1 Introduction

[E]verybody knows what a city is, except the experts.

Horace Miner (1967: 279)

I was sitting in Peter Goheen's graduate seminar on urban historical geography when it happened. He had just introduced the idea that only some of the things that happen *in* cities are truly urban, that is, caused wholly or in part by their urban setting. Doubtless, some of my peers shrugged and began to think of lunch. But for me it marked the slow dawn of a revelation.

I soon discovered that many writers had dismissed this suggestion as being unfounded. Some said that what appears to be the significance of cities – a word I will often use to denote urban places in general – is in fact the product of other forces, commonly the dynamics of capitalism. Others conceded cities might matter but in different ways, in different places, making generalization impossible. And many others reckoned that at one time, perhaps when cities had walls, they might have counted but that that is no longer true. In time, the issue resolved into a question. Apart from the forces that create and work within them, do cities still matter? Put that way, the question answered itself. Of course! Why else would they exist? Why would people cluster together unless they perceived some advantage? And what can we call that advantage other than 'urban'? The relevant question was no longer whether but how cities matter. This Element is my answer.

As you can tell, I became a believer. I address myself to those who are curious about the truth but above all to those like my younger self who have not yet asked the right question. At one point, trudging home at dusk through the first snowfall of a Canadian winter, I reflected that this Element could turn into a useful but dull bibliographic survey. After all, there is a lot of ground to cover and, as recent surveys and encyclopedias have shown, there is a superabundance of published material on the history of cities (Daunton 2000; Clark 2013; Ewen 2016; Gilfoyle 2019); and so I have tried to make it engaging enough to encourage skeptics to keep turning the (paper or digital) pages.

Yet why should we care how cities matter? What difference does it make to how we understand our daily lives or, for those of us who are academics, to what we research and how we teach? For the urbanists, and particularly the urban historians who are my first audience, there is surely the matter of intellectual satisfaction. Having an answer to what Manuel Castells (1977) called 'the urban question' grounds our scholarly identity, explains our engagement with 'urban' organizations, our decision to examine cities and to publish in 'urban' journals. Beyond such professional considerations there is the more public argument that, if cities matter, then to understand the world it behooves us to figure out how.

We owe it to . . . to whom? There are many answers. The most general is "any urban resident who is interested in understanding the places in which they live," and I hope that this Element will appeal to them, too. A more specific audience consists of those who manage and plan cities. Given my own interests, I think of those who wrestle with the challenges of affordable housing. Some argue that residents need higher incomes or easier credit; others that builders must become more efficient, that municipalities should cut red tape, or that homeowners should accept higher-density development. All of these can have merit, but none get at the root of the problem, the high cost of urban land, which arises from the way modern urban housing and land markets work. Among other things, this Element explains what that means.

What We Are Talking About

So what are these things called 'cities' or, more generally, 'urban places'? The best place to start is somewhere simple: agglomerations of people. This basic formula has satisfied notable urbanists such as Bob Beauregard (2018: 5–15), economic historians like Eric Lampard (1961: 56), and the geographers Allen Scott and Michael Storper (2015). People can cram themselves into smaller and smaller spaces, and that is part of the story of cities, above all for the poor. But this also means a denser built environment: homes built side by side, back to back, or on top of one another. Size and density have other correlates and consequences that are so inevitable that they could be counted as part of the very definition of cities. At any rate, they frame and influence each of the major dimensions of urban life discussed in what follows: the economic (Section 3), the social and cultural (Section 4), and the role of governance (Section 5).

To size and density, the most famous urbanist, Louis Wirth ([1938] 1969), added 'heterogeneity'. The linkage comes through the ease and frequency of face-to-face connections in work and public environments. As noted in Section 3, cities support a more elaborate division of labour than dispersed settlements can, so occupational specialization proliferates; they also attract rural and long-distance migrants with different lifeways, languages, and beliefs. And, as discussed in Section 4, cities foster minority lifestyles and associations that deviate from prevailing norms. In other words, it is plausible to think of social diversity as a defining, 'urban' quality. But then so are some other features that Wirth overlooked or downplayed. As discussed in Section 5, and as many have argued, the juxtaposition of people and activities creates challenges which public agencies – typically, municipal governments – have to deal with: noise, water provision, waste disposal, congestion, and the like. Such problems are generic, neither modern nor geographically specific. Two millennia ago, to

make traffic manageable the rulers of Pompeii devised a system of one-way streets (Vanderbilt 2008: 8), while Roman cities in general were famed for their efforts to deliver drinking water. Collective provision and governance, then, are surely a defining feature of cities.

So, too, is a distinctive rhythm of life. The lives of urban residents are governed weakly by the seasons, while developments in lighting technology have enabled them to be active at night, whether in shift work or for recreation. In Britain, by the eighteenth century there was an urban 'night life' that threw rural living into the shade (Corfield 1982: 169). Indeed, social proximity encourages night-time activity even without much artificial light. In September 1980, my wife and I arrived at 10 p.m. at the train station in Tianjin, China, then a city of 9 million. Stepping outside we encountered a ghostly flock of cyclists, none with lamps, navigating unlit streets past mostly dark buildings. Where there was a need, or a desire, there was clearly a way.

Rhythm involves timing and pace. If urban life is less governed by the sun it eventually, and increasingly, became regulated by the clock. This was no accident. As David Landes (1983: 71–2) observes, "the city needed to know the time even before the mechanical clock was invented . . . necessity was the mother of invention." The first places to acquire public clocks were cities; clocks and their offspring, the wristwatch, gained authority when they became reliable in the early 1800s (McCrossen 2013: 18). In the United States, as the century progressed, the proportion of city people with watches varied with city size and by the 1890s exceeded 50 per cent (McCrossen 2013: 88). At about that time in Berlin, the sociologist Georg Simmel ([1903] 1969: 50) claimed there was a "universal diffusion of pocket watches," for without "strict punctuality … the technique of metropolitan life is unimaginable."

The precise measurement of time encouraged a faster pace. Simmel ([1903] 1969: 48) reckoned that cities had a "faster rhythm of life" than towns and villages. That contrast still exists. New York's sidewalks are notorious for their head-down hustle, while a survey found that walking speed is correlated with city size, "regardless of cultural setting" (Bornstein and Bornstein 1976: 558). People talk about a 'New York minute', not its Schenectady equivalent. From a field survey that included rural settlements, Paul Amato (1983) found the same contrast in Papua New Guinea. The way pedestrians behave is symptomatic. Another survey found that "after economic well-being, the single strongest predictor of . . . tempo . . . is population size" (Levine 1997: 16). And, as cities grew larger, ever more ingenious methods were devised to help people to hurry, exploit light, and incidentally make noise (e.g. Mackintosh et al. 2018).

Of course, neither clocks nor a faster pace were due entirely to the size and density of settlement. It was indeed 'the city' that needed to know the time, in

order to coordinate people in a division of labour that did not rely on the weather. But what helped drive and perfect the emerging rhythm was the opportunity to make money. As Landes (1983: 91) also observes, it was merchants who "understood that time was money"; he quotes an Italian entrepreneur who in 1433 declared (presumably in Italian), "I'd rather lose sleep than time." By the nineteenth century, what had mattered to merchants became vital to manufacturers who paid by the hour; and so it is that, down to the global urban present, the bundle of money, time, and space that David Harvey (1985) detects in the modern city has become ever tighter. It is only small Norwegian islands that can hope to 'abolish time' (Henley 2019).

Anticipating objections, and issues touched on in Section 5, I must immediately make four things clear. The first is that, mostly, cities do not matter in the way that people or organizations do (Lewis 2017). True, municipal governments make decisions that have consequences, but for the most part urban places matter because of how the agents of history – companies, politicians, interest groups, innovators, and so forth – are juxtaposed. Second, the intensity of urbanism varies and may be increasing. Residential densities may have fallen from their historical peaks in many urban areas, but metropolitan areas are larger than ever and arguably faster and more relentlessly paced now that work and life can proceed 24/7. Third, as almost all observers agree, we should not obsess over any particular number for size or density; it is more helpful to think in terms of a continuum. Fourth, as even Louis Wirth commented, there is no longer a sharp line between urban and non-urban territory. Indeed, since he wrote in 1938, the boundary has become more blurred, to the point that many argue that no such distinction can be made (e.g. Brenner and Schmidt 2014). I disagree and explain why in Section 2, but clearly, here too, we must talk about degrees along a continuum.

We have come some distance from the idea of urban places being defined by size and density. In addition to social heterogeneity, the intrinsic qualities of urban living include collective problems of governance, coupled with a faster, artificial rhythm to life that has been encouraged by the development of merchant, industrial, and now finance capitalism. Researchers and statistical agencies rarely invoke these features when they define cities but, together, they make up a plausible package, 'urbanism'.

Parts and Wholes

Planners and their political bosses cannot afford to ignore any aspect of this package for very long. If they do, residents, commuters, and business people, individually or collectively, will bring neglected concerns to their attention.

Academics are another matter. Except for some brave souls who advise governments, scholars tend to concentrate on one or other aspect of the urban scene. When sociologists, and some anthropologists, speak about urbanism what they have in mind is community life beyond the workplace. Those who study the economy focus on markets and industries, deploying a language of bid rent curves, agglomeration economies, and negative externalities; and political scientists think about interest groups, growth coalitions, and the like. As a result, each discipline often allows the interdependent complexity of the city to slip from view.

Such specialization is a problem if we want to understand historical patterns or trends, which typically have complex causes: the unusual inventiveness of both industry and municipal government in Birmingham, England, in the second half of the nineteenth century; the peculiar role of women in Paris, Ontario, for much of the twentieth; or the strange force of labour strife in Mombasa in the 1940s. It also matters if we want to figure out whether and how cities are distinctive. Some of the strongest challenges to this idea have come from sociologists (e.g. Martindale 1958; Gans 1972; Castells 1976). One, Peter Saunders (1981), wrote a book on the subject, concluding that the urban way of life was simply the result of capitalist-style competition. Even on its own terms, his argument is open to debate (Section 4); but, more to the present point, and like many others, he ignored the dynamics of industry and the challenges of governance. Empirically and conceptually, a partial view can produce a misleading conclusion.

In principle, geographers and historians are more disposed to embrace complexity. To make sense of the way cities are laid out, they take account of all types of spaces, whether homes or workplaces, roads, or other infrastructure, and how people connect such sites on a daily basis. Similarly, to comprehend the character and dynamics of any city over time, they must figure out the changing interplay of all major elements of the local scene. Sometimes geographers have learned from historians, as happened in the 1970s and 1980s, while the subsequent 'spatial turn' has partially reversed the direction of influence (Gunn 2001). Unfortunately, both have also specialized – by topic, city, nation, or all three. Leading scholars have regularly noted and regretted this sub-specialization (Stave 1983: 417). In 1973, Jim Dyos ([1973] 1982a: 35) worried that the "vast outpouring of writings" described "countless, minuscule, urban-centred happenings" that were "a challenge to the digestion, not the head," echoing E. H. Carr's (1964: 15) earlier complaint about the trend of "historians knowing more and more about less and less." How much truer today! And then, across all disciplines, the case study dominates. Researchers focus on particular themes in single cities, not the broader, collective significance of urbanization

(Hays 1993; but see Lampard 1983; Bairoch 1988). It becomes easy to lose sight of the significance of the urban and wider whole. If there is one thing that this Element tries to do it is to encourage and enable people to see the importance of a bigger, indeed global, urban picture.

Places and Times

Global but not historically comprehensive. A few writers have followed Lewis Mumford's (1961) example of surveying cities throughout history, but this Element focuses only on cities since the rise of industrial capitalism from the late eighteenth century. The reasoning is that the rise of the industrial, as opposed to mercantile, form of capitalism transformed the character of cities, stimulating their growth to an unprecedented size. More importantly, it enabled urbanization – a growing *proportion* of people living in cities – on a transformative scale (Weber [1899] 1963). In the process, it brought successive waves of globalization, initially through the trading networks of European powers, that transplanted versions of capitalism to almost every urban place. I happen to believe that many of the arguments discussed here are relevant to pre-industrial cities but, except for passing references, I am sensible enough to make no such claim.

For most of the past two centuries, globalization increased the contrasts in wealth between what came to be known, after 1945, as the developed and developing worlds, reframed more recently as the global North and South. In recent decades, however, an increasing number of countries, including Japan, South Korea, Turkey, and above all China, have blurred and crossed that conceptual divide. At the same time, the relevance to the South of "parochial" concepts and assumptions developed by Northern theorists has been questioned (Robinson 2011: 10). This does not mean that we should abandon attempts to develop an understanding of the urban question that are applicable everywhere. Indeed, this Element argues that such a goal is feasible and important. But it does mean that Northerners should not take things for granted and be open to the idea that concepts developed in, or hitherto seen as uniquely relevant to, the South might be as relevant to Kingston, Ontario, as they are to Kingston, Jamaica. A notable example is the concept of informality, that is, economic activity that contravenes regulations and/or evades taxes (Portes and Haller 2005). As Jenny Robinson (2005) has argued, for certain purposes we should think of cities everywhere as essentially the same, 'ordinary'.

The Campaign Plan

If cities are complex wholes, why are the core sections of this Element organized thematically: economy, then social and cultural life, and finally

governance. But what else is possible? Wholes are made of parts, and skipping over the particulars in order to concentrate on the big picture would produce waffly generalities that signified little. What, then, binds the particulars together? Under the label of urbanism, I have already pointed to some general considerations: social heterogeneity, collective challenges, pace, artificial rhythm. Underlying and connecting many of these are externalities, a term favoured by economists. These are the uncompensated, non-market effects that we have as individuals, and as social or economic organizations, upon one another. They can produce unlooked for benefits as well as costs and resentments. Their impact typically declines, often rapidly, away from their point of origin, and so urban concentrations magnify their effects. These bring social, economic, and political dynamics into a complex interrelation, with unpredictable results.

Here, economy, society, and governance are given roughly equal weight. This does not imply a judgment; we cannot assess their relative importance, given that all three are essential and intertwined. Historians and social scientists are both cited liberally throughout, because both have many valuable things to say but not always equally. Historians have said little about the nitty-gritty of the urban economy. This is unfortunate because this is one area where there are good reasons to believe that 'path dependence' – a.k.a. the importance of history – is a key to success (or failure). So Section 3 relies on the work of economists and economic geographers, introducing concepts with which some urban historians will be unfamiliar. In contrast, historians have had plenty to say about the sociocultural and political aspects of city life. Because the former remains controversial and subject to misunderstanding, Section 4 clarifies concepts and debates. In contrast, the role of governance is clearer and better documented. Although Section 5 is framed in terms of a conception of the urban land nexus little used by historians, for many readers its account may be the most familiar part of this Element.

Cities, then, shape the lives of their residents, but it is the effects they have beyond their geographical limits which put the seal on their significance. Section 6 opens by sketching the types of connections that carry the influence of cities to other urban centres and to the wider world. It then turns to consider the way in which we, as researchers, need to look beyond any single city's limits in order to test whether the sorts of general claims made here can stand up. In particular, and in light of the suggestion that cities everywhere have features in common, it argues that we should devote more energy to comparing places that, on the face of it, are as different as, well, the two Kingstons.

All of these are arguments that could most effectively be made in different ways to different people. Each discipline has its own biases. Economists need

little persuasion about the value of comparative research; sociologists and anthropologists are more likely to prioritize a deep dive into local communities. Yet the greatest and most general contrast is that which exists between social scientists and historians. One emphasizes the importance of developing and testing 'theory'; the other uses it sparingly, if at all. Now, although I am leery of the term 'theory', in part because it can sound pretentious to some, it is clear that the present Element addresses a general question with conceptual aspects. Because it is one of a series that are directed primarily at urban historians, I believe it is useful, and perhaps necessary, to make the case for theory. That is the thankless task of the next section.

2 Historians and the Urban Question

> [A] little bit of theory goes a long way.
>
> Reinhard Bendix (cited in Stinchcombe 1968)

> Scholars will probably always contest the meaning of 'urban' and 'city'. By now the debate is pointless ... People identify cities as places; what happens in those places is considered 'urban'.
>
> Tim Gilfoyle (1998)

> [T]he more sociological history becomes, and the more historical sociology becomes, the better for both.
>
> E. H. Carr (1964)

Reinhard Bendix was advising his colleagues in sociology to tone down their emphasis on theory but, judging by what we write, most urban historians would say he didn't go far enough. We freely use terms like 'race', 'class', 'community', and, of course, 'urban' but, like Tim Gilfoyle, most see little need to engage in conceptual debates. Still, as E. H. Carr implied, that can be a problem.

Where Is the Theory in Urban History?

The reluctance of most urban historians to engage with theory is no different from their colleagues in other subfields of the discipline (Stone 1977: 23; Sewell 2005). For us, it takes the form of a reluctance to deal with the urban question. In his editor's introduction to *Cities in World History*, Peter Clark (2013) skirts the issue, and so does Tim Gilfoyle (2019), editor of the *Oxford Encyclopedia of American Urban History*. Nancy Kwak (2018) raises the possibility of a systematic treatment in her contribution to an interdisciplinary survey, *Defining the Urban*, but opts for a narrative about how urban historians have undertaken their work. Similar reticence is apparent in surveys of a sister sub-

discipline, planning history, although land planning is quintessentially an urban issue (e.g. Hein 2018).

This reticence, verging on refusal, is not for want of urgings from a succession of leading Anglo-American scholars. The following is a mere sample. In the 1960s, Eric Lampard (1961: 54) identified the need for a "conceptual framework" while Jim Dyos ([1973] 1982b: 63) asked his colleagues to reflect on how "the experience of living in towns differed, if at all, from the country" and to consider whether "such differences are those of quality rather than degree." In the 1970s, the historical geographer Peter Goheen (1974: 369) observed that the urban question had been lost in empirical detail, and soon Theodore Hershberg (1981: 3) re-emphasized the need to distinguish between the roles of the city as a dependent and an independent variable. Complaints persisted through the 1980s and 1990s (Jansen 1996). Eric Monkkonen (1988) deplored the way urban historians treated cities only as a stage, failing to consider what 'urban' means, and why it mattered, while Richard Rodger (1993: 4) noted, not for the first time, "the absence of theory in urban history." The new millennium brought no rest. In Britain, Rodger (2003: 60) again, and with Roey Sweet (Rodger and Sweet 2008), worried about the neglect of this 'central issue', as the cultural turn had eroded some of the limited identity that urban history already had. Across the Atlantic, surveying the "state of the art," Clay McShane (2006: 595) noted the paucity of theory in American urban history; and in their introduction to an American reader, Steven Corey and Lisa Boehm (2011: 15) commented that urban historians still resisted theory, flubbing Lampard's repeated challenge. The literatures on the history of Canadian, and for that matter South African, cities have attracted similar comments (Stelter 1977; Bickford-Smith 2016: 2–4). The chorus has not let up.

No wonder Sam Bass Warner (1991: 6) once asked (ruefully?) in a presidential address to the Urban History Association, "why are we always preaching at each other?" The answer is clear: many of our leading scholars have believed we should do more than trace what happened at particular places and times. They have wanted us to spend more time ruminating on the core propositions that might define our field.

Such admonitions have always been more relevant in some places than others. English-language historical scholarship is known for its strong "empirical tradition" (Cannadine 1982: 218). Indeed, Cannadine (1982: 204) mischievously suggests that it was only when Jim Dyos came along in the 1960s that British urban historians discovered "what they were doing." Richard Rodger and Roey Sweet (2008) make a further distinction, suggesting that American urban historians have been even less interested in the 'urban question' than the British. That may have been true in recent years but, in the middle

decades of the twentieth century, in the hands of Arthur Schlesinger (1933, [1949] 1973), Richard Wade (1959, 1964) and Blake McKelvey (1963) the reverse was true. At any rate, it does seem that French, and other European, writers such as Paul Bairoch (1988) have worked harder to identify generic urban conditions and effects (Rodger 1993: 1; cf. Jansen 1996). For that reason, European surveys generally say more about the significance of cities than those dealing solely with Britain or North America. In *The Making of Urban Europe, 1000–1994*, for example, Paul Hohenberg and Lyn Lees (1995: 248–289) devote a chapter to the human consequences of urbanization. But, to the extent they exist, these national differences are unstable and are only matters of degree. E. H. Carr would probably reckon that they could all do with a bigger dose of theory.

There are signs that the steady growth of urban historical research on the global South is providing something of an exception. The picture is still unclear, in part because the field is so diverse, encompassing much of the world. Certainly, social scientists there have been giving thought to the urban question and, because of the colonial legacy, have paid attention to the urban past (Robinson 2005; Roy 2015). Urban historians, too, have drawn more explicitly on the ideas of social theorists. They draw on political economy (Nieto 2019), poststructuralism (Mayne 2017), and postcolonialism (Alexanderson 2019), broadly cultural interpretations that speak of gendered and racialized identity (Rogaski 2004; Bickford-Smith 2016; Prestel 2017; Banerjee 2019) and some-times simultaneously (Yeoh 1996; Lewis 2016; Kim 2019; cf. Davis 2005). Dealing, as many have, with colonial eras, they have had to come to terms with large, competing interpretations of historical change. This is perhaps an appro-priate place to assert the claim that, just as the broad lines of argument devel-oped in what follows are valid in both the global North and South, they are useful and relevant to any and all of the social theories mentioned here.

Why 'Urban' Theory Matters

Yet if most urban historians have paid little attention to the urban question, why should we care? There are two ways of answering this. One is that theory is embedded in the categories we use and the questions we ask and that it is healthy to be aware of these in order to test our assumptions. Maybe not all the time – that would be exhausting – but at least on a regular basis. That, and its ramifications, comprises the principled line of argument.

There is also pragmatic self-interest, and this may carry more weight. To use a term very popular lately, it is a matter of identity. If 'urban' has no particular significance, why call ourselves urban historians? If we study things that happen