

“ BETWEEN FIXITY AND MOTION : ”  
EMPLACING TECH IN NEW YORK CITY

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Sharon ZUKIN, *The Innovation Complex: Cities, Tech, and the New Economy*  
(Oxford, OUP, 2020, 296 p.)

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Sharon Zukin has been a chronicler of New York City’s urban fortunes for the past 45 years. As she outlines in her new book, *The Innovation Complex*, post-industrial New York City reinvented itself as a “knowledge” economy in the 1970s, as an “information” economy in the 1990s, and as a “creative” or “cultural” economy in the 2000s [5]. And she has documented these transformations in books including *Loft Living* [1982], *Landscapes of Power* [1991], *The Cultures of Cities* [1995], and *Naked City* [2009] among others<sup>1</sup>. *The Innovation Complex* focuses on New York City’s latest, post-2008 aspirational identity as an “innovation” economy oriented toward a tech future and a startup culture: New York City as “Silicon Alley” [18-19].

Zukin’s trademark in all of her work is attention to intersections of culture and capital in the production of urban space. As she puts it in the introduction, “Cities literally put in place new ways of organizing production” and, “as centers of culture they create new ways of imagining, justifying, and adapting to these changes—and often resisting them as well” [2]. She has made a career of examining emergent cultural ideals, their commodification or use, and their effects on urban economies. Much of her work has been focused on the mobilization of cultural tropes in placemaking and land use, and the importance of culture (sometimes narrowly defined—e.g., artists themselves—but also changing aesthetic ideals more broadly) in shaping demand<sup>2</sup>. *Loft Living*, for instance, examined the conversion of former manufacturing spaces for residential use, as they changed from “sites where production took place to items of cultural consumption” beginning in the 1970s [3]. For Zukin, the conversion of these spaces offered a window into citywide cultural and economic changes: the decline of manufacturing that made them

<sup>1</sup> Sharon ZUKIN, 2009, *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places* (New York, Oxford University Press); S. ZUKIN, 1995, *The Cultures of Cities* (Cambridge, Blackwell); S. ZUKIN, 1993, *Landscapes of Power: from Detroit to Disney World* (Berkeley, University of California Press);

S. ZUKIN, 1989, *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change* (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press).

<sup>2</sup> Page 10-11, in Sharon ZUKIN, 2011, “Is there an urban sociology? Questions on a field and a vision,” *Sociologica*, 3: 1-18.

available; the new valorization of artists and artists' lifestyles that made such living desirable; and the gentrification—first of small business owners as the buildings were converted to residential use, but eventually of the artists and artist-adjacent—that resulted. Her gift is to track the political economy of the particular cultural desires of an era, and concern for the interplay between cultural production and the production of urban space has been a constant as she has charted New York City's packaging of creativity, authenticity, and now, innovation.

In *The Innovation Complex* Zukin turns the same analytical eye onto New York City's tech economy, using the same approach and even focusing in some cases on the same spaces: former sites of industrial manufacturing. The "innovation complex" is her name for the bundle of material institutions, actors and relations—and cultural norms and aspirations—that have been pursued in New York City since the 2008 financial crisis. She argues that first under the city's pro-business, Republican Mayor Michael Bloomberg, and then under its progressive, Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio, New York has courted and cultivated the companies, capital, and forms of community that support tech growth in New York City. This includes the offices of large companies like Google and Facebook but also the less visible "material and symbolic dimensions" [vii] of the whole "tech ecosystem" including the co-working spaces, meetups, boot camps, and university training programs through which the tech economy and its forms of culture, ethics, and rationality are "emplaced" in New York. She describes the book as "an archeology of tech ecosystem as has evolved in recent past" and "a sociology of the city as it will emerge in the not too distant future" [21], and it is organized as an examination of each of these "production spaces" at increasing scales: hackathons, meetups, accelerators, venture capitalists, waterfront production spaces, and the new campuses of "academic capitalism." She draws on interviews, participant observation, and historical data to examine how "cultural forms and economic norms are enacted, performed, and put in place" [23] in each of these sites, and how the innovation complex shapes New York City's physical and mental geography.

Zukin's main concerns are whether the tech economy has created a new power elite in New York City, and with what consequences. More generally, she is concerned with questions of "culture and power" in city affairs [21]: who the powerful actors are and how it matters for the city if those actors change. She follows Mills in posing the main question of the book as if and how the focus on courting tech in New York City has created a new power elite, and if the traditional financial elite have been supplanted. While the participant observation at meetups and

hackathons in early chapters offers a novel window into a foreign world, one of the book’s more interesting empirical findings is to be found in the chapter on venture capitalists, where Zukin’s answer to this question is “no.” She analyzes the board membership of philanthropic and economic organizations and city initiatives such as the Partnership for New York City, a nonprofit membership organization once comprised of New York City’s 18th century merchant elite, then its 19th century robber barons, and then its 20th century financial elites [129]. She finds that the Partnership is still run by the city’s 20th century power elite—finance CEOs [130]—while tech exerts its influence more directly on city government. This is partly for material reasons as even the wealthiest tech elites in New York City count themselves as “poor” in comparison to financial elites, while tech CEOs tend to live in Silicon Valley rather than Silicon Alley [13]. It also reflects the cultural differences between the sectors. It turns out that, unlike finance, tech is not at all civic-minded, and neither the sector as a whole nor individual professionals are being enrolled into the philanthropic culture of prominent donations to arts and cultural institutions (think of the Rockefellers), either by efforts on the part of the city or via proximity to financial elites.

I found most interesting a tension that runs throughout the book between New York City’s attempts to harness tech for local growth and the actual mobility of these jobs and capital in the context of a globally organized economy. Zukin documents a variety of ways in which the Bloomberg and de Blasio administrations have supported the innovation economy in order to build up tech in New York. Many of these economic development strategies are common to many cities—contributing money and resources, institutional and moral support, physical spaces, financial incentives, and recruiting universities to create programs to train a new workforce. She also highlights the particular features of New York City as a place where its tech aspirations are plausible; it is an appealing strategic location for at least some tech activities thanks especially to the presence of capital, universities, and young “creatives” that make it possible to identify and cultivate good ideas, connect investors to tech, and channel capital into startups. But in spite of these efforts and qualities, tech professionals work in markets that are global in character. Venture capitalists have the capacity to (and really, must) look anywhere for promising startups in which to invest. Tech companies can (and really, must) draw from a national labor pool to identify required expertise. And startups can and do move their manufacturing to more inexpensive locations in order to stay afloat.

This tension between place-based valorization efforts and the mobility of capital is not unique to tech. There is an “endemic tension” or

“contradiction” between “fixity and motion” in capitalist urban development: between capital’s deterritorializing drive to overcome barriers to accumulation and its pursuit of that accumulation of profit through reterritorialization, or investments in fixed places<sup>3</sup>. And indeed, there are many echoes of Sassen’s<sup>4</sup> story of New York as a finance capital in *The Global City* in both the contradictions between the city’s efforts to fix tech in New York and globally mobile capital, and the local effects of those efforts as global capital touches down. But these patterns are also historically specific; the territorialization of capital will be different in different political economies, with different requirements for labor and production, in different regulatory contexts, and enabled by different forms of material and social infrastructure.

I wondered if one characteristic of the tech formation in particular is that it might be more difficult to pin down than finance. While New York did become a full-fledged financial capital, in the case of tech, this book repeatedly shows how the global organization of the industry appears destined to undermine New York City’s efforts to emplace a city-scale tech economy within its boundaries. Zukin quotes a blog post by a successful organizer of an “accelerator” (programs that rapidly teach promising startups how to pitch, recruit capital, and adapt to market forces) who remarks that “the main characteristic” of startups—one of this economy’s main organizational forms—is “*growth unconstrained by geography*” [18; emphasis in original]. This does not mean that the tech economy is all ephemeral flows and networks. Zukin describes the laying of tech infrastructure as analogous to the way in which infrastructure is built for any economy: just as the manufacturing spaces along Brooklyn’s waterfront were first converted from industrial production to the film and television sector, they are now being converted for tech; “Just as earlier networks built modern cities’ railroad stations, subway lines, streetlights, and sewers” in an industrial economy, “today’s innovation complex is emerging, brick by byte, in cities all over the world” [200]. Rather, it reflects the fact that flightiness is a feature, not a bug, and suggests that this quality will be reflected in the innovation complex’s spatial footprint and economic geography as well as its cultural norms.

<sup>3</sup> Neil BRENNER, 1998, “Between Fixity and Motion: Accumulation, Territorial Organization and the Historical Geography of Spatial Scales,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 16 (4): 459–481; David HARVEY, [1982] 2018, *The Limits to Capital*

(New York, Verso Books); David HARVEY, 1989, *The Urban Experience* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press).

<sup>4</sup> Saskia SASSEN, 2001, *The Global City* (Princeton, Princeton University Press).

While Zukin does not explicitly link the question of tech’s power elite to the scalar features of its economy, the ways that tech participates culturally in New York City appears to reflect these scalar, material dynamics. In other words, might tech elites not be supplanting New York’s financial CEOs as a new power elite in part because they are just not that interested? Unsurprisingly, she finds that, in addition to the tech community’s lack of philanthropic activity, the sector, with its ethos of individualism and entrepreneurialism, does not see itself as being either helped or emplaced by city government. Similarly, it downplays the role of the public sector in producing the supportive infrastructure (coworking spaces, networking opportunities, training programs) of the innovation complex for which tech has used its local power to advocate [136]. But this lack of investment in New York City as a place also reflects the geography of this industry and the real mobility of capital: the fact that the most powerful tech players are still based in Silicon Valley rather than New York, that their labor markets are national, that their investments are international.

And, of course, this is a problem for New York City because, while the innovation economy’s capital and jobs are dispersed globally, its effects are felt locally. Zukin argues that these effects are not likely to be positive or even net zero, but actually negative. She shows quite clearly that, while New York has justified its support for tech on the basis of the local jobs and economic growth it is to provide, the industry’s most coveted, high-paying jobs are unlikely to be drawn from the local labor market, while the jobs that are tend to be low-pay, low-skill, and non-union. Meanwhile, the salaries of the highly skilled employees that do live locally transform local housing markets, making them unaffordable for those working in other industries. Thus, not only does she demonstrate the futility of the city’s efforts to harness global tech, but also the questionable returns on these investments.

This failure is interesting not just because of the tragic irony and unintended consequences of such municipal action. It is also interesting because, by highlighting that failure, this book locates Zukin in a particular theoretical tradition in a way that is not always visible in her work, and reveals an attitude toward the object of analysis of urban sociology that is currently part of a live debate in the discipline. Reading *The Innovation Complex* sent me back to some of Zukin’s earlier work, and turned up a 2011 article called “Is there an urban sociology?”, in which she revisits Castells’ 1968 article of the same title and reflects on urban sociology’s ongoing existential crises regarding its object of analysis. There, Zukin describes her own intellectual trajectory: her despair at

being assigned to teach an urban sociology course and discovering a field in chaos, with no analytic coherence and no agreed-upon object; her discovery of Harvey and Castells and the influence of Marxist geography on her work—attention to the production of space and study of “capitalist urban processes” in a context in which “space was malleable, but no one discussed how patterns of human settlement, spatial and social mobilization of labor, or even changing land values reflected social and economic motives, namely capital accumulation and control” [10]; and the ongoing empiricism of urban sociology, particularly in the United States, in part a marker of its origins in the Chicago School.

In her work over several decades, while Zukin’s approach has remained harmonious with Marxist-geographic approaches, these commitments may not have always been of primary interest to her audiences. She remarks in this article, for example, that most readers have misread *Loft Living* “as a study of Soho, a place” rather than a study of an “emerging real estate market” that was a product of deindustrialization and “the nascent power of a new mode of cultural consumption<sup>5</sup>”. Her deep knowledge of New York City and the rich empirical grounding of her books perhaps makes them more vulnerable to such misreadings, by making them resonant and compatible with the place-based and empirically-driven research that remains common in urban sociology today. The field has not changed that much in the past ten years; there are still recurrent crises about urban sociology’s object of analysis and still a split between those who study characteristics of cities and neighborhoods and those oriented toward the production of space and transformation of global urban processes.

But in *The Innovation Complex*, because of the geography of the economic and cultural form she is examining *itself*, there is no missing these underlying themes. The story of emplacing tech in New York City—its territorialization at the city scale—literally cannot be told without attention to its moment of deterritorialization, and its global search for labor and markets. Unlike tracking the commodification of cultural preferences through, for example, real estate investors or individual consumption, or the material effects of the presence of such capital in the city through gentrification or changing land values, Zukin is interested in what kind of participants tech elites—as the head of the octopus that is the innovation complex—are in city affairs, as the “tech ‘community’ forms, develops a common identity and interests, and advocates for those interests” in New York [21-22]. Put differently, the features of the

<sup>5</sup> Page 11, in ZUKIN, 2011, *supra*.

tech economy require that her study of a city is not only compatible with such a framework but explicitly reflects the tensions of global capitalist urbanization. In this way, Zukin’s new book is an exemplar of how “models based on space, the economy, or culture” can inform empirically grounded studies of places<sup>6</sup>. The interplay between local economic and infrastructural development and the globally organized tech sector, and the effects of this tension in New York City, illustrate beautifully how such understandings of social reality inform analysis and conclusions even when not the center of a work. These themes also make much more explicit her intellectual links not only to Castells and Harvey but also suggest potential alignments with more recent arguments in urban sociology for attention to the global urban processes that shape the production of urban places.

In the end, however, Zukin’s primary concern is for the future of New York City, and how tech is remaking that city, and for whom. She describes tech’s growth in New York as “stealth” [201] and as a former longtime New Yorker I found this story fascinating. I was dimly aware of the proliferation of WeWork spaces, of the new Brooklyn tech triangle, of the arrival of Facebook and Google, of the expensive lunch destinations, but she has done New Yorkers a favor in documenting these changes and bringing them to light. From the beginning, she engages the paradox that the more successful the tech economy is, the less democratic and livable New York City becomes [x], and raises the important question: how might New York City instead channel innovation for the common good? The book itself is written as a call for city administrators to reconsider this tech recruitment strategy and its consequences. And it is one we might hope is heeded by the current Mayor de Blasio, whose approach to equity and inclusion through job growth has, she observes, allowed his ostensibly progressive administration to comfortably continue the pro-tech, pro-business model established by Bloomberg [8]. Though she reports that a majority of New Yorkers still supported the city’s recent bid to bring Amazon to the Queens waterfront, we can nevertheless hope that the public outrage expressed during that spectacularly failed effort is a sign that this consensus may soon be fracturing.

H I L L A R Y A N G E L O

<sup>6</sup> Page 8, *ibid.*