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# Concepts and Theory in Urban Geography

*Preview: the scope of urban geography; the concept of urban; the urban as an entity; urban as a quality; the importance of a spatial perspective; the value of the urban dimension; a history of urban geography; environmentalism; positivism; behaviouralism; humanism; structuralism; managerialism; postmodernism; moral philosophy; levels of urban analysis*

### INTRODUCTION

As we saw in Chapter 1, in approaching a subject for the first time it is useful to begin by obtaining an overview of the main conceptual approaches, themes and issues that comprise the field. In this chapter we describe the scope of urban geography and its links with other branches of geography. We define the concept of urban and explain the value of an urban geographical perspective for an understanding of contemporary towns and cities. We establish the academic context for the study of urban geography by providing a brief history of the subject. In this discussion we relate work in urban geography to the major theoretical developments in the discipline of geography. Finally, we employ the concept of levels of analysis to illustrate the kind of research undertaken by urban geographers from the global to the local scale.

### THE SCOPE OF URBAN GEOGRAPHY

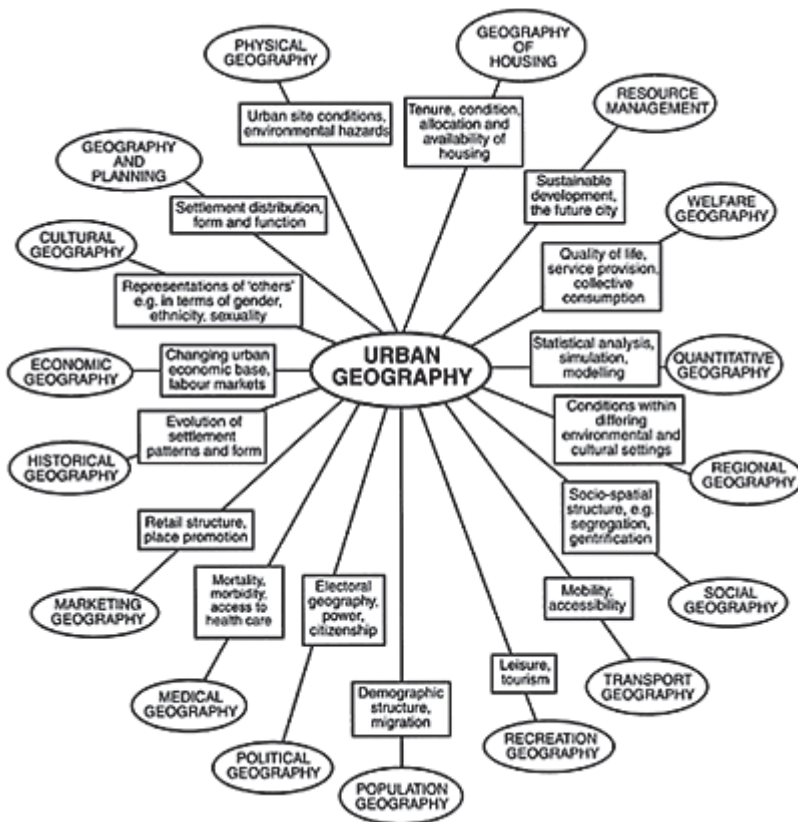
Urban geographers are concerned to identify and explain the distribution of towns and cities and the socio-spatial similarities and contrasts that exist within and between them. There are thus two basic approaches to urban geography:

1. The first refers to the spatial distribution of towns and cities and the linkages between them: *the study of systems of cities*.
2. The second refers to the internal structure of urban places: *the study of the city as a system*.

In essence, urban geography may be defined as the study of cities as systems within a system of cities.<sup>1</sup> Figure 2.1 indicates the scope of urban geography as well as the subdiscipline's links with other branches of geography. The diagram also indicates the power of urban geography to synthesise many different perspectives so as to advance our understanding of urban phenomena. This eclectic approach to the analysis of urban places extends beyond geography to incorporate research findings and knowledge across

traditional disciplinary boundaries. The integrative power of urban geography is a key characteristic of the subdiscipline.

A second principal characteristic of geographical analysis of the city is the centrality of a spatial perspective. This distinguishes urban geography from cognate areas of urban study such as urban economics, urban sociology or urban politics. We shall see later that there is a long-standing debate among social scientists over the relative importance of spatial and social forces for the explanation of urban phenomena. However, as we saw in Chapter 1, it is important to be clear about the place of space in urban geography. By acknowledging the importance of spatial location we are not implying that space *per se* is the key explanatory variable underlying patterns of human activity in the city. The significance of space varies with context. For example, spatial location is of no real significance in the



**Figure 2.1** The nature of urban geography

electronic hyperspace occupied by flows of finance between cities in the global economy but may be of fundamental importance for the spread of infectious diseases in a Third

World squatter settlement. The spatial perspective of urban geography is of real analytical value because, as Massey (1985)<sup>2</sup> observed, the world does not exist on the head of a pin.

## DEFINING THE URBAN

In approaching the concept of urban it is useful to draw a distinction between the question of what is an urban place, and what is urban. This is more than an exercise in semantics. The distinction between the urban as a physical entity and the urban as a quality helps us to understand the complexity of urban life, and illuminates different approaches to the study of cities.

### THE URBAN AS AN ENTITY

Four principal methods are employed to identify urban places:

1. *Population size.* Since urban places are generally larger than rural places, at some point along the population-size scale it should be possible to decide when a village becomes a town. In practice, this urban population threshold varies over time and space. In Sweden any settlement with more than 200 inhabitants is classed as urban in the national census, whereas in the USA the population minimum for urban status is 2,500; in Switzerland it is 10,000, rising to 30,000 in Japan. Such diversity reflects social context. Given the sparse distribution of settlement in many areas of Sweden, a threshold of 200 may be appropriate, whereas in a densely settled country such as Japan virtually all settlements would exceed such a low urban threshold population. If not made explicit, these differences may complicate international comparison.
2. *Economic base.* In some countries population size is combined with other diagnostic criteria to define an urban place. In India, for example, a settlement must have more than 75 per cent of the adult male population engaged in non-agricultural work to be classified as urban.
3. *Administrative criteria.* The majority of towns and cities in the world are defined according to legal or administrative criteria. The definition of urban places by national governments leads to great diversity, which creates difficulties for comparative research that can be overcome only by urban analysts constructing their own definitions and applying them uniformly across the globe. A second problem with administrative definitions is that these may have little correspondence with the actual physical extent of the urban area. A frequent problem is under-bounding, where the built-up area of the city extends beyond the urban administrative boundary. This may lead to major fiscal difficulties for the central city deprived of taxes from commuters resident beyond the legal boundaries of the city.
4. *Functional definitions.* To address problems such as underbounding (and its converse, overbounding), urban researchers devised 'functional urban regions' which reflect the real extent of urban influence. The concept of the extended urban area was first introduced by the US Bureau of the Census in 1910 and later developed into the Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (SMSA) in 1960 and, since 1983, the Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA). Consolidated Metropolitan Statistical Areas

(CMSAs) are formed by two or more contiguous MSAs.<sup>3</sup> As Table 2.1 shows, the US definition includes measures of population size, centrality and economic function.

In 2000 a review of standards for defining US metropolitan statistical areas retained the two main principles established in 1960:

1. settlement form (based on the population size of a central core city);
2. functional integration between central and outlying counties (reflected in journeys to work, with this criterion raised from 15 per cent to 25 per cent).

Other criteria for inclusion within a metropolitan area (see Table 2.1) were dropped. The 2000 standards identify two main types of core based statistical areas (CBSAs). These are:

1. *metropolitan* statistical areas, defined around at least one Census Bureau-defined urbanised area of 50,000 or more population;
2. *micropolitan* statistical areas, defined around at least one urban cluster of at least 10,000 and less than 50,000 population.

Adjacent CBSAs that have sufficient employment interchange (measured using journey-to-work data) are grouped to form larger 'combined statistical areas'.

Another significant development was the replacement of a 'central cities' classification with one of 'principal cities' (defined on the basis of a variety of population and employment data). While this will capture many of the previous central cities it will also reflect recent changes in the US urban landscape by identifying newer outlying employment centres as principal cities.

Within metropolitan statistical areas the 2000

### **TABLE 2.1 DEFINITIONS OF URBAN AREAS IN THE USA AND UK**

The US Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area is:

1. Either one central city with a total population of 50,000 or more or two contiguous cities constituting a single community with a combined population of 50,000 and a minimum population of 15,000 for the smaller of the two.
2. The remainder of the county to which the central city belongs.
3. Adjacent counties, if:
  - 75 per cent or more of the labour force is non-agricultural.
  - At least 15 per cent of workers in the outlying county work in the central county, or 25 per cent of workers in that county live in the central county, i.e. there are significant journey-to-work links between areas.
  - At least 50 per cent of residents in a county meet density requirements or non-agricultural employment thresholds.

Metropolitan Statistical Areas are also categorised into four levels based on total population (level A: MSAs of 1 million inhabitants or more; level B: 250,000-1 million; level C: 100,000-250,000; level D: less than 100,000).

In level A MSAs, Primary Metropolitan Statistical Areas may be identified. Each PMSA consists of

a large urbanised county or cluster of counties that demonstrates very strong internal economic and social links, in addition to close ties with neighbouring areas. When PMSAs are defined, the MSA of which they are component parts is redesignated a Consolidated Metropolitan Statistical Area. Not all PMSAs, however, have a central city.

The UK Standard Metropolitan Labour Area has a core plus ring with a combined population of at least 70,000 with:

1. A core consisting of a local authority administrative area or number of contiguous areas with a density of five jobs or more per acre (13.75 per hectare); or a single administrative area with 20,000 or more workers.
2. A ring consisting of administrative areas contiguous to the core and sending 15 per cent of their economically active population to that core.

standards identify two types of counties as a basis for metropolitan divisions. These are:

1. main counties, with 65 per cent or more of employed residents who remain in the county to work, and with a jobs-to-resident-workers ratio of 0.75 or greater;
2. secondary counties, with a high jobs-to-resident-workers ratio (0.75 or greater), but a lower percentage of employed residents working within the county (50–64.9 per cent).

Main counties can stand alone as a metropolitan division or can provide the organising basis for a metropolitan division. Secondary counties must combine with another secondary county or with a main county to form the basis of a metropolitan division. The remaining counties of an MSA are assigned to the main and secondary counties with which they have the highest commuting interchange. Metropolitan divisions, if present in an MSA, will account for all of its territory.

Comparison of the 2000 metropolitan standards with the 1990 standards revealed that the new definitions accounted for 90 per cent of the US population (compared with 80 per cent for the 1990 definitions). Clearly, the application of the new urban standards will result in a change of status for many US counties.

Geographers in the UK have sought to define a similar set of **daily urban systems**. A first attempt identified Standard Metropolitan Labour Areas comprising a core plus metropolitan ring that together formed the daily urban system (Table 2.1). A development of this system added an outer ring consisting of all local authorities that send more commuters to the core in question than to any other core, the whole being designated a Local Labour Market Area (LLMA). A conceptually similar scheme is that based on Functional Urban Regions, which have been used to compare changing patterns of urbanisation in Western Europe.<sup>4</sup>

## THE URBAN AS A QUALITY

In contrast to definitions of the city as a physical entity, the concept of the urban as a quality is related more to the meaning of urban places and the effect of the urban milieu on people's lifestyles (and vice versa). Clearly, although cities exist as physical objects, it is by no means certain that they are perceived by their inhabitants in the same way that they are objectively structured. It is reasonable, therefore, to think of a city as having both an objective physical structure and a subjective or cognitive structure.

We each have our own conception of what a city is and of our local town or city. The same urban space can be seen in different ways by residents, tourists, workers, elderly people, unemployed people, women and children. For the homeless person the city may be a cold, anonymous and inhospitable place; for the elderly a spatially restricted world; for the wealthy a cornucopia of opportunity and well-being. Understanding these subjective interpretations of the urban is important, because meanings inform us not only about the places to which they refer but also about the people who articulate them and the social context in which they live. Urban geographers and others have sought to identify urban meaning through two main approaches.

1. *Cognitive mapping.* Geographers, planners and environmental psychologists have employed **mental maps** or cognitive mapping techniques to explore the subjective world of urban places, with a view to both obtaining a better understanding of human behaviour in the urban environment and improving the quality of urban life.<sup>5</sup> Whereas traditional means of cognitive mapping provide subjective spatial representations of urban environments, more recently postmodern approaches seek to 'map' the meanings of the city for different 'textual communities' who share a common understanding of the 'text' and organise their lives accordingly as, for example, in the creation of a 'suburban mentality'.<sup>6</sup>
2. *Urbanism as a way of life.* Early efforts to identify urban places in terms of a distinct lifestyle were based on Wirth's (1938) concept of a **rural-urban** continuum.<sup>7</sup> This argued that as the size, density and heterogeneity of places increased, so did the level of economic and social disorganisation. Wirth, a member of the Chicago school of **human ecology**, regarded urbanisation as a process leading to the erosion of the moral order of society due to the concomitant decline of community. He saw the urban as a separate spatial realm with its own environmental influences on individuals, and he contrasted the social disorganisation of urban life (in which much social interaction is of a transitory and superficial nature with 'unknown others') with the strong extended family links and communities in small settlements and rural areas. More recent perspectives that acknowledge the interpenetration of social realms have rejected the crude dualism of bipolar concepts such as urban-rural or public-private.

Accordingly, although cities do exert a particular influence on their inhabitants the concept of a rural-urban continuum has been criticised:

1. for its Western ethnocentrism (which assumed that the rural-urban change process is universally applicable);
2. by studies which reveal the presence of 'village communities' in cities (including Wirth's own work on the ghetto);<sup>8</sup> and
3. for failure to locate the process of urbanisation within the political economy of capitalism (not least the impact of wider social, economic and political changes in rural areas, as demonstrated by the presence of 'urban' societies in supposedly rural areas).<sup>9</sup>

In seeking to reinterpret the meaning of 'urban', Harvey (1973, 1985) and Castells (1977) dispensed with the notion of a separate urban realm and concluded that while urbanism (as a way of life associated with residence in an urban area) has a distinctive structure and

character, it exists within a larger framework created by the forces of capitalism.<sup>10</sup> This means that 'urban lifestyles' can spread beyond the physical limits of the city.

The quintessential diversity of urban life is central to postmodern representations of the city. Informed by processes of globalisation, social polarisation, cultural fragmentation and advances in information and communications technology, these focus on the rise of new cultural groupings and urban spaces, such as those defined by lifestyle communities.<sup>11</sup> Postmodern readings of the city as 'text' employing urban metaphors, such as the city as jungle, bazaar, organism and machine,<sup>12</sup> produce a multitude of representations of cities from the perspectives of different populations. In order to understand the truth of the city we need to acknowledge the 'reality' of the city as a concrete construction (thing) and as an abstract representation (idea), and examine how each influences the form of the other.

### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SPACE AND PLACE

**Place** is part of but different from space. Place is a unique and special location in space notable for the fact that the regular activities of human beings occur there. Moreover, because it is a site of such activities and all that they entail, place may furnish the basis of our sense of identity as human beings, as well as for our sense of community with others. In short, places are special sites in space where people live and work and where, therefore, they are likely to form intimate and enduring connections. As we see in Chapter 18, even in a globalising world a sense of place is of real importance in people's daily lives.

Paradoxically, the advent of cyberspace has re-focused attention on the importance of places in urban life. There is growing recognition among urban scholars that place is a central concept in the analysis of how urban areas are constructed and come to have meaning for their residents. Furthermore, as the constraints of geographical distance become less important, the specific features of particular **locales** are becoming more important in the locational decisions of businesses and households. The 'construction' of place is also a characteristic of the restructuring of many contemporary cities from being centres of production (for example, the steeltowns of yesteryear) to being centres of consumption (for example, Las Vegas of today), in the sense that they provide the context in which goods and services are compared, evaluated, purchased and used. Places such as London's Covent Garden or Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco obtain a distinctive character that not only reinforces the place's sense of identity but transforms the locality into an 'item of consumption', a process often boosted by city marketing strategies (see Chapter 16).

In striving to redefine 'urban' in other than empirical terms, and to explain the meaning of urban life, both Harvey and Castells rightly rejected notions of 'spatial fetishism' (which assigned causal power to space *per se* in determining human action) and emphasised the need to examine the role of urban places in capitalist society. However, it is important not to dismiss completely the power of space. Space is more than a medium in which social, economic and political processes operate. The dimensions of space—size, density, distance, direction, territory and location—exert powerful influences on urban development and on human interaction. Distance and direction have

a direct effect on social networks, journeys to work and physical access to place-bound facilities. The size and density of residential developments have been shown to influence the incidence of deviant behaviour and social pathologies. The concept of **territoriality** contributes to the formation of discrete sub-areas within cities, often segregated on ethnic or class lines. The partitioning of space by local government boundaries has implications for the social composition and fiscal health of different areas and the **quality of life** of residents. Competition between local administrations to attract desirable developments, such as shopping centres, and exclude undesirable facilities, such as mental hospitals, also has a fundamental spatial basis. There is a reciprocal relationship between society and space. As Massey (1984 p. 52) observed, 'just as there are no purely spatial processes, neither are there any non-spatial social processes'.<sup>13</sup>

A more recent challenge to the significance of geographical space has accompanied the advent of cyberspaces (such as the Internet), which for some authors has undermined the relevance—conceptual and actual—of 'real' space. It is argued that as a result of 'time-space compression', cyberspace negates the effects of physical separation and produces new 'spaceless, placeless social spaces' in which people can interact.<sup>14</sup> While cyberspace undoubtedly has spatial implications, the suggestion that it heralds the 'end of geography' is excessive, not least because even in advanced societies connections to cyberspace are unevenly distributed.<sup>15</sup> This is illustrated clearly by the contrast between elite, and often physically enclosed, communities with extensive links to the global information superhighway and spatially proximate 'off-line' urban spaces occupied by the poor, where time and space constraints are profoundly real.<sup>16</sup>

## THE VALUE OF THE URBAN DIMENSION

The Wirthian association of particular lifestyles with different settlement sizes is now regarded as unacceptably simplistic. Some have extended this argument to claim that the concept of urban has become redundant on the grounds that, in Western societies at least, we are all 'urban' no matter *where* we live. This has led some to conclude that it is neither fruitful nor appropriate to study the city in its own right.<sup>17</sup>

Leaving aside the fact that this represents a Western view of contemporary society which is not yet applicable to all parts of the world, the suggestion that the city cannot be a significant unit of study confuses two different questions. These are:

1. whether cities can be objects of analysis;
2. whether explanations of 'urban phenomena' can be restricted to the urban level.

As Agnew *et al.* (1984)<sup>18</sup> point out, a negative answer to the second question does not require a negative answer to the first. We can reject the idea of 'urban explanation' while accepting the urban as a valid object of analysis. Cities are places—or, more accurately, conglomerations of overlapping and interrelated places—and, as we have seen, places matter! Social relations occur in, and help to constitute, places. Individuals, households, communities, companies and public agencies exist and operate in particular places. People's social, economic and political relations are embedded in the particularity of specific places. The results of global-level structural forces come to ground in particular places. To maintain that cities are merely elements in the capitalist **mode of production**



ignores significant variations between and within urban places, as well as the complex suite of other social and cultural factors shown to be involved in the construction and reconstruction of urban environments.<sup>19</sup>

More recent arguments against the urban as a frame of reference reflect those that dismiss the value of space, and contend that advances in telecommunications technologies will lead to the effective dissolution of the city on the grounds that, once time has become instantaneous, spatial congregation becomes unnecessary.<sup>20</sup> Such technologically deterministic views ignore the relational links between new information technologies and urban form which have been apparent ever since the introduction of the telegraph, wireless and telephone in the nineteenth century.<sup>21</sup> New technologies contribute to the reconstruction of urban space but do not render it redundant. Visions of the 'spaceless city' greatly overestimate the degree to which virtual reality can substitute for place-based face-to-face interaction.<sup>22</sup> As Amin and Graham (1997) conclude, the contemporary city, while housing vast arrays of telematic entry points into the burgeoning worlds of electronic space, is a cauldron of emotional and personal worlds and attachments, an engine of reflexivity, trust and reciprocity.<sup>23</sup> While many cities and citizens are linked into an electronic 'non-place urban realm',<sup>24</sup> place-based relational networks that rely on propinquity and physical interaction—the key characteristics of urban places—remain central to the experience of human social, economic and cultural life.

The fundamental importance of towns and cities as focal points in contemporary society, in both the developed and the developing realms, emphasises the significance of the urban dimension and underlines the value of the study of urban geography.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF URBAN GEOGRAPHY

Urban geography is an established branch of geography that attracts researchers and students in significant numbers, and produces a large and expanding volume of published work to aid our understanding of the city. The advance of urban geography to a central position within the discipline has occurred over the past half-century. As Herbert and Johnston (1978 p. 1) noted:

whereas in the early 1950s a separate course on urban geography at an English-speaking university was quite exceptional, today the absence of such a course would be equally remarkable; indeed, in many institutions students can opt for a group of courses treating different aspects of the urban environment.<sup>25</sup>

Urban geography is a dynamic subdiscipline that comprises a combination of past ideas and approaches, current concepts and issues that are still being worked out (Table 2.2). It may be likened to:

a city with districts of different ages and vitalities. There are some long-established districts dating back to a century ago and sometimes in need of repair; and there are areas which were once



**Plate 2.1 The variety of urban environments is shown by examples of ‘waterfront living’ in (top) a shanty town built on stilts over a coastal marsh in the port-city of Manta, Ecuador, and (bottom) the gentrified St Katharine’s Dock in central London**

**TABLE 2.2 THE EXPANDING SCOPE OF URBAN GEOGRAPHY**

<i>Systems of cities</i>	<i>Cities as systems</i>
Urban origins and growth	Site and situation of settlements
Regional patterns of settlement	Urban morphology Townscape analysis Urban ecology
Central place theory Settlement classification	Social area analysis Factorial ecology Delimitation of the central business district
Population movements Migration decisions Suburbanisation	Residential mobility Retailing and consumer behaviour Urban imagery

Urban origins and growth	Site and situation of settlements
Regional patterns of settlement	Urban morphology
Political economy	Urban morphology structural context
Edge cities	Townscape analysis
Counterurbanisation	Urban ecology
Settlement classification	Economic restructuring
Rural-urban migration in the Third World	Social and adaptation
Population movements	Factorial ecology
Migration decisions	Delimitation of the central business district
Suburbanisation	Housing markets and gentrification
Urban and regional planning	Residential property market
Globalisation of culture and society	Traffic and transport problems
The global economy	Urban imagery
The global urban system	Urban physical environment
World cities and global cities	Housing, health and economy in Third World cities
Megacities	Power and politics
Technopoles	Territorial justice
	The urban impact of globalisation
	Differential access to services
	Social construction of urban space
	Cultural diversity in cities
	Social justice
	Urban liveability
	Sustainable cities
	Future urban form

fashionable but are so no longer, while others are being rehabilitated. Other districts have expanded recently and rapidly; some are well built, others rather gimcrack.<sup>26</sup>

Since the late 1970s the scope of urban geography has expanded rapidly. For some commentators the increased diversity is a source of potential weakness that may lead ultimately to its disintegration. For others, including the present writer, the breadth of perspective strengthens urban geography's position as an integrative focus for research on the city.

Urban geographers have approached the study of the city from a number of philosophical perspectives. While the significance of each for the practice of urban geography has changed over time, none of the main approaches has been abandoned completely, and research informed by all perspectives continues to be undertaken under the umbrella of urban geography. It is important for students of urban geography to be familiar with the different philosophies of science which underlie the subject. To aid this understanding we shall structure our discussion of the changing nature of urban geography with reference to the main epistemological developments in the discipline.

## ENVIRONMENTALISM

During the first half of the twentieth century the major concerns of urban geography reflected the more general geographical interest in the relationship between people and environment, and in regional description. Early work on urban site and situation, and on the origins and growth of towns, was largely descriptive. One of the first English-language texts in urban geography comprised a classification and analysis of over 200 towns in terms of their site, situation, relief and climate.<sup>27</sup> Despite their simplicity, these investigations provided a foundation for the more conceptually refined practice of urban morphological analysis which continues to illuminate patterns of urban growth and change to the present day.<sup>28</sup>

At the inter-urban scale, studies of regional patterns of settlement focused attention on the importance of transportation systems.<sup>29</sup> Together with the work of land economists,<sup>30</sup> this shifted attention from environmental factors towards the economics of location. The economic analysis of cities as points in space was developed most fully in **central-place theory**.<sup>31</sup> At the intra-urban scale, work on **urban ecology** also moved attention from the environment to human behaviour, and introduced a social dimension to urban geography. Nevertheless, at mid-twentieth century the focus of urban geography was primarily on land use and related issues. The first major 'paradigm shift' to affect urban geography reflected a desire to make geographical investigation more scientific. This led to the introduction of the philosophy of **positivism**.

## POSITIVISM

Positivism is characterised by adherence to the 'scientific method' of investigation based on hypothesis testing, statistical inference and theory construction (Box 2.1). Although evident in the work of Christaller (1933) and Losch (1954) on the spatial patterning of

### BOX 2.1

The assumptions of positivism

1. Events that occur within a society or which involve human decision-making have a determinate cause that is identifiable and verifiable.
2. Decision-making is the result of a set of laws to which individuals conform.
3. There is an objective world comprising individual behaviour and the results of that behaviour which can be observed and recorded in an objective manner on universally agreed criteria.
4. The researcher is a disinterested observer.
5. As in the study of inanimate matter, there is a structure to human society (an organic whole) that changes in determinate ways according to observable laws.
6. Application of the laws and theories of positivist social science can be used to alter societies in determinate ways (social engineering).

**Source:** Adapted from R. Johnston (1983) *Philosophy and Human Geography*  
London: Arnold

settlements,<sup>32</sup> positivism blossomed in urban geography in the late 1950s with the development of the spatial analysis school. The redefinition of urban geography as the science of spatial relationships<sup>33</sup> was accompanied by a shift in emphasis away from exceptionalism (the study of the unique and particular) towards a nomothetic approach (aimed at a search for abstract or universal laws). This was aided by the emergence of quantitative analytical techniques fuelled by the 'quantitative revolution' in geography of the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>34</sup>

The new approach led to multivariate classifications of settlement types,<sup>35</sup> investigations of the rank-size rule for the populations of urban places,<sup>36</sup> and analyses of spatial variations in urban population densities.<sup>37</sup> Stimulated by translations of Christaller's work, urban geographers devoted attention to modelling settlement patterns and the flows of goods and people between places.<sup>38</sup> Concepts such as **distance decay** (the attenuation of a pattern or process over distance) were also introduced in the study of urban phenomena such as consumer behaviour, and trip generation and travel patterns.<sup>39</sup> The subsequent expansion of computing power and development of geographical information systems has ensured that modelling and simulation remain a vibrant, if minority, area of urban geography.<sup>40</sup>

The new methods of spatial science were also applied to analysis of the internal structure of cities. The urban land-use models of the Chicago school of human ecology reflected the positivist philosophy in their proponents' belief that human behaviour was determined by ecological principles or 'natural laws' which stated that the most powerful group would obtain the most advantageous position (e.g. the best residential location) in a given space. During the 1970s the development of a range of multivariate statistical techniques extended the social area approach of the ecologists in the form of *factorial ecologies* designed to reveal the bases of residential differentiation within the city.<sup>41</sup> The positivist spatial science approach was also central to the models of urban structure introduced into geography from **neo-classical economics**. These were founded on the assumption of *Homo economicus* or the economic rationality of human behaviour. This stated that individual decisions were based on the goal of utility maximisation—that is, the aim of minimising the costs involved (usually in terms of time and money) and maximising the benefits.

For two decades, spatial science was the dominant paradigm in urban geography. However, during the 1970s a growing awareness among geographers of alternative philosophies of science led to strong criticism of positivism:

1. The adequacy of an approach which focused on spatial form to the neglect of underlying causal processes was questioned. It was argued that, since spatial form was largely the outcome of the prevailing *social* forces, the focus of urban research should switch from the study of spatial relations to the study of social relations.
2. Particular criticism was directed at positivism's mechanistic view of the role of humankind, and its failure to recognise and account for the idiosyncratic and subjective values that motivate much human behaviour.
3. The science of spatial relations affords no insight into the meaning of urban places to their inhabitants. To explore this **sense of place** requires an approach that focuses on the daily activities and perceptions of urban residents.

One response to a growing dissatisfaction with positivist science and the poor predictive ability of many spatial models was a move towards direct observation of human behaviour and decision-making. This led to the development of **behaviouralism** in urban geography.<sup>42</sup>

### BEHAVIOURALISM

The behavioural approach sought to overcome the shortcomings of spatial analysis by highlighting the role of cognitive processes and decision-making in mediating the relationship between the urban environment and people's spatial behaviour. Urban geographers employed cognitive mapping techniques to examine a host of issues, including migration,<sup>43</sup> consumer behaviour,<sup>44</sup> residential **mobility**,<sup>45</sup> residential preferences, perceived neighbourhood areas and images of the city.<sup>46</sup>

The behavioural approach introduced greater realism into urban studies, as the emphasis on empirical investigation of human behaviour countered the abstract nature of 'spatial' theory. But behaviouralism did not break away wholly from the positivist tradition. Much of the methodology of positivism was retained, and although focused on exposing the values, goals and motivations of human behaviour, it was still concerned with seeking law-like generalisations. As a consequence, behaviouralism has attracted much of the same criticism that has been levelled at positivism, in particular its failure to recognise and account for the 'untidiness', ambiguity and dynamism of everyday life.

### HUMANISM

The **humanistic** approach views the individual as a purposeful agent of change in the city rather than a passive respondent to external stimuli. Although it is acknowledged that people do not act free of constraints, the humanist philosophy accords central importance to human awareness, agency, consciousness and creativity. The aim of a humanistic approach is to understand human social behaviour using methodologies that explore people's subjective experience of the world. In practice, this means a change from the positivist principles of *statistical* inference based on representative random samples of the population to the principle of *logical* inference based on unique case studies using methods such as ethnography and analysis of literary texts to demonstrate 'the social construction of urban space'.<sup>47</sup>

The humanistic perspective has been criticised for placing excessive emphasis on the power of individuals to determine their own behaviour in the city, and affording insufficient attention to the *constraints* on human decision-making. This critique was advanced most forcefully by proponents of structuralism (see below), who regarded the focus on the individual in society as a distortion of a reality in which people's behaviour is conditioned by forces over which they have little control.

### STRUCTURALISM

Structuralism is a generic term for a set of principles and procedures designed to expose the underlying causes of revealed patterns of human behaviour. In practice this means that explanations for observed phenomena cannot be found through empirical study of the

phenomena alone but must be sought by examination of prevailing social, economic and political structures.

Structural analysis in urban geography has been based primarily on the work of Marx.<sup>48</sup> According to the **Marxian** or political economy approach, every society is built upon a mode of production—a set of institutional practices by which the society organises its productive activities, provides for its material needs, and reproduces the socio-economic structure. Capitalism is a specific mode of production (others being slavery, **feudalism**, socialism and communism). Cities are viewed as an integral part of the capitalist mode of production by providing an environment favourable to the fundamental capitalist goal of **accumulation**. This is the process by which the value of capital is increased through the continual reinvestment of profits from earlier investments. The effect of this expansionary dynamic is most visible in the changing urban land market and, as we shall see later, in processes such as urban redevelopment, gentrification and suburbanisation.

The political economy approach entered urban geography in the early 1970s in response to the continuing social problems of urban areas, highlighted in the USA by the civil rights movement. In seeking to uncover the structural forces underlying observed social problems located in the dynamics of the capitalist system, it was argued that:

1. Capitalist society is characterised by conflict between socio-economic groups over the distribution of resources. A key resource is power, most of which is held by an elite who are able to manipulate the majority.
2. Since quantitative spatial analysis describes patterns but fails to reveal underlying causes, any proposals or policies based on this analysis will be supportive of the status quo and unable to lead to progressive social change.

Much attention has been directed to the analysis of urban property and housing markets, and studies of residential patterns.<sup>49</sup> Notwithstanding the exercise of ‘constrained choice’ by individuals, the political economy approach interpreted urban residential segregation primarily as a result of decisions by those with power in the property market, including building-society managers,<sup>50</sup> estate agents<sup>51</sup> and local-authority-housing managers.<sup>52</sup> Harvey (1976)<sup>53</sup> offered an incisive exposition of the relationship between urban residential patterns and the dominant political economy of monopoly capitalism.

The dominance assigned to social structure over human agency in the structuralist perspective was rejected by humanistic geographers. Other critics have attacked the emphasis attached to class divisions in society to the neglect of other lines of cleavage such as gender, **ethnicity** and sexuality, all of which cut across class boundaries and which exert a significant influence on urban lifestyle and the processes of urban restructuring.<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, the political economy approach has had a major impact in urban geography and has provided real insight into the economic and political forces underlying urban change.

## MANAGERIALISM

Doubts over the analytical value of class in modern societies led some writers to abandon Marx’s class-based analysis in favour of Weber’s concept of ‘social closure’—a process by which social groups seek to maximise their benefits by restricting access to resources

and opportunities to a limited circle of 'eligibles'. (The practice of 'exclusionary zoning' of land use in the US city provides a good example.) This perspective on power and conflict in society is closely related to the concept of urban managerialism, which focuses attention on the power of **urban managers**—professionals and bureaucrats—to influence the socio-spatial structure of cities through their control of, for example, access to public housing, or the allocation of mortgage finance.<sup>55</sup> Structuralists are dismissive of **managerialism's** focus on intermediate-level decision-makers within a social formation. However, at the interface between consumers and allocators of scarce resources, managerialism introduces a humanistic perspective that can help to expose the operation and rationalities of the distributive process in cities.

## POSTMODERNISM

Postmodern theory began to exert an influence on urban geography in the late 1980s and 1990s. The postmodern perspective is characterised by the rejection of grand theory and an emphasis on human difference. This distances postmodernism from both positivism, with its search for general laws and models, and structuralism, with its base in grand theory relating to the capitalist mode of production. The most visible impact of postmodern thinking on the city is in its architecture, where the 'concrete functionalism' of the modern era is replaced by a diversity of styles. In terms of the social geography of the city, the most important contribution of a postmodern perspective is how its focus on difference, uniqueness and individuality sensitises us to the needs and situations of *all* members of a society. This emphasis on the need to study urban phenomena from the multiple viewpoints of diverse individuals and groups has been reflected in studies of gender differences in urban labour markets,<sup>56</sup> as well as of the 'spaces of exclusion' occupied by minority groups defined by class,<sup>57</sup> marital status,<sup>58</sup> sexuality,<sup>59</sup> race,<sup>60</sup> age<sup>61</sup> and disability.<sup>62</sup>

A major criticism directed at the postmodern approach to the city is its apparently unlimited relativism. Because it privileges the views of all individuals, there appears to be no limit to the range of possible interpretations of any situation—there is, in effect, no 'real world'.<sup>63</sup> This has drawn particular criticism from 'socially concerned' urban geographers who decry postmodernism's inability to address the 'real' problems of disadvantaged urban residents.

## MORAL PHILOSOPHY

An approach based on moral philosophy or ethics represents an emergent perspective in urban geography. This seeks to examine critically the moral bases of society. Central to the ethical perspective is the concept of normative judgement that focuses on what *should be* rather than what is.<sup>64</sup> This involves critical evaluation of actual situations against **normative** conditions as defined by ethical principles. In urban geography, researchers are confronted constantly by ethical issues. Questions addressed include the extent to which there is equity in the distribution of welfare services, employment opportunities and decent housing for different social groups in the city; how to interpret the causes of inner-city poverty (including the relative weight attached to personal deficiencies of the population, or structurally induced constraints on behaviour); and the social acceptability



of existing urban conditions—for example, what is an acceptable level of air pollution or of infant mortality?

Although moral perspectives on the city formed an important part of social science in the nineteenth century,<sup>65</sup> the foundations of the current ethical perspective in urban geography lie in the humanistic approach, in the consideration afforded to issues of social justice within the political economy perspective of the early 1970s,<sup>66</sup> and in more recent critiques of the ethics of market-oriented individualism.<sup>67</sup> There is also a degree of commonality with the postmodernist emphasis on the importance of difference (seen, for example, in feminist critiques of male-centred interpretations of what constitutes a liveable urban environment).<sup>68</sup> Most fundamentally, however, the ethical perspective rejects the post-modernist denial of the possible existence of generally applicable moral bases for societal behaviour. Further, an ethical perspective contends that in a society not all manifestations of ‘otherness’ should be fostered; some (racial discrimination or child prostitution, for example) should be constrained.<sup>69</sup> As Smith (1994 p. 294) observed, while acknowledging the importance of ‘difference’ and ‘otherness’, ‘we should not allow uncritical deference to other people’s views and cultures to deny the possibility that some kinds of behaviour, ways of life and even moral codes are wrong’.<sup>70</sup>

### IN SEARCH OF COMMON GROUND

Each of the major philosophical perspectives considered can claim to illuminate some part of the complex dynamics and structure of the city. But no single approach provides a full explanation of urban phenomena. The question of whether an accommodation is possible among the different approaches has been polarised between those who accept a pluralist stance—‘agreeing to differ’ on the grounds that there is no single way to gain knowledge—and those who insist on the need to make a unitary choice of theoretical framework due to the perceived superiority of a particular theory of knowledge. Others have sought to combine approaches in different ways.<sup>71</sup> The latter route, which incorporates a search for a middle ground between the *generalisation* of positivism and the *exceptionalism* of postmodern theory, is the approach favoured here. The analytical value of employing different theoretical perspectives is illustrated in Table 2.3, with reference to the question of urban residential structure.

To fully understand urban phenomena in the contemporary world requires consideration of both the *general* structural processes related to the ‘mode of production’ and an empirically informed appreciation of the *particular* social formations that emerge from the interaction of structural forces and local context. The importance of employing a combined multi-layered ‘realist’ perspective<sup>72</sup> that encompasses the global and local scales, social structure and human agency, and theory and empirical investigation in seeking to interpret the city informs the organisation and content of this book.

### LEVELS OF ANALYSIS IN URBAN GEOGRAPHY

As we have seen, the character of urban environments is the outcome of the interplay of a host of private and public interests operating at a variety of geographical scales. In order

to understand the geography of towns and cities, therefore, it is necessary to look both within and beyond the settlement, and to examine the complex of factors involved in urban change at all levels of the global-local continuum.

Although the factors and processes involved in urban development are not confined to any discrete level of the global-local spectrum, the concept of 'levels of analysis' offers a useful organising framework which simplifies the complexity of the real world and illustrates some of the issues of concern to urban geography at different spatial scales. We can identify five main levels of analysis.

### THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

The neighbourhood is the area immediately around one's home; it usually displays some homogeneity in terms of housing type, ethnicity or socio-cultural values. Neighbourhoods may offer a locus for the formation of shared interests and development of community solidarity. Issues of relevance to the urban geographer at this level include the processes of local economic decline or revitalisation, residential segregation, levels of service provision and the use of neighbourhood political organisations as part of the popular struggle to control urban space.

### THE CITY

Cities are centres of economic production and consumption, arenas of social networks and cultural activities, and the seat of government and administration. Urban geographers examine the role of a city in the regional, national and international economy, and how the city's socio-spatial form is conditioned by its role (for example, as a financial centre or manufacturing base). Study of the distribution of power in the city would focus on the behaviour and biases of formal organisations as well as the informal arrangements by which public and private interests operate to influence government decisions. The differential socio-spatial

### **TABLE 2.3 ANALYTICAL VALUE OF DIFFERENT THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES IN URBAN GEOGRAPHY: THE EXAMPLE OF URBAN RESIDENTIAL STRUCTURE**

<i>Theoretical perspective</i>	<i>Interpretative insight</i>
Environmentalism	Although the notion of environmental determinism is now discredited, the influence of environmental factors on residential location can be seen in the problems of building in hazardous zones, and in the effects of architectural design on social behaviour (see examples in Chapter 19)
Positivism	Uses statistical analysis of objective social, economic and demographic data (e.g. via factorial ecology) to reveal areas in the city that display similar residential characteristics (see examples in Chapter 18)

Behaviouralism	Addresses the key question of why people and households relocate by examining the motives and strategies underlying the intra-urban migration of different social groups (see examples in Chapter 10)
Humanism	Explains how different individuals and social groups interact with their perceived environments, as in the differential use of public and private spaces within a city or residential neighbourhood (see examples in Chapter 19)
Managerialism	Illustrates how urban residential structure is affected by the ability of professional and bureaucratic gatekeepers to control access to resources, such as social housing or mortgage finance (see examples in Chapter 11)
Structuralism	Examines the ways in which political and economic forces and actors (e.g. financial institutions, property speculators and estate agents) influence the residential structure of a city through their activities in urban land and housing markets (see examples in Chapter 7)
Postmodernism	Explores the place of different social groups in the residential mosaic of the city by focusing on the particular lifestyles and residential experiences of various populations, such as ethnic minorities, affluent groups, gays, the elderly, disabled, and the poor (see examples in Chapter 18)
Moral philosophy	Critically evaluates the ethical underpinnings of issues such as homelessness or the incidence of slums and squatter settlements (see examples in Chapter 25)

distribution of benefits and disbenefits in the city is also an important area of investigation in urban geography.

### THE REGION

The spread of urban influences into surrounding rural areas and, in particular, the spatial expansion of cities have introduced concepts such as urban region, metropolis, metropolis, **conurbation** and **megalopolis** into urban geography. Issues appropriate to this level of analysis include the **ecological footprint** of the city, land-use conflict on the **urban fringe**, growth management strategies and forms of metropolitan governance.

### THE NATIONAL SYSTEM OF CITIES

Cities are affected by nationally defined goals established in pursuit of objectives that extend beyond urban concerns. Successive New Right governments in the UK (under Margaret Thatcher and John Major) and the USA (under Ronald Reagan and George Bush) followed an economic policy that focused on *national* economic development largely irrespective of its consequences for the growth or decline of individual urban areas. Cities were encouraged to become more competitive to attract inward investment. National-level policy guidelines, incentives in the shape of competitive grants, and financial and other controls over the actions of local government have a direct influence on urban decision-making and management. In order to comprehend processes and patterns of urban change, geographers need to have an understanding of national policy and the ways in which it affects the inter- and intra-urban geography of the state.

## THE WORLD SYSTEM OF CITIES

The concept of a world system of cities reflects the growing interdependence of nations and cities within the global political economy. In this urban system, 'world cities' occupy a distinctive niche owing to their role as political and financial control centres. This status is evident in the concentration of advanced **producer services** such as education, R&D, banking and insurance, accounting, legal services, advertising and real estate services. Drawing on a 'world cities' perspective enables the urban geographer to reframe many urban questions previously defined in the context of the city or regional boundaries. This is illustrated graphically by the way in which investment decisions by managers in a Japanese-owned multinational company with head-quarters in New York can lead to job losses and deprivation at the neighbourhood level in Liverpool or Lagos.

In studying the contemporary city, urban geographers must remain aware of the relationship between global and local forces in the production and re-production of urban environments. The need for such a perspective is reinforced by the process of globalisation, which, as we have seen, emphasises the linkages between different 'levels of analysis'. In particular, the global and the local must be regarded not as analytical opposites but as two sides of the same coin. The process of globalisation underscores the need for urban geographers to employ a multilevel interdisciplinary perspective in the search for urban explanation.

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### KEY CONCEPTS

- meaning of urban
- urbanisation
- urbanism
- rural-urban continuum
- space and place
- cyberspace
- social processes
- spatial processes
- environmentalism
- positivism
- behaviouralism
- humanism
- structuralism
- managerialism
- postmodernism
- moral philosophy
- levels of analysis

### STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What do you understand by the term 'urban'?
2. Consider the value of an urban geographical perspective for understanding contemporary towns and cities.
3. With the aid of relevant examples, identify the concerns of the urban geographer at different levels of the global-local spectrum.
4. Dr Johnston (1709-84) said, 'When a man is tired of London he is tired of life; for there is in London all that life can afford', yet Shelley (1792-1822) thought that 'Hell is a city much like London'. Make a list of the positive and negative features of urban life.
5. Select any one of the major theoretical perspectives (such as positivism, structuralism or postmodernism) and write a reasoned critique of its value for the study of urban geography.