



SURVEY AND SPECULATION

Making the global turn matter: strategies and pathways

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Abstract

The survey examines the past, present and future of the urban history field in Britain, mixing memories and reflections. I trace the global turn of that field and the challenges it brings. One argument concerns the impact of a global scale on the methods and the explanatory frameworks used. A second concern is the role of economic history and economic frameworks of analysis in the writing of urban history, and I advocate their continued relevance.

In July of 2023, dozens of urban historians met at Leicester University for the 50th Anniversary Conference of *Urban History* to discuss the state of the field. For me, Leicester has always been *the* world centre of urban history activity. My first visit took place around 1970 at the invitation of Jim Dyos, who was extraordinarily kind and generous to this recently minted, young American Ph.D. Dyos had founded the *Urban History Newsletter* in 1963, and his efforts to reform the field were in full swing. After asking – with a twinkle in his eye – whether *Hard Times* ought to be considered more fact or fiction, he invited me to contribute an essay to *The Victorian City*, his and Michael Wolff's brilliantly conceived and edited study of nineteenth-century British urbanism. From that time forward, my Leicester contacts and friendships have been central to my research and writing. While I am deeply rooted in past practices of urban history, I am also an enthusiastic supporter of an urban history future that incorporates a global framework. I want to thank Roey Sweet, Rosemary Wakeman, Shane Ewen and Dominic Vitiello for inviting me to speak at the Leicester conference and to publish my thoughts on the evolution of the practice of urban history over the past half century.

My subject is the challenge that the global turn poses for urban historians. I want to raise two inter-related issues. The first concerns the ways that a global scale influences historians' methods and their explanatory frameworks. In a field that began in urban biography and developed largely through topical studies of a single place, the expansion to a world-wide framework removes most, if not all, of the institutional scaffolding that normally orders a single urban story. Yet a broadened scale requires reframing and reconceptualization. Practitioners must think about multiple structures and networks, which then have to be connected and compared.

A second set of issues posed by a jump to a global scale arises from urban historians' relative lack of attention to economic history in recent years and by their fading interest in general explanations of long-run changes. Global history requires a global framework of analysis, which most urban historians have not developed and not been active enough in pursuing creatively. That puts our field in a weak position to answer the 'so what' question. What and how can historians contribute to discussions of urban issues on the transregional scale? We deal with changes over time, but those changes have to be explained. Urban historians must re-examine the stories we choose to tell given the vast expansion of the territory in which the field now operates. In the Dyos era, economic history, coupled with political idealism and a concern for inequality, were at the analytical centre of the new urban history field. As we look toward the urban history future, I advocate the continued relevance of such frameworks – in ways compatible with contemporary concerns of those fields and current theoretical formulations.

Let's return to 'Urban History Past', and leap back in time to Leicester in 1966, when around 40 scholars formed the Urban History Group. Participants were almost all men and most held positions in the urban universities of the Midlands or industrial north, known for practical curricula and red brick buildings. Most were affiliated with departments of Economic History or Economic and Social History and belonged to the Economic History Association, which supported the new group in various ways. Jim Dyos urged researchers to move away from isolated case-studies by posing large questions and using social science methods. Dyos was both a visionary thinker and a man of his time. Living through an era when many inner cities declined in population, Dyos studied suburbanization. His book, *Victorian Suburb: A Study of the Growth of Camberwell*, explored urban sprawl and migration out of central districts through tales of leaseholds, construction companies, roads and trams. He effectively bridged the gap between economic and social history and turned a local study into one that explored a widespread urban process.¹

The reformed urban history wave in Britain was part of the tsunami of innovative economic and social research that swept over Europe and the United States during the 1960s and 1970s and was deeply influenced by the events and context of those decades. Dyos and the urbanists came together in a boom time of urban and economic expansion, when educational opportunities were growing. Journals and study groups could be launched, and students flocked into the classrooms. During a time when social coalitions of the under-represented marched in the streets to demand a political voice, younger historians – quite in tune with their times – brought marginalized groups into the centre of their analyses. Opposition to inequality in various forms animated both political and academic work. The study of women, workers, students and African-Americans became incorporated into university curricula in the United States and, to a lesser extent, in Europe. *Past & Present* and *Annales* challenged the dominance of conventional political history by turning to political economy and demography. The early years of the new urban history also coincided with the enthusiasm of the French *Annaliste* historians for the possibility of 'histoire totale'. Think of Pierre Goubert's deep dive into the history and demography of Beauvais during the seventeenth century. Perhaps a single city could be emblematic

¹H.J. Dyos (ed.), *The Study of Urban History* (London, 1968), 13, 46; H.J. Dyos, *Victorian Suburb: A Study of the Growth of Camberwell* (Leicester, 1961).

of all that needed to be known about an urban society and its economic base. But the most notable books – Edward Thompson’s *Making of the English Working Class*, Fernand Braudel’s *Capitalism and Material Life* and Immanuel Wallerstein’s *The Modern World System* – used multiple examples to make very broad claims about national or transnational territories.² More importantly, their challenges of dominant interpretations in the history field directed attention to ‘history from below’ and to the lives of ordinary people. The ‘new urban history’ was born in an exciting and troubled time from which it gained energy and relevance. There were great stories to be told of the urban past, which illuminated the urban present, and which could signal a hoped-for future. This academic energy was idealism with a political edge, and it directed attention to past and present inequalities. At that time, however, the geographic spread of most individual research projects in urban history remained local or national.

This story of the urban history past has a second instalment, however. When he founded the *Urban History Yearbook* in 1974, Jim Dyos recommended to urban researchers a different more conservative and less political path than the one he had advocated in 1966 and certainly more conservative than the one taken by Edward Thompson. Dyos suggested building on the work of William Farr and Adna Weber and creating ‘statistical surveys of towns’. Computers would permit quantification of the newly available British census manuscript schedules and similar sources. He wanted scholars to build a ‘typology of British towns’ based upon detailed analysis of their structures and functions. The initial issue of the *Yearbook* did not go very far in that direction, but the lead article described a joint research project on the small town of Kendal in Westmorland conducted by MA students.³ Their initial research used censuses and parish registers to plot the town’s population and industrial organization. Book reviewers discussed important demographic studies, and they highlighted Brinley Thomas’ new book, *Migration and Economic Growth*.⁴ The second issue looked directly at the social sciences, emphasizing recent works on urbanization by Kingsley Davis and Brian Berry. Although this volume did not include hard core economic history, interest in the economic background of modern British urban development was unmistakable, as was approval of quantification and social science modelling.

Attention to the social sciences was only part of the early urban history mandate. Jim Dyos also intentionally staked out a second, more eclectic approach to urban history when he put on his editorial hat. His strong interest in literature and art, which infused the pages and superb pictures of *The Victorian City*, can be seen as an early example of the cultural turn.⁵ In the *Urban History Yearbook*, he explicitly defended diverse and multi-disciplinary research strategies, and he gave them all scholarly attention via the *Yearbook*’s reviews and bibliographies. Economic history had a place but so too did urban culture, politics and planning. Dyos wanted the

²P. Goubert, *Cent mille provinciaux aux XVIIe siècle: Beauvais et le beauvaisis de 1600 à 1730* (Paris, 1968); E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963); F. Braudel, *Capitalism and Material Life* (London, 1973); I. Wallerstein, *The Modern World System* (New York, 1974).

³H.J. Dyos, *Urban History Yearbook (UHY)*, 1 (1974); S.M. Brown *et al.*, ‘A small town study: an experiment in teamwork’, *UHY*, 1 (1974) 19–23; *UHY*, 2 (1975).

⁴B. Thomas, *Migration and Economic Growth: A Study of Great Britain and the Atlantic Economy* (2nd edn, Cambridge, 1973).

⁵H.J. Dyos and M. Wolff (eds.), *The Victorian City: Images and Realities* (2 vols., London, 1973).

urban history tent to be a large one where all sorts of approaches were welcome. He reached out to those working on pre-modern towns and brought them into dialogue with those studying more recent developments. All of this made great sense for a new specialty and for a journal which needed to attract readers and writers. So the field of urban history was launched on two different levels: a social science approach that highlighted urban processes and social groups, and a second multi-disciplinary path that moved through the humanities, planning and architecture. This divided approach, overlaid on the practice of urban biography, continues to shape and to complicate the field's expansion onto a global terrain. Multiplicity is a strength but poses analytical problems.

As the field of urban history expanded, economic history, whether defined in Marxist or neo-classical, neo-liberal terms, faded in importance among younger scholars. It was crowded out by growing interest in and excitement about anthropology, cultural history, gender analysis, structuralism and semiotics. When Derek Fraser and Tony Sutcliffe took 'the pulse of urban history in the early 1980s' in their edited volume, *The Pursuit of Urban History*, their readers found very little urban economic history. Of the 23 essays they included, only one, Richard Rodger's essay, 'The invisible hand: market forces, housing, and the urban form in Victorian cities', uses an explicitly economic model, one used in this case to explain the inferior housing conditions in Scottish towns.⁶ Urban historians had not forgotten economics, but most had moved in other directions.

One aspect of the urban history field in the 1960s and early 1970s that contrasts strongly with present practice was its relatively narrow geographic focus. Not only did most projects centre on one or two cities, but the first generation of the new British urban historians worked primarily on English towns with remarkably few forays into Scotland or Wales. When John Foster designed his comparative study of nineteenth-century industrial towns, he chose Oldham, Northampton and South Shields rather than more far-flung, culturally different examples.⁷ Although a sprinkling of French, German and American scholars contributed work on towns in their own countries to the *Yearbook*, the new urban history as practised in Britain focused primarily on English examples, although this framing did not last long.

After the Dyos era, the urban history field in Britain quickly broadened its geographic scope. In 1992, when he became the editor of *Urban History*, Richard Rodger identified 'international and comparative perspectives' as journal priorities. Robert Tittler testified to the success of this design in a 1997 review, which argued that the 'strongly insular tradition' of British urban studies had been replaced by transnational collaborations and comparative investigations of cities.⁸ If we look ahead to the present practice of urban historians and current editorial practice at *Urban History*, we find articles on Asian, African and Middle Eastern cities. Special issues such as 'Transnational urbanism in the Americas', 'China's urban turn' and 'Indian suburbs' broadened the conceptual terrain to urban processes in other parts of the globe.⁹ In recent years, the growing power of the internet has deepened *Urban History's* geographic reach, now that the journal is available online and supported

⁶D. Fraser and A. Sutcliffe, *The Pursuit of Urban History* (London, 1983), xi, 190–211.

⁷J. Foster, 'Nineteenth-century towns – a class dimension', in Dyos (ed.), *Study of Urban History*, 281–99.

⁸R. Rodger, 'Urban history: prospect and retrospect', *Urban History* (UH), 19 (1992), 1–22; R. Tittler, 'Capitalism and culture: the functions of the European city', *UH*, 25 (1998), 231–6.

⁹*UH*, 36:2 (2009); *UH*, 38:3 (2011); *UH*, 39:1 (2012).

by open access agreements. Between 2020 and 2022, 28 per cent of authors publishing in the journal came from Europe and 5 per cent from Asia or the Middle East. During those same years, around a third of the articles published dealt with cities in the Americas, Asia, Africa or the Middle East. The editorial team of *Urban History* now has North American members, and almost half its International Advisory Board is based outside Europe and the UK.¹⁰ When the Global Urban History Project was founded in 2017, it arose within a field whose major British publication had since long gone transnational and transcontinental, and the academic lives of its practitioners expanded well beyond the EU.

The relatively recent global turn within the field of urban history lagged behind the global shifts in international structures of power that came with decolonization, the expansion of the United Nations and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Devotees of a Washington Consensus spread enthusiasm for globalization with its vision of ‘free market capitalism’ as a world-wide, progressive and unstoppable force. Yet over time, as former colonies became voting members of the UN as well as recipients of loans from the IMF, international dialogues sharpened around issues of power, equity and economic policy, which could no longer be limited to the industrialized countries of Eurasia and North America. What obligations did the winners of the free market system have toward the losers? What responsibilities remained for the European imperial powers after the formal collapse of empires? These moral and political questions rising from the reconfigured international political sphere spilled over into classrooms, research projects and thinking about cities. Certainly, part of the enthusiasm for the global turn among historians was an impulse to retreat from the Eurocentric state of the field and to decolonize some of its assumptions as well as its territory of research. It was in this context that Jeremy Seabrook published *In the Cities of the South* (1996) and Dipesh Chakrabarty wrote *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (2000), which asked historians to re-examine categories of European thought and to explore how they ‘may be renewed from and for the margins’.¹¹

Now let’s shift forward in time to ‘Urban History Present’. Today, whatever their individual research projects, urban historians have to confront the existence of the global turn. Urban history in the present operates in transnational territory – via conferences, journals and classrooms. Nevertheless, the traditions of urban biography and local studies remain powerful. But how should we bridge the gap from the local to the global? Pointing out the existence of global ties and networks is insufficient unless we can also define the importance and impact of these global connections. What results from long-distance, transregional ties and networks? How did they shape trajectories of change? What differs among local understandings of imported ideas or practices? The mere fact of geographic spread of something does not answer the ‘so what’ question. Readers and students legitimately want to know what and how global ties changed urban societies, and how cities reshaped the world around them.

When reaching out for a global story, the easiest path is first to multiply examples and then to compare them. Juxtaposition supposedly turns thematically linked,

¹⁰Editors’ report, CUP report for UH Board’ (April 2023), 1–7.

¹¹J. Seabrook, *In the Cities of the South: Scenes from a Developing World* (London 1996); D. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, 2000), 16.

geographically dispersed local studies into a coherent whole. A familiar example of this technique, particularly in the United States, is a single conference session called 'global patterns of x', which groups three or four research studies on a particular theme in several cities, chosen usually because someone was working on them. Many insightful comparisons can be made, of course, but historians tend to individualize their cases and to assert the exceptionalism of their favourite place, which limits the impact of results. One needs to know why particular, limited comparisons are important. How can an individual case be integrated into a pattern of wider significance? Linking case-studies requires the asking of broad questions and providing a framework within which to situate research.

A second tactic for taking research global is the search for the long-distance ties of a single city, following flows in and out. Key issues become reception and transmission. Since cities normally import and export goods and ideas, as well as people, it is easy to find ample evidence of world-wide exchanges, particularly in the cases of ports, capitals and religious centres. But the simple fact of these exchanges and flows tells us little about their importance. How significant are these ties in comparison to local linkages? What changes over time – and why? Does the studied city differ from its neighbours? Too often such questions are not raised. In any case, a single set of connections says only a limited amount about a global pattern of flows. Research on knowledge of one set of influences can be illuminating, but historians rarely specify the totality of circuits within which a city is embedded – even if such a task were possible. Moreover, a larger picture needs to be built and the issue of significance raised. One successful example of this tactic of interconnection is Catherine Hall's *Civilising Subjects*.¹² Not normally seen as urban history, the book ties Birmingham to Jamaican towns and rural spaces via the themes of empire, race, gender, power and equality. The imperial framework and use of broad categories of analysis allow this transregional story to go global, giving other researchers a structure within which to compare urban links between Europe and slave societies in the mid-nineteenth century.

A third strategy is to trace a broad process through which cities act as nodes of transmission and action. There are lots of activities to choose from: urbanization, state-making, migration, trade and imperial expansion, to name but some of historians' favourites. Such processes create movements along transnational circuits, which change over time. For the modern period, Carola Hein has used steamship routes and other water-based transport links to map global networks of port cities, which then channel global flows that reshape societies at all points of the web of connections.¹³ For the ancient, medieval and early modern periods, the tracking of trade via urban merchants and their geographic circuits of activity reveals patterns of urban consumption and the shapes of cultural exchanges.¹⁴ Studies of the European trading companies and their port-forts not only can be mapped geographically as they expanded, but they blend urban history and power politics with analyses of the early modern global economy.

Stories of urban networks and long-distance exchanges gain meaning, however, from the larger frameworks within which they are set. If narrowly considered, the

¹²C. Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the Imagination, 1830–1967* (Cambridge, 2002).

¹³C. Hein, *Port Cities: Dynamic Landscapes and Global Networks* (New York, 2011).

¹⁴P. Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History* (New York, 1984).

book, *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta*, merely follows one man's journey as he moved in the mid-fourteenth century east from Morocco to Mecca and then wandered throughout Asia. But if set within research on trade routes, court cities, language and legal systems, Ibn Battuta's stopping points and reception map the world of fourteenth-century Islam. His story, as told by Ross Dunn, can be translated into a tale of a Muslim cultural world.¹⁵ It scales up the adventures of one man into a global tale that links political economy to cultural exchanges within the towns of Eurasia and Africa. The challenge of doing global urban history requires connecting an individual research topic to a world-wide story of importance and interest.

What are the urban issues that resonate today and have a global reach? There are many to choose from certainly, but the growing mega-cities of the Global South, as well as the rising numbers of immigrants and refugees crossing borders and heading into major towns across the Americas and Eurasia, are reshaping attitudes to our urban world, as shown by the increasing fears of cities today in the USA. At the same time, popular rage over economic inequality has grown internationally and surfaces in cities around the globe. Think about the recent Gilets Jaunes protests in Paris, Punjabi farmers using tractors to block Delhi streets and pot-banging demonstrators in Santiago demanding higher wages. Books, such as *Capitalism in the Twenty-First Century* by Thomas Piketty, add credence and historical depth to resentments about rising levels of income inequality, which he shows to have worsened in different societies around the world both in the later nineteenth century and then again after 1970.¹⁶ Urban historians have a wealth of examples and data on which to draw when they frame research projects on cities past and present. Attention to migration and to inequalities will deepen those projects and connect them to the important political concerns of our time.

While there is no single story to tell, most of the wide-ranging analyses of urban development over time which have been produced in the last hundred years or so have emphasized economic factors. European and North American scholars and theorists have long used economics to explain the origins of urbanization. Remember V. Gordon Childe's connection of the agricultural revolution to an urban revolution. Max Weber called trade 'the decisive' influence in the founding of cities. More recently, Paul Bairoch in his study of global urbanism, *Cities and Economic Development: From the Dawn of History to the Present*, placed the 'very essence of urbanism' in 'a division of labour, whereby the peasant trades his surplus products for manufactured goods (and services) provided by the city'.¹⁷ Scholars when writing about cities either within a Marxist tradition or that of liberal or neo-classical economics cannot avoid economic categories. Research on industrial cities, whether inspired by Friedrich Engels or Liberal thinkers such as Edward Baines, has to consider in some form labour, capital and wages. In the 1950s and 1960s, modernization theorists linked high levels of city growth to the economic changes triggered by industrialization. In the 1970s and 1980s, multiple scholars linked Immanuel

¹⁵R.E. Dunn, *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta: A Muslim Traveler of the Fourteenth Century* (Berkeley, 2012).

¹⁶T. Piketty, *Capitalism in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA, 2014); T. Piketty, *Capital and Ideology* (Cambridge, MA, 2020).

¹⁷V.G. Childe, *What Happened in History* (Harmondsworth, 1943); M. Weber, *General Economic History*, trans. F.H. Knight (New York, 1961), 239; Paul Bairoch, *Cities and Economic Development: From the Dawn of History to the Present* (Chicago, 1988), 9.

Wallerstein's arguments of an uneven global division of labour within a capitalist world order directly to urbanization and historical urban systems.¹⁸ Discussions of urbanization in the modern period normally invoke industrialization and economic development as engines of growth.

Economic explanations and relationships occupy a central place in broad syntheses of urban history done on the transnational and global levels. *The Making of Urban Europe, 1000–1994*, which Paul Hohenberg and I wrote decades ago, relied on an economic model based on population change, real wages, prices and output to explain cycles of urban growth and decline in the early modern economy. Overall, we focused on 'technology, demography, and markets', as the main drivers of the urbanization process.¹⁹ To jump ahead to more recent decades, large-scale syntheses of the European urban experience often give economic themes a central place. In *European Cities and Towns, 400–2000*, published in 2009, Peter Clark follows analyses of demographic rhythms with a detailed examination of urban industries, service sectors, marketing and trade. *The Oxford Handbook of Cities in World History*, edited by Peter Clark, discusses urbanization around the globe from ancient times to the present. Authors were asked to think about urban systems and their interconnectivity, produced in part by international trade and population diasporas. Workshops among the participants raised questions about the drivers of urban development, which included market forces, commercialization and industrial growth, operating in tension with political institutions. The editors of the soon-to-be-published *Cambridge Urban History of Europe* also examine economic institutions and explanations in detail, particularly in volume II, which includes articles on migration, consumption, trade, manufacturing and early industrial cities. Economic categories have been, and continue to be, heavily emphasized in recent general treatments of cities, although they are often employed in a low key fashion and not strongly argued.²⁰

The explanatory problem for global urban history and historians is not the absence of references to economics as an influence on cities, but a distancing from more general explanatory frameworks, whatever their political bent, which emphasize economic categories. Currently many, if not most, urban historians emphasize non-material, cultural and linguistic categories of analysis and are rightly sceptical of single-issue models that ignore variation over time and space. But general theories can be used to highlight issues, even if not embraced as the single answer to the problem posed. Their arguments offer frameworks within which to evaluate evidence and examples.

Urban historians need to recognize both the continued popularity and the political spins of large-scale interpretations of our global past. William McNeill's highly influential book, *The Rise of the West*, while long since superseded by more nuanced interpretations, set a pattern for multiple textbooks, university courses and research projects, which encoded assumptions of European superiority and confidence in 'modernization'. The concept of 'The West', grounded as it is in the post-war political

¹⁸M. Timberlake (ed.), *Urbanization in the World Economy* (Orlando, 1985).

¹⁹P.M. Hohenberg and L.H. Lees, *The Making of Urban Europe, 1000–1994* (Cambridge, MA, 1995), 114–15.

²⁰P. Clark, *European Cities and Towns, 400–2000* (Oxford, 2009); P. Clark (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Cities in World History* (Oxford, 2013), 4–5; P. O'Brien and M. Prak (eds.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Europe*, vol. II (forthcoming).

economy of North America and Western Europe, carries with it and still supports a particular triumphalist vision of government and society in that part of the world. A contrasting framework derives from the work of Immanuel Wallerstein, for whom 'The West' signified the capitalist core of a world economy that drew resources and labour from peripheral areas, doomed to perpetual underdevelopment. Ironically, both of these opposing political interpretations of global change raise similar sets of ethical issues. Both of these interpretations have hard-wired into them powerful visions of long-run inequality.²¹ Global history leads directly to political questions of distribution, causation and, ultimately, social justice. The global turn, therefore, has embedded in it huge comparisons and world-scale meta-narratives, which must be confronted by scholars working at that scale of analysis. This is unavoidable.

If one abandons both the neo-liberal and Marxist narratives of world history, what other paths exist to structure analyses of cities on a global level? Think back to the Dyos era and his early suggestions. Social science theory offers historians multiple categories of cross-cultural relevance that can be used to frame and compare urban experiences as long as they are historicized and carefully defined. Decades ago, Charles Tilly argued that 'historically grounded, huge comparisons of big structures and large processes help establish what must be explained, attach the possible explanations to their context within time and space'.²² Tilly's instincts were profoundly attuned to the sorts of differences that historians say matter. He believed in deeply researched, detailed comparisons which could help test the soundness of general statements. His aim was not to defend a theory, but to examine, to refine and then to use it to illuminate a historical problem. Urban historians should look more carefully at certain 'big structures and large processes' as effective pathways to the global turn. Categories such as migration, urbanization, environmentalism and urban hierarchy give historians effective tools with which to frame studies of the urban past on a global scale while giving them more interpretive flexibility. In addition, such categories raise the problem of inequality as it shapes cities and their networks linking them to one of the central moral issues of our own time. Let's look briefly at a few examples.

An obvious place where one might begin is the notion of globalization, which has been historicized by Anthony Hopkins.²³ He distinguishes four historical types of globalization which followed one another in time and which can be distinguished on the basis of the role of the state, economic exchanges, scope and agency. While the categories of archaic, proto, modern and post-colonial globalization seem both too vast and too vague, they are different enough to provide a scaffolding for thinking about change over time in economic and political relationships, as well as power differentials. Globalization as a concept brings with it at least two major problems, however. First, it risks circularity and adds little explanatory power to the issue of global interconnectivity of city networks. Second, the idea is directly linked to the economic policies that shaped the Washington Consensus and the naïve faith in supposedly 'free' markets, liberalized trade and transnational supply chains that emerged after World War II. Rising awareness of the shortcomings of this theory and its political impact inevitably shapes scholars' reliance upon the concept of

²¹W. McNeill, *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community* (Chicago, 1963); Wallerstein, *The Modern World System*.

²²C. Tilly, *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons* (New York, 1984), 145.

²³A.G. Hopkins, *Globalization in World History* (London, 2002).

globalization, whose flaws are becoming more widely recognized.²⁴ The idea of globalization is a weak scaffolding for urban history on the transnational level.

Other large processes seem more promising as effective gateways to the global. The study of migration and the routes, identities and timing of those who move are indispensable elements of global urban history. As Jane Jacobs argued decades ago, cities create jobs, and this economic function, which draws people into cities, has operated since ancient times. Historical measurements of long-distance migration, such as those by Jan and Leo Lucassen, can create specific comparisons of the mobility of populations and their hybridity in specific places and times.²⁵ They do not propose a single causal pattern of global migration nor do they normalize European examples, but they offer a typology of different types of ‘cross-cultural migrations’, one of which is movement into cities. Such migration data give urban historians a needed frame for the internal experiences of individual cities and movements among regions. It is risky to underestimate the amounts of long-distance movement in the past, which provides a tool for comparing change over time as well as a framework for thinking about inequality as it relates to groups, individuals and destinations,

Similarly, scholarship on urbanization, as inflected historically and geographically, offers handles on how to think about the role of cities and how people in different periods and places used them. As Tony Wrigley argued decades ago, the fact that at least a sixth of England’s population had ‘direct experience of life in the great city’ was a ‘leaven of change’ in the rest of the country.²⁶ But cities and urban systems offer different structures of opportunity to immigrants, and historians can specify constraints and possibilities as part of their analyses. Using categories that link directly back to the ideas of Patrick Geddes, Mike Davis takes the urbanization story, which both described as ‘slum, semi-slum, and superslum’, away from European industrialism onto a global stage. His book, *Planet of Slums*, chronicles the recent rush into the mega-cities of the Global South and the toxic conditions in shantytowns.²⁷ Even though it is directed toward contemporary conditions, his linkage of urban poverty, informal economies, segregation and urban finance offers historically relevant categories and a powerful argument of cause and effect.

Another large process of overwhelming importance and obvious contemporary interest is that of the environment. Urban environmental history, a growing subfield, can easily make the leap to a planetary scale. To quote David Armitage, seas stream together in a ‘singular world ocean’, their currents spreading pollution, shaping microclimates and carrying debris. Historicizing these processes and knowledge of them and the underlying science is an important task for scholars.²⁸ Concern about climate change brings to the field not only contemporary relevance but a framework against which to measure impacts and actions. Carl Nightingale’s impressive new book, *Earthopolis: A Biography of Our Urban Planet*, asks the question of how and in what ways have cities shaped the natural environment and habitats for all species. His

²⁴ ‘Failures of globalization shatter long-held beliefs’, *New York Times*, 18 Jun. 2023, 1, 10.

²⁵ J. and L. Lucassen, *Globalising Migration History: The Eurasian Experience (16th–21st Centuries)* (Leiden, 2014).

²⁶ E.A. Wrigley, *People, Cities, and Wealth* (Oxford, 1987), 138.

²⁷ M. Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London and New York, 2006).

²⁸ D. Armitage et al., *Writing World Oceanic Histories* (Cambridge, 2018), 4–5; see also S. Amrith, *Unruly Waters: How Rains, Rivers, Coasts, and Seas Have Shaped Asia’s History* (New York, 2018).

story is one of geo-energy capture and transformation as it shifted over time from the coastal and riverine cities of Anatolia and Mesopotamia to the hydrocarbon cities of today. The relationships he traces are deeply historicized and as he says ‘foundationally plural: multifariously diverse and profoundly unequal’. His master narrative moves from spatial transformation to environmental degradation and climate change, as he argues for a ‘fairer human habitat’.²⁹ This is urban history painted on a very large canvas, and it raises issues of value and equity.

‘Big structures’ also have a part to play in the global urban history story. Let me suggest one of particular relevance to urban historians: the venerable concept of an ‘urban hierarchy’ ought not to be forgotten. Historians and geographers continue to use Walter Christaller’s theory of central places to explain differences in town sizes and to link relative population sizes to urban functions. Although the heyday of quantitative studies of urban size distributions has long since passed, the notion of an urban hierarchy undergirds Saskia Sassen’s influential work on global cities, which she defines as ‘command points in the organization of the world economy’, ‘major sites of production’ and key markets for the ‘leading industries’ of finance and other producer services.³⁰ In addition to New York, London and Tokyo, she has identified over 70 other similar ‘global cities’ which dominate their national urban hierarchies and link those urban systems into the transnational world economy which has emerged since the 1980s. Her work also offers historians a framework for examining how long-distance migration has reshaped labour markets and local communities. Sassen adapts world systems theory to take into account both differences among cities within regions as well as the great and growing inequalities within urban populations. Although cities at the top of the global urban hierarchy create new types of high-wage jobs and a growing demand for workers, they also generate increased inequality of incomes and produce a growing proportion of low-wage workers, much more strongly than did manufacturing-based cities. Sassen offers historians tools for comparing cities in different regional systems. In addition, her emphasis on global migration directs attention to the composition of urban labour forces in the largest cities, and raises questions about social mobility, identity formation and gender disparities.

Another ‘big structure’ that can help historians make the leap to a global scale is that of urban networks, which John Darwin explores in his new book: *Unlocking the World: Port Cities and Globalization in the Age of Steam, 1830–1930*.³¹ Using a primarily economic definition of globalization which links to technology, Darwin traces the impact of railways and steamships on the large coastal ports in linking regions around the world. He gives a historical account of shifting distributions of political power and authority, as people, goods, ideas and armies move along ‘oceans of change’ to gateway cities that then speed them inland. He borrows from Ken Pomeranz the notion of cycles of divergence and convergence, and then applies it to more recent times. Darwin sees the contemporary world as entering a new era where the global cities of finance replace port cities as the great connectors, and computers take the place of steam engines. Now the tides of investment and human capital flow

²⁹C. Nightingale, *Earthopolis: A Biography of Our Urban Planet* (Cambridge, 2022), 1, 3, 678.

³⁰S. Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton, 2001), 5; S. Sassen, *Cities in a World Economy* (5th edn, Los Angeles, 2019), 7.

³¹J. Darwin, *Unlocking the World: Port Cities and Globalization in the Age of Steam, 1830–1930* (London, 2020).

from South to North, and East to West, rather than in the opposite direction. His book uses major concepts of social science analysis to help trace a geographic network and then to explain why and how cities mattered in a particular space and time. His book looks both to urban pasts and urban futures using categories that would have been familiar to Jim Dyos.

Thinking on a global scale about cities, which I find intellectually energizing and illuminating, requires overarching concepts and frameworks. Each of the big three processes of urbanization, migration and environmentalism offers an effective scaffolding for interpreting individual city experiences and linking them to broader patterns of change on a global level. Other 'large structures', such as urban hierarchy and urban networks, fill this function too. I find the concepts of urban hierarchy and urban networks particularly helpful because of their global applicability and emphasis on connectivity. You will notice that my choices all operate within the territory of political economy and link to the issue of the inequalities that continue to divide urban communities. My choices are deeply embedded in past and present practices of urban history, but they also offer effective strategies for embedding urban history in the political concerns of our time and permit the shift to a global framework.

In conclusion, let me raise briefly one issue of research process. Global urban history leads us to a more inclusive vision of our field, but for that enlarged field to thrive and move forward, it needs more than individual research efforts. Transregional research strategies can help scholars work together to escape local and national preoccupations. International scholarly networks and publishing ventures can move us toward the goal of global research. Two excellent examples are the Global Migration History Programme of the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam and the international seminars and discussions organized by the Global Urban History Project. Journals such as *Urban History*, which highlight transregional research, also advance a global agenda through special issues and international conferences that focus on large questions and broad territories. Such projects – and the internet – open doors to global conversations about cities. As *Urban History* bridges the distance from a field's past to its present and future, it nudges scholars in many creative directions. I want to thank its editors for offering me the chance to share my reflections on global urban history and for launching a conversation on that subject's future.

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