Introduction: class, community and the processes of urbanisation

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During the nineteenth century Britain became both an urban and an industrial society. The census of 1851 reported significantly that over half the population of England and Wales lived in towns. By 1801, one-third of the English population could be classified as urban, but only one in ten town dwellers lived in the big cities of 100,000 people or more. By 1901, three-quarters of the English population was urban, of whom about one-third lived in big cities. The industrialisation of the nineteenth century was more exclusively urban and happened far more quickly than hitherto. The earliest decades of industrialisation in the new cities were particularly based on the recruitment of labour from beyond the city. The cities effectively pulled free from earlier seasonal and circular patterns of migration which had balanced the sometimes competing and more often complementary demands of town and country. British cities, though, continued to be fed primarily by internal migration and offered nothing comparable to the melting-pots of North America or Eastern Europe.

The dramatic recasting of the spatial structure of British society has attracted the attention of sociologists, economists, historians, anthropologists and geographers, as it attracted, too, the attention of contemporaries. Some description of this transformation is present in almost all general accounts of nineteenth-century Britain. The processes of urbanisation and their consequences have also been studied in detail in more specialised monographs. In Britain, historical geographers may, as Dennis and Prince suggest, have paid far too little attention to towns in the past, looking instead at rural landscapes. The belated growth of British urban historical geography in the 1970s and 1980s was especially marked by an emphasis on the patterns of residential segregation within cities and, although similar concerns were shown in the work of American urban historians such as Warner, Thernstrom, Hershberg and Zunz, American historical geographers remained more concerned with regional cultural geography in the tradition of Carl Sauer, an approach much closer to the work of Darby and his
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collaborators than to the concerns either of British urban historical geographers or American urban historians.5

The essays in this book cover many of the topics treated by earlier historical geographers. In studying migration and its consequences, Blakeie, Withers and Southall are drawing on earlier studies such as those by Darby, Smith, Johnson, Lawton and Pooley.6 In looking at the way work, home and community were related, Bramwell has taken up a theme previously studied by Vance.7 Geographers such as Howe and Gilbert have looked at disease in the city and this is the concern of the paper by Kearns.8 The intellectual context in which we are working, though, is continually changing. Migration is not taken up here in quite the way that the spatial science tradition reaching back to Ravenstein has treated it. The relations between work, home and community are not covered by Bramwell in the same manner as they were by Vance. Kearns is not retracing the epidemiological perspective of Howe and Gilbert. These differences partly reflect the unpredictable play of intellectual curiosity, but they are also shaped by broad changes in the concerns of historical geographers. It is the purpose of this introduction to sketch some of the features of this changing scene.

Urban ecology and historical geography

For many writers the spatial rearrangement of social and economic life was and is a symptom of more fundamental changes in society and economy. The new spatial structure is principally treated as posing problems of adjustment for society: the anomie of the uprooted, the risk of moral and biological contagion, the challenge of housing the poor, the necessity for intra-urban transportation, the problem of public order and so on. These topics assume greater or lesser significance in historical writing relative, at least in part, to broader contemporary political and social concerns. This is clear in the approach of the urban ecologists. Two things characterise this work: an emphasis on broadly biological processes of city growth and social adaptation and an interest in the logistics of social interaction and cohesion. The first covers the well-known influence of Darwinian plant ecology on the Chicago school of urban sociology.9 The second is quite explicit in the writings of Simmel and Park and has been developed further by others.10 The biological perspective was always under question in sociology. The worries of Max Weber, writing contemporaneously with Park and Simmel, about the applicability of these natural science concepts to the social sciences are only the best known of a set of writings dating from what Hughes has termed the attack on positivism of the 1890s.11 Furthermore, in sociology, spatial relations as such received less attention than the social organisation of groups.12 Yet questions of social cohesion in the face of ethnic segregation
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(which, in part, animated the Chicago school of the 1920s) did not evaporate. They were repeatedly put back on the agenda by black civil rights groups. Measurement and discussion of segregation has thus remained a crucial and active issue within urban sociology.\textsuperscript{13} It was this reduced version of a purely quantitative urban ecology that attracted the urban geographers of the 1960s and 1970s.\textsuperscript{14} Historical data sets were often used to illustrate the testing of these models.\textsuperscript{15} Factor analysis and associated correlation techniques corresponded to a ‘stripped-down’ version of urban sociology whose aim was to describe urban structure with reference to a small group of spatial models. The existence of the ‘natural areas’ on which the exercise depended might be demonstrated by showing the range of economic, cultural and attitudinal variables that could be mapped to reveal essentially the same underlying spatial structure. It is only in this sense that Robson could claim in 1969 that ‘increasingly, human geographers are including aspects of sociological material within their field of interest’.\textsuperscript{16}

It would have been possible to show that the spatial science perspective of the geographers had offered them a blinkered view of the intellectual range of the early urban ecologists and, in their different ways, the discussions of Park and Simmel in the recent works of Ward and Harvey show this very clearly.\textsuperscript{17} Further, the intellectual agenda of urban historical geography could have been regenerated by a more careful reconsideration of the social and political theories explicit in the work of the Chicago school. Instead, historical geographers looking at the city have responded to changes in urban and social history and changes in human geography.

The first of these pressures for change came from urban historical geographers’ greater contact with urban history and, in particular, from the flowering of urban social history. Studies such as Pritchard’s on Leicester incorporated an analysis of the building process as a producer of the urban spatial structure. Following the work of Dyos on Camberwell and Beresford on Leeds, there was a series of works in urban history that looked at the policies of landowners and the effect of the pre-urban cadastral on city-form.\textsuperscript{18} This was taken up by several geographers.\textsuperscript{19} There were also monographs in social history, influenced to a greater or lesser extent by Marxism, which took particular cities as containers for significant social processes. The question of the place of an aristocracy of labour in defusing revolutionary pressure in Britain, which goes back explicitly to Lenin, was discussed in general terms by Hobsbawm and was taken up in local case studies by Gray and Crossick and, most excitingly, in a comparative work by Foster.\textsuperscript{20} Hobsbawm’s work has been tremendously important in integrating social and economic issues and in framing some of the ‘big questions’ that dominate evaluations of the industrial revolution. Edward Thompson’s studies of the changing social relations of production incorporated cultural and political alongside economic factors.\textsuperscript{21} Thompson’s moral and political
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commitment held both materialist and empathetic approaches in a creative
tension that continues to inspire even while its theoretical implications are
still being evaluated. The sociology of social stability concerned not only
labour historians but also scholars working on disease and poverty. Stedman Jones’ promiscuous sampling of sociological theory as well as the
wide-ranging nature of his synthesis has not been equalled and Outcast London has done much to extend the research agenda of urban social history
and subsequently urban historical geography. There were simply too few
urban historical geographers to take up all the topics raised in urban history,
from politics to leisure, but there was at least a familiarity with the range of
these interests and a sense that if geographical accounts of the city did not
take some of these on board, then they might end up being far too narrow.
Geographers were certainly in debate with urban historians both at
conferences and in print. In the mid-1970s Cannadine, an urban historian,
and Ward, an historical geographer, debated the date at which British cities
could be described as ‘modern’ simply in terms of Burgess’ original model of
transport development and the emergence of rings of distinct social status. When, in 1982, Cannadine urged that the debate should shift from the
explanation of urban form to the study of the interrelations between spatial
structures on one hand and social and political processes on the other, he was
doing no more than echoing developments within human geography itself.
The best insulation against the sprawling concerns of social history might,
quite reasonably, have been to suggest that, interesting as all this was, it was
t not geography. However, with their own questioning of the value and
methods of the spatial–science approach, human geographers were becoming
highly eclectic. The developments in geography had two related features:
First, the advocacy of Marxist approaches and, secondly, the more general
critique of positivism. In 1973 Brookfield and Harvey set out Marxist
perspectives for, respectively, development and urban studies in geography.
These two surveys were very critical of the current models based on
neoclassical economics and offered instead the politically committed project
of historical materialism. Human geography began to be reintegrated into
social science, no longer with just one possibly outdated school but with the
whole debate about the grounds of knowledge in social science and the
consideration of Marxist and non-Marxist alternatives. These tendencies
were reinforced by an accompanying critique of positivism. From a rejection
of bogus claims to value-neutrality in human geography, this moved to a
wholesale consideration of the epistemology of the social sciences. Gregory
claimed for human geography a place among the social sciences and urged
that geographers contribute to Habermas’ project of a critical social
science. Gregory argued that geography was a social science and that
historical questions were central to many of the really exciting controversies
in the social sciences.
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These challenges cannot be met without a fundamental rethinking of the urban ecological tradition in historical geography. Such a re-evaluation is implicit in the gap between the best of current research and the lifeless rings and sectors of earlier studies. Once the theory of natural areas is abandoned, then the endless correlation of distributions based on censuses, rate books and directories and covering ever more imaginative measures of residential persistence and class composition becomes less and less defensible. If the ‘natural areas’ of the urban ecologists do not exist, then we either abandon the pretence of a separate spatial perspective or we urge it in rather different terms. Only with urban ecology can the spatial pattern be both explanans and explanandum.

In this respect there is some justice in Pooley’s harsh judgement on Dennis’ comprehensive survey of urban historical geography: it came too late.25 It essentially reported on Ph.D. research of the early 1970s, by himself and others, but it took on board what Baker has called the ‘conceptual revolution’ of late-seventies’ human geography. Dennis’ shotgun marriage of urban ecological research with anti-positivist and philosophical critique produces a curious difference between the textbook sheets. If Dennis’ book was too late, was it not also too early? It is a helpful oversimplification to say that theory ran ahead of research in human geography. If historical questions really are basic to many of the contentious issues in social science, then there must be some dialogue between theoretical inquiry and empirical research. The theoretical ferment of the last decade in human geography has emphasised the inevitable interplay between theoretical and empirical concerns. There are a number of tasks to be undertaken before any summary view of nineteenth-century British urbanisation, such as that attempted by Dennis, could be offered with any pretence of integrating empirical studies into the broader intellectual agenda to which many geographers are now committed. Not least among these, of course, is the need to continue with new research. The toing and froing between generalisation and research cannot be bypassed through the use of ideal types. Only an intimate familiarity with the variety, scale and contemporary opinions revealed by making and reading detailed case studies can guard the geographer, as well as the historian, against the dangers of ahistorical and hasty generalisation.

At the same time, careful attention to the theoretical and empirical basis of existing generalisations is necessary before they are used, as they must be, both to frame case studies and then to evaluate the significance of the findings. Neither the insensitivity of the grand theorist anaesthetised against the irritation of contextual variety nor the blithe disregard of the antiquarian wallowing in the celebration of local specificity will answer the challenge thrown down by the final death throes of urban ecology.

These essays have tried to handle that tension creatively. In no sense do they add up to a systematic re-examination of nineteenth-century urban-
Urbanisation as a process

When Berry wrote of ‘cities as systems within systems of cities’, he pithily expressed a connection between the organisation of each city and its place within a network of cities, structured both spatially and hierarchically. The study of the forms taken by this connection has been a small but productive seam in both geography and history. Cities are far more than containers; they are nodes in a network.

This interconnectedness of things is difficult to study and the external relations of cities have received less attention than they should, being confined primarily to the disruptive impact of migration on social structure. As Southall shows below, the notion of the city as a container rather than a node supports a style of community study which, in its concern with stayers rather than movers, downplays the importance of the experience of a system of cities and focuses instead solely on the encounter of individuals with just one. The possibility, even expectation, of movement was basic for many nineteenth-century citizens. Sociological models often set up a threshold between traditional and modern society which is crossed with the move to a city. That is not the way urbanisation was experienced by individuals. The coming and going between town and country and the circulation of workers around a network of cities mean that place of residence on census night gives us a picture that cuts into a set of flows and misleadingly tempts us to read back modern expectations of relative stability of residence into the very different society of the nineteenth century. In spite of the well-recognised mobility of the people of the nineteenth century, there is still a tendency to see movement as disruptive of social norms and none more so than movement between country and town. Towns were connected with each other and with the countryside. Movement was the norm and experience of and familiarity with town life was far from being confined to those resident in town on census night. The uprooted peasant arriving in town straight from the country may, in one sense, be paradigmatic of the sociological contrast between traditional and modern society, rural and urban ways of life and even a convenient stereotype for the comparison of successive static maps, but it is an ideal type which, with its rural and urban ‘boxes’, presents far too static a picture of the mobility within and between the two, which was perhaps even more fundamental to social relations in cities than the trauma
of the rural–urban transition. The study of process must be more than the comparative study of sequential static pictures.

When one speaks of Britain becoming an urban–industrial society, this means the rural areas too. The framework of expectations in rural areas was radically altered by the continuous growth of cities. Landowners responded to growing markets for food, rural proletarians to expanding job opportunities. Blaikie's paper serves to remind us that ideas about the countryside were extremely important to urban elites. As contemporaries tried to come to terms with the implications of the transitions they were living through, they constructed a concept of traditional society against which they might indicate the threats of the modern. They located this traditional society in some putative rural idyll and treated the political challenges of industrial capitalism as being solely due to the uprooting of workers from safe rural places and their exposure to the chaotic, corrupting and gargantuan cities. Social relations were explained as spatial ones. Yet rural realities kept breaking in on these ideological fancies. Blaikie directs our attention to the place of rural myths in constructing urban bourgeois hegemony and to the empirical and political difficulties the bourgeoisie faced. The middle-class sense that the ground was shifting under their feet came as much from rural as urban realities. They perceived an urbanising society rather than just a growing city and, as sociologists were to do ever after, they saw the temporal shift as having a contemporary spatial analogue: here and now, there and then. From an ideological point of view, urbanisation was seen as a new state of things, defined in terms of its rural opposite. Raymond Williams' The country and the city is a brilliant exposition of the way the middle classes poured their own ideals and expectations into their perception of the contrast between town and country. Williams showed that images of the countryside owed as much to the middle-class analysis of the causes of political and social tension in the towns as to the rural realities themselves. These images in turn bolstered the dominant diagnosis of the urban question.

Class and the city

At its worst, the urban ecological approach treated class as a set of pigeon-holes, or a scale from high to low, a filter through which data was passed before it was mapped. This socio-economic grading, then, formed one dimension of differentiation within the city alongside others, of which ethnicity was the most important: the one based on occupation or profession and the other on birthplace, as given in the manuscript returns of the census enumerators. There is a risk that far too static a conception of class will result. Following Marx, Thompson has always insisted that we see class as a set of relations. Classes only have meaning in their mutual interaction. Such relations can hardly be inferred from an occupational label. At the very
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least, static classifications need to be supplemented by detailed studies of local work practices and local cultural and political relations; the context in which class relations take on their meaning. Indeed, political and cultural practices and alliances are symptomatic of class relations in much the same way as is the residential segregation of occupational groups. All these sorts of evidence require evaluation if they are to be of use in describing and explaining urban class relations. The point is made clearly by Ward in his study of Leeds.44 Does spatial segregation inflame class passions or not? At what scale should one look for meaningful segregation? Is the absence of some small part of the social spectrum from one or other part of the city, large or small, more significant than the greater range between that is found intermixed in the rest of the city? Is the frequency distribution of social status within an area more important than the average social tone of the area? Answers to these questions depend upon assessing the meaning attached to residential segregation by the different classes within the city. The construction of communities of interest was a cultural and political process and this was the context in which segregation took on its meaning. Bramwell's study of the uses of public space addresses this set of relations between community and class as does Withers' paper on Gaelic communities in Scottish cities.

Withers argues that ethnic groups were located by others as simultaneously a class and an ethnic group, the latter serving almost as shorthand for the former. Class relations prevailed within the ethnic group as well as between it and other groups in the city. This complicated the basis on which a community of interest might be asserted. Ward's useful discussion of an ethnic division of labour suggests one set of reasons why ethnically identifiable groups were discriminated against in labour markets, but the interrelations of class and ethnicity also go further than that.45 There were fine calculations to be made by certain (usually better-off) members of an ethnic group between, on the one hand, attempting to integrate with the dominant classes in the city and, on the other, holding themselves apart as at least dominant within their own group. Questions of ethnic identity were thus clearly over-determined by matters of class. The role of ethnic contact networks in securing employment or accommodation for their fellows raises the question whether cultural homogenisation and separate development are really appropriate polar opposites when talking about the ways newcomers coped, or failed to cope, with city life. Powerlessness and assimilation might be characteristics that the bulk of ethnic groups shared with the rest of the urban working class. The significance of such things as ethnic segregation and community identity is not, therefore, something that can be evaluated on the basis of spatial data, but rather from attention to issues of class and the relations between people in given institutional and other social settings.
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The images that classes held of each other crystallised certain aspects of class relations. Those images, as with the ghetto and the slum, occasionally incorporated a sort of moral topography. All sorts of metaphors were used to think about class relations and the spatial structure of the city. It is striking how important topographical metaphors were; quite obviously high and low, but also ideas about flow and stagnation. The well-ordered city would, it seems, have shared much with the physical geography of an improved piece of farmland or a country estate. In place of Cobbett’s wen sucking people in, there would have been a growing, efficient, well-drained, landscaped town with its hydraulic systems in perpetual Chadwickian motion and its populace in healthy Boothian centrifugal flow.46 As Kearns shows, these topographic metaphors were linked with biological ones. Ideas of contagion and environment were basic to the ways people wrote about class as well as disease. When a medical view of society was offered, there was an implicit conflation of social and biological relations. Class infused social epidemiology. Ideas of biological separateness reinforced a more primitive sense of the alienation of classes from one another. It is true that urbanisation transformed the biological basis of society and that, in particular, the demography of class was an important, though rarely studied, aspect of class formation; people found themselves not just in this or that occupation group but also as having this or that set of life chances. Class permeated the reality of the biological basis of society but also promoted a biological view of social and political relations.

Class and community

Community is something experiential, a process, a shared (if contested) set of meanings that attach to various social practices.47 The urban ecological approach has looked at the distribution of institutions or at evidence of so-called interaction across space. These studies need to be supplemented by research on the creation of shared meanings. We cannot endlessly postpone the day when the study of the significance of marriage will enervate the frequency distributions of marriage distances, when the explorations of classes in interaction will agitate the maps of dissimilarity indices, when the study of the use made of cultural institutions complements the descriptions of their distribution. These things are regularly concealed in principle, but in practice there is a tendency to equate culture with mappable institutions. It is not, for example, the existence of churches that matters, it is the way that they fitted into and helped mould a whole way of life that we should study. Thus, Withers considers the place of churches in forging ethnic identity. These sites of cultural struggle have been of interest to urban ecologists often as de facto evidence of the existence of an ethnic culture without attention being paid to the significance they held for their putative clients.48 Bramwell

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looks at the life of the streets as another arena of struggle. In asserting and expressing their culture in their daily use of these public spaces, working-class people had to contend with shifting possibilities for self-identification within their communities, but they had also to resist the efforts of external, middle-class forces to impose alien standards on public conduct. In exploring the forms and vibrancy of working-class communities, issues such as the middle-class civilising mission and broader working-class political radicalism have been much studied.49 There has been much less attention paid to the construction, from within working-class communities, of shared values out of the repetitive routines of daily life. Yet, in certain respects, the tenacity of working-class communities, their responses to their exclusion from the hegemonic equation of the public sphere with that of the middle class and their resistances to direct assaults on their living standards through changing labour relations were all rooted in a militantly local culture that, as Bramwell shows, often successfully rejected and subverted external pressures. Both Withers and Bramwell focus on the active construction of communities from within, in ways that are often omitted from those spatial studies of interaction whose attention to community formation has rested on the study of marriage distances and the distribution of churches.

Southall and Bramwell draw attention in their chapter to different aspects of working-class communities. Southall considers community interaction in a system of cities and Bramwell examines the rootedness of working-class communities in local daily routines. Both studies emphasise the active construction of shared meanings out of shared experiences. These experiences were invariably structured by inequalities of class. Class and community are inseparable. The perceptions of and reactions to class inequalities were invariably framed by cultural factors. Market relations are embedded in cultural practices. Economic change takes on significance in the context of shared or contentious assumptions about the way things should be. Thus the contestability of change is about conflicting visions of what is right and proper and is also coloured by more obvious calculations of economic advantage. Craft traditions often provided an important focus for struggles around the labour process, but there was more at stake than the defence of wages. Craft traditions projected their own notions of community and of appropriate authority systems within those communities. The resistance to dilution of labour at work, by the employment of women or the unskilled, often carried over into an exclusion of women from organised political activity (except where issues of food or housing were directly involved, as they frequently were). The assertion of a shifting division between the rough and the respectable, as behaviour appropriate to particular contexts or, more aggressively, as labels for different social strata, could sometimes exclude poor, unskilled and immigrant from artisan-based ideas of community.