

Interview



Contemporary urban matters: an interview with Hillary Angelo

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Issue: Urban land and landscapes: Thinking urban matters relationally

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For the last two decades, urban political ecology has grappled with both urban greenery as carrying particular political projects and what it means to explore cities as socio-ecological relations made through the relations internalized. In this short interview I discuss such themes with sociologist Hillary Angelo.

I want to begin with the article that first made me interested in your work, the 2015 Urbanizing urban political ecology: a critique of methodological cityism, and its attempt to urge urban political ecology to foreground nature and de-emphasize cities. What provoked you to write this article?

Well, I think it was really two things. One, urban political ecology at the time was doing such important work in helping people think about cities as environments that were not without nature, so we of course cite work by Matthew Gandy and Roger H. Keil and others. I was actually a graduate student at the time that David Wachsmuth and I wrote that article, so I think that was the work that we had been reading. And we were also quite inspired by arguments being made by Neil Brenner and others about planetary urbanization, and also other urban political ecologists as well. So, we were trying to think about urbanization as a socio-ecological process, and one of the things that really struck us about the work in urban political ecology was that most of it was still focused on the production of cities themselves in a fairly narrow sense. And so, [the article] was supposed to be an injunction to follow the methodological and theoretical prescriptions that the field had set out itself, but that we didn't feel like it had at the time.

In this article, there's a wonderful passage in the passage: "Is strip mining in the Appalachian mountains any less a case of urban environmental injustice than polluted rivers from sewage treatment plants in the Bronx? If it is, why? And if it isn't, why doesn't UPE study it?" Should we, maybe even more than we do today, force ourselves to take these kinds of starting points beyond what we usually think about as the city, or as urban. And could you maybe give any inspirational examples of those who you feel have already done so, managing to take non-urban starting points here?

I think it depends a lot on the kinds of questions we want to ask. I don't know if we all should. I have started to, and we can talk more later about my more recent work. But I think it has become important for me, partly for political reasons. We're in this moment of climate change. We're seeing a lot of transformations in infrastructure, in the built environment, in land use, certainly in weather patterns. And I think the kinds of investments that are needed in urban and rural communities, but also the kinds of political issues that are facing places in very different locations, are often connected. They're connected by climate change, and they're connected in these material and political-economic ways. So, I think in this moment there's probably more of a need, or more pressure, for urbanists to be broadening their view in those ways. And, who's doing it well? You know, that urban political ecology article got some pushback, or it's gotten some critique. One of the things we tried to say then was that people were doing it well. Books like *Concrete and Clay* by Matthew Gandy and *City of Flows* by Maria Kaika, and Erik Swyngedouw's work, early statements in UPE, were looking at the watershed in New York City, the watershed that made New York possible and that sort of thing. They were

still quite focused on the production of cities themselves. What does it take to make New York City? Now there's Planetary Mine, Martin Arboleda's work, that's really taken a global view of extractive landscapes. There's work by some young scholars that I've found quite interesting. Two Brazilians, João Tonucci and Rodrigo Castriota, have written on the Amazon in Brazil, I think, in some interesting ways. I have a graduate student who just published his first article in IJURR, Kyle Rod Galindez, who works on Guam. He's interested in urbanization and militarism, looking at these US territories that are small islands. So I think it has become more of a consensus for the field.

When students study urban sociology or urban geography it seems that it's often big spectacular cities that we begin with. For example, Peter Hall's *Cities of Tomorrow*. And in your 2017 *Urban Studies* piece, you argue that the city lens is this inheritance of the industrial metropolis at the turn of the last century. That made me think about other ways of starting to think about the urban. So given your shift to doing research on solar farms, for example, what does it mean to think of urban sociology, or urban sustainability, or urban studies with Beatty, Nevada, or Appalachian strip mining as the starting point?

I guess I want to answer in two ways. One thing I think urban studies can, and should, do and has been doing, is to focus less on big spectacular cities, and to look at smaller cities. Of course, lots of people have been making those sorts of calls, saying that these big cities are in many ways exceptional. Their political economy is exceptional, their morphology is exceptional, the kinds of patterns of inequality we find in them is exceptional. So absolutely, we should expand our research to other places. The other thing, when I think about my work on Beatty, Nevada, or despite the *Urbanizing Urban Political Ecology* article, my own work had still been focused on cities or sites of urban concentration. Actually, what I've been saying lately is, my work and my book look at old ideas of nature – the durability of old ideas for solving new problems related to climate and sustainability – through insights related to areas of urban concentration. I myself have now been quite deliberately moving to these extractive landscapes and extended urban landscapes to think about questions of change – cultural change and political economic change. I think, for me, it's become a more relational view because the way these political claims are being articulated, or the way critiques of existing systems are being articulated – the vocabulary seems to me so different across these kinds of communities, that it's important to have a shared political vocabulary, and also a shared analytical vocabulary. I'm working with two colleagues right now, Kian Goh, who I've published with, and Kasia Paprocki, who is at the London School of Economics. She's trained in rural sociology or development sociology. We're writing a paper together on urban and rural politics, prompted by many of these same kinds of questions that you were asking before. Like, why is urban the meta category and how well can we do this more expansive kind of relational research if we're still insisting on that as the term? Because that term creates a set of power relations, at least discursively, that we don't want to reproduce.

Returning to Beatty and the solar farm development, reading this text got me thinking of Gray Brechin's work on San Francisco, in *Imperial San Francisco*, and how he describes the city as made by the mid 19th century gold rush, as an inverted mine, a phrase that he

uses, which cities have emerged or might emerge as inverted solar farms?

What a fun question. At the moment it's likely to be Silicon Valley. One of the complaints that people around Beatty have is that most of this power is going to companies like Tesla and Google and Facebook. I don't want to get too in the weeds here, but these large companies are basically agreeing to purchase large amounts of renewable energy and those agreements make these infrastructure investments possible. And so it's almost becoming this tech landscape, I think.

So, a hinterland to the Silicon Valley, basically.

More or less, yes. But it's interesting because Silicon Valley itself is itself a hinterland. It's basically tech campuses and big roads. I don't know if you've been there, but there is no there, there. It doesn't really have a center.

I want to shift to your work on the Ruhr valley. In your book, How Green Became Good, you describe the Ruhr valley as a case of non-city urbanism, and a case that quite obviously, differs remarkably from other influential histories of urban greening. What awakened your interest for the Ruhr region, and also what surprised you in the process of researching the history of greening there?

I became interested in it because I worked for the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation before I got my PhD. And it was at the time that the Ruhr redevelopment was happening. In New York, it was the time that the High Line was being constructed, the former rail line. And the Ruhr was having this brownfield redevelopment. It was at that moment, in the early 2000s, that this was all happening. There was a lot of knowledge transfer between these two places. Landscape architects kept coming to New York and vice versa, so I knew about the site. I wasn't planning to write a book on it, but then, as a PhD student, I became very interested in these questions of urbanization. And I'm trained as a sociologist, so I try to bring sociological questions to these debates in interdisciplinary urban studies. I was interested in a more sociological way, I guess, in thinking about urban greening and these ideas about nature and how they travel in relationship to urbanization. I was interested in finding a place where I could study the ideas about greening happening in the absence of the usual city characteristics, the kind of large dense metropolis that needs a city park as an escape from slums and density. I also wanted a place with a long urban history, so that I could study it across these periods. And suddenly the Ruhr seemed like the most obvious place. It's funny, certainly American audiences think, "what a weird and idiosyncratic choice that no one's ever heard of." But it's also quite a significant place.

For the readers of this interview who have not read How Green Became Good, how would you describe non-city urbanism?

What I usually say is that the Ruhr is a low-density polycentric urban region. So it has multiple small centres instead of one large centre. And it has lots of open space, open space that was initially agriculture that was later made into green belts. There were also brown fields left from industry. And it is a very working-class region. So the Ruhr has recurrently greened itself, remade nature or symbols of nature, in the absence of the kind

of dense urban form that usually makes us think that we need the park as an antidote – and also without the kind of urban bourgeoisie, the kind of middle class social reformers, who either want parks for recreation and promenading, or who decide to fund them to cure problems in the slums.

In the introduction to this book, you remarked that adding green space to cities is not intrinsically meaningful, and also that urban sustainability is but the most recent iteration of green urbanism. And I agree with your essentially historical argument. But is there a risk of overstating, in a sense, ideology and the production of particular landscapes, particular nature at the expense of necessity or landscapes' function? It feels like there's a sense of greening becoming more of a necessity as planning shifts to managing the effects of climate change. I'm thinking of floods, for example, heat waves, etc. And this is something that you do touch upon in the conclusion to the book.

Well, it's interesting. Some of the work that I've done since that book has looked at the durability of old ideas for solving new problems. I've looked at how these ideas of 'green is good', and specifically these kinds of symbolic forms of green nature as good, seem to be driving municipal climate planning to make bad decisions. Recently I've been studying California, the title of the article is Missing the Housing for the Trees. We basically look at how city climate plans are really focused on parks and trees, even in places where that really doesn't make any sense, because it's a dry climate or they have other problems. And we show how those kinds of investments are emphasized rather than things like public transit or dense affordable housing that could probably have greater impacts. So, certainly there's a role for things like protection against storm surges and ways to deal with flooding and that sort of stuff that are green infrastructure, that are making use of natural materials as opposed to more manmade ones, absorbent surfaces, that kind of thing. But this book is a critique of the knee jerk turn to parks and trees as a solution. So yes, it does overstate it. I think it does deliberately, because it's so understated most of the time.

You end the book with these, as you say, lessons for practice, urging planners and politicians to green better, but also to green less. What reactions have you gotten to these final pages? How receptive would you say that planners and politicians are to these lessons?

A lot of people, especially students, actually say something like what you were saying before, which is "but isn't greening actually important in some ways?", and "aren't you overstating the case?". I think that is true. And I state the case strongly for reasons I already said. And even since the book came out, there has been more discussion, more climate related discussion, about the use of green infrastructure in the broad sense for dealing with some of these weather impacts. So that's one thing. A second thing I've thought more about since publishing the book is what some of the challenges are, for planners and policymakers, of not missing the housing for the trees. There are lots of reasons why climate plans focus on parks and trees, right? They're politically popular, for reasons we just talked about. They're easier to implement. They're cheaper than investments in housing and public transit. They can be done at a municipal scale more easily. They don't require regional planning. There are lots of structural, material,

economic, reasons that also cause us to turn to parks more easily. And then the third thing that I've learned, which has in some ways prompted my new work on public lands in the West is, again, that book really makes quite a strong argument about the continuity and durability of these very old European ideas of nature and how they are getting mobilized around the world today. And especially young people, often, who are involved in social movements of various kinds say to me, "actually there are lots of different ideas. There are indigenous movements, there's this and that". Many people are articulating hopes for different kinds of society-nature relationships and trying to enact those in different landscapes. I'm trying to take that seriously and look now at different alternative ideas, ideas that are not just reproducing these old tropes and where we as human beings are able to take them up in response to climate change.

I'm going to end with, I guess, the most open and biggest question of them all, connecting to your 2017 Urban Studies piece, where you say that the history of the urban studies field, can be told as the story of these changing answers to the urban questions, what a city is? How would you say, that question is answered today and how would you like it to be answered?

Of course it depends who you ask. But I think, if we assume that we're a bunch of urbanists, I think we would say that cities are sites of concentration of resources, financial resources, cultural resources, political power, infrastructure, buildings, you know, sediments, all that stuff that, as we know, that rely on these extended zones. That's not very innovative, but I guess that's my answer to what the city is within this planetary urbanization framework. But what would I like it to be? I'd answer it slightly differently. I've been moving towards starting to try out different vocabulary and wondering how much urbanization is the process that matters for us to be talking and writing about today. So one word I've been trying on is modernity, which is obviously super fraught and it's a vocabulary I've avoided. But I've been thinking a lot about how the epistemological frameworks that I've spent a lot of my own life thinking about, mostly this city-country city-nature set of dualisms as well as many of the kind of power relations between city and country, and actual physical built environments, infrastructure, settlement space and so on have all been built out in the last 150-200 years. So if we look at what a city is, a lot of it is these physical artefacts. For example, at least in the US, where did the train go? Okay, then where did the train have to refuel? That's where we'll build a settlement. Now we have the settlement there. Then we built power lines, and so where does the power need to go now? Here where all these people are. I've been trying to think more and more about these built up layers of physical infrastructure, of legal infrastructure, and how much inertia they exert on the present as we are trying to transform so many things as a result of climate change and other things. This is not an answer to the question what a city is, but it's the way that I've been trying to think about these amalgamations. The word assemblage comes to mind, but that's also not a vocabulary that I've used myself. But the point is to focus on these piles of stuff that cause us to exert so much energy in maintaining them and protecting them and keeping people living in them, and servicing them.

I think that's a very good answer. And of course it's bound to be a long and complex

answer because it is a big and complex question, the so called urban, what this it is.

One last thing, you can cut this or fit it in somewhere. The other thing that I didn't say about what a city is, but I think is useful, is of course a more David Harvey-like answer about investment in the built environment. The urban is capital spatialized, essentially, which I think is a useful framework for thinking about what drives the transformation of these spaces.

References

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Hillary Angelo is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Santa Cruz, Director of the Center for Critical Urban and Environmental Studies, and was a Member of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton for the 2022–2023 year. Her work offers a social-theoretical perspective on socio-ecological questions through historical and contemporary research on urban greening, sustainability planning and policy, infrastructure, and climate change. She has published widely in leading scholarly and public venues including *Nature*, *The Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, *Theory and Society*, and *Harper's Magazine*, and her first book, *How Green Became Good: Urbanized Nature and the Making of Cities and Citizens*, was published in 2021 by the University of Chicago Press. She is currently writing a book on public lands and the energy transition, which treats America's public lands as a key site to ask and answer questions about climate crisis, social crisis, and paths of social change in the 21st century.



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Erik Jönsson is an Associate Professor at the Department of Human Geography, Uppsala University. His research interests lie at the intersection of political ecology, science and technology studies, and landscape geography. He has in several research projects and based in different case studies explored the political role of future visions, rural planning conflicts and high end golf landscapes, and the role of labour-owned parks in the emergence of the labour movement in Sweden.