

**What's Still Important about the L.A. School in the Twenty-first Century  
(Learning from Dallas-Fort Worth)**

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## **What's Still Important about the L.A. School in the Twenty-first Century (Learning from Dallas-Fort Worth)**

If, as Ed Soja said in the late 1980s, Los Angeles has “become the paradigmatic window through which to see the last half of the twentieth century,” what, then, is the relevance of Los Angeles in the first part of the twenty-first century? And, what is the continued importance of the rich and sustained burst of scholarship, focused on and inspired by the city of Los Angeles, spawning what has come to be called the “L.A. School” of urban studies (Dear 2000; Miller 2000)? The aims and scope of the L.A. School continue to be debated and discussed (e.g., Dear et al, 2008). This paper hopes to participate in this discussion by positing two key contributions of the L.A. School to critical urban theory: methodological, in the form of the case study or “paradigmatic window”; and substantive, in the form of a Marxian analysis of capitalist spatial disorientation and urban restructuring.

In positing these contributions, there is no claim that the reading of the L.A. School offered here is the correct one, nor the one intended by L.A. School scholars. Rather, the tactic here could perhaps be understood as in a small way akin to Derrida’s aporetic reading, or Althusser’s symptomatic reading, in that there are multiple readings of a text (in this case, the broad scholarship of the L.A. School), some of which trace ideas in the text beyond the text’s own borders. Through the politics and uneven development of knowledge and scholarship, some of the contributions of the L.A. School have remained more lively and can be traced more readily than others. Nor is there a claim that the contributions of the L.A. School offered here come uniquely from the L.A. School. Rather, it would make sense that the debates and practices of twentieth century scholars extend far beyond the L.A. School, even if the latter is one site where they have condensed and unfolded. This paper considers these two contributions, focusing the second (the substantive) around an L.A. School analysis of the Dallas-Fort Worth metro region, in effort to argue for the continued relevance and applicability of L.A. School scholarship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Contributions of the L.A. School

### *Methodological*

For the L.A. School, Los Angeles is understood as a “paradigmatic window” on contemporary urbanization, shedding light not just on Los Angeles but on urban restructuring in other cities and regions. Soja, in an oft-quoted passage already referenced above, may have been the first to invoke the term paradigmatic window, at least in relation to critical urban theory and Los Angeles:

Ignored for so long as aberrant, idiosyncratic, or bizarrely exceptional, Los Angeles... has, more than any other place, become the paradigmatic window through which to see the last half of the twentieth century. I do not mean to suggest that the experience of Los Angeles will be duplicated elsewhere. But just the reverse may indeed be true, that the particular experiences of urban development and change occurring elsewhere in the world are being duplicated in Los Angeles, the place where it all seems to ‘come together’<sup>1</sup> (1989, p. 221)

In interpreting this quote, Dear suggests that Los Angeles is studied because it is both “a world leader, but also a mere petri dish with peculiar powers to distill external global forces” (Dear 2000, p. 75).

This notion of Los Angeles as laboratorial case through which to study both Los Angeles and beyond Los Angeles, that is, the context in which Los Angeles arises and is situated, namely, the conditions of contemporary urbanization, does not necessarily imply that Los Angeles is the archetype or harbinger of contemporary urbanism. Soja seems clearly not to be claiming this latter, but rather that urban processes going on elsewhere are also coming together and condensing in Los Angeles, which precisely is why it provides a good window through which to view these processes. The OED’s definition of “paradigm” and “paradigmatic case” — an example, a typical instance of something, a representative case — as well as of “window” — an opening to afford a view of what is outside or inside — seem to reinforce this notion that, as a paradigmatic window, Los Angeles is typical but not archetypical and, as such, is simultaneously both the object of study and a window through which to view the object of study (more below on what, more exactly, L.A. School scholars are viewing).

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Come together’ here has a double reference: i) in the 1980s, the slogan for the Los Angeles Times was “It All Comes Together in the Los Angeles Times,” and ii) as discussed in a moment, multiple and heterogeneous circumstances and currents merged and came together to produce an effect called late-20<sup>th</sup> century urbanization, visible via the study of Los Angeles.

In current literature, the case study is often defined in terms of its contexts. Yin (2009) defines a case study as an inquiry into a phenomenon with the intent to gain an understanding both of that phenomenon, in depth, and also its contextual conditions, in part because the contextual conditions may be inseparable from the phenomenon itself. Stake similarly describes a case study in terms of its contexts: it is a “complex entity located in a milieu or situation embedded in a number of contexts or backgrounds,” and, as a result, explanation often is “multiply sequenced, multiply contextual, and coincidental more than causal” (Stake 2008, p. 127). Studying a case thus means recognizing the diverse contexts and circumstances in which the case is situated, that merge and come together to constitute and shape the case.

Knowledge arising from a case study is thus different from the context-independent, decontextualized, abstracted knowledge arising from positivist methodology, with its simplifying assumptions and one-way causality (“independent” variables correlated with “dependent” variables); knowledge arising from a case study is context-dependent and rich in its concrete complexity (Flyvbjerg 2006; Orum et al 1991). Indeed the point and strength of the case study is (re)placing a phenomenon into its current situation, and understanding it in its complex relation with its contextual conditions. In Ragin’s words, a case study is particularly useful for understanding the coming together of “multiple and conjunctural causes — where different conditions combine in different sometimes contradictory ways” to produce an effect that is studied via the particular case (Ragin 1987, p. x). For Yin, because of the complex relation between the case and its contextual conditions, “data” in case study research is often both empirical and also informed by the “prior development of theoretical propositions” i.e., theories produced through previous rounds of research (Yin 2009, p. 18).

For both Yin and Stake, as well as others, case study research can contribute to knowledge production and be the basis of generalization, a point often debated both among and between case study methodologists and positivists. Stake distinguishes among three different kinds of case studies depending on their role in generalization and theory building: i) *intrinsic* case studies, undertaken because of intrinsic interest in a particular case, but not necessarily to generalize nor extract broader meaning; ii)

*instrumental* case studies, undertaken when a case is instrumental in understanding and generalizing about a broader issue, and can be the basis of generalizations and theory building; iii) *collective* case studies, i.e., instrumental studies extended to several cases, undertaken when the group of cases is used to understand and theorize about a broader issue. Stake tends to value the intrinsic case study,<sup>2</sup> while Yin sees the value of generalizing, and differentiates between generalizing from a case study, namely theoretical and “analytical generalization,” versus generalizing from a sample to a universe, namely “statistical generalization” (Yin 2009, p. 43). Analytical generalizations are not abstract end-products but rather the basis of further case research and theory building. Flyvbjerg (2006) also forcefully argues that a single case not only can be the basis of generalization but, contrary to statistical normativity, the single case need not be “representative” of some broader “population” since “the typical or average case is often not the richest in information” (Flyvbjerg 2006, p. 229). Flyvbjerg argues that the meaning and claims made of a case study are never conclusive, always unstable, and may depend on how well the researcher argues the case in the broader scholarly community, as well as the myriad (social, political, etc.) contexts in which the study is received.

The case study is no stranger to critical urban theory and indeed was a dominant form of inquiry in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as evidenced by the Chicago School (Platt 1992; Orum et al 1991). In the hands of the Chicago School, the case study was “like a microscope,” (cf. Dear’s “petri dish”) able to see both the individual and its social context, and, with Burgess’s call to record the case on the case’s own terms rather than translating it into the factual abstractions of the knowing observer, it “signifie[d] a revolutionary change” from other modes of social inquiry (Burgess 1928 quoted in Platt 1992, p. 21). This revolutionary change, or epistemological rupture (to borrow a term from Burgess’s contemporary, Gaston Bachelard), was an early attempt to call into question the subject-object split and to practice a more personal or inter-subjective form of social inquiry, seen more fully in the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in postmodern and feminist epistemology. Yet, despite this modern advance, the case study as a

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<sup>2</sup> “Damage occurs when the commitment to generalize or theorize runs so strong that the researcher’s attention is drawn away from features important for understanding the case itself” (Stake 2008, p. 125).

methodological category in social science declined in the post-World War II era for a variety of reasons, including the blurring of distinction between case study and other forms of inquiry (particularly participant observation and ethnography, which gained prominence at the expense of the case study) as well as the growing hegemony of logical positivism in social sciences, including urban studies. And, “it is only in the later 1980s... that the term ‘case study’ has made a noticeable return to serious discussion,” with Yin and others reformulating and formalizing it in a post-positivist era into “something significantly different from the classic interwar ‘case study method’” (Platt 1992, p. 42 and p. 45). This return of the case study to methodological discussions in the later 1980s is contemporaneous with urban scholars’ emerging practice of using Los Angeles as paradigmatic window to view contemporary urbanization.

In the hands of the L.A. School, the case study, in the form of paradigmatic window, also signifies an “epistemological radical break” (Dear 2000, p. 157). This break, drawing on Althusser’s notion of epistemological break (which, in turn, draws on Bachelard),<sup>3</sup> signifies a “mutation” of abstract, subject-centered, decontextualized knowledge of the phenomenon under consideration (what Althusser calls “ideology”) into concrete, contextualized knowledge by understanding the phenomenon in terms of the current conjuncture using previous rounds of contextualized knowledge, i.e., theory (Althusser 1970, p. 32 and p. 184). For Althusser, what arises on the other side of the break or mutation in the theory of knowledge, is what he calls “theoretical practice,” which, he argues, is distinct from previous empiricist theories of knowledge in which a knowing subject produces knowledge through abstracting an object’s essence from the dross (Althusser 1970, p. 167). For Althusser, a key aspect of theoretical practice, of producing an understanding of a phenomenon not in the abstract but in its multiple concrete, conjunctural contexts, is to make visible the anomalous, or lacuna, that is overlooked and rendered invisible in decontextualized, abstract knowledge. The anomalies and lacunae that Althusser is most concerned with making visible in the process of understanding a phenomenon are its political-economic conditions of existence. In particular, he is concerned with the class relations and capitalist processes that are invisible

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<sup>3</sup> These notions of epistemological rupture (Bachelard) and epistemological break (Althusser) are also akin to paradigm shift and scientific revolution (Kuhn 1962).

in mainstream ideology but which are nonetheless inseparable from the phenomenon under consideration, which both constitute, and, in turn, are constituted by, it (Althusser (1970, p. 101) uses the term, *overdetermined*, to describe this inseparableness, and mutual constituting, of a phenomenon and its contexts, with focus on hitherto obscured political economic contexts).

Los Angeles as paradigmatic window on contemporary urbanization thus signifies, following Dear, a break from previous, ideological, conceptions of the city (ideological in the sense that they have abstracted the city from its class, capitalist, and other diverse contexts that nonetheless constitute it). Previous concepts of the city (e.g., the concentric rings of the Chicago School, according to Dear) understand the city as an abstract universality centered “around a central, organizing core,” while Los Angeles represents a conception of the city as inseparable from its contexts “in which the periphery organizes the center within the context of globalizing capitalism” (Dear 2000, p. 157). The specifics of these peripheral and global capitalist contexts, that come together and organize the city in contemporary urbanization, make up the substantive contributions of the L.A. School, and have been the product of much elaboration and debate over the years (more on this below). The point here is that, since the 1980s, with the return of the case study to scholarly discussions, Los Angeles has become the instrumental case through which to understand the diverse contexts and circumstances, including the oft-hidden class and capitalist contexts, that come together to constitute and shape the phenomenon called contemporary urbanization.

As such, Los Angeles is paradigmatic in the sense that it is symptomatic of a paradigm shift (epistemological break) in understanding cities, not in the sense that it is an empirical harbinger or prototype. Yet somewhere along the way, L.A. School scholarship has been interpreted not as the study of Los Angeles as way to better understand the city’s broader (capitalist) conditions of existence, but rather as asserting Los Angeles as exceptional, special, or as some real archetype and original model of contemporary postmodern urbanism. L.A. School scholars seem careful to eschew such assertions, at least explicitly, yet some of their claims seem also to confound this self-effacing decentering of the subject. For example, Dear admits that:

Los Angeles undoubtedly is a special place. But adherents of the Los Angeles School do not argue that the city is unique, nor necessarily a harbinger of the future, even though both viewpoints are at some level demonstrably true. Instead at a minimum they assert that Southern California is a suggestive archetype... (2000, p. 21)

Such a statement may be crudely akin to the popular girl in high school who admits, “I’m sorry that people are so jealous of me... but I can’t help it that I’m so popular.”<sup>4</sup> This interpretation of L.A. School scholarship has had unfortunate consequences, as scholars with fascination or experience with other cities have not been content to yield what they perceive as exceptional status to the City of Angels, and instead “square off against” each other in subject-centered debate over whose city best represents contemporary urbanism (Conzen and Greene 2008, p. 98). This has led to a contest of what Beauregard calls the superlative city and a “blur[ring of] the distinction between theory and publicity” (Beauregard 2003, p. 184).

[to be completed...]

Following Beauregard regarding the importance for urban scholars to reestablish critical engagement in analyzing cities, I argue that one of the central contributions of the L.A. School, and critical urban theory more broadly, is its use of Marxian economics in analyzing urban spatial structure, producing critical and illuminating “mappings” of contemporary urbanization. To illustrate this central contribution, in the next section I use an L.A. School type analysis to understand the Dallas metropolitan area in the current conjuncture.

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<sup>4</sup> The character Gretchen, from the 2004 Hollywood film, *Mean Girls* about the politics and ploys of female social cliques in high school, is the source of this oft-quoted line where she calls out her own specialness in a disingenuously self-effacing way.



### *Substantive*

Much of the initial work of the L.A. School was produced by “a new wave of Marxist” scholars, involved in a “reconstruction of urban political economy”<sup>5</sup> (Davis 1989, p. 9). While much of the initial work drew upon Marxist economics and class analysis, such as the work of David Gordon, Rick Edwards, and Ernest Mandel, some of the subsequent work has transcended, forgotten, and/or eschewed the initial role of Marxian analysis. This preterition of Marxism may have been conditioned by a complementary yet also competing discourse in the L.A. School, that of postmodernism and its accompanying critique of, among other things, economic determinism. In efforts to eschew economism, L.A. School scholars have sometimes eschewed economic theorizing altogether (Arvidson 2003).

Yes, the L.A. School’s Marxist “bloodlines” have drifted with its postmodern “bloodlines,” coming from, for example, such critics of Marxism as Michel Foucault and Jean Baudrillard.<sup>6</sup> This epistemic drift of Marxism and postmodernism, perhaps not random, has moved the L.A. School away from its initial Marxist influences toward a “school [that] evades dogma by including divergent... approaches... ranging from Marxist to Libertarian” (Dear 2002b, p. 27). Yet, despite this drift toward a more ‘inclusive’ L.A. School, or maybe because of it, there is still a spectre of Marxism haunting the L.A. School. Why is it important to summon up this spectre rather than call Ghostbusters<sup>7</sup>? Because Marxism makes a unique contribution to social analysis by pinpointing the source of capitalist profit in the exploitation of labor amid social (class) relations, rather than in, say, the marginal productivity and self-interest of individuals (Resnick and Wolff 2006). And, this contribution enables class analyses of sites and practices of capitalism, towards perhaps an anti-capitalist, or post-capitalist, politics.

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<sup>5</sup> “For some, political economy is a synonym (or euphemism) for Marxism” (Strinati 2004, p. 250) although for others, especially in the U.S., it could be “not just a euphemism for ‘Marxist’ but also a deliberate effort to be inclusive and non-sectarian” (King 2002, p. 223).

<sup>6</sup> Michael Dear (1997), in his paper “Postmodern Bloodlines,” draws bloodlines between modern and postmodern to argue that the postmodern represents a reassertion of the importance of space and spatiality in social theory. Soja (1989) makes a similar argument. In this paper rather, the bloodlines of the L.A. school are drawn between Marxist and postmodern to argue that the L.A. School’s Marxist bloodlines may have been eclipsed by its postmodern bloodlines, in full admission that there are different types or “readings” of Marxism, some modern and some postmodern, as discussed later in this paper.

<sup>7</sup> The theme song from the 1984 Hollywood film, *Ghostbusters* about a paranormal exterminator service, is the source of the slogan “Who you gonna call? Ghostbusters!” The song was nominated for an Academy Award for “Best Original Song” (“Ghostbusters.”)

By summoning the spectre of Marxism in critical urban theory, there is no intent to rehash the heady debates of the 1980s and '90s over economic determinism, essentialism, totalizing discourses, modes of production, etc. Rather, this paper skirts these issues by drawing on a noneconomistic Marxist economics with a focus on class (Resnick and Wolff 2006; Arvidson 1999).

Early L.A. School scholarship situated its analysis of Los Angeles in the contexts of, among other things, class and capitalism. For example, Soja, Morales, and Wolff (1983)...

[to be completed with an application to Dallas Fort Worth]

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