

# CRITICAL RESPONSES TO THE LOS ANGELES SCHOOL OF URBANISM<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This article reviews critical responses to the Los Angeles school of urbanism that have appeared in the urban studies literature since 1986. Common categories of complaint include the accusation that LA scholarship lacked sufficient evidence to support its claims and that the language and rhetoric of the School were hyperbolic. Some criticism was also decidedly personal and discipline-specific in tone. Constructive engagement with the LA School was evident in the growing corpus of empirical and theoretical comparative urban research. In particular, recent research work of the 'New Chicago School' reveals several concordances with the LA School.

## KEY WORDS

Comparative urbanism, Los Angeles School, New Chicago School.

During the 1980s, Los Angeles became the focus of serious scholarly attention in urban geography. Introducing a special issue of the journal *Society and Space* devoted entirely to LA, Scott and Soja (1986) predicted a deluge of scholarly works that would soon eclipse established analytical traditions. In the intervening years, LA studies have tended to fall into three overlapping categories. First, there has been a cornucopia of theoretical, empirical and historical research that has consolidated the knowledge base for what was hitherto a relatively neglected city-region. Second was a concurrent realization that many of LA's issues were relevant to

scholars beyond Southern California because they added up to a distinctive break with past urban analytical traditions; these concerns became codified as an ‘LA School’ of urbanism. Third, a subset of scholars recognized in Los Angeles a particular form of contemporary urban process they labeled as ‘postmodern urbanism.’

In this essay, we designate as ‘Angelistas’ all scholars whose work focuses on one or more of these three burgeoning traditions in LA scholarship. Some urbanists happily engage in all three; others reject certain affiliations (e.g. identification with a school or with the precepts of postmodern urbanism) even as their work is resolutely LA-based. Directly or indirectly, however, Angelistas of all stripes have mounted a sustained assault on the ‘Chicago School’ of urbanism as manifest in the works of Robert Park, E.W. Burgess and their followers. In our view, the classical Chicago model is best understood as an expression of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century industrial urbanism in the US *and* as a codification of modernist principles of urbanization, most notably the logic that presupposes that a primary urban core will organize its surrounding hinterlands. But time and knowledge have moved on. In this country, classical industrial cities are no longer built, and core-hinterland relations are in flux. In this sense, the Chicago model is ‘dead’ but we insist on retaining Chicago as a point of departure because of its singular clarity in defining the modernist urban theory we seek to supplant.

As might be expected, LA research has engendered criticism, especially from Chicagonistas (defined, as before, as those taking Chicago as a research focus, and/or self-identified members of a Chicago School of diverse epistemological persuasion). Our purpose in this essay is to provide a preliminary assessment of critical responses to LA, the LA School, and postmodern urbanism; that is, to critique the critiques. We began with a systematic search of academic

journals since 1986 in the fields of American Studies, anthropology, geography, history, politics, sociology, urban planning and urban studies. We considered research articles, critical syntheses, and book reviews. Most of the articles appeared later, once the LA work had begun to permeate different fields. Since many articles mention LA only peripherally, our report highlights only those contributions with a substantial engagement; it should not be regarded as a comprehensive survey of all relevant literature on this topic. Subsequently we focused on criticism that emanates from Chicago, especially two specific sources: (1) the inaugural 2002 issue of *City and Community*, a journal of the American Sociological Association, whose lead article on the LA School was followed by five commentaries by distinguished urban sociologists; and (2) an edited collection (mostly on Chicago's urban geography) produced for the 2006 meeting of the Association of American Geographers and entitled *Chicago's Geographies: Metropolis for the 21st Century* (Greene et al., 2006). We conclude with brief remarks on what we can learn from this comparative critical analysis.

## COMPLAINTS

One of the commonest early complaints about LA scholarship was that it *lacked sufficient evidence* to support its claims. Many of these concerns surfaced in reviews of *The City*, a collection edited by Scott and Soja (1996) that included essays by several LA luminaries. More concerned with “urban theory” than “urban fact” was the response by Gordon and Richardson (1990, p. 575). Phil Ethington (1998, p. 350) warned disparagingly about “a new crop of Los Angeles boosters who... have been clamoring too loudly with too little evidence.” Historians seem suspicious of work by non-historians. For example, Michael Engh (2000, p. 1681) avers that the “absence of historians among contributors” to *The City* maroons the reader in the “weird, outlandish, and incoherent” terrain of LA. Coquery-Vidrovitch (2000, p. 1685) cautions about

“historical chapters not being written by historians,” and Jablonsky (2002, p. 321) excoriates Angelistas’ presentism. Even the usually reliable Richard Harris (2000, p. 670) is moved to articulate his preference for “systematic historical information,” and to rue the “partial amnesia” he sees in some LA histories.

Complaints about the absence of an adequate empirical base in past and present LA research are easily dismissed. To take one example: those who attacked the theoretical speculations in Dear and Flusty’s “Postmodern Urbanism” (1998) evidently overlooked the more than 150 references cited in support of their argument. Moreover, there is by now more than ample empirical evidence of LA’s urban character (see, for example, the noteworthy collection of essays in Wolch et al., 2004). But such demonstrable accumulations of evidence are unlikely to satisfy those who permit only certain kinds of evidence to enter their calculus. These solipsistic selections tell us more about the personal predilections of their authors than about LA or its scholarship. Such critics seem uncomfortable because many Angelistas have called for a complete reformulation of urban theory, insisting on a radical break with past trends and a reinvention of the very categories that are used to define urban knowledge.

The *language and rhetoric* utilized in rewriting urban theory have themselves been targeted by critics. Some dislike the term ‘school’ for instance, preferring the term ‘LA studies’ (Monahan, 2002, p. 155); others demur from what they perceive as the linguistic excess, hyperbole, and the gloomy *noir* tone that characterize the field. Hannigan (2001, p. 524) closes the door to considered debate when he refers to the “nutty notions” contained in Dear’s *The Postmodern Urban Condition*. In slightly more measured tones, Schneider (2000, pp.1668-9) claims that the “rush to proclaim the sheer novelty” of LA leads to “excessive claims” in *The City*. Most intriguing is Beauregard’s (2003) alert that the liberal use of *superlatives* in academic discourse

(the first, best, largest, etc.) is actually distorting urban scholarship (see also Brenner, 2003). Harris also worries that ‘most’ seems to be Angelistas’ “favored adjective” (Harris, 2000, p. 677). Perhaps the least expected complaint comes from those who perceive LA writing as excessively pessimistic, dystopian or apocalyptic. Gordon and Richardson (1999, p. 589) achieve their own pinnacle of rhetorical counter-flourish in this example:

...what is so distressing about this book [*The City*] is the revulsion and hate that many of its authors express about this city, this country and this economic system. Their views reinforce the worst stereotypes of Los Angeles generated by the media and by those who resent its optimism, its positive attitudes and its dreams.

In response to such complaints, let us first point out that the term ‘school’ has many useful attributes, not least its emphasis on the collective act of constructing social knowledge, the alternative it offers to the overheated term ‘paradigm,’ and its explicit invocation of the Chicago School. Complaints that one’s work is nutty may simply signal that a reviewer lacks the wherewithal to appreciate its intent. Claims to be the first, most, etc. are generally easily (dis)proven, but the use of rhetoric *as persuasion* should not be shunned. Once the LA School had garnered attention, it became easier to let go of some rhetoric while refusing to abandon the new terminologies posited by LA’s mutant urban forms. Are we being *noir-ish*? Possibly, but it is hard to ignore the problems of poverty, racism, homelessness, etc. amidst the enduring sunshine. To all complaints about verbiage, we refer to Dennis Judd (2005, p. 129) who recognizes that the *noir* triptych (tragedy, high drama, and foreboding doom) is far more riveting than the customarily pedestrian world of academic reportage. Of the LA School and its writings, Judd (2005, p.130) concludes:

The world of urban scholarship would be much the poorer without this brilliant, complex and sometimes maddening, fun, provocative literature. It is certainly robust enough to withstand the critique I level at it in this article.

Finally in this list of complaints we note a set of *contrarian responses* that are: (a) decidedly personal in their *ad hominem* attacks; (b) place-based, as in anti-LA; (c) anti-postmodern; and (d) anti-geography. One egregious example manages to incorporate all these tendencies; in the first two paragraphs of an essay on the LA School, Mark Gottdiener (2002, p. 159) manages to assert that a focus on LA as urban exemplar is “ridiculously false;” that the School’s strategy “seems like shameless self-promotion at the expense of scholarship;” and that the School’s affiliates are “sacrificing the cumulative projects of urban science in its transparent attempt at intellectual elitism.” Keeling (2004, p. 332) comments that much of Gottdiener’s critique makes sense but that his message is lost in an “embittered denunciation of self-hyping geographers.” Geographers are themselves quite capable of launching intramural holy wars; see for example Sui’s (1999) unbridled assault on postmodern urbanism. And, of course, everyone hates/loves LA. In one of the oddest examples of place-envy, Curry and Kenny (1999) attack LA’s status as a “paradigmatic city,” portraying it as a has-been and priding San Francisco as a “much better choice” for urban paradigm. In reply, Storper (1999) chides the authors for reviving an ancient LA/ San Francisco rivalry under the guise of academic debate (see also Scott, 1999). This is not to suggest that credible counterclaims on behalf of alternative urban prototypes should be discounted. For instance, a strong literature on Las Vegas has recently emerged (e.g. Gottdiener et al., 1999), New York City’s claims have been reasserted (Halle, 2003), and Nijman (2000)

makes a spirited case for Miami. Such interventions are to be welcomed as contributions to a burgeoning comparative urbanism.

## ENGAGEMENTS

Much the most heartening of recent trends has been the emergence of a growing corpus of *comparative urban research*, including that which incorporates Los Angeles. One of the earliest sustained analyses was Janet Abu-Lughod's (1999) monumental compendium on America's 'global cities:' New York City, Chicago and Los Angeles. Abu-Lughod laid out the historical trajectory of each city, including the colonial era establishment, industrialization, and global restructuring. She concluded that history and geography matter greatly in the specificities of urban evolution, and worried that Chicago's location might be detrimental to its future status in a global urban hierarchy. In that same year, a special issue of the *Pacific Historical Review* was devoted to comparing the "orange empires," Los Angeles and Miami, which according to the editors "are perhaps more like each other than like other American cities" (Deverell et al., 1999, p.145). In this collection of 10 essays written from a wide variety of disciplinary perspectives, contributors deftly probed the historical, demographic, political and cultural similarities of the two centers, including their histories of place promotion. Another good example of insight garnered through synthesis across a broad range of discipline- and place-based perspectives, David Halle's (2003) edited volume considered politics, society and culture in New York and Los Angeles. Directly engaging with the challenges of the LA School, Halle himself concluded that differences between the two cities might be overstated, and that measured by certain indicators (including demographics, political balkanization, and socio-economic polarization) the pair was actually convergent. He also suggested that a distinguishing feature of the contemporary urban problematic was the flux in core-hinterland relations, a point that is fully

consistent with much LA research. In another LA-NYC comparison, Catterall (2002, p. 147) sees optimistic signs of an “emerging [analytical] synthesis” even as he remains critical of the lack of an action-orientation in current urban research.

A valuable group of *empirical studies* systematically compares LA to a number of US cities quantitatively. Sheamur and Charron (2004), for example, undertook what they describe as a Chicago-inspired quantitative analysis of income distribution in Montreal. They warn that monographs about LA may be fascinating but “do not have much to teach us about other cities.” While conceding that methodological “polyvocality” is inevitable, they insist that not all empirical approaches are “equally valid” (p.123). Like Sheamur and Charron, Hackworth (2005) favors a quantitative approach. In a painstaking cross-sectional comparison of ten large US metropolitan areas, he reveals consistencies and differences across many measures of urban structure, including income and housing costs. He also plunges into epistemological thickets, concluding that postmodern urbanism is too deliberately idiographic to generate urban communalities, indeed it might even obscure them (Hackworth, 2005, p. 486). In a study of ethnic residential segregation Johnson et al. (2006) show that LA does possess a greater degree of ethnic mixing than other US cities, and that this diversity is a harbinger of things to come in other cities—another key proposition in the Angelistas’ canon. And in an account of Vancouver’s downtown, Hutton (2004) learns from LA without direct empirical comparison. Observing that Vancouver marks a “clear break” from classical post-industrial urban “modernist form and imagery,” Hutton (2004, p. 1953) still resists the notion that it adds up to “the spatial disorder and chaotic patterns of ‘incipient’ post-modernism.”

Hutton’s approach is typical of an emerging trend toward *engagement with LA at the theoretical level*. A revealing clash of theoretical and praxis perspectives emerged at a 1999 conference in

Venice, Italy on postmodern geography organized by Claudio Minca (2001). The Venice debates were mostly focused on the urban question, and Soja (2001) perceptively identified the fault lines among participants: a continental divide, between Italy/Europe and North America; and a bicoastal division, between Los Angeles and New York City. This latter was also evidently an epistemological divide between postmodern and Marxist thought. For instance, Mitchell (2001, p. 83) excoriated what he perceived as the postmodernists' lack of a constructive progressive politics, proclaiming: "Our goal should be precisely a search for order and stability – *progressive* order, and equitable stability: a clear, straightforward vision of universal social justice..." For his part, organizer Minca (2001, p. xxviii) gently reminded readers of the contested nature of political truths and the unavoidable differences that derive from scholars' own positionalities, things that are not resolved by quick dismissal of other viewpoints or by ringing manifestos, however heartfelt and appealing they may be.

One of the most unexpected collisions has been between LA and the field of American Studies, as reported in a special issue of the journal *American Quarterly* (reprinted as Homero Villa and Sánchez, 2005). The sixteen contributors to this volume focus on the lived experience of LA as seen through cultural expressions in music, art and community. Feeding off the tensions between LA's "paradigmatic singularity" and its "prognostic capacity" Homero Villa and Sánchez (2005, p. 3) speak of the "valuable expansion of the Los Angeles studies" that coincides with a "substantive diversification of American studies." Such welcome critical openness is also evident in other recent urban geographical, political and sociological studies. For instance, Spain (2002) takes both Chicago and LA to task for undervaluing gender relations in the city (see also Michel, 2002); and Arvidson (1999) uses LA and postmodern urbanism to rethink class in the contemporary city. Others reconsider the broader urban problematic, including its analytical

categories (see Kirby, 1999, on ‘urban,’ ‘suburban,’ and so on), its theoretical presuppositions (Arvidson, 1999; Clark, 2000; Minca, 2002), and what LA means for the practice of urban politics (Cherot and Murray, 2002; Flusty, 2004; Keil, 1998).

Outside the mainstream of urban research, Gieryn (2006, p. 7) explored the ways in which place matters in the creation of knowledge, or as he puts it: “the emplacement of scientific claims, and (in particular) the relationships between the place where knowledge comes from and its bid for credibility.” Central to his investigation is the notion of a “truth-spot,” defined as “a delimited geographical location that lends credibility to claims” (Gieryn, 2006, p. 29). He focuses on the Chicago School, but also takes note of the distinctive challenge of the LA School, observing that while Angelistas and Chicagonistas inevitably seek credibility by rooting their claims in their own cities, “*epistemically*, Los Angeles becomes a vastly different kind of place than Chicago was for its School” (Gieryn, 2006, 26, emphasis in original). This is because:

The LA School in effect empowers its readers by weakening its own claim to privileged readings of the city... The objective city of Los Angeles vanishes amid multiple coexisting and contested imageries ... as the LA School invites its audiences to co-construct the place. *The city becomes a collaborative process...* (Gieryn, 2006, p. 26; emphasis added).

This is very different from the Chicago School, in Gieryn’s opinion, because Chicagonistas have rarely shied from asserting the superiority of their scientific understandings. Even if his case is somewhat overstated, Gieryn’s social studies of science perspective has (in our view) succinctly identified a key fault-line separating Chicago modernism from LA postmodernism.

## NEW CHICAGO SCHOOL

Chicago made a noisome entry into the urban debate in the inaugural issue of *City and Community*. The journal's editor, Anthony Orum, invited Michael Dear (2002) to write an introductory essay on the LA School, to be followed by critical remarks from Andrew Abbott, Harvey Molotch, Robert Sampson, Saskia Sassen and Terry Nichols Clark. The tone was set by Abbott (2002, p. 33), who insisted correctly that the Chicago School was still "good to think with" and he welcomed the opportunity to reconsider the urban. However, sticking close to a conventional urban sociological agenda, Abbott (2002, p. 38) advised that debate was less important than getting on with careful empirical research. A similar sentiment was evident in Sampson (2002, p. 45), who evinced surprise at Dear's invocation of Burgess' concentric zone model of urban form which, he opined, was akin to the "flogging of dead horses," despite the proliferation of concentric-zone diagrams in current text books and research monographs. Conceding that LA is a "fabulous subject" and appearing to champion multiple methodological approaches, Sampson (2002, p. 48) drew a line that cautioned against "breezy pontification about postmodernism." With roots in Chicago and LA (and New York), Molotch (2002, p. 43) willed a plague on all 'schools' for their inherent parochialism, urging instead a focus on our common research enterprise. Sassen (2002) presented a welcome shift in emphasis toward a more abstract theoretical frame in a discussion of space and scale in understanding global urban dynamics. Finally in his revealingly-titled "Codifying LA Chaos," Clark (2002) outlined a conceptual framework for exploring the 'new political culture' of the city, together with a brief quantitative analysis of its principal dimensions. Taken together, these five essays reveal a strong bias toward the empirical and quantitative consistent with urban sociology as a whole. A tangible theoretical tilt was added in the commentaries by Molotch, Sassen and Clark. Overall, there is

only a limited engagement with LA as an alternative urban model, although at one point Abbott (2002, p. 34) bravely concedes that “were Park alive, he would without question be back in California”!

Things had changed quite markedly by 2006, at least according to the evidence of the contributions to *Chicago's Geographies* (Greene et al., 2006). An eclectic list of scholars provides a compelling view of contemporary Chicago, and while not all contributors refer to Los Angeles, the reader is left with a clear sense of direct engagement with LA's urbanism. Michael Conzen (2006, p. 35) begins boldly: “Chicago remains the quintessential prototype of the American metropolis.” It is older than LA so reveals more, yet is unencumbered by New York's colonial past; furthermore, many urban tendencies in both cities are also evident in Chicago. So, Conzen deduces: “...metropolitan Chicago continues to typify the general American urban experience.” We agree that Chicago is a good exemplar of an American industrial city of a certain vintage; it might even be indicative of an older industrial metropolis currently being overlain by a contemporary (postmodern?) urban process. However, *contra* Conzen, we cannot agree that Chicago is typical of the contemporary postmodern American urban experience, at least in its purest forms as manifest in Los Angeles or Las Vegas.

Greene's (2006, p. 50) essay on Chicago's “new millennium landscape” precisely illustrates the claim that Chicago is a modernist city presently being overlain with a postmodern scrim. After considering the Latinization of Chicago, industrial dispersal, globalization, rise of the creative class, and so on, Greene (2006, p. 53) concludes:

The features that make up Chicago's classic urban form are undeniable and the new urban developments...accrue to an urban frame that has been long in

development. At the same time contemporary economic, cultural, and demographic processes overlies this classic urban form, processes that are dictating new patterns of movement and interaction within this urban form...

Saskia Sassen (2006, p. 75) makes a bold claim that Chicago has recently acquired all the “classic features” of a global city, and thereby alleviates Abu-Lughod’s concern that a global urbanism might bypass Chicago. These features include: “economic dynamism and prosperity centered in rapid growth of high-income professionals, high-profit corporate service firms, high-end residential markets, and all the auxiliary sectors associated with such a mix.” Sassen links her political-economic analysis specifically to the evolution of Chicago’s inter- and intra-urban metropolitan geography, and concludes that Chicago as a global city has a “stronger orientation to the US market than is the case with New York or Los Angeles (Sassen 2006, p. 85). It is left to Terry Nichols Clark to make the most direct challenge to the LA School in the final essay of *Chicago’s Geographies*. Entitling his essay “The New Chicago School -- Not New York or LA, and Why it Matters for Urban Social Science,” Clark announced seven “axial points” for a “New Chicago School” as assertively as any rhetorical feint in the history of the LA School. Drawing on what he identifies as “The Chicago Not-Yet-a-School of Urban Politics,” Clark’s (2006, p. 250) axial points reflect a mix of political and sociological concerns (such as his focus on religion in Chicago). Although his personal preference is toward the quantitative, Clark (2006, p. 242) also pleads for “new and better theorizing;” at one point, he even seems regretful about postmodernism’s “relative absence as a serious intellectual commitment among Chicagoans [sic]” (Clark, 2006, p. 248).

The 2006 Chicagonista essays are encouraging for several reasons: (1) the strong counterclaims on Chicago’s behalf, even to the point of unveiling a New Chicago School, are indicative of a

serious engagement with LA's challenge; (2) a commitment to methodological (and sometimes theoretical) pluralism represents a breach in the monumental walls of Chicago traditions in quantitative empirical analysis; (3) Chicago's empirical juggernaut is turning up evidence that supports the contentions of the LA School; and (4) Chicagonistas are uncovering aspects of the global urban hierarchy and emerging political cultures that should interest all urban researchers. This said, the agenda of the emerging New Chicago School is still ill-formed; how could it not be so, at this early stage?<sup>1</sup> To identify gaps that we might all usefully address, consider for a moment the four dimensions of comparative urbanism suggested by Dear (2005). These are: the *theoretical assumptions* undergirding alternative models of urban form and process; the *empirical outcomes* observable on the ground; the diverse *urban dynamics* that produces these outcomes; and the *ontological/epistemological frames* structuring alternative urban problematics. How does the infant New Chicago School shape up on these dimensions?

- Theoretically, the New Chicago School is so far only very loosely articulated and retains strong links with the earlier Chicago School of urban sociology. These roots may wither as interdisciplinary efforts to meet the challenges from LA multiply and as empirical findings reveal that Chicago is getting more like LA (if indeed this proves to be the case).

<sup>1</sup> In a personal communication, Dennis Judd (2006) attests to the existence of a lively debate on the value and implications of the term 'school,' but also points out that few Chicagonistas presently promote or aspire to membership in a New Chicago School; nor is there any agreement on what this putative school consists of. In these terms, Chicago very much resembles LA!

- Empirically, Chicagonistas are without peer in their tireless efforts to map the city's emergent urbanisms, but their quasi-obsession with the empirical may be crowding out other important aspects of the urban research enterprise.
- A refreshing recalibration of inter- and intra-urban dynamics is beginning to appear in Chicago, most notably around globalization and local politics.
- However, epistemological and ontological awareness is the New Chicago School's weakest point because the hegemony of quantitative social science persists. Is it possible that urban sociology somehow lacks the critical self-reflexivity that characterizes other corners of its parent discipline? Do residual traces of a disciplinary bias against Geography – most definitely not a characteristic of the Chicagonistas discussed in this section - hinder urban sociology's contribution to understanding the production of place?

## MI CASA ES SU CASA

The first fruits of comparative analysis responsive to LA urbanism are now available for harvesting. Inevitably we all begin from a place-based, idiographic, even idiosyncratic foundation, whether it is LA, Chicago, New York, Las Vegas, or Miami. However, we have a common object in mind (the city), and are united in our ontological and epistemological goals of revised readings and representations of the city, different as they are. Yet our comparative approach has uncovered many potentially synergistic overlaps, most interestingly (for us at least): (a) Halle's (2003) contention that a key trope in contemporary urban analysis is the changed nature of core-hinterland relations; and (b) that Chicago, the archetypal modernist industrial city is being overlain by a postmodern urban form (cf. Greene, 2006). It is also interesting and entertaining to observe Chicagonistas evoke their own genteel rhetorical excess

as they engage the intellectual battle (see, for example, Conzen, Dahmann and Schuble's 2006 map of Chicago's "new global-era core").

No-one is yet able to prove conclusively that we are entering a new era in the production of urban space. We are prepared to assert that such a radical break is underway: that globalization, the rise of a network society, socioeconomic polarization, cultural hybridization, and the sustainability crisis are changing the way we make cities, and the ways we understand the urban. And while these five tendencies may find formal equivalence in earlier times (e.g., the claim that there have been previous eras of globalization), we believe that the present is different because these five tendencies have never before appeared in concert, never before penetrated so deeply, never before been so geographically extensive, and never before overtaken everyday life with such speed; in short, never has there been anything so globally universal as the rise of the Information Age. Whether you agree or not with these assertions, there is much we can learn from each other if we embrace a comparative urbanism. This Chicago-LA exchange proved that we flourish during time spent in each others' cities, homes and minds.

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