

Conference Outline and Call for Papers

Paradigmatic Cities?

A two-day conference organised by the RGS-IBG Urban Geography Research Group

Friday 3rd and Saturday 4th November 2006
Scottish Trade Union Congress, Glasgow

The Urban Geography Research Group is organising a 2-day conference and open forum discussion around the theme of *Paradigmatic Cities?* The conference organisers are seeking short (7-10 minute) position papers around the following themes:

- Paradigmatic thinking as epistemology
- Paradigmatic thinking and the politics of the academy

Background

Urban studies has a long history of identifying particular cities as emblematic of urbanism more generally. Through such processes certain cities have emerged as 'obligatory points of passage' within the urban studies literature: whether because apparently emblematic of particular 'urbanisms' (for example, Paris as the birthplace of 'urban modernism' or Los Angeles as the eponymous 'post-metropolis') or of more specific processes (for example, New York as the 'revanchist city' extraordinaire or Toronto as the 'diverse city').

Such tendencies have been the focus of sustained critique in recent years. Where some have launched what might be termed a 'thin critique' (challenging the paradigmatic status of one city, only to substitute that city for another), others have mounted a more serious challenge to the identification of 'paradigmatic' cities *per se*. Within this more substantial critique, 3 main charges may perhaps be identified:

- Exclusivity - that the focus on a small number of 'paradigmatic' cities draws attention away from other, more 'ordinary' cities, limiting the scope of urban studies and fostering divisions between urban studies and other fields (for example, development studies)
- Reductionism of process - that as the (quite particular) ways in which certain processes are articulated in one place come to define the 'core' features of those processes themselves, other articulations of those processes (and other places) are ignored. For example, the way in which 'global city' status has come to hinge upon the presence of producer services, rather than upon other articulations of global inter-connectivity
- Reductionism of place - just as accounts of such key cities may themselves be rather 'thin' (because concerned only with aspects of that place seen to demonstrate its paradigmatic status), so the turn to paradigms more generally articulates an obsession

with the universal at the expense of geography's traditional concern with the particular and the unique

In an attempt to try and explain the tenacity of paradigmatic thinking in urban studies, Robert Beauregard (2003) has examined the politics of the academy, suggesting that the attempt to identify one's self with the 'most important' cities is in fact an attempt to set one's own work aside as particularly important. In other words, the championing of certain cities in the urban studies literature emerges as a way of securing distinction in an increasingly competitive academy.

It is in the light of these arguments, that this conference intends to focus debate around the two main themes:

- Paradigmatic thinking as epistemology
- Paradigmatic thinking and the politics of the academy

Despite such critique, the tendency to focus upon a small number of cities continues, as does the attempt to identify newly paradigmatic places (witness the re-emergence of a 'Chicago School' at this year's AAG).

In light of this, and taking account of other developments in the discipline, we can perhaps ask three questions:

- What are the advantages – conceptual, methodological, political – of working with paradigms?
- To what extent is such a tendency evident in other parts of the academy, or beyond? For example, is a similar such tendency evident in media or literary studies (Paris as the core site of C19th literary modernism, New York as the 'auteur's city')? Can such a tendency be traced beyond the academy – in business, architecture or planning for example? If so, which cities are identified as emblematic of what in these fields? To what extent do the cities identified overlap with/conflict with the cities holding centre stage in urban studies?
- In light of recent debate about the need for geographers to engage with policy makers and practitioners, how might the identification of key cities help/hinder an engagement between urban studies and these other fields – and with the public and policy makers?

Conference format

The aim of the conference is to provide a forum for genuine debate. To this end we are adopting a slightly unusual format, with a small number of Key Note Speakers interspersed with shorter position papers and open discussion.

Friday will be given over to presentations and discussion around paradigmatic thinking in urban studies, Saturday morning to presentations and discussion around paradigmatic thinking in related disciplines and to the connections between urban studies, policy and practice.

Call for Papers

It is anticipated that position papers will situate themselves in one of the two main themes outlined above (Paradigmatic thinking as epistemology, or Paradigmatic thinking and the politics of the academy). But contributors should not feel restricted by these themes. Rather, our aim is to attract a wide range of papers that will stimulate debate and discussion. We would ask presenters to circulate a written version of their position paper (4-6 pages) in advance of the conference to facilitate debate.

Those interested in presenting a short position paper of 7-10 minutes during Friday's session are invited to submit expressions of interest and/or a 250 word abstract to:

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Deadline for receipt: **31 August 2006**