Urban Space in Perspective: An Interview with Matthew Gandy

Aaron Henry

Aaron Henry[1] (AH): You have suggested that the process of urbanization is too complex to be captured by a narrow theoretical framework. Instead, you have utilized an interdisciplinary perspective that combines a number of fields. Can you expand on the analytics you use to put these fields in conversation with one another?

Matthew Gandy[2] (MG): The challenge of interdisciplinarity is one of the intellectual driving forces behind my work. But interdisciplinarity presents us with a profound paradox. On the one hand, as Andrew Barry and other scholars have shown, the movement towards greater interdisciplinarity reflects an emerging emphasis by governments and funding agencies on making scientific research more "useful" and responsive to the needs of a wider spectrum of so-called "stakeholders". On the other hand, however, the types of research questions we need to pose in order to make sense of urban space necessarily entail the use of more than one discipline, and may extend to radically distinct bodies of knowledge. The field of interdisciplinary research is often conceptualized as an interaction between the social and natural sciences, a dialogue that is most frequently invoked in relation to urban environmental challenges.

---

1 Aaron Henry is a PhD candidate at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Carleton University. His research is focused on the Hudson Bay Company and the formation of colonial registers of territory as a technology of primitive accumulation. Other research interests include: state formation, natural history as a conduct of social-spatial inspection, and late nineteenth century projects of pacification.

2 Matthew Gandy is Professor of Geography at University College London. His book *Concrete and Clay: Reworking Nature in New York City* (MIT Press, 2002) was co-winner of the 2003 Spiro Kostof award for the book within the previous two years "that has made the greatest contribution to our understanding of urbanism and its relationship with architecture." He is currently completing three book manuscripts: *The Fabric of Space: Water, Modernity, and the Urban Imagination* (MIT Press), *Moth* (Reaktion animal series), and a co-edited collection *The Acoustic City* (Jovis). Since 2013 he has been co-editor of *The International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*.

Yet these earlier attempts at interdisciplinarity, that we could extend to the appropriation of ecological metaphors by the Chicago School of Sociology, have almost invariably proved unsatisfactory. A typical outcome has been an unreflective extension of one epistemological approach into an unrelated domain or the misapplication of scientific metaphors (a trend observable in more pretentious forms of architectural discourse). So how should we do interdisciplinary work? I would suggest that a first step must be to take seriously the work of different disciplines to understand better their specific agendas, methodologies, and expository strategies. If I draw on art history to analyze cultural representations of cities I want to be sure that I understand the types of key debates in pages of journals such as *October* that clearly speak to my concerns. Equally, if I want to include epidemiological aspects to urban landscapes or appreciate the wider scientific context for protecting urban bio-diversity I need to examine those fields carefully before attempting to combine aspects of the bio-physical sciences with a historically and geographically nuanced approach to the analysis of the production of urban space.

The example of art history is significant since the widely held conception of interdisciplinary work as an intellectual pivot between the natural and social sciences can effectively exclude the humanities and a whole raft of critical insights. It is better, I think, to conceive of interdisciplinarity as a triangulation between the social sciences, the natural sciences, and the humanities. I have used this "triangulation" in my recent research on Gilles Clement's design for Parc Henri Matisse in Lille in response to recent debates about the "rewilding" of urban space and new approaches to urban design. In this context I have been reflecting on the status of an artificially created "urban island" in relation to its ecological dynamics, symbolic significance, and wider connections to urban land speculation. Like much of my work the starting point was serendipitous (in this case a chance visit to an exhibition in Montreal) and evolved gradually through a process of close engagement with specific sites.

AH: You have focused on the technological mastery of water and malaria and its relation to the constitution of urban space in Lagos, Nigeria. How does linking ecological and epidemiological projects to the formation of urban space allow us to resituate the colonial dimensions of capital accumulation?

MG: I think a starting point here is to acknowledge that any urban project is simultaneously an environmental project. The transformation of urban space entails a complex set of ecological and epidemiological effects ranging from new types of metabolic interactions with the human body to the destruction and creation of distinctive types of ecological assemblages. In the case of colonial Egypt, for example, Timothy Mitchell shows how the imposition of a particular conception of technocratic modernity, exemplified by large-scale irrigation, generated a public health crisis through the spread of malaria. In my own work on Lagos I have been interested in the way new insights into the epidemiology of malaria emerging in the late nineteenth century became incorporated into a form of "scientific racism" that fed into governmental concerns with residential segregation and essentialist understandings of cultural difference. The persistence of malaria in Lagos through both the colonial and post-colonial era has occurred in spite of attempts to drain swamps and alter the "disease topography" of the city and its surroundings. In my recent writing on Lagos I show how the first serious attempt to control malaria occurred for geo-political reasons during the Second World War. The Apapa air base near Lagos served as the main staging post for British troops in North Africa but because of extensive illness that interfered with military operations a vast swamp drainage programme was initiated in the 1940s that also helped to protect the city of Lagos itself. By the late 1950s Nigeria was a focus for public health optimism about the eradication of malaria, tuberculosis, and other diseases through a kind of science-led technocratic modernity but in subsequent decades many of these assumptions behind global health policy have unraveled. With the effective collapse of the Nigerian economy in the 1980s and infrastructure planning in disarray it has been possible for malaria and other infectious diseases to become more prevalent in urban areas. The history of malaria, through both the colonial and post-colonial era, serves a poignant indicator for wider tensions and contradictions underlying the development of Lagos and its changing socio-ecological dynamics.

AH: In a recent talk entitled "Mosquitoes, Modernity and Post-colonial Lagos" you suggested Lagos may be thought of as "a partial modernity", "or as a space outside or in distinction of modernity". Arguably, this assessment places modernity on one side as the instrumental rationalization of social, political and ecological processes and the chaos of failed or non-existent attempts to rationalize social life on the other. Yet the western imaginary of the city seems increasingly preoccupied by

'failure' and 'chaos' (e.g. feral cities, the failed city, militarized cities and urban-centered catastrophe). Does this perhaps complicate the 'North' and 'Global South's' 'custody' agreement on modernity?

MG: The term "partial modernity", which I used at my public lecture in Newcastle, denoted the failure of a particular model of technocratic modernity exported from Europe. It is important to recognize that modernity is not a singular teleological process but an array of simultaneous, overlapping, and sometimes contradictory developments. To think of modernity as a multiplicity of forms helps to de-centre urban discourse and avoid Manichean distinctions that fail to recognize the global interconnectedness of urban space.

AH: You have historicized urban space from the nineteenth century 'bacteriological city' to contemporary urban spaces constituted through 'municipal managerialism'. How, if at all, have environmental concerns shaped the constitution of urban space? Has the recent focus on green cities/technologies disrupted spaces of municipal managerialism or served as a means to further mobilize these processes?

MG: It is certainly the case that histories of engineering, planning or other professional fields tend to overstate their influence over the urban process. The classic critique here is Christine M. Boyer's book *Dreaming the Rational City* where she re-interprets the practice of planning within a broader historical and political context. Boyer's account is especially helpful in thinking through the dissolution of the "public interest" as a self-evident or unproblematic focus for professional discourses. The identification of various periodizations can be helpful, certainly in a heuristic sense, but I think terms such as the "bacteriological city" or "municipal managerialism" need to be used in combination with a broader explanatory framework. There is a tendency in much historiographic research to look for patterns, phases, and distinctions that can sometimes obscure interconnected and overlapping sets of developments. I think it is more interesting to reflect on how conceptual terms such as "modernity" have been used in practice rather than worry too much about semantic distinctions. The recent upsurge of "green urbanism" or "ecological urbanism" is a case in point. The speculative dynamics of contemporary urbanization have cannibalized any available vocabulary to provide an ecological veneer to the oxymoronic dimensions to sustainability. The tragedy for municipal managerialism has been the brutal divestment of the public

realm and the shattering of links between environmental policy and the democratic arena. The possibilities for strategic thinking that might have been achieved via the relative autonomy of the state and its cadre of technical experts has been so extensively circumscribed that the very idea of "public policy" now lies in a zone of conceptual limbo. Where does expertise now lie in relation to urban and environmental policy making? In the case of London the disbandment of the city's regional government in 1986, followed by the re-introduction of a weaker successor authority in 2000, has involved a process of dismemberment and scattering of public sector expertise. In fields such as bio-diversity, for example, London now lacks dedicated scientific personnel, systematic data collection, or a coherent strategy for the future. Interestingly, in other cities such as Berlin, we can observe how failed privatizations have opened up the possibility for essential services such as water and other utilities to be taken back into public ownership. Perhaps what is most critical here is the political need to dispel the deleterious neoliberal mantra of only one pathway and enable an informed citizenry to wrestle back control of urban space.

AH: In *Concrete and Clay: Reworking Nature in New York City*, you discuss the environmental politics in New York City around waste management. What does the political scale of the city offer environmental politics, is it an expedient scale for radical political action?

MG: I have also been reflecting on this question of scale. I think perhaps there are two dimensions here. First, the scale of urbanization itself and the "ecological frontiers" and "operational landscapes" engendered by the process of urbanization. We can usefully return to Henri Lefebvre's distinction between cities and urbanization as is currently underway in the "planetary urbanization" project developed by Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid. Second, there are the various spaces within which political action and public deliberation can take place. The emergence of a digital public realm is producing new types of intersections and alliances between material locales and different bodies of knowledge. At the same time, however, the massive increase in global inequalities and the etiolated "post-political" characteristics of much policy discourse generates new tensions exemplified by the rise of xenophobia, anti-political movements, and a pervasive sense of confusion and disorientation fostered by corporate-owned media networks and what we might term the "culture industry" in its broadest sense. Recent grassroots insurgencies

such as the Occupy Movement have been highly significant in terms of highlighting injustices and attracting global attention but they do not yet offer a coherent political strategy.

AH: The 'spatial-turn' has brought critical geography to the fore as an important set of analytics. What do you think critical geography can do to help unpack ongoing strategies and projects of austerity in urban spaces?

MG: A key aspect of the "spatial turn" is a cross-fertilization of ideas since the 1990s that forms part of the impetus towards more interdisciplinary modes of scholarship that I alluded to earlier in this interview. The term "critical geography", however, is not as straightforward as it might appear since its use does not so much denote the radical neo-Marxian insights of the 1970s and 1980s but to some degree their relative displacement by other approaches in the 1990s that have been loosely grouped under the umbrella of postmodernism. In contrast, I am interested in thinking through critical geography as a radical synthesis between the neo-Marxian heritage of radical geography and more recent insights from feminism, queer theory, post-colonial studies and other fields. The Just Space network in London, involving many of my colleagues at University College London, is a clear example of how critical geography can enrich the public sphere and contribute towards the articulation of alternative strategies for cities. If we want to challenge "austerity urbanism" we need to draw on all the intellectual resources at our disposal.