Responses and Rejoinders

Economism in the New Urban Sociology: a critique of Mullins' 'Theoretical Perspectives on Australian Urbanisation'

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Since the February 1977 urban sociology symposium in the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology* there has been a rapid development of the new urban sociology in Australia. Mullins' attempt to develop a Marxian theory of Australian urbanisation, (Mullins, 1981a, 1981b) coming as it does four years later, must therefore be seen as a natural and healthy development and a welcome elaboration of a perspective which in recent years has come to dominate theorisation of the urban. At the same time, the particular Marxian paradigm which has come to dominate urban theory contains a number of serious deficiencies, and in recent years there has been much critical evaluation of progress to date (see, for example, Harloe and Lebas, 1981; Lebas, 1980, 1982; Walton, 1981; Zukin, 1980). Inevitably these strengths and weaknesses have been especially prominent in earlier applications to Australian urban structure (see Kilmartin and Thorns, 1978; Sandercock, 1978; Aungles and Szelenyi, 1979). An understanding of the problems which Mullins' analysis entails therefore depends on an appreciation of the perspective which he has attempted to apply.

The new urban sociology differs from Marxian sociology in general in two main ways. In the first place, the early work on class and class conflict (by Mills, Dahrendorf, Bottomore, Ossowski, Rex, Lockwood, Gouldner and others) which has informed and heavily influenced sociology in general has not made any appreciable impact on the new urban sociology, mainly because of the latter's late development. The growing influence of Marxian analysis during the 1960s in a sociology hitherto dominated by Weberian and Parsonian perspectives must be understood in the context of the liberalisation of

capitalist societies after the virulent anti-communist hysteria of the Cold War period: a liberalisation which in sociology involved a rejection of the myth of classlessness and an acknowledgement that class conflict is a fundamental characteristic of capitalist society. This class and class conflict perspective underlay Marxian sociology during the rapid expansion of the discipline from the late 1950s to the early 1970s. For sociologists the rehabilitation of Marx has primarily meant the rehabilitation of the concept of class and class conflict as a major issue in understanding capitalist societies.

Marxian influence on the new urban sociology has been strikingly different. For urban sociologists, the rehabilitation of Marx has involved fruitful departures from Weberian conceptions of class in occupational and sectoral terms (such as urban managerialism and housing classes), but has not as yet resulted in substantially reconceptualising the urban in class terms. It is not just the Althusserian structuralist influence which contributes to this difference, but the predominance of a specific kind of Marxian economics rather than Marxian concepts of class and class conflict which gives the new urban sociology a completely different starting point from that of Marxian sociology in general. Indeed, it is possible to further argue that there is no new Marxist urban sociology, but instead an urban political economy: an attempt to analyse urban phenomena in terms of basic Marxian economic categories of capital accumulation, surplus value, rent, the changing organic composition of capital, the falling rate of profit, etc. This peculiarity of the new urban sociology has been discussed elsewhere (Kemeny, 1982). For purposes of this discussion it is only necessary to note that Mullins' approach reflects the economistic and 'class regressed' analysis of urban political economy where class becomes merely an intervening variable.

The economism of Mullins' approach stems from his adoption of a 'stages of capitalist urbanisation' approach derived from the work of Gordon (1978) and Hill (1977) who attempted to explain the overall pace and nature of urbanisation in the U.S.A. as a product of different forms of capitalist accumulation. Mullins adopts a similar three-stage model, arguing that each of the three major forms of capitalist accummulation (commercial capitalism, competitive capitalism and monopoly capitalism) produces a distinctive form of urban structure, which Mullins calls mercantile urbanisation, industrial urbanisation and corporate urbanisation[1] (Mullins, 1981a, 67). Mullins then goes on to argue that whereas core capitalist countries passed through all three stages, in the case of old semi-peripheral capitalist countries, including Australia, the second industrial stage did not take place and there was a direct shift from mercantile to corporate urbanisation i.e., from cities based on transport, exchange and trade to cities charac-

terised by large-scale suburbanisation without an intervening stage of concentrated factory production and its concommitant urban form produced by industrial urbanisation.

This is a very general political economy view of urbanisation which compares, in broad brush terms, differences in urbanisation between Australia and older capitalist countries. It has much in common with the 'Stages of Economic Growth' model developed by Rostow (1960), together with many of its fundamental problems. This model purported to be a non-Marxist alternative explanation of industrialisation. The most important problem with this type of model is that such a view of change in terms of 'stages' is in itself not explanatory, but only classificatory. Mullins' argument that the stages of capitalist development were collapsed in Australia is also strikingly similar to Rostow's explanation of the way in which some recently industrialised countries, including Australia, skipped certain stages of growth.

But Mullins takes the Rostowian argument a stage further. He goes on to argue that the low level of rental housing provision and of residential facilities, which are major characteristics of Australian urban structure, can be explained in terms of the fact that Australian urban structure was determined by the dominance of mercantile capitalism until the 1940s and the failure of the industrial capitalist stage to intervene between mercantilism and corporate capitalism. Australian urban structure is therefore a product of mercantile capitalism while the urban structure of core capitalist countries is a product of industrial capitalism with its large concentrations of factory workers (Mullins, 1981a, 68-9). Furthermore, Mullins also argues that since about 1950, with the beginning of the corporate stage of capitalism in Australia, there has been a convergence with core capitalist countries and so 'Now, as a consequence there is greater similarity in residential form between all capitalist countries,' (Mullins, 1981a, 69).

This explanation of Australian urban structure therefore places emphasis upon an early divergence of Australian capitalism from that of core countries and a subsequent post-war convergence. Mullins therefore seeks to explain modern Australian urban structure in terms of processes which ended nearly half a century ago. I want to argue here that the evidence points to the opposite conclusion: that Australia's unique urban structure is a product of a process of *divergence from*—not convergence with—that of many other capitalist countries which took place during the massive suburbanisation boom of the 1950s and 1960s. Furthermore, I want to place the locus of the explanation for this process of divergence, not in terms of the general political economic stages of the development of Australian capitalism, but in terms of class conflict, and the inability of the

working class to ensure the development of a collectivised urban structure during the 1950s and 1960s. The locus of such an explanation—in terms of class and power—is therefore sociological, in contrast to Mullins' explanation—in terms of stages of capital accumulation—which is economic.

The post-war period witnesses virtual transformations of Australian urban structure, based on a rapid and sustained expansion of Australia's industrial base and involving a trebling of metropolitan housing stocks. By the late 1970s housing built during or before the 1940s constituted a residual sector largely located in inner suburban areas. Modern Australian urban structure is therefore primarily a product of the post-war period of ubanisation.

But the crucial comparison is not between Australian cities at the start and at the end of the post-war period, but between the different post-war trajectories of Australian urban structure and those of other, especially capitalist, industrialised societies. Mullins contrasts 'mercantile' nations (Australia, New Zealand and Iceland) with major European countries (France, West Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, Britain, Belgium) to argue that the two groups 'contrast sharply' in terms of home-ownership rates, the former being higher than the latter (Mullins, 1981a, 70), but that the differences have narrowed over the post-war period as convergence between mercantile and industrial nations has occurred.

The problem with this analysis is that it lumps together a large number of very different European societies: the home-ownership rates in Britain and Belgium of over 50 per cent contrasting more with West Germany (34 per cent), Sweden (36 per cent) and Switzerland (27 per cent) than with Australia, New Zealand, the U.S.A., Canada and Iceland, all with rates over 60 per cent. Moreover, it ignores the fact that over the post-war period the trend in home ownership rates has not been uniformly upwards: indeed, in some societies the home-ownership rate actually fell between the 1940s and the 1970s. Thus, for example, in West Germany it fell from 40 to 35 per cent, and in Sweden from 45 to 36 per cent. Mullins' argument that '. . . the suburbanisation process of the contemporary monopoly period of capitalism has increased rates of home-ownership in industrial countries,' (1981a, 70), is therefore a generalisation which overlooks crucial differences between different capitalist societies.

The differences are crucial because they contradict Mullins' hypothesis that Australia and other mercantile nations differ markedly from the U.S.A., Britain and other European countries. The evidence, on the contrary, is that Australia shares a common tenure structure (both in terms of home-ownership and public renting) with the U.S.A. and, increasingly, with Britain, and that these societies

contrast with the pattern of tenure and tenure change of some European societies.

The contrast between 'mercantile' and industrial capitalist societies, and the argument that there has been a convergence between them as a result of the establishment of international monopoly capitalism is, therefore, inadequate as an explanation of the distinctiveness of Australian urban structure. The pattern of Australian urban structure, with its low level of public urban infrastructure provision, its low residential densities and other salient characteristics is more comparable with that of the U.S.A., Canada and New Zealand and in contrast to some, but not all, European countries, notably West Germany, The Netherlands and Sweden, where there are high residential densities and high levels of public urban infrastructure provision. This marked contrast has been pointed out by Popenoe (1980) and Kemeny (1980, 1981, chapter 4) and results from a divergence between such societies *over the post-war period.*

It is worth spelling out what precisely this difference involves. We are not primarily talking about basic environmental facilities such as sewage and utilities, nor about general welfare state provision such as education, health, and social security. The crucial difference between countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the U.S.A. on the one hand and West Germany, The Netherlands and Sweden on the other is that the organisation of urban space has diverged over the post war period, with the former countries developing urban forms in which private space and resources are maximised and public space and resources minimised. The difference is therefore between houses and flats, private and public transport, gardens and public parks, domestic and collective child care provision, home-centred and public amenity centred life styles: or what I have termed elsewhere 'privatised' as against 'collectivised' urban structures (Kemeny, 1981, chapter 4).

Essentially, countries such as the U.S.A., Iceland, Australia and New Zealand have failed to increase the degree of collectivisation of urban structure over the post-war period whereas countries such as West Germany and Sweden have done so to a marked degree and countries such as Britain and France have done so to a lesser extent than West Germany or Sweden but considerably more so than Australia. What needs to be explained, therefore, is why levels of public provision of urban infrastructure increased significantly less in Australia after the war. The per cent of public rental houses has not risen significantly since the early 1950s, nor have rates of water, sewerage, and utilities provision increased significantly in metropolitan areas. What has been significant, however, has been the failure of the state to increase its degree of intervention of collectivising urban structure at a time when urban collectivisation was increasing rapidly in a number of capitalist societies.

The key issue is therefore why Australia's post-war urbanisation took on such a highly privatised form. It is interesting to note that a similar highly privatised urban form developed in New Zealand in spite of important differences in the development of the welfare state (Kilmartin and Thorns, 1978). The answer lies, not in terms of different 'forms of accumulation', but in terms of the specific historical conditions of the class struggle in Australia and its very different outcome from that in some other capitalist societies. Before considering this it is necessary to consider Mullins' position concerning class and urbanisation.

Taking stage of capitalist development as the starting point, Mullins argues that mercantile capitalism produces a less powerful working class than does industrial capitalism (1981a, 68) and so Australia's mercantile working class was not powerful enough or sufficiently urban-based to place pressure on 'capital' for both higher wages and better living conditions which would have increased levels of public urban infrastructure provision (1981a, 69). Mullins therefore explains Australia's highly privatised urban structure partly in terms of a weak mercantile working class.

There are two reasons why this argument is unconvincing. In the first place, it is not at all clear that '. . . industrial labour . . . forms the most powerful section of the working class . . .' with a political muscle enabling greater pressure to be placed upon capital for obtaining both higher wages and better living conditions,' (Mullins, 1981a, 68). Miners, dockers, seamen, railwaymen and other elements of the working class (which according to Mullins' schema are important in mercantile capitalism) have often been militant and able to exert economic and political pressure as powerfully as any other element of the working class under fully developed industrial capitalism.

Secondly, and more important, it is clear from the explanatory framework employed by Mullins that the power of the working class is a function of the stages of capitalism which the country has passed through. According to this, because Australia did not pass through a stage of industrial capitalism it did not develop a working class which was capable of demanding high levels of public investment in urban infrastructure. If this is correct, then we would expect that countries which *did* pass through such a stage—and notably the U.S.A.—would have urban structures which were rich in public urban infrastructure and which did not suffer from 'public squalor'. In fact, this is not the case. On the contrary, as already noted, Australian urban structure has much more in common with that of the U.S.A. than with most European capitalist societies, and especially Sweden and The Netherlands, where, like Australia, industrial development did not get under way until the 1940s.

In any case, it is not at all clear what relevance the working class has in determining urban structure if the nature of the working class is predetermined by the stages of capital accumulation. In Mullins' schema it is the stage of capitalism which is the explanatory variable and not the structure of the working class. Urban structure reflects the manner in which capital accumulation takes place. Working class militancy cannot be the determining variable though it presumably can be an intervening variable which marginally modifies the overall outcome in terms of urban structure. Yet if this is so, then how is one to explain the fact that levels of state infrastructural expenditure in Australia are comparable to those in the U.S.A., Canada and Iceland but starkly different from those in some European countries?

The dilemma in this analysis derives from the attempt to explain differences between individual countries in terms of underlying long-term trends in the economic development of capitalism rather than in more specific differences in terms of class structure. Herein lies the root of the problem with the economistic explanations of urban structure in urban political economy. Castells' treatment of housing reflects precisely the same problems. Taking housing as an example, Castells (1977, 145-169) attempts to argue that the French experience, with heavy state involvement in public housing provision, is typical of capitalist societies at a certain stage of development. He therefore argues that the U.S.A. is an exception. But nearly all of the exceptional conditions which he lists apply with equal force to Australia, while Duncan (1981) clearly shows how Castells' analysis does not apply to other societies, notably Sweden.

What is required, then, in order to explain the specific nature of urban structure in Australia is a framework which goes beyond a generalised 'stages of economic growth' model and which centrally addresses the issue of class power as the explanatory variable. Specifically, in the case of Australia it is necessary to explain why it was that in the post-war period public expenditure on urban infrastructure failed to increase to the level that it did in some countries. This involves an analysis of the relationship between class and the state, a relationship which is conspicuously absent in Mullins' analysis, such that the conservative ascendency which lasted through the 1950s and 1960s must be a crucial element in such an explanation. Recent analysis of the Australian welfare state in comparison with other countries shows clearly that the divergence of the Australian experience began to be marked during the 1950s and became pronounced by the end of the 1960s (Mendelsohn, 1979; Jones, 1980). The nature of urbanisation during this period similarly requires analysis in these terms. Connell (1977), for example, has argued that working class dissatisfaction with the neglect of public urban infrastructural

investment was a major factor in the election of a Labor Federal Government in 1972.

Besides an analysis of working class structure and its implications for power, analysis of the owners of capital is also required. This is a real *lacuna* in urban political economy where generalisations about 'capital' and 'capitals' predominate (for notable exceptions see Mollenkopf and Pynoos, 1971, 1972; Ratcliffe, 1981).

It is in this context that Mullins demonstrates a fundamental misreading of some of my own work on owner-occupation. Mullins claims that I argue in favour of the thesis that home-ownership creates working class commitment to capitalism, 'carrying over' a British debate to Australia (Mullins, 1981b, 41). In fact, I argue almost completely the opposite, and this requires correcting here because my argument closely relates to issues concerning class conflict and ideological hegemony. My argument has not been that home-ownership has created a working class commitment to capitalism, but rather—that there has been a *belief among policy-makers*, and perhaps in certain sections of the bourgeoisie, that home-ownership does have conservatising consequences (for a discussion of this issue see Forrest *et al.*, 1983) and that this has fundamentally determined Australian housing policy. Other observers of Australian housing have made a similar observation quoting speeches made by numerous State and Federal politicians over the decades to the effect that home-ownership is a bulwark against social unrest and defuses social and industrial conflict (see, for example, Bethune, 1977, 362-366; Jones 1972, 120-121; Kemeny 1977). The main thrust of my argument has been that the policy-outcome of the implementation of this belief, in terms of a high home-ownership rate, has been a major factor in creating the social structural conditions of privatisation which in turn have had a major impact on urban structure (Kemeny, 1979, 1980, 1981).

Thus, far from being a 'carry over' from a British debate to Australia, I have argued that housing policy, particularly in terms of the balance between the tenures, must be understood in terms of class conflict. Whereas a powerful labour movement in Sweden was able to develop a radical housing policy, and whereas in Britain at least until the early 1970s there has been a clear socialist alternative in terms of a large public rental sector, in Australia 'housing is . . . one of the few major areas of social policy in which there is no left-wing alternative to the dominant conservative ideology' (Kemeny, 1978, 13).

The point about this is that the form which urban structure takes must be understood as a product of class conflict in which the ideologies and courses of action of those in positions of economic and political power clearly play a part. To argue that the working class is

'weak' is to admit to the possibility that others are more powerful. An analysis of the ideologies and internal structure of the capitalist class and of policy making, and how these influence urban structure is therefore as important as an examination of the strengths and weaknesses of working class structure (Mollenkopf and Pynoos, 1972, 1973; Ratcliffe, 1981).

In summary, then, attempts to understand Australian urbanisation need to be based on a sociological appreciation of class rather than on an analysis of the changing economic basis of capitalism. The problem is partly one of 'the displacement of scope' (Wagner, 1964), in that the highly generalised level of analysis—of three stages of capitalist development spanning two centuries—is too crude to be of any help in understanding processes which span much shorter periods. But essentially the problem resolves itself into a difference of theoretical perspective. History can be understood in terms of the economic logic of capitalist development. But it can more appropriately be understood in terms of a 'making of history' in which class struggle forms the basis and out of which the outcome is by no means certain, or even predictable. This issue of economic determinism in Marxian theory, is old and well-worn, but it does have practical implications for research. The interesting problems which Mullins has attempted to address require, I believe, a much more fine-grained and 'sociological' approach than the broad brush political economy approach which, in the context of this particular problem, is overly mechanical and deterministic.

NOTES

1. It should be noted that Mullins' terminology differs from both that of Hill and Gordon. Gordon refers to 'The Commercial City', 'The Industrial City' and 'The Corporate City', while Hill refers to 'mercantile urbanisation', 'industrial urbanisation' and 'metropolitan urbanisation'.

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