibliography of British Municipal History Including Gilds and Parliamentary Representation* (London, 1897) and G.H. Martin and S. McIntyre, *A Bibliography of British and Irish Municipal History* (London, 1972).

³ For a detailed analysis of the emergence of urban history and its contexts, see Gary Davies, 'The rise of urban history in Britain, c. 1960-1978', University of Leicester PhD thesis (2014).

Firstly, the emergence of urban history in Great Britain has to be understood as part of a much broader efflorescence of disciplines in the social sciences in British universities, including historical geography and economic and social history in this period. In particular it was the point at which Economic and Social History Departments were being founded in universities across Great Britain to promote a very different kind of history to that taught in traditional history departments.⁴

Secondly, these institutional changes also coincided with the advent of main frame computers that could be used to analyse data on a scale that had hitherto been impossible while funding to support such research was available from a new government research body, the Social Science Research Council. Finally, in terms of ideology, there was, at the time, a widespread conviction in the value of social and behavioural analysis as a basis for macro level policy and planning. This combined with the relatively recent post-war reconstruction of cities, provided a bridge between the historical and the contemporary. It was part of a belief in the 1960s that social scientific analysis—in which urban history was conceived as a discipline -- was a means to an end, the end being a fairer policy and a better, more equitable world.

These developments went explicitly against the traditions of urban history that concentrated on the urban biography. Indeed, in 1975 H.J. Dyos suggested that ‘the day of the individually posed, idiosyncratic study of a town that has no particular analytical purpose or significance is probably on the wane despite a certain efflorescence’.⁵ Individual urban histories might fill in the missing pieces of an ‘histoire totale’, but Dyos questioned whether they contributed to a greater understanding of urban processes. Urban historians as social science historians were wary of the individual case, and of what they saw as antiquarianism and localism. If the urban history agenda was to investigate general processes or laws, then the focus necessarily had to be wider than the individual event or town. This is, of course, still a problem that we wrestle with now: the balance between the particular and its value as a case study, and the need to engage with wider processes of cause and effect which transcend the ‘time space particularism’ of such local studies.⁶ Arguably, however, the importance of *place* as a historical factor is now attracting greater recognition as will become apparent below.

⁴ These departments have now almost all been absorbed back into History departments or ‘Schools’ of History as economic and social history has declined in popularity with undergraduates and lost its distinctive disciplinary identity. On this issue see Richard Rodger, ‘Putting the economy back in to the City’, *Urban History* 42:1 (2015), pp. 157-68.

⁵ H.J. Dyos, ‘Editorial’, *Urban History Yearbook* (1975), p. 3; on Dyos see David Cannadine, ‘The “Dyos” phenomenon and after’ in David Cannadine and David Reeder (eds.), *Exploring the Urban Past. Essays in Urban History by H. J. Dyos* (Cambridge, 1982); Davies ‘The rise of urban history’ and Peter Jones, *Unfinished Work: An Essay in Honour of H.J. Dyos, 1921-1978* (Leicester, 2010).

⁶ Charles Tilly ‘What good is urban history?’, *Journal of Urban History*, 22:6 (1996), p. 710.

H.J. Dyos and the other members of the 'Urban History Group', in effect a sub-group of the Economic History Society, that became established during the 1960s, were predominantly students of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and urban history, influenced in part by developments in urban history in the USA, was equated with the process of urbanization and the narrative of modernity. The history of towns prior to the massive shift in population towards the cities in the nineteenth century did not feature prominently on the agenda of this social science influenced urban history. Indeed, medievalists and early modernists in Britain were often uncomfortable with the theory that was being applied and with quantitative analysis that often depended upon evidence of a kind which simply did not survive from earlier periods.

Their concerns were various: the medieval and early modern town was a very different phenomenon to that of the nineteenth or twentieth century. There was even considerable debate as to what constituted urban status in a period when few towns, in Britain at least, exceeded 10,000 people and many were far smaller.⁷ Towns in this period were certainly important agents of change, but the great cities aside, they cannot be understood to have exercised the kind of influence or autonomous agency possible in later periods. All towns must be understood in relation to their hinterlands, but in an essentially agrarian economy, medieval and early modern towns need to be studied as part of much broader systems and processes in which a distinctive urban experience is less easily isolated and defined. Quantification, which was axiomatic for so many of the questions posed by historians of the modern city was problematical: even establishing basic population figures for urban settlements prior to the introduction of the census in 1801 has been a challenge. The value systems of medievalists and early modernists also sat uncomfortably with those analysed by urban historians of the modern period. Questions of legal status, systems of authority or the organising role of religion have loomed large in pre modern urban history. Concepts of class, by contrast, were far less important. Rather than urban growth, it was decline and decay that frequently attracted historians' attention.⁸ At times, it seemed that there was little in common between the towns of medieval Europe, which numbered a few thousand or less, and the great cities of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This led Peter Burke to pose the question: 'Does the nineteenth century mark the great divide in urban history?'⁹

⁷ See discussion of urban populations in Rosemary Sweet, *The English Town. Government, Society and Politics, 1680-1840* (Harlow, 1999), pp. 7-14.

⁸ Charles Phythian Adams, *Desolation of a City: Coventry and the Urban Crisis of the Late Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1979); Peter Clark and Paul Slack (eds.), *Crisis and Order in English Towns 1500-1700* (London, 1972).

⁹ Peter Burke, 'Some reflections on the pre-industrial city', *Urban History Yearbook* (1975), p. 16.

This temporal divide hardened, with social scientists dominating urban historical writing in the period after 1750, and 'traditional' historians colonising the earlier period (a divide either side of the main thrust of industrialisation in Britain).¹⁰ This in itself is a social science based generalisation, but the emergence of a separate Pre-Modern Towns group in 1987, in contrast to the Urban History Group of which Dyos was a founder member, was an expression of this intellectual and philosophical divide in Britain. It also made explicit the disciplinary distinction between colonies of social scientists and of historians in their respective approaches to towns and cities. The divide still exists – the Urban History Group and the Pre Modern Towns Group in the UK – still meet annually as separate bodies, although in recent years there have been deliberate efforts to make the UHG more welcoming to medieval and early modern contributors by selecting themes with as broad a chronological frame as possible. More recent developments in historical writing have also encouraged something of a rapprochement between historians across this chronological divide.

Since the 1980s, the rise of cultural history, the linguistic turn, postmodernism, and the influence of the Annales School (as reflected in interest in the construction of historical *mentalités*, for example) cast doubt on the empiricism and the theoretical assumptions of the social science based approaches and even queried the certainty of phenomena such as the industrial revolution itself. Quantitative methods, which were implicit in much early social science based urban history, could be criticised for having reified towns as depersonalised, abstract entities which simply grow or decline, experience problems or resolve them.¹¹ Such an approach distorted the nature of historical inquiry by focusing on issues and questions for which quantifiable sources exist, and by marginalising aspects of urban life which did not lend themselves so easily to quantification, such as women's work. Urban history, as Griffiths and Jenner observed in a collection of essays on early modern London, was rendered as 'a series of graphs and tables, or a succession of maps'.¹² Historians across the chronological divide have been reacting against these methods.

Whereas earlier urban historical research focused upon how towns grew or questions of class formation, housing, structures of power, and political movements,¹³ the 'linguistic turn', and the school of cultural history which grew from it, directed historians towards the analysis of language

¹⁰ Whilst the members of the Urban History Group included geographers, sociologists and economists, the pre modern urban historians tended all to come from an economic and social history background or from English Local History: for example, Charles Phythian Adams, Paul Slack, Peter Clark and Penelope Corfield.

¹¹ Joan Wallach Scott, 'A statistical representation of work: *la statistique d'industrie à Paris 1847-1848*' in eadem, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1988), pp. 113-38.

¹² Paul Griffiths and Mark Jenner, 'Introduction' in Griffiths and Jenner (eds.), *Londinopolis. Essays in the Cultural and Social History of Early Modern London* (Manchester, 2000), p. 7.

¹³ See for example essays in Richard Rodger and R. J. Morris (eds.), *The Victorian City. A Reader in British Urban History, 1820-1914* (London, 1993).

and the way in which it shaped perceptions of identity and experience, particularly in terms of social status, class and gender. The concentration of people within towns and cities and the rich potential for different forms of communication in urban society multiplied the opportunities to establish and create meaning, or express identity. This approach has lent itself well to sources from the middle ages to the twentieth century and is not tied to the same chronological parameters dictated by a framework constructed around economic growth. Questions of identity and social experience, meaning and representation equally transcend the chronological boundaries and since the 1990s historians have been moving away from quantification and functionalist approaches, which seek to explain stability or describe economic growth, to explore how social identities were constructed, the processes of implementing governance and the experiential dimensions of living within urban space.

The emphasis on 'experience and identity' as categories of analysis has opened up new avenues for urban historians to explore which had previously been ignored or regarded as incidental. Much of this work has focussed upon gendered identities in the city, building on work that had already been done to make women visible in the urban past: like most areas of history, urban history tended very often to be gender blind. Women have not, historically, featured so obviously in many of the key sources used by historians of work, labour, wages, business and their role in the public life and civil society of towns was largely unacknowledged. In the last twenty or so years we have seen huge advances made in terms of recovering the presence of women in urban society and economy, as well as in the more traditionally 'feminine' spheres of sociability or the home. Thus in the eighteenth century, the critical contribution of women to the expanding urban economies of British towns has been highlighted by a range of scholars who have pieced together often fragmentary archival evidence.¹⁴ Although much of this literature dates from the 1990s, it is striking that gender does not feature explicitly in any of the three volumes of the *Cambridge Urban History of Britain* published in 2000. Had it appeared ten years later, such an omission would have been unthinkable: even in 2000 it was surprising, but the absence was in part a reflection of the long gestation period for such volumes. When the series was first conceived, gender as an analytical category in urban history was far less fully developed.¹⁵

¹⁴ There is a considerable and growing literature on this subject, but see for example, Hannah Barker, *The Business of Women. Female Enterprise and Urban Development in Northern England* (Oxford, 2006); A.L. Erickson, 'Married women's occupations in eighteenth-century London', *Continuity and Change*, 23:2 (2008), 267-307; Nicola Phillips, *Women in Business 1700-1850* (Woodbridge, 2006), and Rosemary Sweet and Penelope Lane (eds.), *Women and Urban Life in Eighteenth-Century England* (Aldershot, 2003).

¹⁵ Issues of gender (or at least the position of women in urban society) is addressed in Pam Sharpe's essay "Population and society", in P. Clark, (ed.), *The Cambridge urban history of Britain. Volume II 1500-1840* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 491-500.

But there is also increasing recognition of how urban society itself was productive of distinctive masculine and feminine identities and of how towns and cities were experienced in fundamentally different ways by men and women.¹⁶ Nineteenth-century London has proven particularly fruitful in this regard: thus Judith Walkowitz's study of prostitution, violent crime, gender and class relationships, *City of Dreadful Delight*, highlights the radical differences between the way in which men and women inhabited the urban space of nineteenth-century London through analysis of competing representations of sexual danger.¹⁷ Linda Nead's *Victorian Babylon* offers an exploration of urban modernity in nineteenth-century London, but rather than focussing simply upon the male flaneur, equal attention is given to the opportunities offered by the spaces of the modern city to assume new identities to men *and* women.¹⁸

The influence of cultural history has also been particularly associated with analysis of representations of the city. It is, of course, an area where urban history combines productively with literary criticism and art historical approaches, but urban historians are particularly interested in the way in which representation influences perception, experience and the reputation and identity of specific towns.¹⁹ In my own work, for example, I have examined the changing representations of Italian cities amongst British travellers during the long eighteenth century in textual and visual sources, relating this to developments in British culture and attitudes to the urban built environment more generally, as well as changes in taste amongst the travellers themselves.²⁰ But the sensory and emotional experiences of cities are also a crucial factor in the way in which cities are represented across a variety of media: the analysis of the sensory experience of the city, its sight, smell, touch and sound is a rapidly growing area of research. Thus we have articles on the sounds, the visual perception of the city, and the smell or even the taste of the city and how such sensory perceptions have been conditioned by distinctions of class, gender or ethnicity.²¹ Urban centres are, of course, productive of some of the richest sources for answering precisely these kinds of questions: employing approaches from anthropology and cultural theory, historians such as Mark

¹⁶ Elizabeth Wilson, *The Sphinx in the City* (Oxford, 1991).

¹⁷ Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight. Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late Victorian London* (London, 1992).

¹⁸ Linda Nead, *Victorian Babylon. People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century London* (New Haven and London, 2000), especially part 1.

¹⁹ Joseph Rykwert, *The Seduction of Place. The History and Future of the City* (Oxford, 2000); Peter Borsay, *The Image of Georgian Bath* (Oxford, 2000); Richard Dennis, *Cities in Modernity: Representations and Productions of Metropolitan Space, 1840-1930* (Cambridge, 2008),

²⁰ Rosemary Sweet, *Cities and the Grand Tour: The British in Italy, c. 1690-1840* (Cambridge, 2012).

²¹ See for example, A. Cowan and J. Steward (eds.), *The City and the Senses: Urban Culture since 1500* (Aldershot, 2006); Emily Cockayne, *Hubbub. Filth, Stench and Noise in England, 1600-1770* (New Haven and London, 2007); David Garrioch, 'Sounds of the city: the soundscapes of European towns, seventeenth to nineteenth century', *Urban History*, 30 (2003), pp. 3-25.

Jenner are exploring questions of both the regulation and the sensory perception of the urban environment.²² Sensory perception has a direct relationship to the individual's emotional state, and the history of emotions, something of a growth area in western historiography, is also influencing the way in which urban historians approach the experience of cities in the past.²³ The urban environment has the capacity to inspire strong emotions or emotional states, but also to exercise a distinct influence over emotions such as fear or anxiety. Thus urban historians are beginning to ask whether there are and have been distinct 'urban emotions' that are the consequence of life in the city.²⁴ At the Max Planck Institute in Berlin for example, there is a current project on the role of emotions in a period of rapid urban change in Berlin and Cairo: how did emotions shape the debates over change, and what emotional impact did such changes have?

This interest in the relationship to the urban environment has of course been influenced by the emergence of environmental history as a sub-discipline and by increasing awareness of the precarious relationship between man-made environments and natural forces: the never-ending balancing act to maintain some kind of equilibrium in the urban metabolism.²⁵ Urban environmental history rejects the traditional opposition between the man-made city and a 'natural' world, acknowledging that the city is, itself, an ecosystem in its own right and cannot be studied in isolation from its hinterland or from its geology, its climate or its geographical location. Moreover, mankind, largely in the context of urban society, has itself exercised multiple and irreversible changes upon the global environment, giving rise to what geologists now call the anthropocene age, a process in which urbanization has been paramount.²⁶ An environmental approach to urban history has also encouraged historians to reconsider traditional questions relating to the urban economy, the growth of administration or the legitimacy of urban governance with reference to urban environmental factors: responses to flood, fire, and other 'natural' disasters have been crucial

²² Mark Jenner, 'Civilization and deodorization? Smell in early modern English culture' in Peter Burke, Brian Howard and Paul Slack (eds.), *Civil Histories: Essays presented to Sir Keith Thomas* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 127-44; idem, 'Follow your nose? Smell, smelling, and their histories', *American Historical Review*, 116, no. 2 (2011), pp. 335-51; 'Tasting Lichfield, touching China: Sir John Floyer's senses', *Historical Journal*, 53 (2010), pp. 647-70. Jenner's articles also provide a useful survey of the recent historiography in the field.

²³ Centres for the study of the History of the Emotions have been established by the Australian Research Council, by the Max Planck Institute, Berlin and at Queen Mary College, University of London, for example.

²⁴ There are many examples, but see eg special issue of 'Emotions in the city' edited by Nicholas Kenny, published in *Urban History Review*, 42:2 (2014).

²⁵ Bernhardt, Christoph (ed.), *Environmental Problems in European Cities in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New York, 2001). The literature on the USA is huge but see, for example, W. Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York, 1992); Martin Melosi, 'The urban environment' in Clark (ed.), *Oxford Handbooks of Cities in World History*; Martin Melosi, 'Humans, cities and nature: how do cities fit in the material world?', *Journal of Urban History*, 36 (2010), pp. 3-21; Martin Melosi, *The Sanitary City* (Baltimore 2000); Harold Platt, *Shock Cities* (Chicago 2005); Joel Tarr and Gabriel Dupuy (eds.), *Technology and the Rise of the Networked City in Europe and America* (Philadelphia, 1988).

²⁶ Dipesh Chakrabarti, 'The climate of history: four theses', *Critical Inquiry*, 35:2 (Winter, 2009), pp. 197-222.

episodes through which urban administrations have developed new powers or extended their authority.²⁷ Most importantly, perhaps, has been the recognition of how profoundly environmental issues are implicated with broader questions of social justice within the city.²⁸

Environmental urban historians have sought to remind us that cities are not simply the product of human agency: geography, geology, climate and other 'natural' forces have to be taken into account. In decentering the human, environmental urban historical approaches also have much in common with the work of urban historians who have been influenced by 'actor network theory' (ANT) and sociologists such as Bruno Latour.²⁹ Latour and others have called for sociologists (and historians) to move beyond essentialising constructs such as the 'social' or 'society', conceptualising in its place a much more fluid and transient understanding of society, that is in effect the product of multiple networks, of both humans and non-human concepts and objects. Whilst not all urban historians have embraced the full implication of ANT, the indirect influence is much more pervasive, evidenced in a much greater willingness to recognise the agency of material objects and the dynamism and contingency of networks, rather than assuming static social structure. Humans are no longer regarded automatically as key agents. At the same time the physical urban environment and the material fabric of streets, houses and public buildings can no longer be seen as passive actors in the historical process. As noted above, historians are now much more sympathetic to an approach that understands the natural environment as a powerful form of agency, but the physical, man-made environment of the city is equally an agent too. One approach has been to think about how technologies such as lighting, sewerage systems, telephone networks have structured urban life and how the governance of urban society has been enforced through these inanimate objects, which force or 'teach' urban inhabitants to live according to routines, timetables, patterns determined by the technology.³⁰ Instead of focussing on the people who built the roads or used them, the road itself, the materials from which it is constructed, the way in which it is used, the road signs that interpret it, are becoming the focus of interest as quintessential features of a peculiarly modern form of urbanity.³¹ Inanimate objects and technologies play a crucial role in such networks, and in recognizing the importance of such non-human agents (or actants) the influence of ANT is evidence again.

²⁷ There is a rapidly growing literature on this subject, but see for example, Shane Ewen, 'Socio-technological disasters and engineering expertise in Victorian Britain: The Holmfirth and Sheffield floods of 1852 and 1864', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 46 (2014), pp. 13-25; idem, 'Sheffield's great flood of 1864: Engineering failure and the municipalisation of water', *Environment and History*, 20:2 (2014), pp. 177-207.

²⁸ See Richard Rodger and Geneviève Massard Guilbaud (eds.), *Environmental and Social Justice in the City. Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge: White Horse Press, 2011).

²⁹ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social* (Oxford, 2005).

³⁰ Chris Otter, *The Victorian Eye: A Political History of Light and Vision in Britain, 1800-1910* (Chicago, 2008);

³¹ Joe Moran, 'Crossing the road in Britain, 1931-76', *Historical Journal*, 49:2 (2006), pp. 477-96.

Much of this research has focused upon the nineteenth and twentieth-century city, where historians, influenced by Michel Foucault's concept of 'governmentality' (essentially the techniques and strategies by which a society is rendered governable) and his understanding of power as diffused through networks rather than being a top-down imposition.³² For both these approaches the environment (as in the physical infrastructure) of the city and its spatial ordering are crucial analytical categories. Indeed the emphasis upon space in urban historical research since the 1980s is one of the most obvious developments in western urban historiography. In focusing upon urban space, one of the most significant influences has come from another French theorist, Henri Lefebvre.³³

Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*, first translated into English in 1991, encouraged historians to consider space not as a neutral backdrop but as the product of human and material agency and as existing in three different modes: the space that is conceived by for example urban planners or administrators; the space that is represented, for example, through texts and images; and the space that is experienced by those who inhabit and use the space on a daily basis.³⁴ The spatial turn has made us much more aware of how spaces are constructed and conceived, and how these in turn interact with human agency.³⁵ Space, it has been argued, can have a coercive capacity in shaping certain forms of social relationship, for example,³⁶ and is an active constituent of historical consciousness.³⁷ The spaces of the city are not just the location of events and activities, but created through lived experience, shaped by cultural and material practices.³⁸ A more sophisticated understanding of urban space, for example, means that the built environment now has to be understood in terms of landownership, mercantile activities, the power base of previous settlements, social relationships, and the value and cultural systems which fundamentally shaped the physical appearance of towns and cities. Town halls and public buildings are no longer viewed simply as physical structures; rather they are significant for what they represented and as the spaces which both helped to define and were defined by public demonstrations and civic ceremonies. Slums were real – to the extent that many thousands lived in sub-standard living conditions, but they also

³²The most influential statement of this approach is found in Patrick Joyce, *The Rule of Freedom: Liberalism and the Modern City* (London, 2003).

³³ See the special issue of *Cultural Geography*, 13:4 (2006) for a collection of essays that represent this combination of interest in environment, non-human agency and spatial analysis in the context of the nineteenth and twentieth-century city.

³⁴ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, transl. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford, 1991).

³⁵ See for example, Miles Ogborn, *Spaces of Modernity. London's Geographies 1680–1780* (Guildford, 1998).

³⁶ Leif Jerram, 'Kitchen sink dramas: women, modernity and space in Weimar Germany', *Cultural Geography*, 13:4 (2006), pp. 538-56.

³⁷ Nead, *Victorian Babylon*, p. 8.

³⁸ For a powerful statement of this thesis see Rykwert, *The Seduction of Place*.

entered the imagination through the power of the written and graphic media and acquired a much more potent historical agency thereby as an imagined space.³⁹ Analysis of the relationship between space and power and the use of spatial strategies as a means of social control has been similarly fruitful, not least in the context of colonial cities.⁴⁰

The spatial approach to the historical study of cities has been given additional impetus by the development of ever more sophisticated digital mapping resources. Projects such as Visualising Urban Geographies, run by the National Library of Scotland and the University of Edinburgh enables historians to use digitized and geo-referenced maps in conjunction with other historical data.⁴¹ Digitized Ordnance Survey town plans are overlaid with zoomable and searchable maps from Google Earth. This offers the potential for mapping in a much more straightforward way than is possible with GIS as the locational co-ordinates for most sites can simply be taken from the mapping data in Google Earth.⁴² Such an approach enables any historian (not only those with specialist training in GIS) to make manifest the spatial distribution of urban actors, be they businesses, clubs, shops, individuals, and with much greater clarity. Thus the interaction between human networks and social behaviour with the physical spaces and boundaries in which they are located becomes much more apparent.

The websites *Locating London's Past* and *London Lives* have led the way in demonstrating how different digital databases can be combined in order to interrogate data in a new way, allowing users to generate and visualise their own research.⁴³ *Locating London's Past* uses a GIS compliant version of the John Rocque map of 1746 onto which users can map data from the digitised records of crime, poor relief, taxation, elections, local administration and archaeological finds. *London Lives* operates in a similar way and combines the resources of eight archives, fifteen datasets and allows access to a total of 3.35 million names. These resources are extremely valuable and powerful for a number of reasons, but I will highlight two: firstly, the ability to give spatial definition to historical data that is otherwise fragmentary and partial, which can in itself open up new questions, and secondly, in the

³⁹ Alan Mayne, *Imagined Slums. Newspaper Representation in Three Cities* (Leicester, 1993).

⁴⁰ Simon Gunn, and R.J. Morris, *Identities in Space: Contested Terrains in the Western City since 1850* (Aldershot, 2001); Stephen Legg, *Spaces of Colonialism: Delhi's Urban Governmentalities* (Oxford, 2007); John Broich, 'Engineering the Empire: British water supply systems and colonial societies, 1850–1900', *Journal of British Studies* 46 (2007), pp. 346–65.

⁴¹ <http://geo.nls.uk/urbhist/>

⁴² D. Henrie, 'Ordnance Survey historic town plans of Scotland (1847-1895): geo-referencing and web delivery with ArcIMS and OpenLayers', *e-Perimtron*, 4 1 (2009), pp. 73-85.

⁴³ <http://www.londonlives.org/> and <http://www.locatinglondon.org/>. On the dangers inherent in over-reliance upon digital resources, see Tim Hitchcock, 'Confronting the digital: or how academic history writing lost the plot', *Cultural and Social History*, 10:1 (2013), pp. 9-23.

ability to take nominal record linkage to an entirely new level. Thus it becomes possible to trace the histories of individuals who left no records themselves, as we follow their names and the course of their lives through the digital archive. The digital medium also opens up possibilities to structure works of original scholarship in new ways, not limited to the linear narrative of a traditional journal article. Multimedia companions provide authors with the opportunity to analyse, interpret, and present maps, photographs and other materials in an interactive way that allows the visual to assume much greater centrality than in scholarship that relies solely on the written text.⁴⁴

Another important strand of history that has been emerging in North America and western Europe is the analysis of the post-industrial city – its degeneration and in many cases regeneration. The physical legacy of the industrial city poses a challenge for urban societies across the westernised world: it is a resource for community heritage and embodies the lived experience of generations of workers, but it is also potentially a blight in the urban landscape and costly to restore or regenerate. As more and more cities de-industrialise, the management of these areas becomes a highly important political, economic and cultural issue for urban authorities and local communities, as such sites frequently embody a collective identity and represent the collective memory of the inhabitants. The debates over policy, planning and heritage that result have given rise to a growing field of research. Rebecca Madgin, for example, has analysed sites in Manchester, Leicester, Edinburgh, with comparative work in other European cities including Lille and Rome, in order to build up a comparative perspective on the way in which the urban industrial heritage is managed: some of the problems are generic but different systems of planning legislation and regulation in each country; different inherited traditions means that even within the United Kingdom very important differences emerge between England Scotland.⁴⁵

Madgin's work raises the issue of the value of de-industrialised sites as part of an urban 'heritage': heritage has more conventionally been associated with older buildings – often of rather greater aesthetic appeal than factories and mills – but the importance of 'heritage' and the heritage movement within urban society and its value for both the urban economy (through tourism and leisure) and through the promotion of community and social cohesion is increasingly being recognised by both governments and historians.⁴⁶ Cities, it has been said, are 'memory machines' – the past is implicated in the fabric of even the most rapidly expanding cities. Urban historians –

⁴⁴ See for example the 'multimedia' essays published by *Urban History*:
http://journals.cambridge.org/fulltext_content/supplementary/UHY/urban/default.htm

⁴⁵ Rebecca Madgin, 'Reconceptualising the historic urban environment : conservation and regeneration in Castlefield, Manchester, 1960-2009', *Planning Perspectives*, 25:1 (2010), pp. 29-48 and her *Heritage, Culture and Conservation* (Saarbrücken, 2009).

⁴⁶ An excellent example of this in Europe is the recent HERA call on the uses of the past:
<http://heranet.info/hera-jrp-documents-1>

interdisciplinary as ever – are working with planners, architects and architectural historians and local community groups to understand the meaning and social value of the past in contemporary urban culture. This is in part a response to the changing environment of the funding climate: since its foundation in 1994 the National Heritage Lottery in the UK has invested millions of pounds each year to support communities in exploring and preserving their heritage. Universities have frequently been a source of specialist advice on these projects, and indeed partners, not least because this offers the opportunity to acquire additional grant income. With the recent advent of the requirement for ‘Impact’ in the UK’s Research Excellent Framework such partnerships with community groups, the voluntary sector and heritage organizations have become increasingly important.⁴⁷ Departments are now judged not just on the quality of the research that is produced but upon the extent to which such research contributes to the economic, social or cultural well-being of the wider community. This can be interpreted in many different ways: increasing visitor numbers to a museum through an exhibition, advising on urban regeneration, or contributing to lesson packs in local schools for example. But it has fundamental consequences for the way in which funded research is now conceptualised. Thus, for example, ‘The Redress of the Past’ based at Kings College London examines the phenomenon of historical pageants in twentieth-century British towns. The aim is to explore the stories that urban communities told about themselves through the historical re-enactment of scenes from national and local history and to understand the importance of ‘heritage’ as a part of leisure activities in the twentieth century. Written into the project is collaboration with local museums and engagement with the public through oral history and an interactive website.

The consequences of Impact are not necessarily negative: universities have not traditionally been good at demonstrating the wider social value of their work, it is true, and the incentive that ‘impact’ provides to collaborate with partner institutions and to disseminate findings beyond the academic community is surely a positive one. There are legitimate concerns, however, regarding the potential for the impact agenda to distort the direction of research, much of which does not have an obvious or immediate ‘impact’. Many scholars are rightly suspicious of an instrumentalist agenda. But impact is only one way in which the funding structure of the UK is shaping patterns of research : the other chief influence is the emphasis upon interdisciplinarity and collaboration.⁴⁸ UK funding councils are prioritising research which breaks down disciplinary barriers and which involve teams of

⁴⁷ For the purposes of REF, impact was defined as ‘an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia’.

⁴⁸ The University of Leicester, for example, is developing a major interdisciplinary bid between colleagues in Geology, Urban History, History of Art and Film and Management Studies for a research centre in Anthropocene Studies.

researchers: this does present exciting opportunities and is generating some excellent research, but conversely, the chances for the 'lone scholar' (with whom many historians identify) to pursue an individual research project are becoming increasingly limited.

Collaboration is moreover, increasingly seen in international terms, and for urban historians who have traditionally operated on a comparative basis, this is not unwelcome. As South Asia, China and also parts of Africa and South America undergo unprecedented urbanisation, the study of urban history is losing its Eurocentric focus and is instead taking on an increasingly global perspective.⁴⁹ Towns and cities have always been hubs where people, ideas, technologies and material goods have circulated across national boundaries, facilitating the cross fertilisation of cultures and influencing the course of urban development, but this aspect of urbanism is being increasingly emphasised in our own age where the integrity of the nation state and its conceptual value as a unit of analysis is becoming less and less clear. 'World cities' such as Bombay, Delhi, Shanghai and Singapore, as well as London and Los Angeles are the crucial nodal points of global networks and key players in the emergent field of transnational history, which looks at interactions and developments beyond the nation state and across continental boundaries.⁵⁰

But if transnational history makes us question the category of the nation state, the rise of postcolonial history and subaltern studies has similarly questioned the western construction of Europe, a historicist understanding of the past, and with that key assumptions about the relationship between urbanization and modernity. Europe itself and the models of urbanism which define modern British and European society today were themselves constituted through engagement with the colonial world.⁵¹ For British historians the study of urban history within the imperial context is necessarily a study of the transnational processes of exchange; of the local assimilation and adaptation of metropolitan norms; of the strategies of resistance or non-compliance with metropolitan directives, of reciprocal influences and the creation of distinctive hybrid urbanism which informs both our understanding of British and India history.⁵² Beyond the colonial period, South Asia and China are, of course, amongst the most rapidly urbanizing parts of the world: they are confronting in a highly compressed period of time, the challenges of industrialization,

⁴⁹ The extent to which a global approach to urban history has become orthodoxy is symbolised in the recent *Oxford Handbook of Cities in World History* (Oxford, 2014) edited by Peter Clark.

⁵⁰ The classic articulation of the global city is by Saskia Saasen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton, 1991). Recent examples of the transnational approach to urban history include, Shane Ewen and Pierre Yves Saunier (eds.), *Another Global City* (Basingstoke, 2008) or the special issue on 'Transnational urbanism in the Americas' published by *Urban History*, 36:2 (2009).

⁵¹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, 2007).

⁵² See for example, Prashant Kidambi, *The Making of an Indian Metropolis: Colonial Governance and Public Culture in Bombay, 1890-1920* (Aldershot, 2007).

urbanization, mass population growth, politicization, nationalism – challenges which in Europe followed one upon the other, sequentially, at a much more sedate pace. Comparative studies of urbanization in these parts of the world is essential in terms of attempting to understand an unprecedented phenomenon, but such research also promises to set British and European urban history in a very different light, offering stimulating comparative perspectives on how cities respond and adapt to challenges and the resilience of the city as a socio-political organization.

For some historians urban history ceased to have validity in the late twentieth century: Anthony Sutcliffe once remarked that ‘as the state took over, the city disappeared’.⁵³ The dominance of nation state has, it is argued, led to a ‘hollowing out’ of democracy, whereby the vast majority of taxation that is raised in the UK goes straight to the Treasury rather than being disbursed by locally elected bodies. The autonomy of the city has been progressively undermined as national legislation and regulations decided in Parliament have been implemented and local variation – often demonised as the ‘post code lottery’ (whereby access to resources varies according to the local authority in which one lives) --is eradicated in the pursuit of a homogenous society. Communities feel disenfranchised and urban leaders are hamstrung and unable to respond to the specific needs of their towns in cities. In Europe even the national unit is becoming less relevant as cities are considered simply as part of broader pan-urban regions transcending the territorial boundaries of nation state and with little distinction between individual urban entities being observed.

But this view presumes that the town or city can only have a role by virtue of its independence from the nation state. The independence to levy taxes, administer justice, frame regulations, and to decide the qualifications for admission to inner councils and decision-making bodies – all of which were central to much research in British urban history before the late twentieth century – all this does convey autonomy and the loss of these functions has substantially changed the nature of urban governance and indeed urban identity over the last century. However, the town is not simply the receptacle of national developments in social, economic and political activity. It is, as many authors have noted, the locus of the interaction of these forces, and their interplay produces specific outcomes. Irrespective of national guidelines, implementation may take unexpected forms that are sometimes unacceptable to national policy-makers. Urban resistance, adaptation and independence, did not, of course, disappear with the nation state; there continue to be further adaptations of endemic local-central tensions which have been an enduring theme in studies of towns and cities in every age. Thus when Margaret Thatcher’s government tried to introduce a poll

⁵³ Anthony Sutcliffe, ‘In search of the urban variable’, in Derek Fraser and Anthony Sutcliffe (eds.), *The Pursuit of Urban History* (London, 1983), p. 263.

tax in 1990 it was met with widespread acts of civil disobedience in towns across the country, in protest against the Westminster political elite, who were by this stage held in widespread contempt.

Moreover, in recent years there have been increasing calls for a return of greater municipal autonomy through an increase in devolved powers from Westminster. Since the debate over Scottish devolution in the summer of 2014 there has been increasing pressure in parliamentary circles to match the kind of devolved powers being offered to Scotland with similar powers to English urban regions. In November 2014 the first step was made in an agreement between the Treasury and Manchester City Council which surrendered to Greater Manchester a portfolio of activities formerly managed by Whitehall including transport regulation, strategic planning, housing development, further education, skills training and economic growth and the introduction of an elected mayor. The proposals have yet to be implemented, but already other major cities (Birmingham, Leeds and Sheffield, for example) are calling for similar powers and Manchester aims for full devolution of all public spending. These developments are fascinating in terms of the disintegration of the post war British state in the twenty-first century but they are also a salutary reminder to the urban historian of the continued importance of the city as both a place and an idea: it is the locus for economic and political activity, the embodiment of a sense of community and purpose, and a framework for collective activity. And as the discussions over Manchester's acquisition of devolved powers have shown, Manchester's own municipal past – its urban history – has been crucial in inspiring and legitimating the call for greater autonomy.⁵⁴

It is, in fact, this interaction of the national with the local and the distinctive inflection provided by the particularity of place, defined by the urban form, that has driven much urban historical inquiry in twentieth-century studies. To return again to the physical environment of the city -- it is here that the individuality and independence of the city is best exemplified – in the physical and social fabric that inhabits and sustains it. The buildings and open spaces, colours and textures, smells and sounds of the city help constitute the lived experience of the citizens; they represent compressed memories, they project meanings and they symbolise values. These are dimensions of the urban which have little if anything to do with national policy, and are largely independent of central government. If anything, the emphasis upon *place* is becoming an increasingly important focus. Historians generally are becoming more sensitive to local and regional complexity; whereas in the early days of urban history the emphasis was upon analyses of class from which generalisations could be drawn across the field of urban history, or upon establishing the trajectory of industrialisation, many

⁵⁴ See for example, the article by Simon Jenkins in the *Guardian* on 12 February 2015: <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/feb/12/secret-negotiations-restore-manchester-greatness>

studies today are oriented much more towards analysing the relationship between the particularity of place and wider societal trends.

In 1801, one person in four in Britain lived in a town or city; by 1901 almost four out of every five did so. Today it is 9 out of 10. Much of our early modern and modern history is an account of that transition from country to town, and of the processes by which townspeople obtained a living, and managed their social, cultural and political organisations. In Britain, there was an early realisation that the study of life in towns and cities provided an important counter-balance to the former reliance on the political history of the state and its imperial ventures. Urban history has evolved to embrace different theoretical and methodological approaches as they have emerged and has been central to many of the critical questions emerging in our contemporary world, where towns and cities are central to the pressing issues of environmental damage, energy efficiency, inequality and how to develop sustainable communities and functional family relationships. Whilst historians remain divided over what constitutes a definition of urban history,⁵⁵ Dyos's 'urban variable' remains an enormously cogent mode of analysis for historical research, and the particularity of place continues to be essential in defining who we are.

⁵⁵ H.J. Dyos, 'Urbanity and suburbanity', in D. Cannadine and D. Reeder (eds.), *Exploring the Urban Past. Essays in Urban History by H.J. Dyos* (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 19-36; Harry S.J. Jansen, 'Wresting with the angel: on problems of definition in urban historiography', *Urban History*, 23:3 (1996), pp. 277-99; Richard Rodger, 'Theory, practice and European urban history', in idem (ed.), *European Urban History. Prospect and Retrospect* (Leicester, 1993), pp. 1-18.