Knowledge for Change

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Urban Imaginations and the social dynamics of the 21st century

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What knowledge for what?

Social knowledge differs from the knowledge which the modern hard sciences deal with and produce.

A major problem of social science, and of social cognition generally, including the one used by politicians and managers, is the abundance of social knowledge. Even if we, with quite a bit of nonchalance, neglect the knowledge of children under fifteen, there are about 5.5 billion human social knowers in today's world. One reason why social scientists do not get a Nobel Prize is probably that we have too many competitors.

Most of the knowledge of this 5.5 billion is local, partial and narrowly circumscribed, and a good part of it is likely to be unstable, unreliable, and/or biased. But it is there, to be neglected only at one's peril. And we are all here, lay people and credentialed social scientists alike, products as well as members of this planet of 5.5 billion social knowers, and furthermore surrounded by 1.9 billion children who are also knowledgeable.

Everyone who wants to know the social world enough to understand, explain, and/or change it has to learn how to navigate this ocean of local and partial knowledge. This is being done in two ways, both involving adherence to some existing discourse or perspective, but one driven by stories, values, and beliefs, the other by curiosity, above all. The former leads to religions or secular ideologies or worldviews, the other to social science, in the broad sense. However, perspectives of curiosity are also in ample supply. You have to make more choices. A good way to start is to get a grasp of the range of major offers, about society generally as well as, e.g., perspectives on the city.

Where is society?

The path of social curiosity first led to philosophy, and then from the mid-l8th century increasingly to social science. But what is the social, where is it to be found? Where is society? In its quarter-millennium history, social scientists have given four different answers about their object. The first was the universe, perceived in evolution, from agrarian to commercial, from capitalist to socialist, from military to industrial,

from traditional to rational. The hecatomb of WWI shattered the optimism and evolutionary progress, and university inroads required stronger empirical credentials of social science. The new response was that the social was local, in the cities of North America and Western Europe, or in pre-industrial villages of Africa and Asia.

The third answer was, society is national, the social circumscribed by nation-state boundaries. Sustained by new methodologies, sampling surveys and national accounting, it emerged in the USA in the l930s, and hit Europe and the rest of the world after WWII.

Fourthly, and currently, the hegemonic answer is, society is global. It was originally inspired by studies of the "development of underdevelopment" in Africa and Latin America, and first staked its paradigmatic claim in l974, with Immanuel Wallerstein's *The Modern World System*. From the l980s the globality of the social became mainstream, fuelled by capitalist "globalization", and empirically sustained by the global data collectors of the UN, with its specialized agencies and its regional development banks, the World Bank, and global survey projects.

The crucial difference between social knowledge as universal – the aim and product of the natural sciences – and as global is this. A universal human history is differential development – whether genetically precoded (according to racism) or by natural selection out of accidental circumstances and events. A global history, on the other hand, while possibly evolving by cultural selection, is first of all characterized by cultural variation and unequal interaction. In contrast to the universal, what is global is always delimited in time and space in some sense.

A global conception of social knowledge does not entail that everybody in the field of social science has to make global comparisons. Local expertise is not losing its value. What a global conception of the social entails most directly is that you, your study, your city, is best understood if also placed in a global context.

However, adherence to and training in a discipline of social cognition is not sufficient to cope with the waves of social knowledge rolling around you. In order not to be only a believer, you have to be self-consciously and historically aware, having a reflective notion of knowledge.

For emancipation – and for domination

In mainstream Greek philosophy, in the Renaissance, and in the Enlightenment, knowledge is a key to freedom and emancipation. Kant summed up this strand of thought in his slogan for the Enlightenment, *Sapere aude!*, Dare to know! This was directed against superstition, mythology, and dogma. Most, perhaps all, of us here see us as heirs of

this tradition, against anachronistic fundamentalisms and current "fake news" and "alternative facts".

But there is also another conception of knowledge, highly relevant to the knowledge economy of today. It derives from a critique of the Enlightenment – not from the counter-Enlightenment of religious and monarchist reaction –, adumbrated by Nietzsche and developed by Michel Foucault. Knowledge is also a means of domination, of "governmentality", for the governing of populations, and, increasingly in the contemporary economy, a means of exploitation.

The exploitative nexus of the current knowledge economy is well illustrated by the cost structure of Apple's iPhone 7. One third of the US sales price goes to bought components and the cost of manufacturing it is 0.8 percent. The rest sixty-five per cent is profit, for the designers and the shareholders (estimates by *Fortune* magazine 20.9.2016, fortune.com)

Another aspect of the knowledge economy worth thinking about at least twice is consumer surveillance. Google, Amazon, down to your local food store keep track of you and of what you buy, directing their weapons of persuasion accordingly.

The dialectic of social cognition

Social cognition is very much a process of handling contradictions and conflicts. It therefore requires an awareness of its dialectic.

There is a tension and a potential conflict between, on one hand an anthropological and/or political respect for all human knowers, including the poorest ones, especially of their personal experience, and, on the other, a scholar's task of questioning and critiquing all existing knowledge as possibly unreliable, biased or false.

The social world often has to be understood not only as it is, but also for what it is not. Empirical research should investigate not only what exists, but also what does not, what is absent or missing. Often it is fruitful to search extra for the opposite of what exists, for instance counter-power in studies of power. And the hopes of the World Social Fora can sometimes function as a good research strategy; other worlds are possible.

A critical scepticism towards prevailing opinions of the world is part of the scholarly mind, in particular towards media-multiplied opinion, driven as it very often is by unreflected herd behaviour. But also towards collegial research, that is why we have this institutionalized practice of peer reviews. However, scepticism and caution may lead to overlooking latent phenomena and just emergent tendencies. Empirical research has an inbuilt conservative bias, with a small c, disregarding subterranean,

social processes. The firmest evidence tends to be found in what is firmly established. That is why opinion polls sometimes fail miserably.

Moving our investigatory sight from the local or the national to the global, as social science has been doing in recent decades, is not simply a straight extension of one's vision. It is imperative to search for the global impact in the local city or the national state, as well as for the local and national variations which make up the global.

A practitioner of social science, from your first student paper to your post-retirement writings, has to be committed to cognitive objectivity and to objective knowledge. This does not necessarily imply diplomatic politeness nor "balanced" presentations of "on one hand, and on the other". It means a commitment to objective truth claims, "X is A and not AB or B", and you must have reliable evidence for your claim. At the same time, you will be a better researcher to the extent that you are aware of why you want to know about X, and not (so much) about Y or Z. There is a fruitful dialectic also between objectivity and self-reflexivity.

The knowledge for change requested by Malmö University should in my humble, but strong, opinion be global and dialectical, including not only what is but also what is absent or lacking, not only what exists but also its opposites and what might be emerging. A progressive, self-reflective "knowledge city" should be aware of the Janus face of knowledge, freedom and emancipation on one side, domination and exploitation on the other.

Urbanization and Re-Urbanization, and imaginations of the city

The kind of change I shall touch upon here refers to cities and to processes of Urbanization and Re-Urbanization.

Cities are built human environments above a certain, never consensually defined, density and size. As such a city is, as the great 20th century urbanist Lewis Mumford (*The Culture of Cities* 1938) said, "...the point of maximum concentration for the power and culture of a community ..."

Since the UN in 2007 without any clear criteria proclaimed that the majority of humankind had become city dwellers, cities have become the new social hype, and "urbanization" replacing the aging "globalization" of the l990s as the buzzword of social conversation. Most recently, the ruling Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia has launched crash entertainment urbanization as a rescue of a bored and idle Saudi Arabian youth from oppositionism.

From perspectives of science and culture studies cities are fascinating for their attraction as meeting-places of many very different disciplines, of

economics and anthropology, of political science and geography, of social work and demography, of sociology and cultural history, of economic history and architecture, and of each of these with everybody else. Cities are where strangers meet, including cultures and disciplines who are strangers to each other.

City perspectives of Eagles, Creators, and Frogs

The contemporary literature on cities is vast and sprawling. But three major mainstream strands dominating the general urbanist vision may be discerned, alongside specialized side-currents preoccupied with urban rebellions of various kinds, or ecological challenges and urban sustainability.

There is an eagle perspective of global political economy, to which cities appear from high up, without any visible social life, as specks in network lines of business transactions and of communication. A few "global" or "world" cites stand out as hubs in these networks. The landmark work is Saskia Sassen's *The Global City* which with perfect timing appeared in l991, just after globalist, neoliberal politics and financial capital had won decisive battles for New York, Tokyo, and London. Sassen herself is too sophisticated and progressive a sociologist to be a booster of the global city race, so the paradigmatic work of the genre, focusing on business and communication connectivity and on ranking of corporate business sites, is best represented by Peter Taylor and his Chinese and other associates, exemplified in their *Global Urban Analysis* (2011).

This business perspective, concentrating on post-industrial global competitiveness, is a recent genre; its Ur-text, by the Los Angeles urban planner John Friedmann, "*The World City* Hypothesis" appeared in l986[1]. It rapidly gained a hegemonic position in the international urban literature. It seems to provide the favourite, if not the only, lens through which urban planners of Stockholm and Malmö look at their city in the world.

The two other dominant approaches have much longer pedigrees. The second is concentrated on the meaning of urban living. It started out in early sociology, with Georg Simmel's l903 essay *Die Grosstädte und das Geistesleben* and continued in the post WWI Chicago School of sociology, where Louis Wirth published a seminal article, "Urbanism as a Way of Life", in l938.

However, with the expansion of urbanization, urbanism as a sociological "way of life" became banal, and the predominant interpretations of the meaning of urban life came to focus on creators and creations of urban

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[1] *In Development and Change* vol. 17 (pp. 69-83)

culture and on the role of cities in civilizations and epochs of high culture This classical tradition of urban cultural history was summed up in a grand manner by Peter Hall's *Cities in Civilization* (l998). In recent times the most fashionable writer of the genre has probably been Richard Florida and his lionizing of an urban "creative class", the recruitment of which cities had better compete for, by cultural amenities and sexual diversity, in *Cities and the Creative Class* (2004). This was another obligatory read, for a while, among urban managers and politicians following intellectual fashion.

Thirdly, there is a strand of urban imagination mainly concerned with cities as specific forms of social organization. The oldest part of it, as sketched out by Robert Park et al. of the Chicago School of urban sociology in *The City* (l925), dealt with the spatial patterning of urban economic functions and their paths of growth. Another, specialized in studying the architecture of urban forms, streets, squares, grids, skyline etc., the magnum opus of which is Spiro Kostof's *The City Shaped* and *The City Assembled* (1991 and 1999, respectively).

More recently, this vision of the city has turned more into another direction. Because of its pronounced from-the-bottom approach, we might, with all due respect, call it a frog perspective. It comes with an epistemological and a political mission, "See like a city", alluding to a modern classic of political anthropology, the anarchist critique by James C. Scott of *Seeing like a state* (l998). This take on cities was launched in 2008 by a Canadian political scientist, Warren Magnusson. The title was recycled in 2017 by two sophisticated British geographers, Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift, with an emphasis on the material infrastructure of cities. In the US, this perspective has gained traction among liberal academics frustrated by national American politics, with a gridlocked Congress under liberal Obama and currently governed by illiberal Trumpism. The late Bernard Barber's 2013 book *If Mayors Ruled the World* sums up the political program.

While the third view seems to be growing in popularity for the moment, the two first mentioned have been damaged by the financial crisis and by accumulating, in many places accelerating, inequality. The financial crash demonstrated that even the biggest "global cities" were not disconnected from their respective nation-states, to whose Treasuries their bankers had to run for cover and for bail-out money. In his latest book, *The New Urban Crisis* (2017) Richard Florida has left the hype of the creators for a dark painting of urban inequality and polarization.

All the three mainstream imaginations of the city have stimulated interesting and important research. But in my opinion they are all unduly reductionist as general guides to urban studies. The eagle perspective of the political economy approach reduces urbanity to zip codes of corporate headquarters. Its dismissal of the significance of nation-states is

clearly wrong, and ironically so, as London and New York as cities have less autonomy than many, including Swedish ones. The London Mayor and his government are heavily dependent on the national state financially as well as legally. New York City is bound by the laws, the planning prerogatives, and the tax system of New York state. The cultural approach has become too infatuated with high culture and its creators, and tends to bypass the political contexts of cities and their majority of ordinary people. The frog sub-state vision of cities is just wishing away the state and power contexts cities are operating in, like an ostrich putting its head in the sand. After all, mayors do not rule the world, and will not for the foreseeable future.

….and that of a Political Flâneur

Urban studies need a fourth imagination of the city, also, one viewing cities as constructed human environments in contexts of multidimensional power – and of counter-power. It comes from political sociology by an author who once wrote *What does the ruling class do when it rules?* (1978) and *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology* (1980). It dawned upon me in Budapest in the mid-1990s as a semester's incumbent of a European Chair of Social Policy, a job which left me with plenty of free time, which I spent walking the streets of the city studying how its dramatic history was layered in the urban landscape. Therefore it might be called the perspective of a political flâneur, adding a bit of self-irony to the slightly ironic presentation of the other perspectives. The flâneur is a product of urbanity as a way of life, an indefatigable observer of cityscapes and of urban sociability. Some people may see me as a political rebel, an epithet I take as an honour and not as an insult, but the flâneur and the scholar have the same drive, curiosity.

However, the flâneur's curiosity is typically non-committal, the gaze of a disengaged observer, and I have always been an intellectual engagé. The perspective I am going to present, which has been deployed in a global study of capital cities, *Cities of Power* (2017), had better be called, more seriously, a *power approach*.

Without ever forgetting that cities are forms of sociability, we can situate them in an analytic triangle of territory, capital and people, and in a modern time flow of national constitution, of popular contestations against the national elites, and of globalist challenges. Cities can be read as semiotic scripts of manifestations and representations of power.

The constitutive modern change of territoriality was the substitution of nation-states for princely realms, settler colonies or purely imperial colonies, which provided the institutional and socio-political framework

of modern cities. Frameworks, very different in different parts of the world, depending on the context and the pathway to a nation-state. The new nation-states and their cities all had their characteristic kinds of elites, in the non-evaluative sense of elite as a privileged minority stratum.

The bourgeois national elite of Sweden around l900, for instance, was remarkably conservative culturally and underdeveloped ideologically, as manifested in the Malmö elite's accompanying its Industrial Exhibition of 1896 with a statue in the Main Square of the 17th century warrior-king Karl X Gustav.

As a flâneur, you are collecting images, as a scholar or as a concerned citizen you try to decode the signs of the cityscape, and you try to read the story of the city from its layers of urbanity, something which also requires archival and library work. You may focus on six key variables, from which to read the city as a manifestation of power:

The spatial layout of the city, its connections and divisions of centre and periphery, its public spaces, its social use of the topography, etc.

The functionality of the city, its supply of employment and economic opportunities, urban amenities, and urban services, from basic infrastructure to housing, transport, culture and leisure.

Thirdly, the patterning of buildings, their homo- or heterogeneity, their clustering, and their hierarchy between private and public and among public buildings.

Fourthly, the architecture, but more than the style, the meaning of which is often ambiguous and historically path-dependent, the grammar of construction, e.g., the size, the distance, and the height of buildings.

Fifthly monumentality, who and what is commemorated in public monuments, art and museums?

Finally, toponymy, the naming of streets, squares, and institutions.

The dynamic contexts of city power: Territory, Capital, People

The overall city context of power can be grasped by a framework of territory, capital, and people. This triangle furthermore opens an entry to the ongoing social dynamics of this century. Cities are territorially situated, and after the eclipse of most city-states, cities are part of a larger territory, which in the modern world is normally governed by a nation-state. State constitutions provide cities with variable sets of institutional power and financial resources.

However, while the nation-state remains at a historical high plateau of its resources and capacity, the territorial make-up of the world is changing

in a number of ways and for a number of reasons. De-industrialization of the old industrial countries and new areas of industrialization is shaking up the socioeconomic topography of territories. The re-connection of Eastern and Western Europe and the new Silk Road initiatives, "One belt, one road", of China are only big examples of lots of roadmaps being redrawn. The spilling out of seemingly endless megacities are transforming vast territories. In the wake of these and similar changes, the administrative, cultural, and even political organization of territories have got unstuck. The new mass mobility across territories has made a city's built physical attraction a major economic target. Urbanist globalization, competitive skyscraping and iconicity, is virtually everywhere. It is not driven by global capital, London a rather single partial exception, but by local and national elites, economic and political, aspiring to becoming members of an imaginary de-territorialized elite club.

On a small scale, we are experiencing these territorial transformations and reorganizations in Malmö, with the bridge and the integrating Öresund region, with the return of a Baltic vista, and the new, half-suspended regional reorganization of Sweden. The Turning Torso and Malmö Live bear witness of the city's attempts at competing in the new territorial game.

Modern cities are usually centres of capital and of capital accumulation. In the cities of capitalist countries, capital has therefore usually been a major urban power, even under conditions of universal suffrage. In the post-industrial areas of the world, this is now becoming much more pronounced. Finance, real estate, the so-called event industry, and digital design are all eminently urban avenues to enrichment. The urban power of capital has increased enormously in recent years, for two main reasons at least. One is that the post-industrial sectors of central capital accumulation are much less dependent labour, and in particular on local labour. The other is the enormous upscaling of accumulation under global financialized conditions. In l963/64 Sweden's five wealthiest families owned together 1.17% of the country's GDP. By 2016, the then five richest owned 23.5% of Swedish GDP.[2]

People are the third side of the triangle in which the power context of cities is shaped. In national European cities, popular challenges derived historically first of all from the working class and the labour movement. The most developed form of a popular contestation of the national elites in Europe was municipal socialism, urban labour governments concentrating on popular housing, support for the needy, and culture for

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[2] 1963/64 from M. Henrekson, "Kapitalägare då och nu …". In B. Swedenborg (ed.), *Svensk ekonomisk politik* (2015). p. 165; 2016 calculated from *Veckans Affärer* December 2017 p. 38 and Swedish national accounts from Statistics Sweden.

the people. Vienna from l919 to l934 was the prime example, but there were many others. Malmö was the birthplace and the original centre of the labour movement in Sweden, but in Malmö as well as in Sweden as a whole a Social Democratic reform government emerged slowly and cautiously after universal municipal suffrage.

De-industrialization has eroded the basis for urban labour governments in Europe. Now, popular protest and urban action can take many other forms, civic middle class movements, youth protests, riots of "urban rage". The most effectful so far was the one stopping the widespread plans of the l950s and l960s of making cities "car-friendly" and breaking up inner cities by motorways. The movement started in Greenwich Village, New York in the late 1950s and swept over the North Atlantic area from Washington D.C. to Paris, London, Amsterdam, and Stockholm.

In popular Malmö the organized industrial working class has declined and to a large extent been replaced by little organized, often non-voting ethnic minorities. In spite of the good intentions of some politicians and concerned academics, expressed in programs like Welfare for All, and the launching of the excellent Malmö Commission, Malmö has become an almost model polarized city, on one side a shining, eagerly globalizing city manifesting the power of capital and the upper middle class, and on the other, by Swedish standards, exceptional poverty and inequality. Among all Sweden's 290 municipalities, Malmö has the largest proportion of people in relative poverty, 22.6 percent.[3]

The powerlessness of the many is a major problem.

Conclusion: A triple vocation of Malmö University

Malmö has, I think, a triple vocation. First, as indicated by its chosen theme for its inaugural series of lectures, it seems to be assuming a self-reflective conception of knowledge and knowledge production, a reflexivity which becomes a new university, standing on the shoulders of predecessors, and for which I would underline a couple of points:

- the ambiguity of knowledge, a means of emancipation, of freedom and equality, but also of domination and exploitation, an ambiguity which appears both in the knowledge economy and the knowledge city, and

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[3] The share refers to disposable income among households (adjusted for composition) of people 20+ in 2014. Data come from Statistics Sweden and have been put together by Anna Almqvist, *Regional ojämlikhet i Sverige* (LO 2016) p. 7.

- the dialectical character of social cognition, a cognitive process challenged by contradictions, and enriched by them, to the extent you are aware of and coping with them.

The second vocation is global, a global vision of society and the social is what is driving contemporary social science. And, situated close to the two much older and established universities of Copenhagen and Lund, and in a major entry port of Sweden, a new Malmö University cannot afford to be provincial. In order to make any intellectual sense it has to be globally oriented, a global watchtower of Sweden. To natural scientists this means to compete ambitiously in the production of universal knowledge. To scholars in the humanities and the social sciences, the new university vocation will mean to produce and teach global knowledge including its limits and its variations. And not least, including finding out where and how in the whole world Malmö is located, and how the global operates in the local city.

Malmö University's third vocation, I think, should be urban. As an inner-city university in a city remarkably engaged with social research, and in a challenging dual city of both power and massive powerlessness. The urban imaginations on the market reflect different interests, and often not only intellectual but also economic and political. Assessing them, politicians and managers as well as academics should keep critical scepticism as the default opinion, rather than entrepreneurial enthusiasm. While thus highly respecting your scepticism, I would suggest that it may be fruitful to look at cities, including Malmö, from a perspective of power, and that the triangulation of territory, capital, and people might be useful. Territories are being re-structured. Capital is being upscaled, turning to new sources of accumulation. People are changing, but cities are built by and should be built for them.

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