



Narratives in Urban Theory

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This article traces three phases urban theory: descriptive urban theory, Marxist urban theory, and postcolonial urban theory. It argues that these three types of urban writings do not only differ thematically from, but also critique directly the phase of theory that precedes them. While the descriptive theory of the Chicago School is interested in studying then-new features of urban life, the political-economy paradigm of the Marxist urban theorists argues for a structural analysis of urbanism, pointing to the role of capital accumulation vis-a-vis the production of urban space. Most recently, postcolonial urban theory argues against the political-economy paradigm and its structuralist tendency to theorize world cities in terms of economic-financial relations at the expense of other aspects of urbanism. The article concludes by reviewing the usefulness and limits of writing urban theory around a theme.

If the purpose of a theory is to enable us to understand the world, and to provide an informed explanation, urban theory is tasked with helping us make sense of the urban world in a more helpful way than we would without it. The term 'urban' in urban theory not only serves to distinguish itself from the rural, regional, or national; but is also an academic burden. In calling a theory urban, we expect it to provide insights into framing our urban problems. It is in this manner that a theory defines what it explains. However, this relationship is unsettled when the former fails to adequately capture, or worse yet, misrepresents the latter. Urban life is diverse, disparate, and constantly evolving. The urban world is not a whole, coherent monolith. So why should urban theory be?

This article traces three phases of urban theory as they strive to explain the changing urban world around them: descriptive urban theory, Marxist urban theory, and postcolonial urban theory. These three types of urban writings not only differ in their focus on a particular aspect of the city, but also critique directly the sets of urban theories that precede them. While the descriptive theory of the Chicago School studies new features of industrial urban life at the turn of the twentieth century, the political-economy paradigm of the Marxist urban theorists champions a structuralist analysis of urbanism, pointing to the role of capital accumulation vis-a-vis the production of urban space. Most recently, postcolonial urban theory argues against the political-economy paradigm and its structuralist obsession because it sees world cities in terms of economic-financial relations, at the expense of theorizing other aspects of urbanism. The article concludes by reviewing the usefulness and limits of writing urban theory around certain narratives. I argue that urban theorists should encourage the constant pluralizing of accounts, to make urban theory fuller and more attuned to the ever changing conditions of our urban experience.

Descriptive Urban Theory


Writings on the urban conditions at the turn of the twentieth century, as exemplified by the works of Engels and Tonnies, documented the effects of the parallel processes of industrialization and urbanization. That is, these scholars are interested in the new urban experience and conditions associated with the industrializing city. Ferdinand Engels (1845) provides a literary account that captures the essence of urban life when industrialization in England was in full swing. Although cities

dates back to antiquity, the industrial city that Engels documents was a hitherto unprecedented experience. Spending two years treading the congested streets of English towns, Engels documented the debasing conditions of the working class in the mid-nineteenth century that belied the country's grandeur. His detailed narrative gives a dramatic description of people's clothing, food, and deteriorating domestic spaces that were "fit only for the accommodation of cattle" (Henderson, 1976, p. 318).

If the pioneering work of Engels provides an ethnography of life in industrial urbanism, Tonnies' seminal work, *Community and Society*, points to a dramatic shift in social organization. Written at the end of the nineteenth century amidst intense commercial exchange and the rise of modern bureaucracy, Tonnies distinguishes *Gemeinschaft*, a folk society, from *Gesellschaft*, a modern city, and posits the trajectory on which modern society progresses from the former towards the latter (Tonnies, 1887). To him, the modern city is a manifestation of *Gesellschaft*, where the money economy prevails and personal ties weaken. Unlike Engels who devotes his attention almost exclusively to the living conditions of the urban working class, Tonnies speaks about the coming of a new mode of social organization. This societal transformation affected every urban dweller alike. The money economy, bureaucracy, and the increasing differentiation between professional life and folk life, are among the many new conditions.

Whether or not Engels and Tonnies viewed themselves as theorists and their accounts as theory, their writings attempt to capture the zeitgeist, the spirit and essence, of a new age. A group of sociologists at the University of Chicago produced similar works in the early decades of the twentieth century. These writers were interested not only in documenting the new urban life, but also in empirically studying its patterns and effects. If Engels' concern was to document physical deterioration resulting from industrialization, the Chicago School sought to answer how the new urban life mentally and socially affected the urban population.

In addition to observing and documenting of the industrial urban society, the Chicago School theorists are distinct from the precedent writers in their focus on the connections between spatial patterns and social outcomes. For example, Burgess (1925) attributes traits of promiscuity and vice to the proximity to sources of those traits. He argues that districts closer to



these sites tend to contain more promiscuous acts. Motivated by the study of organisms in biological sciences, Burgess then argues that, as the city expands, it also allows for the dwellers to move about the city and interact with people from different backgrounds. Residential mobility from one area to another, Burgess argues, leads to social disorganization and eventually 'confuse and demoralize' a person as the new city lacks the primary social ties and control of preindustrial cities (Burgess, 1925: 79). Similarly, Wirth's influential essay 'Urbanism as a way of life' (1930) explores the relationships between the physical and ecological components of the city, such as population size, density, and heterogeneity, and their impacts on social bonds and kinships. Like Burgess, he attributes urban problems, e.g. schizoid personalities and loss of primary ties, to the spatial characteristics of population distributions. That is, as the urban resident comes to live in a denser, more heterogenous environment, contacts with other people affect his mental and social life.

The Chicago School's focus on taking stock of new features and patterns of urban society drew criticism from later theorists. The criticisms come from two fronts. First, the Chicago School researchers assign a deterministic connection between spatial patterns and social outcomes, suggesting one's urban environment is a definitive predictor of certain behaviors. Second, they provide a simple description of the new urban life as differentiated from the old traditional life without identifying a deep structural force that underpins them. Dismissing Wirth's theory of urbanism, Herbert Gans (1968) argues that social demographics such as social class, race, and ethnicity, rather than size, density, and heterogeneity, have more determinant influence on urban behavior. He then points out that Wirth's exclusive focus on the urban leaves the suburban unexplained, and argues that suburbanism, just as urbanism, is a way of life. Claude Fischer (1976) suggests that 'urban factors' such as density do not necessarily create 'negative urban effects' like the demoralized, blasé personality; in fact, close spatial proximity can generate a wide variety of subcultural groups and their creative expressions. Overall, while empirically grounded and commendable for pioneering the field of urban studies and planning, the Chicago School's research projects are flawed. They fail to establish strict relationships between differentiation of social groups in urban space on the one hand, and social order, differentiated urban culture, and urban mental life, on the other.

Second, the Chicago School assumes the objectivity and neutrality of place and space and presents a linear approach to describing urban issues. Instead of simply recounting urban problems, we should provide a deeper analysis of structures and processes that underlie urbanization. In describing new urban conditions and enumerating their features, the Chicago School operates on a paradigm that creates a simplified dichotomy between the preindustrial, homogenous, orderly, Gemeinschaft-like town, on the one hand, and the industrial, heterogenous, fragmented city on the other. What results is an account thrilled and excited by the unprecedented features of industrial urbanism, one that analyzes form at the expense of formation. This tendency is exemplified in Burgess' predictive concentric model of urban form, Wirth's study of socially differentiated neighborhoods, and Robert Park's treatment of urbanism as a form of human ecology in which units are functionally related. The Chicago School "substituted description of the novel features of urban existence for a sustained analysis that could situate the new

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industrial city within a larger process of social change" (Halpern, 1997). In other words, these descriptive urban persuasions shy away from the historical process that gives rise to the new urban form in the first place.

Marxist Urban Theory

Marxist sociologist Manuel Castells critiques the Chicago School researchers for their deterministic assumptions about urbanization and urban problems. Castells (2002) argues against the view that urbanization is a natural process and that urbanization leads to a certain urban culture. He dismisses their argument that the 'urban problem' results from urban life. What are framed as urban problems e.g. crime, poverty, or civil unrest, he argues, are in fact biases that stem from environmental determinism theories of the Chicago School, which view urban space as a determinant

of behavior and culture. In a more sustained critique than those put forth by Gans and Fischer, Castells demystifies each of the professed links between behavior patterns and spatial contexts. He argues that we cannot readily observe urban behavior at the individual residential unit, because the notion of an urban unit is arbitrary and cannot be artificially drawn. Then, unlike the propositions of the Chicago School, the city cannot be divided into discrete spatial units where each is self-contained and has its own culture. A particular spatial form does not independently create, nor do they correspond to, a social structure (Castells, 2002, p. 56-67).

Rather than an explanation of the links between behavior patterns and ecological context, a connection whose causality is hard to establish, Castells calls for an explanation of historical urbanization processes that takes into account the linkages between economic processes and spatial structures. Castells dismisses the Chicago School as pervasive 'ideology' and argues that it stigmatizes 'urban problems' by ignoring the underlying social relationships and conflicts that cause these them in the first place. In order to move beyond the ideological problematic of 'urbanization', he asks: "What is the process of social production of the spatial forms of a society?" and "What are the relations between the space constituted and the structural transformation of a society" (Castells, 2002, p.31). In this sense, Castells conceptualizes urbanism and urbanization on a different plane than Chicago School theorists. He focuses on urbanization as a long historical process involving society's economic classes, rather than urbanization as a predictor of behavioral symptoms.

However, David Harvey develops a systematic Marxist urban theory. He directly engages Marxism with urban theory by bringing together Marx's otherwise scattered writings on space and capital. If the central themes of the Chicago School are the description of new urban conditions and their effects on social life, Marxist urban theory deals with spatial-geographical dimensions and manifestations of what Harvey calls the "twin themes of capital accumulation and class struggle" (Harvey, 2001, p. 88). That is, while the themes of capital accumulation and class struggle run clearly throughout his writings, Marx is more focused on their time dimensions (e.g. his prediction of the eventual social revolution) and is less explicit about how they take place in space and the built environment. Harvey draws out the 'space' from Marx's theory by

advancing spatial processes and consequences of capital accumulation, such as geographical expansion, uneven urban development, and the obsolete built environment. For now, Harvey's spatial dimension of capital accumulation helps move urban theory beyond describing the urban experience to engaging with the structural dynamics that shape the urban built environment. While the Chicago School asks: 'How is the city urban?', Harvey asks: 'How is the city capitalist, rather than just urban?' (Parker, 2003).

If we believe, following Harvey, that the city is not just urban, but also the site of capitalist production, we have to explain how and why the capitalist production of space is a determinant of urbanism. Harvey looks at Marx's writings on capital accumulation and interprets how it plays out in space. To this end, Harvey presents four Marxian spatial theories: the theory of accumulation, the theory of location, the theory of imperialism, and the theory of the state (Harvey, 2001, pp. 239-278). The theory of accumulation argues that crises are endemic to the capitalist accumulation process because the capitalist system tends to overaccumulate. Capitalists constantly avoid overaccumulation by reinvesting surplus. The theory of location explains that, since there are costs inherent in produced goods not immediately entering the marketplace and finding a willing buyer, an imperative arises to shorten distances, or to 'annihilate space by time'. This can be achieved through advances in transportation or agglomeration. The theory of imperialism argues that capitalist states will expand their capitalist activity abroad in order to avoid crises of accumulation at home. Lastly, the theory of the state explains how, in capitalist societies, the state must perform certain basic tasks to facilitate a capitalist mode of production, e.g. enforcing property rights, creating a common value such as currency, and providing public goods and infrastructure. The four Marxian explanations are encapsulated in the concept of the 'spatial fix', which refers to geographical expansion as a way to reinvest surplus in order to avoid the crisis of overaccumulation.

Harvey's Marxist analysis of urbanism helps explain the city as a site of production and accumulation, rather than the city as a site of coexisting neighborhoods. Urbanization can now be viewed as a form of spatial fix. The built environment, Harvey argues, can be and is used to absorb the surplus of capital accumulation in the forms of buildings, infrastructure, and landscape. Instead of seeing different neighborhoods as socially discrete fragments



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Eric Huntley, M.U.P. 2014. "Shinjuku Shopping by Night". Tokyo, Japan.



in the larger urban ecology, we can begin to see them as differently positioned in the larger capitalist project. This view can shed light on why we reinvest in some neighborhoods and desert others. Marxist urban theory enables us to see 'the city not in terms of a concentration of a new fragmented culture, but of concentration of capital and political power' (Katznelson, 1992, p. 25 cited in Halpern, 1997). If Chicago School of urban theory operates under the paradigm of urban description and differentiation, Marxist urban theory provides a political-economy paradigm that views the city as a site of capital accumulation in its many spatial shapes and forms, all of which are uneven.

Postcolonial Urban Theory

What does the political-economy paradigm of urban theory leave out? Later insights from postcolonial theory, cultural studies, and anthropology in recent decades help us see the urban conditions in a different way by incorporating various actors, voices, and processes. By privileging the role of capital in structuring space, the political-economy paradigm risks downplaying or omitting altogether the 'local' from the urban scene. In his critique of Harvey's dynamic of capitalism, Michael Peter Smith (2005) argues that Harvey's narrative privileges 'capital' as the superior agent of change and finds the role of the local and the people missing: "we never know who lives, works, acts, and dies in Harvey's urban spaces since people are seldom represented as anything other than nostalgic romantics or cultural dupes" (Smith, 2005, p. 243).

Smith's plea for the inclusion of everyday actors in the narrative of grand structural processes such as capitalism or globalization sits well with recent trends in urban scholarship that recognize the multiplicity of actors, processes, and origins in theory. Recent works (e.g., Shatkin, 2008; Markusen, 2004; Olds, 2001; Yeoh, 1999) move away from globalization literature that privileges the Western City, often suggesting it as the model for other globalizing cities. Instead, they restore analytical clarity by emphasizing an actor-centered approach, rather than grand structural processes. These scholars encourage us to look at a wider range of urban phenomena and experiences, and at each city's complex, non-linear engagement with economic processes. Jennifer Robinson's (2002) work perhaps singlehandedly marks the 'postcolonial turn' in urban theory is. She argues that urban studies of recent decades pay attention to the phenomenon of world and global cities at the expense of other cities 'off the map.' In what she

calls 'the regulating fiction of West', most cities of the world only not aspire to but are actively judged against the standards of the global/world cities. It is as if 'going global' is the only worthy policy goal and the ultimate urban trajectory. This reflects a deeper problem in academia: in urban studies, between the production of 'urban theory' rests on the West and 'development studies' on the rest. The current state of theory does not have a large enough vocabulary to understand all kinds of cities. Instead, Robinson argues for urban theory without categories, a theory that is more inclusive of the diversity of experience.

The essence of Robinson's argument is her critique of a structural analysis of a small range of economic processes, e.g. global finance. The reduction of cities into narrow economic relationships, she argues, has dominated recent theoretical imagination. Examples include literature on world and global cities by Taylor (1995), Sassen (2005), and Friedman (2005), and the geographical study of capitalism that dates back to Wallerstein's (1974) world-system theory and Frank's (1966) view of the global economy as an exploitative relationship between métropoles and satellites. The narrow view of 'world cities', Robinson argues, privileges and constitutes only a small minority of 'the world's cities', as not every city participates in the global circuits of finance. This resonates with Roy (2009, 2011) who explicitly argues for new geographies of theory. Building on Amin's relational/topological readings of regions, and on Robinson's earlier call for an end to 'asymmetrical ignorance of urban theory', Roy argues there is a good possibility for urban theorists to discuss a variety of dynamic processes and urbanisms beyond finance and capital accumulation. Migration, commodity exchange, and foreign migrant workers, she suggests, are equally global phenomena and are, in fact, more global than the financial centers that reside only in a few 'global cities.' Understanding a wide range of urbanisms not only expands the current repertoire of urban theory, but also refines it. The Global South urbanism, she argues, is in every city including those in Global North; the Global South is in poor neighborhoods, informal settlements, ghettos, and foreclosed suburbs. Therefore, Western cities are struggling with the issues that Global South cities have long experienced and negotiated. The North can very well learn from the South, thus reversing the current direction of the production and circulation of knowledge.

The Role of Narrative


Urban theory has indeed always been about explaining the city from a certain theoretical standpoint: urbanism as a new social life associated with industrialization, urbanism as a historical-materialist process, and urbanism(s) as a variety of actors, processes, and geographies. This variety should not only be welcome, but actively encouraged, since different worldviews are helpful in capturing the city in different lights and thus expanding our current understanding. While a call for a so-called postmodern urban theory may not be new or original, it should not be treated as a tired, hackneyed cry, for it has yet to be canonized in the repertoire of what we call 'urban theory'. The social sciences have long undergone the 'postmodern turn', marked by at least two characteristics: 1) a rejection of positivist approach and 2) a presentation of other narratives and explanations. Urban theory has been more comfortable with the former than the latter. To be sure, urban theory was alerted to the turn. Urban theory shares the rejection of a Wirthian descriptive analysis in favor of a more structuralist analysis of the city, as exemplified by the works of Harvey, Castells, Lefebvre, and their students. By contrast, the presentation of other urban existences is more limited and, more often than not, takes the form of those additional at-a-glance chapters on world cities, third world urbanization, or

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planning in developing countries (Roy, 2009; 2011). Such inclusion, while commendable, is simply an addition. It does not create a meaningful dialogue, an internal reflection, or a productive theorizing activity. This leaves urban theory in the state of being simply aware of the postmodern turn and still late to the party, for its 'awareness' is perfunctory at best, noncommittal at worst.

At the heart of postmodern theory is the recognition of multiple narratives, possible explanations, or the plural others whose voices have hitherto not been heard. The discipline in which postmodern theory is comfortably at home and has long been used (although not necessarily named as such) is history. To be sure, the discipline of history as recently as the early 20th century also privileged, a totalized history. In those years of history research, the dominant belief was that a single history of the world was possible (Groat and Wang, 2013, p. 185). The major proponent was Hempel (1942), who advocated for a 'covering law' as a general concept that explains a historical event in the same way there is a law that explains every phenomenon in natural sciences. Similarly, the philosopher Hegel held that a historical account can capture the zeitgeist, the absolute spirit of an age as one collective consciousness. However, in the later decades of the 20th century, a growing section of history research began to emerge, expressing what the literary theorist Jean-Francois Lyotard called an 'incredulity towards meta-narratives'. These works cast doubt on dominant narratives in favor of various historical perspectives from gender to historically subordinated groups. It is in this mode of writing that recent scholarships in history work to expand the narratives of the past by always assuming the infinite possibility of explanations. What results is an ever-expanding corpus of stories that were once unwritten, unexplored terrains across space and time. Histories now exist in plural.

Urban theory, too, can profit from historical research methods in at least two ways. First, in a somewhat pedantic way, the urban theorist can become an urban historian and approach a well-treaded, commonly acknowledged historical past from a different angle. For example, Castells demystifies Wirth's account of Chicago, arguing that there is no systematic association between urban factors and urban effects, and the stigmatized 'urban problem' is not necessarily a problem unique to the urban. To supersede this ideology, Castells develops an explanation for the historical process of urbanization, one that reveals a multifaceted nature of conflict within cities (Castells, 2002, p. 18). Second, and perhaps more relevant to urban theory today, the urban theorist must accept his or her school of thought as incomplete and inadequate, the way the historian views his or her historical account of the past as but one facet of that past. In recent years, there have been accounts that study various forms of urbanism and thus provide numerous narratives, themes, and explanations. This growing body of empirical evidence takes



account of various types of 'paradigmatic cities' such as postindustrial urbanism, postcolonial urbanism, fragmented urbanism, subaltern urbanism, and other emerging forms of urban life that reflect a growing unease in urban studies scholarship with the current state of urban theory' (Murray, 2013). As Shatkin (2005) writes of Manila, the city has three kinds of capitals: the colonial city, modernist city, and the global city, which policymakers often tout. These works, while multifarious in themes and diverse in locations, are exactly identical in their uncomfortable rebuttal of the dominant urban theory and their rejection of one exclusive account, for it fails to adequately account for a variety of urban experience and processes.

The most important feature of pluralizing urban theories, or writing urban and planning history based on a certain narrative, is recognizing these disparate narratives on equal terms. Historians treat historical accounts as discrete, dissimilar, and different: American history, working-class history in 1960s Paris, East Asian history, and so on. History book titles like history of American female working class, or Colonial India, although relatively recent, are part of today's historical inquiry. By contrast, works such as female urban space and Indian subaltern urbanism do not readily fit with our perception a 'urban theory' and are relegated instead to the historians or anthropologists. It is not surprising, then, that recent contributions to urban theoretical understandings come from works outside of

urban planning scholarship. The 'regulating fiction of the West' or what Roy later calls the 'sanctioned ignorance' is an academic symptom that ignores lives and livelihoods in other places. The importance of pluralizing urban explanations is not only the business of the self-referential scholarly community, but also has important implications for practice. Planning schools do not train just planners but also practitioners in related fields who will work in development agencies that seek to promote developmental (or 'developmentalist') goals. An awareness of wider urban explanations can make for wider policy imagination for urban futures.

We favor poetic descriptions of the city. We call it complex, diverse, layered, and multidimensional. We call the city's problems 'wicked' because they elude simple solutions (Rittel and Webber, 1973). However, we cannot call the city complex, diverse, layered, or multidimensional, and expect to understand it from one paradigmatic angle. Similarly, we cannot call urban planning a multidisciplinary field and feign surprise when someone researches a planning question from a disciplinary perspective with which we are not immediately familiar. Urban theory will retain its appeal by continuing to write about unexplored urban themes. Urban theory will gain strength by making sure, as Roy suggests, the narratives that are parochial do not circulate as universal. ■

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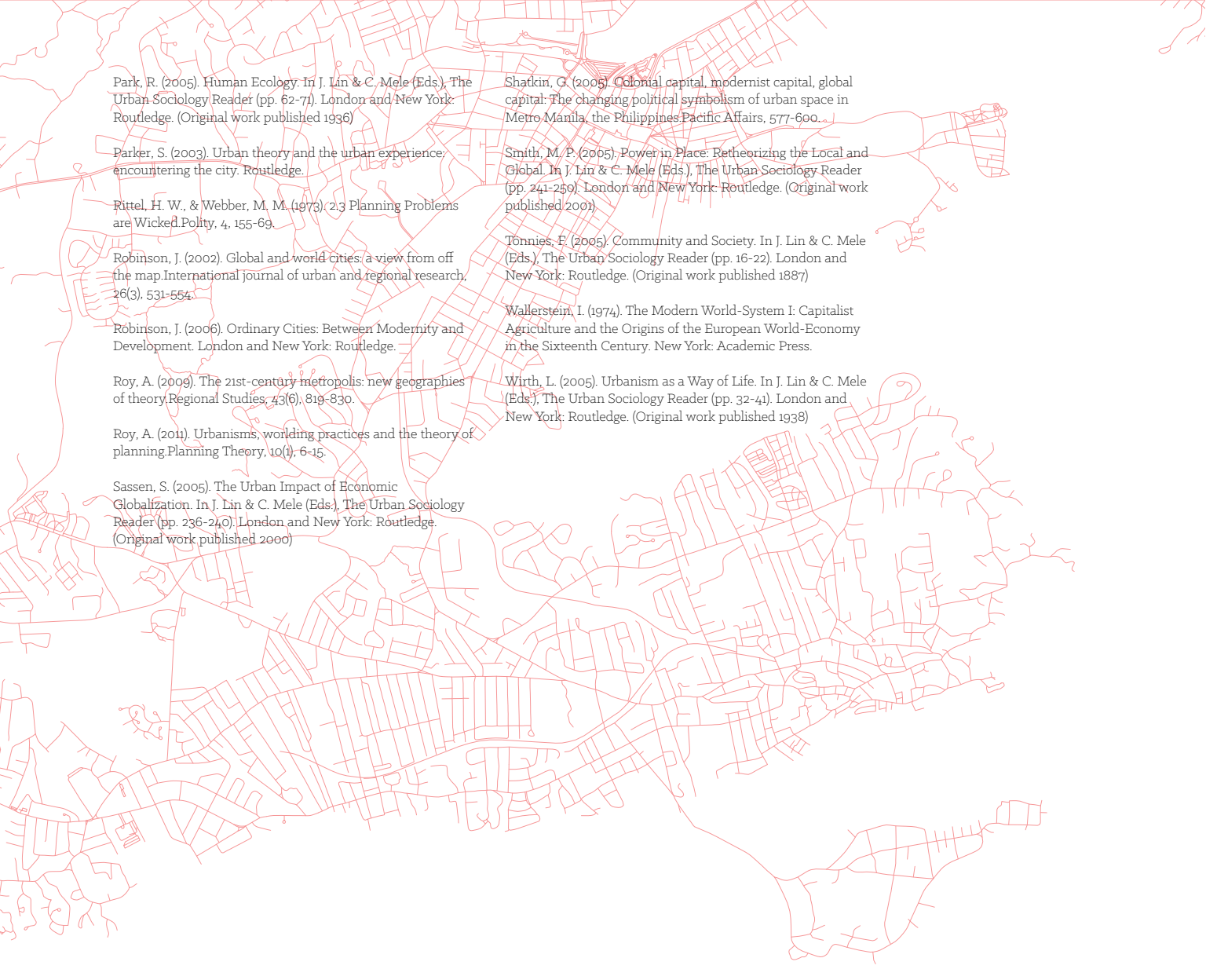
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