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Jane Jacobs as a Theorist

Paper Presentation

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In this paper, I shall be looking for a pattern, something that Jane Jacobs, possibly both unwittingly and irrespective of content, keeps doing.

In her Introduction, certainly what is most memorable is her conclusion that the North End of Boston—an area that most people—notably most city planners—took to be a slum was not a slum. It is thought to be a slum because it is old, low rent, has little parkland, children playing in the street and, finally, a high number of dwelling units per acre. However, she is able to convince us, using arguably more relevant indicators such as its low delinquency, disease and infant mortality rates, that it is no slum.

Next she manages three whole chapters about sidewalks and while she does not go so far as to claim that they too are not what we think they are, the thrust of the chapters is that they are not just or only what we think they are. They are not just spaces for pedestrians to walk because they are also, when well designed, a device for keeping a city safe, a place for a healthy form of hanging out and a good place for children to play.

This last point is developed in the next chapter where her focus is on what, contrary to most opinions, is not necessarily a good place for children to play, parks. What is a park? While it can be a welcome oasis, we should not confuse it with this just because it is a park. Indeed, most of the parks she discusses are better seen as something quite different from oases, namely vacuums.

Chapter 6 as well, can be seen to be rectifying a confusion about what something is, in this case, a good neighborhood. We think it is a cosy and inward looking thing, defined above all by good schools, parks, clean housing and our concept of middle-class people. She says, on the contrary, it is best seen as any area that manages self-government. In so being, it would emphatically not be either particularly cosy or inward looking.

Chapter 8 can be seen as largely concerned with what another thing is, in this case a city's downtown. The pattern is again to develop a way of clarifying a common confusion about what this thing is. Downtowns are not lost causes because (as it is

thought) ‘Americans all stay at home at night watching TV or else attend the PTA meeting.’ (169) What a downtown is is a city’s heart, the implication being that if a city does not have a thriving downtown, it is dying.

Chapter 10’s explicit topic is the need for aged buildings but again there is the pattern of Jacobs finding confusion, about what a building is, in this case. She says we think a building is a signifier of ‘well being’ (193) just because it is new and just because it is old and no longer used for its original purpose that makes it makeshift.

Chapter 13 is largely about the process by which an area loses its diversity, in other words how it comes to have too many of one thing. However, her method is again to dispel confusion about what something is. In this case, the form it takes is an entrepreneur who thinks, in adding yet another instance of what there are too many of, that what he is doing is cashing in on success when he is better seen as naïve party to what is actually a fad.

What is most striking in Chapter 15 is the application of the by now familiar method to still another topic, this time a version of what it is to be middle-class. She says we are confused about what it is to be middle-class, largely because we think what it takes to make one middle-class is having a ranch house and a barbecue. The positive message in this case is that it is the case that many middle class people are living in areas that in the Introduction were seen (though not by her) as slums or in Chapter 10 as old buildings.

Chapter 16 is about the role of money in development but we again see her method at work, now in her reflection on what money is. We tend of course to see money as good but she says what a great deal of money at one time is best seen as is a flood and, as we know, a flood is no good thing.

Much of the last few chapters is devoted to what amounts to Jacobs’ most fundamental what is question, what is a city? The pattern is to resist conventional confusions about this thing too is. First she makes the point that one thing a city is not is chaos but rather ‘a complex system of functional order.’ (376) Yet, while it has this kind of order, that does not mean that a city is what many planners would like to believe it is, a work of art. While not this, however, it can partake of some features of art-some artistic techniques. An example is that city landmarks can serve the aesthetic purposes of ‘emphasis and suggestion.’ (377)

There is also another thing that cities or at least the cities such as London, New York, and Toronto that are her subject matter are not, they are not little cities. Here too the idea is to locate a source of confusion since the mode of governance borrowed from little cities is said not to work for big ones.

Finally, there is also what amounts to the deepest confusion because it generates many of the particular confusions. One thing a city is not is evil. Seeing that is fundamental because it liberates us from assuming that things that do define a city such as old buildings, density, complexity, etc. are themselves necessarily bad.

This general discussion of what a city is and is not also leads to thoughts about viable alternatives to it. What she particularly considers in this context is what nature is.

Here again the method is to dispel confusion. We should not think about nature as if it is 'a nice big Saint Bernard dog for children.' (444-5) Nor is nature 'grass trimming and sunbathing' (445) and barbecues. Here the point is that living in a suburb rather than a city is not living close to nature. Here the positive formulation of what nature is is that it is countryside, the point being that the ideal world would be cities plus countryside but not what is only a confused version of nature, namely suburban sprawl.

Sufficient examples have been discussed to make it credible that Jacobs does have this overall method. Furthermore even the exceptions seem like merely minor variations. Thus, in Chapter 14, instead of suggesting that we are confused about what one thing is, she says we are confused because we do not see that many things are better seen as one thing. That is, whereas railroad tracks, waterfronts, college campuses, expressways and large parks are not the same, we need to appreciate that all are borders. Or, in the chapter on automobiles, the minor variation is that, while she does not exactly complain that we are confused about what a car is, she does say that we are confused about what it is not. Whereas we tend to think about what it is not as being on foot, she says the more relevant thing it is not is a horse, in this case the upshot being that Jacobs arrives at a much more tolerant view of the place of cars in cities than her general perspective would lead us to expect.

With there being so many instances of others being confused about what various things are, a compelling question is whether there is some general mistake, others are making, something general that Jacobs herself is managing to avoid. The closest she comes to expressing her own view on this issue is when, in her conclusion, she insists on the need:

To work inductively, reasoning from particulars to the general, rather than the reverse. (440)

Her point is that the others are too ideological or, as she puts it elsewhere too inclined to 'shrug reality aside.' (8)

Even though it is true that Jacobs is less dogmatic than most in how she arrives at her ideas, the trouble with this way of accounting for herself is that it implies that she does not have or need to be committed to any ideas as if all she needs to be doing is to be open to reality. Here we see the genesis of the closely related assumption that her forte is common sense.

However, what begins to suggest that Jacobs might be more of a theorist than even she herself realizes are the sort of remarks she makes when she appears to be at her most frustrated at how mistaken her opponents conclusions are. She calls their thinking 'superficial' (101), 'a superficial gloss' (193), 'simple minded' (229). She says their flaw is their 'not digging deeper.' (443) As tempting as it is to treat these admittedly in passing remarks merely as insults, I suggest they constitute somewhat inarticulate and probably therefore less than fully conscious expressions of what most clearly differentiates Jacobs from all those she criticizes.

‘Superficial gloss’ is itself a gloss but an important one because it hints at a major way in which error is possible, by having a less than fully thought out version of all the concepts-ideas- the book discusses, material things such as slums, parks, neighbourhoods, downtown, etc. less directly visible ideas such as the makeshift, fads, art, nature, evil, etc. What we need now is some more articulate-even fully conscious-account of the nature of superficiality, its likelihood, the specific dangers it entails, and, above all, how to avoid it. I find all this in an admittedly unlikely source, a relatively neglected dialogue by Plato, Theaetetus. There Plato provides a convincing account not so much of how we arrive at knowledge but how what contrasts with it, false opinions, are even possible. The existence of false opinions is puzzling because they must come from somewhere. By analogy, we are entitled to be puzzled by all the supposedly false opinions about slums, money, parks, neighbourhoods, cities as a whole, etc. Jacobs dismisses because they must come from somewhere.

Theaetetus begins by hinting that at least part of the possibility of false opinions stems from the fact that, like people, things including non-material things that are not the same can still look alike. That things can look alike means that there is always a possibility, indeed a very strong possibility, of confusing two or more things with each other. However, the key development arrived at in the dialogue is that more than similar appearance is required for a confusion between two things to be likely or even possible. To borrow Plato’s example, the possibility of mistaking one’s acquaintance Socrates for one’s other acquaintance, Theaetetus depends on more than just the true fact that they both have snub noses and protruding eyes. It depends also on the more fundamental requirement that one already have some knowledge of them but also not enough knowledge to be able to tell them apart. Some knowledge amounts to an impression but, in Plato’s words ‘an indistinct impression’ or, again, ‘an impression easily confused and effaced.’ (195) Having one or another form of an indistinct impression of things that, undeniably, do share some characteristics, is how a false opinion is both possible and indeed likely.

While we need to be careful not to be merely mechanical in applying Plato’s dictum to Jacobs’ material, it does seem that those whom Jacobs opposes always do have some impression but also not a particularly clear one of the various things under discussion. For example, in the mistakes they make about slums, bad parks, and big cities, it is the sharing of some characteristics with other things that leads to the confusion. Both slums and some non-slums do have old buildings and high population density. Both parks that are oases and those that are vacuums have green grass and open space. And of course both big and little cities will have much in common.

Sometimes what leads to their confusion is that the opponents conceptions of things are still indistinct but now in the sense of too limited. So an overly limited conception of what a sidewalk can be does not permit recognition of the various less than obvious uses Jacobs notices for it, a too narrow conception of who can be middle-class does not allow for including in this category anyone who does not have a ranch house and a barbecue and a restricted conception of the idea of order makes cities per se appear chaotic.

In other cases, it seems the opponents conceptions are little more than clichés. Thus, by thinking of neighbourhoods as something cosy, they miss the nature of them as the

type and perhaps the one type of place with a capacity for self-government. Or by thinking of nature as where one needs to cut the grass they confuse suburban sprawl with countryside.

Some cases offer the mirror image of what Plato warns us about. There are indistinct impressions that can cause us not to notice that things are the same just because there are characteristics that they do not share. So Jacobs' opponents do not realize that just because railroads, etc are different that does not mean that they should not all be seen as borders. Or, obvious differences can lead to an inability to see how much horses and automobiles can be seen as doing the same job, but in the case of the horse doing an inferior version of it.

And a final case of persons who certainly have some impression of things but where it produces only confusions is where persons are taken with the good side of a thing but oblivious to the bad. Hence planners and others who are so enamoured with money that they do not see the danger of a flood or so committed to new building that they do not see the potential waste of the old and destructive potential of the new. As part of this particular misunderstanding, they do not see the potential of the old to be reconfigured without the result being at all makeshift; the concept of the makeshift here being one more thing that it is possible to have some impression of without that impression being clear enough to be of use.

Clarity with regard to concepts now does appear essential but as total clarity likely being impossible and almost certainly being pedantic, exactly how much is needed or even desirable? As his answer, Plato offers the idea of 'the mark or sign of difference which distinguishes the thing in question from all others.' (208) His example is that, were we to wish to identify the sun, what we would need to do and indeed all we would need to do is look for the brightest object in the sky. With the proviso that we are careful enough not to confine our searching only to night time and cloudy days, we can concede that just this one mark will be sufficient.

If we return to Jacobs' material again, I would say that, to her credit, besides illuminating general discussions of the concepts in question, we do sometimes even find what do qualify as distinguishing marks. So, with regard to slums, what is probably most helpful is when she says at one point that we can decide whether even the most slum-like areas are slums by determining whether, however counter-intuitive it may at first seem, most of the residents would actually choose to live there. With regard to a neighborhood much of the vagueness at what constitutes a good one is dispelled when she remarks that what really matters is whether it is neither too big, too small, too insular, too dispersed, to 'fight city hall.'

But on the other hand as helpful as it would be to be told what in particular distinguishes a flood of money from welcome investment, falling for a fad as distinct from seizing on an opportunity or where to draw the line between a big city and a small one, the help, I suggest, is not extractable from even a close reading of Jacobs' text.

There are at least two ways to understand what does seem to me to be this significant lacuna in Jacobs qua theorist. If, as seems apparent, she is not fully conscious of her own method of theorizing, it makes sense that she could not be as clear as Plato as to how valuable it would be to be as explicit as one could manage about what most distinguishes the concepts one is working with. Or, her own opinion that the only major problem she is facing is the dogmatism of conventional city planners could be misleading her into assuming that the conceptual confusions she is pointing to are too obvious to require anything so explicit as a distinguishing mark.

There remains one more what is question: what is Jane Jacobs' book? While we have established that it is not common sense, there is another view that should be addressed. While her general assessment is that Jacobs is 'the great urban writer' (xii) and a 'theorist' (17), when Sharon Zukin gets more specific about what Jacobs actually is doing, she says she 'published a call to arms' (11), she 'raised an alarm' (13), she 'directed her ire.' (219) The underlying notion is that the book is a polemic.

Polemics, even or perhaps especially successful ones tend to have a short shelf life. When opponents have been defeated, it is not just they who lose their relevance. So does the polemicist's particular way of defeating them. This is Zukin's verdict on Jacobs. Her work is as passé as those she attacked. Zukin even subtitles her own book *The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places*, code for a claim that, just as once Jacobs wanted us to see why great cities are dying, now Zukin wants us to see that it is Jacobs' approach that is on the way out.

What do our observations as a whole enable us to conclude about what the book is? In particular, is her book a polemic? Because she does, undeniably, attack (indeed the very first words of the book are 'this book is an attack...') (3) certainly the book can be confused with polemics but at least three properties make such a characterization problematic. 1. The willingness to acknowledge that her opponents' difficulty is confusion rather than complete disregard of reality. 2. Her appreciation of how possible if not exactly inevitable confusion is both because many of the things she seeks to distinguish do look alike and others she seeks to equate do look different. 3. Her awareness that both she and her opponents have possible, albeit in their case less than fully worked out, versions of the concepts that both are utilizing. To see it as a polemic is, then, yet another superficial gloss, these three things being our differentiating marks.

References

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Plato *Theatetus*

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