

# Urban inequality – methods, flows and state processes

**Eleanor Jupp**

School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Research, University of Kent, Canterbury, Kent, UK

Dialogues in Urban Research  
2023, Vol. 1 (3) 278–282  
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DOI: 10.1177/27541258231204001  
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## Abstract

As DeVerteuil asserts, urban studies should engage anew with matters of inequality and social justice. In this commentary piece, additional perspectives on this task are offered, drawing on research on community action and austerity. These include the importance of paying attention to the importance of ‘small’ practices, feelings and affects as constitutive of urban politics, which can be accessed via ethnography; attending to the digital as it remakes city fabrics and communities; and new explorations of state processes drawing on feminist and psycho-social approaches.

## Keywords

Urban ethnography, affect, community, austerity

DeVerteuil has offered an engaging and provocative argument about urban inequality, exploring some key and enduring debates – and indeed fracture lines – within urban studies. Via the intriguing use of photographic ‘vignettes’ of a number of world cities, he develops the argument that the structure of inequality in cities has moved from ‘corrugated’ to a ‘more entrenched version of inequality’ (p. 2), described as, ‘the lopsided city where the powerful few hold increasingly disproportionate power over the majority’. This analysis is developed partly via an appeal for a return to a body of literature written in the 1990s, which centred inequality and class relations in cities in particular ways. Key texts discussed include those by Sassen (1991), Zukin (1992) and Smith (1994).

I share the ambition, both in the article and in DeVerteuil’s wider vision for urban studies, for research engaged in radical critique, and that centres ambitions for social justice and a transformed

politics and economics. I also still believe in the ongoing relevance of urban studies from the 1990s, without which it would be hard to imagine contemporary urban geography. However, and without seeking to simplify the nuanced arguments presented, I would like to insert some further themes and thoughts to sit alongside those presented, and to draw attention to some aspects of contemporary urban research which are less attended to in the article. I would suggest that these other avenues of urban research can overcome some of the fractures and dichotomies presented in the article. In the first instance, these concern matters of methods and analysis, with a focus on the value of ethnography and

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## Corresponding author:

Eleanor Jupp, School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Research, University of Kent, Canterbury, Kent, CT2 7NZ, UK.  
Email: [e.f.jupp@kent.ac.uk](mailto:e.f.jupp@kent.ac.uk)

urban practice. Secondly and relatedly, I discuss digital flows and culture as constitutive of contemporary urban politics, and lastly, I discuss attention to state processes and politics in the austere city. Across these themes, I draw on my own current areas of research interest, which centre on care and activism in the context of austere politics, including mutual aid and community food initiatives, as well as interactions with the contemporary welfare state (Jupp, 2022a).

### **The big and the small in urban politics and research**

A concern across the piece is that urban studies have become too narrowly preoccupied, and DeVerteuil wonders whether, ‘perhaps the field of urban studies has become “small”, lacking the desire to ask big questions about certain pressing issues, or simply too fragmented to present a common front’ (p. 3). Although not explicitly stated, there seems to be a concern here with the shift to urban research framed by social and cultural geographical approaches rather than economic ones. This shift is also associated with a move away from centring class analysis, although DeVerteuil is careful to underline the new insights which have come from postcolonial approaches and a focus on cities beyond the Global North, as well as more intersectional approaches to class.

However, I disagree with this dichotomy between big and small things and approaches in urban research. My own research into local forms of community organising and activism frequently centres on ‘small’ practices such as making cups of tea, socialising, friendship and conviviality (Jupp, 2012, 2022a). I also pay attention to feelings, atmospheres and affects, which could be seen as not just small but ephemeral. Yet small-scale practices and feelings can also be powerful and significant, involving matters of inclusion and exclusion, power and marginality as well as inequality. Much feminist research in particular has focused on emotions as powerful constituents of the urban political fabric (e.g. Dyck, 2005; Pain, 2019). Such analysis stitches

together ‘big analysis’ with ‘small moments’ in order to illuminate everyday experiences and political processes including inequality (Askins, 2015; Morrow and Davies, 2022).

At stake here are also matters of methods and perspectives. DeVerteuil draws on Zukin’s (1992) powerful and important analysis that involved a ‘reading’ of the landscapes of cities, deconstructing the symbolic power of the built environment in particular. The photo vignettes included also ‘read’ and deconstruct the patterns of economic power that shape the cities involved. However, an important development since the 1990s has been a return to ethnography as a way to understand urban landscapes, within a much more practice-based and immersive approach to understanding urban fabrics (Streule, 2020). This again involves attention to the multi-sensory and affective as well as discursive. In relation to the tall buildings which are a particular focus of this piece, researchers have argued for a multi-sensory exploration of the politics of buildings (Lees and Baxter, 2011). Rose et al. (2010) focus on the ‘big things’ of urban buildings to propose an analysis of ‘building events and feelings’ which combine an understanding of wider circuits of power and institutions around buildings, as well as feelings ‘in’ and ‘of’ buildings which may trouble straightforward accounts of the operation of power. I have used this approach in relation to an analysis of institutional spaces that combine diverse and resistant rationalities as well as powerful dynamics of governance (Jupp, 2013). I would therefore propose that readings of the economic power of landscapes need to be supplemented with methodologies and analysis which get in amongst urban life as it unfolds, in all its complexity and contradictions, whether that be within sites of power, of the marginalised, or those in between. Furthermore, a practised and multi-sensory approach to the city can break down perceived dichotomies between powerful and ‘vernacular’ landscapes in cities.

This is important in apprehending the changing nature of power and capital in the contemporary city. Certainly, since the classic Marxist texts referred to in the piece (e.g. Harvey, 1973), the nature of class, inequalities and identities has changed dramatically and continues to evolve.

The shifting nature of work, particularly in relation to precarity and the ‘gig economy’ since 2008, as well as immigration status and super-diversity, and shifting dynamics of gender, complicate any straightforward approach to analysis of inequality based on a bifurcated view of class. Indeed there is a wealth of research which explores these new sites of inequality in relation to cities (e.g. Hall, 2017; Katta et al., 2020; McDowell et al., 2007).

### **Digital worlds and inequalities**

Another major shift in city life since the 1990s has been the advent of digital cultures and worlds which constitute city fabrics as much as the visible built environment. Just as urban real estate is largely held by a powerful few, digital spaces are owned by a few companies and property owners (Graham, 2020). However, understanding digital platforms and apps in practice also requires immersion in the connections and communities they produce, rather than just ‘reading off’ or assuming the operation of power and inequality through a more distanced mode of critique. Doreen Massey (2007), as DeVerteuil mentions, always combined economic critique with an attunement to a more hopeful and emergent urban politics. Her notion of place as a ‘meeting place’ and the ‘thrown togetherness’ of urban life, seem enduringly relevant in relation to the forging of connections and meeting places via the digital (Massey, 2005). On the one hand, the meetings of everyday worlds online have the potential to increase forms of inequality and exclusion, often shaping a dangerous and reactionary wider politics (Davies, 2018). Indeed the statement with which DeVerteuil begins his piece, about the decline of racism, homophobia and transphobia, does not hold true when applied to digital spaces.

On the other hand, the digital holds open the promise of new forms of community, conviviality and mutual support. Koch and Miles (2021) coin the phrase ‘stranger intimacies’ to explore the coming together of strangers via urban platforms such as AirBnB and Tindr. They argue that the classic focus on the urban crowd and encounters in public spaces where strangers might be ‘thrown

together’ should now be supplemented by a move to a focus on the intersections of the digital and the face-to-face, via which strangers in cities now meet. While these new communities can also be exclusionary and reinforce inequalities, they also have the potential to enact progressive political experiments. In my own work (Jupp, 2022a), I have analysed the development of ‘stranger intimacies’ in relation to mutual aid and collective care, particularly during the pandemic, as hopeful experiments in small-scale collective action. I view such experiments as indicative of other micro-democratic and cooperative approaches to community provisioning involving food, clothes and household goods. Overall, I would suggest that digital platforms can reshape the politics of urban places, but in ambivalent ways, producing community, inclusion and progressive political action, as well as exclusion, animosity and a rejection of progressive politics. More research is needed on sites such as local Facebook groups and their role in shaping place-based dynamics.

### **Urban inequality and the everyday state**

Considering everyday organising and collective care in cities brings the (shifting) role of the welfare state in cities into view. DeVerteuil mentions in several places in the article the need to pay attention to the actions of the state in cities. He points to the hopeful actions of welfare states during the pandemic, when national and local governments intervened to meet the needs of citizens in new ways – although can also be seen to have enacted widespread neglect of certain sections of the population, including older people and those with disabilities (Kawira and Sakamoto, 2023).

Indeed, alongside new methodologies and approaches to cities I would argue that since 2008, urban geography has developed new analytics of the state in particular. This has partly been in order to trace the dynamics of austerity processes in Global North cities in the wake of the 2008 financial crash. This is a shape-shifting state that has withdrawn from welfare services in many everyday ways.

There is now a considerable body of research in this vein, often combining urban and economic concerns with social, cultural and feminist geographical approaches (e.g. Hall, 2019; van Lanen, 2017). This means paying attention to atmosphere, affect and shifting feelings associated with encountering the austere state (Jupp, 2022b). Such research has also traced resistance to austerity, both within and without the local state itself (Penny, 2020). Again combining 'big' shifts and small-scale practices, this body of research offers a rich analysis of how local states and actors both produce and sometimes seek to progressively tackle inequality. Such approaches might therefore be seen as providing hopeful pathways for overcoming some of the fragmentation of concern in DeVerteuil's article, both for urban studies, and cities themselves.

### Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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### **Author biography**

**Eleanor Jupp** is a reader in Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Kent. She has research interests in care, mutual aid and community action in cities, explored in her recent book, *Care, Crisis and Activism: The Politics of Everyday Life* (Bristol University Press).