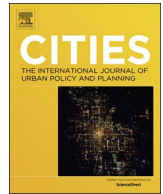




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Jane Jacobs's urban ethics

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ABSTRACT

The 2016 centennial of Jane Jacobs's birth was an opportunity for scholars and pundits to reflect on the legacy of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* and the author's other works and activism. Such reflections naturally reflected on her enduring appeal and readership, but also sought to find shortcomings. Among the critics, and even some otherwise admiring biographers, was a theme that while Jacobs was keen to observe the importance of “eyes on the street” and other street-scaled phenomena, she was weak on such overarching structural concerns as racism, power, and capital. From such charges arose claims that Jacobs was race-blind and a neoliberal, accusations made more dramatic in the context of the polarizing rhetoric of the 2016 US presidential election, Brexit, and other ideological divisions. By examining Jacobs's ideas about the freedom of the city; segregation and discrimination; public space and social capital; neighborhood organization and self-government; and her rejection of the “Plantation mentality,” this paper challenges those claims and shows Jacobs as an important theorist of ethics in the city, which she described as an “ecosystem” of “physical-economic-ethical processes” ideally characterized by “mutual support.”

1. Introduction: ecosystems, cities, and ethics

In the 1993 edition of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs emphasized the study of “the ecology of cities” as the overarching ambition of her canonical 1961 book. Explaining what she meant by this, Jacobs observed that natural ecologies and city ecologies have “fundamental principles in common.” Among their similarities, both natural and human urban ecologies require great diversity to sustain themselves. The greater number of “niches for diversity of life and livelihoods in either kind of ecosystem,” Jacobs explained, “the greater its carrying capacity for life” (Jacobs, 1993, xvi). In other words, in natural ecosystems, the diversity of gene pools enables and enriches life, while in city ecosystems, the diversity of people, with a diversity of interests, tastes, and desires to pursue diverse kinds of work, enriches urban economies. These ideas, present in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (hereafter *Death and Life*), led to her subsequent books on city economies, the roots of which can be found in her earliest essays on cities and “city naturalism” from the late 1930s and early 1940s (Laurence, 2016, 50).

However, Jacobs recognized that natural ecosystems and city ecosystems are not the same. In her view, their key difference was this: While natural ecosystems are composed of “physical-chemical-biological processes,” city ecosystems are composed of “physical-economic-ethical processes” (Jacobs, 1993, xvi). For Jacobs, ethics are as important a part of city systems as their physical and economic composition.

This description of cities as systems defined by physical-economic-ethical processes is perhaps as condensed a summary of Jacobs's interests in *Death and Life*—and her larger oeuvre—as we might find. *Death and Life* was concerned, in Jacobs's fluid and synthetic approach, with the physicality, economics, and ethical dimensions of cities. By the time she had written the foreword to the 1993 edition, she had followed *Death and Life* with two books on city economics—*The Economy of Cities* (1969) and *Cities and the Wealth of Nations* (1984)—and had just completed *Systems of Survival: A Dialogue on the Moral Foundations of Commerce and Politics* (1992), a book on the ethics of public service and private economic life inspired by Plato's *Republic*. Thus, by 1993, Jacobs had examined the component parts of the physical-economic-ethical

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dimensions of city ecosystems in separate books.

As Jacobs wrote the new foreword to her most famous book some thirty years after it was first published, she was likely reflecting on the overarching interests and ambitions of her work. Appropriately, her next book was *Systems of Survival's* sequel, *The Nature of Economies* (2000), a book that explored the similarities of natural and economic systems in detail, extending themes, among them systems thinking and complexity, first explored in *Death and Life*. And by the time *The Nature of Economies* was finished, she may well have had in mind her final book, which was tentatively titled *A Short Biography of the Human Race*.

Unfortunately, by the time Jacobs was in her late 80s, *A Short Biography of the Human Race* was too ambitious a project. Nevertheless, some of its themes can be found in her rather hastily written last book, *Dark Age Ahead* (2004), and in a lecture presented in New York just after *Dark Age Ahead* was published. In this lecture, titled “The End of the Plantation Age,” Jacobs explained that early civilizations, built on the abundance of natural resources and “cheap and disposable” human life, had fundamentally operated as plantations. Guided by a “Plantation mentality,” these civilizations eventually perished because, as monocultures, plantations could never endure because plantations systematically reject the vitality, adaptability, and resiliency of ecosystems (Jacobs, 2016, 432). Nevertheless, the “dead and unburied, putrefying Plantation Age” lingered in such potent forms as wars, colonization, factory farms, racism, and even gated suburban communities.

These ideas, Jacobs said in her lecture, were “a partial preview of a future book I hope to write, under the optimistic assumption that we have not reached a point of no return in loss and corruption of our culture” (Jacobs, 2016, 458–59). For the human race to survive, Jacobs argued, the Plantation Age must be eclipsed by an Age of Human Capital, with cities and an ecological mindset at its heart. Echoing ideas developed in earlier works, Jacobs remarked that, “In their modes of connecting, their deep organizational principles, ecosystems are much like cities, and not at all like plantations.” It was only cities and economies developed in emulation of ecosystems that could contain, as Jacobs wrote in the final lines of *Death and Life*, “the seeds of their own regeneration” (Jacobs, 1961, 448).

Because of Jacobs's scientifically oriented mindset, and her inclination to turn to scientific rationales and forms of proof, it can be difficult to extract the moral aspects from the physical-economic-ethical gestalt that comprises her understanding of the city. For example, although ethics was a critical theme in *Systems of Survival*, that book is not especially concerned with cities per se, and, moreover, a detailed study of Jacobs's ethics and conceptions of the just city across her oeuvre of seven major books is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, what is undertaken here is an in-depth study, informed by her larger work, of these ideas primarily in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, her most read work and the one most directly and explicitly concerned with cities in a holistic fashion. And while *Death and Life* is widely read, as seen in essays and books published around the time of her centennial in 2016—some of which claim that Jacobs was race-blind, a flag-bearer for gentrification, and a neoliberal—it is still prone to misinterpretation more than a half century after its publication, indicating that a better understanding of Jacobs's ethics at that critical point in her thinking is worthwhile and necessary.¹

¹ Example of Jacobs being described as racist or race-blind include biographer Alice Sparberg Alexiou's *Jane Jacobs, Urban Visionary* (2006), who stated that Jacobs “hadn't acknowledged the importance of race in her analysis” (135). As discussed here, *Death and Life* and other evidence shows that Jacobs was not race-blind or a racist. Apparently referring to Alexiou's book, in “Jane Jacobs's Tunnel Vision,” Lev Bratishenko stated, “Her inattention to racism, whether in the form of American housing markets or in official policies like redlining, is well known—at least within the academy, and it was noticed before *Death and Life* was published.” Again, Bratishenko's first point is revealed as erroneous by reading *Death and Life*. His second point refers directly to Robert Kanigel's book *Eyes on the Street* and Kanigel's story of Nathan Glazer and “the Negro question,” discussed below. Another example is Adam Gopnik's condescending essay “Jane Jacobs's

Thus, in examining *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* in detail, with the help of some of her other writings, this paper challenges claims that Jacobs's was a casual racist, an apologist for gentrification, and a libertarian and, to the contrary, finds in Jacobs's view of the city's ethical infrastructure a vision of an open, just, and democratic city. In the pages that follow, this is taken up in four sections. The first, “*Stadtluft macht frei*,” examines Jacobs's thinking about the freedoms of the city. Second, “Our Country's Most Serious Social Problem” investigates her attitudes toward race. Third, “A City's Wealth of Public Life” interrogates her attitudes toward capital and the public good. And fourth, “On Self-Government,” the concluding section, summarizes her attitudes toward social organization, power, and democracy.

2. Cities and freedom: “*Stadtluft macht frei*”

Jacobs likely first read Henri Pirenne's *Medieval Cities: Their Origins and the Revival of Trade* (1925) during her brief career as a college student at Columbia University, where she studied economic geography among other subjects between 1938 and 1940 (Laurence, 2007). But whatever the date, *Medieval Cities* became one of the most influential books on Jacobs's thinking; she referenced or alluded to it in all of her major books, beginning with *Death and Life* (Laurence, 2016, 53).

In a thesis that Jacobs found especially compelling, Pirenne argued that Medieval European cities had liberated European people from servitude, subsistence economies, and caste. He wrote,

“The air of the city makes free,” says the German proverb (*Die Stadtluft macht frei*), and this truth held good in every clime. Freedom, of old, used to be the monopoly of a privileged class. By means of the cities it again took its place in society as a natural attribute of the citizen. Hereafter it was enough to reside on city soil to acquire it. Every serf who had lived for a year and a day within the city limits had it by definite right: the statute of limitations abolished all rights which his lord exercised over his person and chattels. Birth meant little. Whatever might be the mark with which it had stigmatized the infant in his cradle, it vanished in the atmosphere of the city” (Pirenne, 1925, 193).

Medieval cities were, in this sense, the cradle of Western civilization, economies, and liberalism. They created, and were conceived by, a merchant class that evolved into a middle class that had incrementally carved out civil rights and freedoms from the authority of the landed gentry, nobility, and church, and established municipal institutions, ultimately offering serfs opportunities for freedom and upward mobility. “Little by little,” Pirenne wrote, “the middle class stood out as a distinct and privileged group in the midst of the population of the country. From a simple social group given over to the carrying on of commerce and industry, it was transformed into a legal group, recognized as such by the princely power. And out of that legal status

(footnote continued)

Street Smarts,” in which Gopnik stated that he would “pay her the compliment of taking her seriously.” Among other notable errors dispelled by reading *Death and Life*, Gopnik states that Jacobs's “unslumming” is what we would today call gentrification, when in fact for Jacobs it was the opposite. Gopnik was also misled by Kanigel's book on the race question. Gopnik snarkily asked, “Are there black folks on Hudson Street?” In fact, there were, and Jacobs joined her neighbors in 1964 in protesting a plan to segregate the public school her children attended. An example of Jacobs being described as a neoliberal is Brian Tochtermann's “Theorizing Neoliberal Urban Development: A Genealogy from Richard Florida to Jane Jacobs” (2012). Tochtermann ultimately blames Jacobs for “lack of progressive vision and lack of a sustainable, replicable model for urban economic development,” claims at odds with her vision for diverse cities in the Jim Crow era, at the dawn of mass suburbanization and a historic urban decline, and her various books on economics, among them *The Nature of Economies*. As the title suggests, he also blames Jacobs for having inspired Richard Florida. Another example of Jacobs being portrayed as a neoliberal, also connected to Florida, is the 2014 comment by the editors of *Jacobin* magazine that “Jane Jacobs-style urbanism has become all too adaptable to liberal appropriation. Her celebration of mixed-use, walkable neighborhoods has been used in the service of gentrifying, high-income developments” (“The People's Playground”, Oct. 3, 2014). The writers admit their preferred models are “socialist cities,” but ultimately their critiques of Jacobs—a pioneering theorist of gentrification and street activist against gentrification—are ironic and uninformed.

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