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What is Urban History?

Shane Ewen

Cambridge, Polity Press, 2016.

Global Cities: A Short History

Greg Clark

Washington, DC, Brookings Institution Press, 2016.

About two thirds of the way through his brief but informative survey of *Global Cities: A Short History* Greg Clark, an international mover and shaker in the field and Fellow at the Global Cities Initiative (and other prominent think-tanks and universities), reproduces a graph, based on Google Ngram Viewer data, measuring the approximate occurrence of 'world' and 'global city' in book form between the 1920s and the near-present. For the first 40 years of the period the former term became increasingly prominent. Then, in the mid-1960s it began to lose ground, moving downwards between that date and the early 1980s. After that, 'world city' renewed its rise and in the latter years of that decade, moved into a close shadowing role in relation to its definitional partner until the end of the 20th century. The post-1980s trend suggests that, in the eyes of many authors, the two typologies were synonymous.

What of the use of 'global' and by extension 'globalization'? Here Clark's graph reveals a staggering picture. From the early 1980s until the present, use of the term in book form spiralled nearly vertically upwards, confirming that, together with 'neo-liberal', to which it is often intimately though not always accurately or meaningfully linked, 'globalization' and 'global' have become taken-for-granted terms among governments, political elites, academics, public intellectuals, journalists, ideologues, authors and countless numbers of people in every part of the world. Goodness knows what Clark's graph would have looked like had it been magically capable of monitoring usage in newspapers, magazines, television, radio and of course the internet, with which instantaneous globalization is so deeply intertwined.

So, like 'totalitarianism' and 'ideological', 'global' and 'globalization' are terms that possess a free-standing discursive identity of their own. Unfortunately, over-use has led to confusion. By its critics globalization pure and simple is assumed to be the principal cause of many of the worst things that undermine the quality of life of millions of people in every part of the world. Since the 1980s theoretical and conceptual clarification of the complexities of the term and its branching connections with other ideas and ideologies has been a major growth area in universities. But conclusions have not yet been translated and incorporated into everyday discourse in the media and among critics of the phenomenon, a majority of whom occupy political positions approximately related to those once non-problematically associated with the Left.

Unfortunately Greg Clark's overview fails to do justice to seminal thinkers who have played a central role in the evolution of the ideas of world and global cities and the compression of space and time. Here the key authors have been Immanuel Wallerstein, Andre Gunder Frank, David Hardy and Manuel Castells. Nevertheless, his account of the emergence of 20th-century world and global centres provides a simulating starting-point.

In the early 20th century the idea of a world city began to be used in a boosterish style reflecting a desire on the part of newly expanding cities to be accepted as equals in terms of status and influence as centres like London, New York, Berlin and Paris. In 1915 in his *Cities in Evolution* Patrick Geddes followed a technological route, and suggested that the internal combustion engine and mass electrification were central to the evolution of large-scale into mature world centres. Clark notes that Lewis Mumford's predictive *Cities in History*,

published half a century later, made crucial connections between the emergence of Marshall McLuhan's then ubiquitous 'global village' and large-scale cities characterized by a high degree of cultural heterogeneity and a powerful and early drive to conquer space and time. Thereafter, neo-Marxists fixed on the idea that London, New York and Tokyo were quite different from and more economically, socially, politically and culturally influential cities than other urban communities: they were the 'command posts in the latest stage of capital'. At this point the extraordinarily influential Saskia Sassen, author of *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (1) appeared on the scene. Sassen identified a small number of centres that had generated large-scale networks of financial, professional and creative services which greatly enhanced the interests of spiralling numbers of global corporations. She updated her position in 2006 and stated that an increasing number of cities were now beginning to challenge the foundational elite.

Both Greg Clark and Shane Ewen in his exceptionally well written and argued *What is Urban History?* examine this exponential growth in the numbers and scale of super-cities. At the beginning of the 20th century London with around seven million inhabitants towered above every other world centre. New York, Paris, Berlin and Chicago were next in line with populations of between four and a half and one and three quarter millions.

A century later world demographic growth and ever higher levels of internal migration had led to a situation in which city-dwellers would soon be more numerous than those living in hamlets, villages and market towns in nearly every continent. 500 urban centres now had populations of more than a million. Tokyo had 35 million inhabitants and Delhi, Shanghai, Mexico City, Mumbai and Sao Paulo more than 20 million. In demographic terms European and north American cities were now near-minnows. Nevertheless, a handful continued to possess the same kind of economic, financial and cultural power as they had a hundred years earlier. Would this continue to be the case? Much depended on levels of financial and political stability. To take a single example: would London maintain its highly developed international status in the wake of the British decision to leave the European Union?

So much for the modern and contemporary eras and the differing prospects of existing and future global cities. What kind of sense does Greg Clark make of the very beginning of the urbanizing process in the ancient and pre-industrial world? Providing a summary of the period between 1000BC and the near-present, he presents a cluster of definitional criteria for each of his selected centres: time period, trade and connectivity, and less revealingly 'innovations' and 'negative impacts of growth'. A heavy and justified emphasis on trade and trade routes means that there are several chronological overlaps. Examples here include the first and extreme *longue duree* Mediterranean period between 1000BC-AD 400 and the 'Silk Roads' era between 400BC-AD1600.

In an ideal world, it would have been helpful to have been able to match each of these (in their time) exceptionally large centres with what is known about the demographic record. But here (and unsurprisingly) the picture is exceptionally blurred. Over the last 40 years Tertius Chandler and Gerald Fox and the world-systems scholar George Modelski have estimated world city data reaching back to 3000BC, approximations that have recently been revisited by Meredith Reba and associates.

For a lengthy period these seemingly heavily documented estimates have been accepted by the small number of scholars working in the field. But there have also been sceptics, notably Jan de Vries, the most influential investigator of world urbanization between the early 16th and the beginning of the 19th centuries: de Vries has dismissed Chandler and Fox's estimates as next to worthless.(2) Self-evidently, sources for cities in the period between the early modern era and the immediate past are much more reliable than those relating to the ancient and medieval worlds and here exceptionally detailed summary accounts have been provided by Jan de Vries and B. R. Mitchell.(3)

There can be little doubt that for the ancient and medieval world size still matters. Some of the reasons have been succinctly summarized by the classical scholar, Walter Scheidel, who

has recently published a telling paper on the venerable issue of the scale of the population of ancient Rome at the height of the Empire. Scheidel is more concerned with what he calls the 'logic' of the debate than proposing a compromise between those who continue to believe that we are dealing with a figure close to a round million and others convinced that the city at the height of the Empire probably housed around half that number.

In Scheidel's view, lack of scholarly agreement has socio-economic and human as well as demographic import. On the explicitly demographic front, disagreement has had an adverse knock-on effect both in relation to the population history of Italy, and by extension, that of the entire Empire. In addition, scholarly schism makes it exceptionally difficult to arrive at estimates of GDP and hence also approximate *per capita* income. (Solid economic data here is even scarcer than material on demographic processes.)

Scheidel's far-reaching conclusion is that disagreement about the demographic facts and figures undermines a deeper understanding of Roman history and society as a totality. In his view, the GDP issue in particular stymies nothing less than an understanding of Roman 'human development'.⁽⁴⁾ Within the present context, and given Seidel's warnings, Greg Clark's omission of demographic data in relation to 'prominence' is probably a sensible decision. Indeed, looking at the contemporary world, we might well conclude that population size is a secondary factor in relation to globality and influence in a number of important ways.

Clark's overview provides a useful account of the history of world and global cities in a style that clearly privileges the present and the future of these extraordinary twentieth and early twenty first century phenomena. Posing the question *What is Urban History?* Shane Ewen is more concerned with disciplinary development, theory and method. His chapters – on the growth and diversification of the discipline, 'spaces and identities', government, environment, modernity and transnational analysis – provide the best overview of the subject that has yet been published. Ewen's book also provides an exceptionally interesting account of the way in which urban history has changed since the beginning of the 20th century.

Germany and the USA took the lead: Britain was a late starter.

Ewen also reports on important linkages between past and present, something that would almost certainly have been decried in the 1960s and 1970s. This thematic decision takes him into the kind of territory that lies at the heart of Clark's account. Here there is a revealing account of the work of Gyan Prakash and the Mumbai Studies Group.⁽⁵⁾ In a nation in which over a third of the population now live in towns and cities and which now boasts nearly 50 urban centres with populations of over a million, Mumbai, with approximately 18 million inhabitants, is characterized by barely credible differentials in environmental conditions, standards of living and life expectation at birth. It stands as an extreme example of problems confronting every urban centre aspiring to become a global city. Living on a pittance, an overwhelming proportion of Mumbai's inhabitants earn a bread-line living working in casual (or, more euphemistically, 'informal') urban labour markets.

At the same time, increasingly Europeanized members of the professional classes seek lifestyles that emulate everyday life in Paris, London and New York. Unsurprisingly, Prakash points to neo-liberalism and globalization as central explanations for widening differentials in wealth and income between the poor and poverty-stricken and the well-to-do, the affluent, the rich and the super-rich. As we have seen, these twin concepts can get in the way rather than illuminate causal processes. But here they seem pretty much to fit the explanatory bill.

One other point needs to be made about the new mass urbanization. The rate at which villagers are leaving the countryside to resettle in near-global centres is rising even more rapidly than in nations which have already reached the point at which more than half the population already live in towns and cities. There is no logical or *a priori* point at which the process will either decelerate or come to an end. The rush to the city will continue.

In China, political leaders and policy-makers have belatedly realized that the regeneration of a more economically enticing rural sector might possibly take the edge off the rate at which

young people head for the economic and cultural promises of massive cities. At the moment, however, this is a distant vision, not least because of the impact of the billions of seductive internet images that flood into increasing numbers of village communities. These create a wholly imaginary world and one that has next to nothing to do with 21st-century Shanghai or Guangzhou. Here, again, a straightforward global kind of explanation appears to do at least some of the work required of it, although a good deal more needs to be said in detail about instantaneous space-time compression.

Within a British academic context, Shane Ewen takes us back to a period in which small numbers of urban historians often found themselves working in non-urban academic environments or university departments, whose primary function it was to explore economic and social dimensions of the past rather than the specifics of the structure and texture of daily existence in towns and cities. Ewen correctly emphasizes the achievement of, first, H. J. Dyos and David Reeder, and later Richard Rodger at the University of Leicester. Wherever one lived and worked in the early days of British urban history, 'Leicester' constituted a kind of academic and psychological lode-star. Each of the academic and organizational pioneers worked selflessly for the creation and continuing existence of the Urban History Group (UHG) and the creation of a Centre for Urban History.

At the beginning – and quite a bit later – there were threats to the continuity of a still in some ways rootless and under-funded discipline. But slowly multidisciplinary approaches fully established themselves and annual meetings of the UHG began to attract scholars from Europe, Scandinavia and the USA. These latter participants greatly enjoyed the informality of an event that they found more stimulating and relaxing than comparable gatherings back home. This was British history-making at its very best.

Any scholar (like the present writer) who developed his or her skills in the 1960s and 1970s will have gone through a quite different kind of experience from those whose work is described and evaluated in Shane Ewen's overview. In those days urban history seemed to be about concrete localities and environments. Identity was relatively non-problematic. The spatial dimension had yet fully to secure a place on the agenda. Theory hadn't made its presence felt. Nor had the mercifully brief 'conversion' to postmodernism. There had been no 'turns'. (Ewen over-uses this term.) Engagement with urban-environmental history lay in the future: and the same was the case with modernism.

It was a different world. Nevertheless, here and now urban history is a much more exciting, rewarding and revealing discipline. Fully to appreciate that point one need only skim the pages of *Urban History* and the *American Journal of Urban History*.

I only have only one major problem with Shane Ewen's book. Do the chapter headings implicitly exaggerate the extent to which a majority of mainstream urban historians drew on each or any of the historiographical innovations to which he refers? My own view would be that the dominant mode of analysis was and remains 'eclectic empiricism'.

Notes

1. Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (Oxford, 2001).
2. See here Tertius Chandler and Gerald Fox, *3000 Years of Urban Growth* (London, 1974) and George Modelski, *World Cities -3000–2000* (Washington, DC, 2003). See also Meredith Reba *et al*, 'Spacializing 6000 years of global urbanization – From 3700 BC to AD2000', *Scientific Data* (2016) <<https://www.ncbi.nih.gov/articles/PMC4896125>> [accessed 16 February 2017]. The criticisms of Chandler, Fox and Modelski by Jan de Vries can be found in Jan de Vries, *European Urbanization, 1500–1800* (London, 1984), p. 18.

3. De Vries, *European Urbanization* and B. R. Mitchell, *International Historical Statistics: Europe, 1750–2003* (Basingstoke, 2003). Mitchell has also published companion volumes on each of the world's continents.
4. Walter Scheidel, 'Roman population size: the logic of the debate', *Princeton-Stanford Working Papers in Classics* (July 2007).
5. The full story can be found in Gyan Prakash, *Mumbai Fables* (Princeton, NJ, 2010).

Author's Response

Shane Ewen

I am very grateful to Bill Luckin for his positive review of my book. I am particularly pleased that he thinks the book provides 'the best overview of the subject that has yet been published.' Polity's *What is History?* series contains some excellent titles written by highly regarded authors; several have been well-thumbed by this author over the years and it is exciting to think that this book could encourage future generations of historians to pay closer attention to 'the urban' variable in their research. That really is the purpose of the book: to encourage others to write their own urban histories by adding to the rich historiography that has appeared over the past century or so.

When I was researching the book, I struggled to find similar books that provided either a global or a historical synthesis of the field, certainly any that had been published since the early 1980s (it is, then, pleasing to see Luckin's accompanying review of Greg Clark's short history of global cities, which I must now read myself). I soon found out why this was the case, of course, and inevitably had to make difficult choices about the nature and scope of my book, which I explain in my introduction.

The next challenge was to write a synthesis of the vast scholarship that has been published over the past century. The book reflects what I think have been the main developments in the field, as well as the major waves (or 'turns') that have shaped the thematic approach taken by historians. They have shaped me as an urban historian. This inevitably took me to the main periodicals in the field: *Urban History* (published since 1974), the *Journal of Urban History* (since 1974), and the *Urban History Review/Revue d'histoire urbaine* (since 1972). I found the Bibliography of Urban History, published annually in *Urban History*, of particular use in compiling my own reading lists.

Aside from a passing comment criticising my over-use of the phrase 'turn' in the book (I have just found 36 uses of the word in the manuscript, with four specific methodological 'turns' in the sense that I think Luckin refers to in his review, so he may well be right), Luckin only raises one significant query about the book. He poses the question, 'Do the chapter headings implicitly exaggerate the extent to which a majority of mainstream urban historians drew on each or any of the historiographical innovations to which he refers? My own view would be that the dominant mode of analysis was and remains "eclectic empiricism".'

I'm not entirely clear who or what constitutes a 'mainstream' urban historian, but I don't think that the headings exaggerate what we do; if anything, they simplify it. The question does, however, raise two broadly overlapping and interesting areas of concern: first, how we *do* history, and, second, how we *organise* our historical writings.

Firstly, it will come as no surprise to anyone that I agree with Luckin's final statement: the vast majority of practising urban historians today, in Britain and further afield, are fundamentally empiricist in their approach. I certainly self-identify with the phrase 'eclectic empiricism' and may use it myself in future conversations with students (I have generally referred to myself as a 'new empiricist' after years of teaching historical theory modules). In my own research, I have drawn upon a great number and variety of eclectic sources, ranging from more conventional sources (council minute books, maps and trade directories) to less traditional sources such as advertisements, photographs and material objects, including the

built environment (indeed, I, like so many budding urbanists, was taught to walk the streets looking up at the surrounding buildings, as well as down at the pavement). They present a multiplicity of eclectic voices about the urban experience – those of the conventional urban ‘elite’ (this too is an increasingly over-used word), the professional expert, and the worker all feature strongly in in my published work.

Having said that, urban historians continue to be influenced by ideas, concepts and theories in their research, and I set out to give a flavour of these in the book. Theories and concepts do provide a way that we can organise our method of enquiry; they generate coherent links between our city case studies. As I write in my introduction, urban history has enjoyed an elasticity in its treatment of discipline, methodology and theory, which we wear lightly on our sleeves. Luckin is, however, right that we should not be stymied by theory, hence the book is rooted in concrete examples and case studies.

Secondly, onto the organisation of the book. The chapter headings – including the sub-headings – are there to organise, condense, simplify and make sense of the huge volume of urban histories published over the past century or more. The toughest aspect of writing this book was choosing which authors and texts to read. Had I not taken a thematic approach I would probably still be researching the book!

In this aspect, I was led by my own training in urban history. And, yes, I too am a graduate of ‘Leicester’ and its Centre for Urban History. Luckin’s right: ‘Leicester’ really is ‘a kind of academic and psychological lode-star’ as I and others can testify. As a student on its MA in Urban History (1999–2000), we studied, amongst other things, the early modern town and the Victorian city, through reference to appropriate theory as well as historiography. In so doing, we generally took a thematic approach to weekly classes: power, politics, identity, economy, culture, planning and so on. The common variable was always ‘the urban’, whether we were discussing the Reformation town or the garden city.

I take the chapter headings as signposts for the reader – here is a chapter predominantly about politics and government, there a chapter on culture, and so on. They reflect some of the key areas that urban historians have been working on in recent years: scrolling through the past issues of the periodicals reveals these as well-established or emerging (in the case of transnational and environmental approaches) subjects of inquiry. The sub-headings further organise the text around specific groups (the middle classes and the urban poor in the case of chapter two) or waves of scholarship (chapter three, with its shifting emphasis from the composition of urban councils (‘government’) to the practices of government (‘governmentality’) does this reasonably well I think). Each chapter contains a short section outlining the significance of the theme before moving on to discuss the different ways that historians have used it to frame their research. The book, whilst only 50,000 words long, is not intended to be read in a single sitting (the internet generation can only digest small chunks of text in bursts of activity, after all).

I am glad that the book has already generated debate in the reviews that have appeared. This can only be positive for the future direction (or turns!) that the field takes.