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Chapter One

Re-industrialisation as progressive urbanism: why and how?

Michael Edwards and Myfanwy Taylor

Introduction

This book, like the conference which led to it, is part of an essential and expanding discussion which criticises the fundamental structure of contemporary economy and society and examines the scope for long-term alternatives and worthwhile immediate interventions, demands and experiments.¹ The context is partly a historical one. Over thousands of years, but especially since the emergence of capitalism a few centuries ago, we have moved away from forms of society where needs were almost always met locally, from local resources and with rather little division of labour or division of time between ‘production’, ‘distribution’, ‘consumption’, caring, nurturing, playing and all the other things people do to the elaborate divisions of labour outlined below. Although anthropologists, archaeologists and historians continue to expose and refine our understanding of the actual course of events, it is very useful to think in terms of the progressive shifts from a stylised subsistence society in which exchange was highly localised, long-distance trade limited to rare materials (gold, spices) and products of extreme skill or art (scythes, ornaments, fine utensils, weapons).² We can think of the settlements and architectural expressions of such societies as relatively un-differentiated buildings, with specialised building types emerging alongside specialisations in manufacture (forges, grain mills, boatyards), in the reproduction of population, collective services and social control (schools, hospitals, churches and mosques, prisons) and the infrastructure required (ports, canals, railways, water supply systems), all of which are profoundly influential in the formation of our cities.

The counterpart to that is evolution of non-residential built forms has been the dwelling, robbed of most of its earlier functions and now reduced—for most of us—to a box for sleeping, eating, child-raising and private, individualised consumption. Many of the physical structures we now take for granted are the distinct products of exploitative systems of supervision and control of ‘work’—the factory, the office building—systems which may now, for some, become obsolete through virtual control of distributed work and through casualised self-employment in which we manage our own exploitation.³ Two other features of modern capitalism are relevant to this issue of ‘re-industrialisation’: the growth of globalisation, especially of trade and money-flows, and the dual role of buildings and land as having both use value

¹ There are intersections with the de-growth movements, research and practice in social innovations, many green movements, and Occupy and other emerging urban social movements. Some of these are discussed later in the chapter, while others are linked from the bibliography.

² P. Seabright, *The Company of Strangers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004) and D. Graeber, *Debt: The First 5000 years* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2011), are two outstanding long views.

³ R. Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998); M. Bunting, *Willing Slaves: How the Overwork Culture Is Ruling Our Lives* (London: Harper Collins, 2011).

and asset value. The explosive growth of international trade has tended to integrate previously-localised economies and at the same time transform them.⁴ Thus in recent decades the growing mass of profits accumulating in the world has tended disproportionately to be invested in manufacturing production, where labour is cheap and authoritarian regimes can keep it so; elsewhere investment has focussed on extraction of hydrocarbons, metals and other minerals; and elsewhere again (strongly here in the UK) a major focus of investment has been in land and property, driving up housing and premises values and costs as investors seek rents. This is profoundly important for settlements and buildings which increasingly are produced and managed as ‘assets’ to satisfy investment markets, rather than simply as what is useful or desired by citizens. All of this is both a consequence and an engine of globalisation. The availability of cheap container shipping and extremely cheap manufactured goods, mainly from Asia, has made it possible for wages in the global north to remain static or to decline in real terms, while workers have been paying more for fuel and rent and profits grow. Meanwhile, money capital has been increasingly free to move to exploit these changing patterns of extraction of social surplus and support the credit-fuelled maintenance of consumption. Many of these mechanisms are lucidly unpacked in the work of the geographer David Harvey and are linked with food and energy crises (and their related land grabs) by the economist Alain Lipietz.⁵ These social processes are large-scale, spanning the geography of the whole world and penetrating the most remote and previously autonomous regions. Meanwhile, marketised relations penetrate into spheres of life previously outside the commodity economy—child and elderly care, recreation and sport, education—replacing reciprocity and free, collective provision and ratcheting up the charges for utilities and social housing.

What might provoke change?

A variety of circumstances may start to reverse some of these trends, prompting what the organisers of this conference have termed ‘re-industrialisation’. Reduction in world trade could come from (a) a general contraction of global activity in the crisis; (b) rising relative wages and production costs in China and other countries, reducing their competitive advantage; (c) increases in the cost of freight transport through rising oil prices or through taxation, or even enforcement aimed at ending marine/aviation pollution; or (d) protectionist measures by national or EU governments. Some of these tendencies are already visible on a small scale and it’s worth reflecting on what could cause each to accelerate.

These forces in combination could impel economies like the UK’s towards greater self-sufficiency in raw materials, in manufacturing (and even in certain services, like tourism). Most of those factors don’t apply at a regional scale but affect whole nations. Rising transport costs, however, would be an important factor in redistributing activity within the country, fostering more localised production and compressing supply chains, which means there are more local materials in construction, local brewing again and fewer Cornish potatoes going to be scrubbed in Lincolnshire and then sent to shops in Bristol. It’s worth taking great care with

⁴ A. Glyn, *Capitalism Unleashed: Finance, Globalization, and Welfare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁵ D. Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism* (London: Profile, 2010); A. Lipietz, ‘Fears and Hopes: The Crisis of the Liberal-Productivist Model and Its Green Alternative’, *Capital & Class* 37, no. 1 (2013): 127–141.

words in this discussion. In particular, the term ‘post-industrial society’ is to be avoided, because our society is just as dependent as it ever was on ‘industry’. Much of the production we depend on nowadays takes place abroad, so that fewer of us do factory jobs in Europe and many people under about thirty may never have entered a factory. But whether we use ‘industry’ in the sense of ‘hard work’ or loosely, as an approximation for manufacturing, we are utterly dependent on it. Perhaps individual cities which have experienced dramatic de-industrialisation can more accurately be called ‘post-industrial cities’, but it is important to recognise that even in a city such as London there remain significant portions of land currently labelled for industrial use and many workers still deal with physical goods. Groups such as Just Space and the London Thames Gateway Forum are currently campaigning to prevent such spaces from being converted for office use or housing use. We therefore need to be careful that ‘re-industrialisation’ doesn’t blind us to the industry that already exists, even in primarily service economies.

Reindustrialisation as progressive urbanism?

This takes us to the issue of *why* reindustrialisation might be something we want to propose or encourage. There are multiple answers to this question, and we are not all coming from the same positions. In one corner, there are those who strongly reject today’s rampant capitalism—or capitalism of any kind. Another strand is the critique of the conceptualisation of ‘the economy’ as just the money-traded part of social life, valuing output on a market basis and devaluing much of society’s most precious activities and skills. A third strand is the imperative to take full account of environmental impacts in measuring and valuing activity, and to reconfigure activity to stop or reverse environmental damage. A fourth strand will be the multiple demands to re-humanise work,⁶ reduce our alienation from what we ‘produce’ and ‘consume’, transform social relations in work groups and retain the full value of people’s labour under their individual, collective and/or local control.⁷ These are, of course not rival or competing arguments—they intersect and are mutually reinforcing.

This conference has specifically asked us to consider re-industrialisation as a route to a more progressive urbanism. This takes us directly to the issue of the *nature* of urban growth which a re-industrialisation strategy might generate, and whether this might be considered to be more or less progressive than present approaches, or indeed other alternative strategies. Presently, urban growth strategies tend to be informed by powerful narratives that position a small proportion of the activities that go on in cities as productive and generative. We are all familiar with *global* cities, *creative* cities, *high-tech* cities, etc. As Doreen Massey’s work on London⁸ has shown, these perspectives imply that the interests of all lie in the performance of these sub-sectors of cities’ economies. In fact, as we know, urban growth strategies that privilege high-skilled and high-income activities over all others tend to increase inequality, at the same time as they produce riches for the few.

⁶ R. Sennett, *The Craftsman* (London: Penguin, 2008).

⁷ J. Gough, ‘Neoliberalism and Socialisation in the Contemporary City: Opposites, Complements and Instabilities’, *Antipode* 34, no. 3 (2002): 405–426.

⁸ D. Massey, *World City* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).

Researchers studying cities in the global South know this only too well,⁹ recognising that the means by which the poor make cities work are at risk of being neglected or even destroyed through the application of such narrowly-framed strategies. In this context, perhaps the most powerful contribution the notion of 're-industrialisation' can make is to unsettle these dominant narratives by positioning a very different set of activities in the driving seat of future urban development. Even in a so-called 'global city' such as London, industrial activities play an essential role in making the urban economy work. Simple industrial surveying by the London Thames Gateway Forum has exposed clusters of specialist lift manufacture and repair companies, for example, which are able to respond rapidly and competently to lift breakdowns in London's tubes and offices, as well as aggregate yards, whose central riverside location meant that aggregates could be transported by river and rail rather than road, minimising air pollution. Re-industrialisation prompts us to look again at these neglected industrial activities and to ask how they might be connected to other urban activities. This is also important in light of the evidence that firms benefit from the co-presence of same-sector and different-sector firms,¹⁰ and that it is the collective coordination of urban activities amongst firms and other economic actors that creates agglomeration economies.¹¹ If we are interested in progressive urbanism, however, we perhaps ought to go further than 're-industrialisation'. Some of the other contributors to this book and the associated conference are hopeful about a humanising re-industrialisation, in which engaged work as a maker, perhaps in the 21st-century industry of mass customisation, transforms our relations of production. Others are hopeful about the potential of re-industrialisation to drive the ecological changes we are concerned to see. What we are missing, perhaps, is a specifically feminist perspective, alert to the ways in which whole aspects of life have been ignored by mainstream approaches to cities and the economy. Feminist geographers have showed how cities rely on the unpaid work of women and men in connecting the realms of work and life,¹² while feminist economists have been at pains to demonstrate the value of unpaid work in conventional economic terms.¹³

What this work has shown us is that unless and until we re-think 'the economy', our efforts to achieve more progressive urbanisms will face some serious limitations.¹⁴ Re-industrialisation has much going for it as a starting point for thinking about progressive urbanism. It offers the potential to re-connect with meaningful and humanising work in cities, and to begin to adapt the ways our cities work to avert ecological crisis. It moves in direct opposition to many of the recent developments towards globalisation and modern capitalism, as well as against the dominant

⁹ J. Robinson, *Ordinary Cities: Between Modernity and Development* (Oxford: Routledge, 2006).

¹⁰ G. Duranton, and D. Puga, 'Nursery Cities: Urban Diversity, Process Innovation, and the Life-Cycle of Products', *American Economic Review* 91, no. 5 (2001): 1454–1477.

¹¹ A. J. Scott, and M. Storper, M. 'Regions, Globalization, Development', *Regional Studies* 37, nos. 6&7 (2003): 579–593.

¹² L. McDowell et al., 'The Contradictions and Intersections of Class and Gender in a Global City: Placing Working Women's Lives on the Research Agenda', *Environment and Planning A* 37 (2005): 441–461; H. Jarvis, 'Moving to London Time: Household Co-ordination and the Infrastructure of Daily Life', *Time & Society* 14 (2005): 133.

¹³ J. Cameron and J. K. Gibson-Graham, 'Feminising the Economy: Metaphors, Strategies, Politics', *Gender, Place & Culture* 10, no. 2 (2003): 145–157.

¹⁴ J. K. Gibson-Graham, *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), first published in 1996 by Blackwell.

narratives of how urban economies work and the narrow city strategies they inform. As such, it powerfully opens up the more important—and yet neglected—question of who or what cities and their economies are for.¹⁵ At the heart of a progressive urbanism would be a concern for life as well as work and for the ways in which they together make our urban lives possible.

¹⁵ Massey, *World City*.