

DOI: 10.14394/eidos.jpc.2023.0019

Adam Chmielewski
Institute of Philosophy
University of Wrocław, Poland
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6001-5309>
adam.chmielewski@uw.edu.pl

Eli Kramer
Institute of Philosophy
University of Wrocław, Poland
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7535-030X>
eliorner.kramer@uw.edu.pl

Toward a Philosophy of Urbanism

Adam Chmielewski Interviewed by Eli Kramer

EK: Can you give us some background as to why there has been renewed interest by philosophers in the nature of the city and urban life?

AC: In the nineteenth century, some people thought that the sciences should free themselves from the philosophical speculations from which they originated, and that philosophy itself, as obsolete, should be replaced by strict science. Gradually, however, the strict and uncontested sciences resorted back again to the allegedly obsolete philosophy to understand what they are, what they are actually doing, and why. In other words, not only did science not replace philosophy but returned to it. That is why there emerged the philosophy of science and philosophies of individual sciences, e.g. mathematics, biology, etc. This applies also to urban studies pursued by a great number of specialized disciplines, but a need for a general, philosophical view of the nature of the city is increasingly felt by many people, urban specialists included.

The role of philosophy in today's urban studies cannot mirror the ancient one, which was much more foundational, as in Protagoras, Plato, Aristotle, or Zeno. But it does resemble it. A philosopher cannot pretend to be an architect, urbanist, or city planner. But he or she is particularly qualified to address the problems of how contemporary cities allow their inhabitants to satisfy their needs and ambitions; in other words, to what extent the city is an environment in which human life may flourish. Such questions may profitably be addressed by moral and political philosophy, as well as philosophical anthropology.

EK: How did you first become engaged with philosophical issues surrounding the city and urban life?

AC: My own engagement with urban issues was born during my travels to various cities in the world. It is impossible not to notice the difference between them, and not to ask oneself the question to what extent a given solution to urban mobility, supply chains, respect for greenery, or employment of arts, is proper, adequate, or better than other ones. Several opinion pieces I wrote to the local press, related to some vital issues of the city of Wrocław and Poland, were appreciated. Upon hearing my hyperbolic remarks on how what is being done to the public space in Poland is a crime against humanity, the mayor of Wrocław invited me to write the city's bid for the title of European Capital of Culture for 2016. Psychologically and intellectually, the task was a tremendous challenge. It was to be the first-ever title awarded to a Polish city through the contest. The contest became very heated because the title was coveted by most major Polish cities. Also, the time to come up with a rather thick book length proposal for the bid was forbiddingly short, and I had very little assistance. I wrote the bid, meeting the tight deadline. After the mayor read it, he said: "Adam! You wrote a beautiful book. But sad...". This had to do with the fact that I diagnosed a number of serious deficiencies in Wrocław's ability to provide affordable access to cultural institutions for its citizens. Though our city is a vibrant cultural center, it does not work hard enough to provide its citizens ways to enjoy the cultural productions which they subsidize with their taxes in the first place. Later on, when Wrocław won the precious title, I heard very appreciative opinions from the European Commission about the bid. This public success encouraged my academic interest in the city, which is also additionally fuelled by requests from European cities to assist them in composing their own bids for the same title. So far I have worked for cities in Italy, the Netherlands, Denmark, Germany, and the Czech Republic.

EK: Why have you recently called for the establishment of a new subfield in philosophy, the philosophy of urbanism: how will it be structured, and what is its purpose?

AC: I would rather abstain from addressing the question of the possible structure of the philosophy of urbanism. This should be left to those who would see it worthwhile to delve into the subject. As to the purpose of the philosophy of urbanism, I would respond that it should ask, and seek to answer, all those questions which are not being posed by specialized urban studies. Here is an example. A very interesting, well-structured, and booming academic industry, known as city branding, employs all available knowledge accumulated by studies on merchandise branding, the psychology of marketing, advertising, you name it. Actually, it is a very interesting subject and fun to teach, something I intermittently do. But for a philosopher, it is not difficult to realize that in approaching this particular subject it may be useful to employ insight from a very serious piece of philosophical work, i.e. the contemporary theory of recognition, as developed by the Frankfurt School philosopher Axel Honneth.

EK: If and how do you see this field as distinct from previous work in philosophy of the city and Urban Studies?

AC: Cities were a necessary precondition of the emergence and growth of philosophy in antiquity, and, reciprocally, they were a subject of intense philosophical interest. One could even claim that the cities we know are in some measure an embodiment of various philosophical-political projects designed by Protagoras, Plato, and Aristotle who were interested in a politically proper organization of human life. The cities were at the centre of attention of utopian writings inspired by a hope of establishing rationally organized, thus perfect dwellings for human societies. This utopian sentiment continues to be felt in the thought of many urban planners and reformers. Cities were also viewed from a dystopian philosophical point of view. The anti-urban sentiment, which can already be found among the ancient Cynics, has become most prominent in the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and other philosophers inspired by his critical approach to the then-predominant urban forms of social life. In the 19th century, Karl Marx's philosophy was a framework for Friedrich Engels's criticism of the social consequences of the industrial revolution in England.

Urban studies nowadays include history, economics, management, sociology, demography, geography, cultural theory, political science, and anthropology, as well as urban planning, and architecture, along with more recent ones, such as landscape architecture, urban design, and urban branding. They reflect the variety of aspects of urban life itself. The academically established studies of urban life as an autonomous area of research tend to distance themselves from the traditional philosophical legacy related to the problems of urban life. But the dazzling variety of urban studies may be seen as one of the chief arguments on behalf of reviving the philosophical study of the city. An understanding of the variety of disciplinary approaches to urbanity is a task no less daunting than that of understanding the city itself. It seems that a philosophical approach to the city may not only allow one to tap into the rich resources of the past and contemporary philosophical intuitions related to urban life; a philosophical perspective on urbanity may also help to reconnect the existing approaches which tend to be viewed as separate and independent from each other. As the most general human reflection, philosophy enables, and indeed encourages, one to work out a most comprehensive, general perspective on urbanity, something which it certainly needs and deserves.

The advocacy of the philosophical approach in urban studies is thus meant as a call for a methodological blueprint, or a model, for the investigation of urbanity which would take into account not only the issues usually dealt with by urban studies, but also the moral, political, economic, and aesthetic dimensions of the cities, as well as, and most especially, their viability as a human habitat. Another non-insignificant argument has to do with healthy philosophical scepticism in addressing all sorts of issues, something that is much called for in contemporary studies and practices of urbanism.

But also philosophy should seek to benefit from urban studies. It has already become clear that the survival of humanity depends on our ability to solve grave problems generated by urban life, which is the most common and most important form of human sociability. Serious philosophical thinking ought to revive its original interest in the city and, in doing so, it should be informed by the fast-growing research of the existing urban studies field.

EK: If and how do you think those engaged in the philosophy of urbanism should (at least ideally) work with city planners and policymakers?

AC: It is a normal practice for municipalities across the world to employ sociologists to diagnose problems in their cities. They often employ other academic experts to solve some of them: engineers, architects, urbanists, etc. I believe a place for a philosopher could and should be found too. Let me give you an example which has to do with aesthetics. A lot of things are left to private initiative in Polish cities, which is a good thing. But it may have undesirable or harmful consequences too. Freedom of enterprise expresses itself for example in putting sign-

boards, billboards, and other signage everywhere. As a result, beautiful façades of buildings in old urban centres are plastered with a repelling clatter of shapes and colours yapping at you from every possible corner of the city. It was particularly glaring on Florianska Street in Kraków, a very important historic promenade. I proposed that a municipal regulation should be introduced to curb aesthetic pollution in Wrocław. Initially, I was told that it is impossible. Soon, however, it turned out that the problem can be addressed, and at least partly was.

EK: What are the biggest challenges and opportunities you see for urban life in the coming century?

AC: The challenges are biopolitical and environmental. In other words, the greatest challenge to human settlements is humans themselves, and the revenge of nature which will unavoidably ensue from unregulated urban growth. By far the biggest challenge for contemporary cities is overcrowding. As of November 15, 2022, the Earth is inhabited by 8 billion people. More than 4 billion of them live in cities. The population of people on Earth is supposed to level off at 11 billion and the urban world will expand by an additional 2 billion people. These very numbers should make us realize that the survival of humanity will depend on our ability to solve the problem of how to accommodate an increasing number of urban dwellers while respecting their needs, their dignity, and at the same time the natural environment. Cities are like parasites, they suck in the means of their sustenance from outside, consume three-quarters of the world's energy and cause at least three-quarters of global pollution. This trend is expected to continue. Even though cities are subject to ongoing de-industrialisation, they remain centers of continuously growing production and consumption of most goods and services. As such, they are the chief destroyers of the global ecosystem. Today, addressing the problems of humanity means addressing urban problems.

At the same time, if there is any hope for humanity and for human settlements, it has to be sought in human sensibility, ingenuity, and industriousness. To illustrate this, one could point to the imminent transformation of a West African region along the shores of the Gulf of Guinea from Lagos to Abidjan into an unmanageable monster city stretching for 600 miles and inhabited by 500 million people. There is no political power to control the process. In opposition to Neom, Muhammad Bin Salman's project of a desert city, the Chinese city of Xiong'an, 100 kilometres south of Beijing, known as the "New Area," is a vastly more realistic approach to cope with overpopulation and pollution, but requires a strong political power which is also a philosophical problem.

EK: For those who are interested in developing the field or perhaps even teaching a course on it, what of your own work and those of others would you recommend?

AC: The number of extremely valuable books and papers written on the city is overwhelming so a recommendation is very difficult to make. Western readers would do well to turn their attention to what is going on in the cities of the Global South. Mark Davis's *Planet of Slums* (2006), Jeremy Seabrook's *Cities* (2007), and Edward Paice's *Youthquake* (2021) would be a good start. Such reading would also explain, at least partly, the present immigration pressure on the affluent and smug Global North. Also, instead of reading the Panglossian authors like Richard L. Florida, Benjamin Barber, or Edward Glaeser, I would suggest looking at David Harvey's *Social Justice and the City* (2009) and *Rebel Cities* (2012). This is just for starters.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.