Geography 516
Urban Geography: Frontiers of Urban Theory & Research

D. Asher Ghertner

Tuesdays 1:40-4:40, LCH-B120

Instructor: Asher Ghertner
Office: B-238, Lucy Stone Hall
Office Hours: Wednesdays, 4-6pm or by appointment
Email: a.ghertner@rutgers.edu

Course Introduction

This is an advanced graduate seminar that sets out to examine frontiers of urban theory and research. We use Henri Lefebvre’s foundational writings on urban revolution as our jumping off point, and proceed weekly with an examination of diverse approaches to the study of power, difference and inequality in the contemporary city. Each week begins with a foundational assumption or concept related to urban space, before exploring how ethnographic and critical geographical research can push the boundaries of that assumption/concept and reveal emergent political possibilities and ways of rethinking the city. The course takes a global approach, interrogating the limitations of Northern, metropolitan theory and the often unacknowledged contributions of studies from and on the global South. In treating ‘the urban’ in the broadest of terms, the aim of the course is for students to come away with a critical ‘toolkit’ for understanding intersections of space, power, and difference, and some of the methodological openings and risks of current research in the human sciences.
Requirements

This course will be run as a reading-intensive seminar. Each week we will systematically discuss the argument, method and implications of the texts; present our ideas and questions to each other; and generally learn from the diverse backgrounds and perspectives we all bring. Accordingly, it is imperative that everyone comes fully prepared to participate.

Each student will be expected to undertake the following:

(i) To prepare a short one page critical commentary on each week's readings and to post this on the Sakai forum for that week by the Monday evening (no later than 8 pm) prior to the Tuesday class.

(ii) To lead/chair class discussion, which involves a short (5-10 minute) presentation of the key theoretical and conceptual issues in the readings pertaining to that week. I will circulate a sign-up sheet during week 1 for you to choose the week(s) you’d like to present. This will often be done in groups of two, and you will likely have the opportunity to present more than once in the semester.

Course paper

The main assignment for this course is a ~20 page paper that deploys concepts from the course to an issue, debate, theme, or phenomenon of your choosing. The purpose of the term essay is to demonstrate that you can leverage theoretical insights from the seminar to make an intellectually rigorous argument around an empirical or philosophical problem of your choosing.

Assessment

Students will be assessed according to the following scheme:

| Critical commentaries & presentations | 35% |
| Classroom participation              | 20% |
| Course Paper                         | 45% |
| **Total**                            | **100%** |
Readings

Required course texts:


All additional readings will be posted on the course website on Sakai or placed on reserve in the Alexander Library.

Seminar Outline

Week 1 (September 3rd) – Introduction

Background readings:


Week 2 (September 10th) - Urban revolution
We begin this week with Henri Lefebvre’s seminal theorization of the urban revolution and the various ways it has been interpreted and critiqued. Key here is the role of land/real estate as what Lefebvre calls the “secondary circuit” of capital, or what David Harvey discusses in terms of the spatial fix. We will also raise questions related to more popular political and policy dimensions of the term.

Readings:
**Week 3 (September 17th) The right to the city**
This week we consider the contemporary applicability of the “right to the city” for understanding urban social movements. Henri Lefebvre, for whom “the right to the city is like a cry and a demand... for a transformed and renewed right to urban life,” is our point of departure, but we also examine how other urban theorists have taken up and modified his ideas, including David Harvey’s most recent book on urban protest. We will also aim to compare “the right to the city,” theorized largely in terms of urban processes in the global North, with a wider range of resistance strategies from societies with different state, legal, and property regimes.

**Readings:**

**Week 4 (September 24th) - State space**
This week’s lecture begins with Lefebvre’s abstract reflections on the spatial organization of the state and follows with a series of cuts into how the state space has been studied. This work shows how understanding the state not as an undifferentiated entity, but rather an arena of struggle with its own spatial organization, territorial extent, and scalar hierarchy allows for a reconceptualization of modes of political claims-making and spaces of citizenship. When we look beyond the North Atlantic (and sometimes inside it), we see that clear state-society boundaries are difficult to uphold.

**Readings:**
**Week 5 (October 1st) – Urban citizenship**
This week moves from the spatiality of the state to the practices of citizenship. Whereas citizenship has been studied historically as a form of political belonging linked to nation-states, recent scholarship has pushed the term, suggesting that citizenship in the 21st century is increasingly organized through metropolitan forms of struggle that, through everyday practices, empower, parody, or subvert state agendas. This urban citizenship, Holston and Das suggest, must be understood as a contested set of vulnerabilities and privileges that are assembled and performed, not given and received.

**Readings:**

**Week 6 (October 8th) – Infrastructural politics**
This week we consider infrastructure as a technology of city building and as a key arena of urban political mobilization. How have changing models of urban service delivery, such as water privatization, shaped political struggle and neighborhood identity? How does the study of infrastructure as a socio-political system contribute to a richer understanding of how urban residents interact with, access, and know the state? What might it mean to examine the materiality of urban politics, or to treat sewers, pipes, wires, and bridges as vibrant political objects?

**Readings:**

**Week 7 (October 15th) – Waste**
This week considers the dialectics of waste and value, belonging and unbelonging, beauty and filth in the contemporary city. How are wasted materials and bodies managed in the dense circulations and metabolic circuits of the urban life-world? How does the study of the city from its sewers, slums and landfills change what we understand the production of the urban to mean?
Readings:

Week 8 (October 22nd) – Margins and marginality
Urban marginality was a hotly contested term in the 1970s, when Perlman famously challenged the concept with her claim that marginality was a myth. In the wake of structural adjustment programs and the neoliberal doctrine that followed, the ascendance of structural unemployment throughout the world has led marginality to return as a key sociological term (see Davis and Wacquant). How do so-called surplus or redundant populations make their presence felt in settings that no longer even pretend to have the capacity, or the will, to include them? In the absence of the promise of economic inclusion, how do the poor retain what Appadurai calls the “capacity to aspire,” and with what political stakes? How do they assemble the means to overcome precarity in resource- and infrastructure-scarce environments?

Readings:
Week 9 (October 29th) – No Class
(Asher away for talk at the University of Chicago, but optional Thursday afternoon session to workshop paper ideas and text)

Week 10 (November 5th) – Violence at the margins
Urban peripheries and frontiers have long been studied as sites of lawlessness and violence. Such violence at the margins of the law and city have been understood historically to be indications of marginal(ized) communities’ search for autonomy vis-à-vis the state. This week we read a contrasting argument: Goldstein’s seminal arguments about violence as a performance of political belonging and a claim to the city.


Week 11 (November 12th)– Disciplinary power
This week considers the uses of architecture and planning as technologies of discipline. To what extent can Foucault’s diagram of the panopticon be extended into contemporary forms of city making, and what are the gaps in disciplinary power that allow for political openings and novel forms of dissent?

Readings:

Week 12 (November 19th) – Governing the city
This week examines political technologies used to know, organize and manage urban territories and populations: maps, surveys, censuses, plans and the like. How do states and other authorities direct interventions into densely populated, constantly changing urban environments, without relying on the ever-present oversight and disciplinary gaze we considered last week? How do they simplify dynamic ground realities into plans, and how do they use plans, maps and other calculative instruments to direct the population towards what Foucault called “convenient ends”?

Readings:

Week 13 (Nov 26th) – Planetary urbanization or urban revolution?
We turn this week to the urban revolution underway in China through Hsing’s The Great Urban Transformation. In particular, we consider how informal property markets emerge and operate in the interstices of China’s centralized party apparatus and its rapidly expanding property market. We also contrast the grounded dynamics traced by Hsing with recent triumphant speculations on “planetary urbanization.”


Week 14 (December 3rd) – TBA
Course participants to choose monographs for the final two course meetings

Possible books to consider:

Week 15 (December 10th) -Wrap-up session

- - - - - Paper due December 13th - - - - -