

## “This Is Not Just a Story About New York” – Refiguring Spaces through Innovation

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### Abstract

This essay explores how Sharon Zukin conceptualizes the relationship between space and place in her analysis of how “innovation” is embedded in the political economy, culture, and geography of New York City. Whereas Zukin takes New York as a testing ground for the re-organization of capitalism around the world, I propose to conceptualize the capitalist logic of place production in more complex terms by adding two extensions. First, I propose a more thorough examination of the cultural logic of the tech industry in contrast to the creative industry and a focus on its specific forms of place-making. Second, I will argue for thinking processes of the spatialization of social phenomena in a multidimensional and polymorphic way. To this end, I argue for an understanding of social change as a “refiguration of spaces”.

**Keywords:** Place-making; network capitalism; tech industry; refiguration of spaces.

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Sharon Zukin's book *The Innovation Complex* (2020) is a brilliant empirical analysis "of the embedding of 'innovation' in the political economy, culture and geography of New York City" (Stehlin, 2021, p. 572). Her main thesis is that global network capitalism is characterized by a new, effective *imaginaire*, the *imaginaire* of digitization and technological innovation that disrupts and fundamentally changes existing urban structures and ways of life. Zukin exposes this process of transformation through an archaeology of New York's unfolding tech ecosystem: from the small temporary spaces of hackathons to permanent office buildings for meetups and coding boot camps, to university campuses and neighborhoods, and finally to the city as a whole. Concerning all these spaces, she shows how the cultural forms and economic norms of "innovation" are performed and implemented. This makes the book a valuable and important contribution to critical urban studies. In terms of theory and methodology, Zukin builds on her earlier work on the interplay of culture and power (Zukin, 1991, 1995), by asking "how the culture of a new post-industrial economy is *put in place* in New York and how these processes join different kinds of actors, in different circuits of capital, in a shared pursuit of power" (Zukin, 2020, p. 21; my emphasis). In short, the book impressively traces the emergence of a new "urban growth machine" (Jonas & Wilson, 1999) around the notion of "innovation".

In this essay I would like to address the question of how Zukin conceptualizes the relationship between space and place in her study. She writes:

This is not just a story about New York. [...] I have chosen to tell this story in New York [...] because this city, with its rich embedded resources and oversized liabilities, is an *influential testing ground for the re-organization of capitalism* around the world" (Zukin, 2020, p. 23; my emphasis).

In what follows, I would like to make the here indicated logic of place production in network capitalism a bit more complex by adding two extensions. First, I propose a more thorough examination of the cultural logic of the tech industry (in contrast to the creative industry) and a focus on its specific forms of place-making. Second, I will argue for thinking processes of the spatialization of social phenomena in a multidimensional and polymorphic way. My primary concern here is to question the assumption of a dichotomy between a powerful network "space of flows" (of global capital) and a local "space of places" (of everyday life) as a mere site of embedding these global flows (Castells, 1996; Harvey, 1982; etc.). To do so, I take up Jessop et al.'s (2008) suggestion to acknowledge the multiplicity of spaces in socio-spatial theory and will then argue for an understanding of social change as a "refiguration of spaces" (Knoblauch & Löw, 2021).

Zukin's earlier work was already groundbreaking in understanding the local dynamics of a culturalized network capitalism. In her famous book on *Loft Living* (Zukin, 2014) she shows how in New York City, within a few years, living in former factory buildings became the epitome of the elegant and luxurious lifestyle of the new urban middle class and how "The Creation of a 'Loft Lifestyle'" (p. 58) gradually devalued and displaced other ways of life (which has subsequently also happened in many other cities around the world). Theoretically, Zukin's analyses are in the tradition of urban political economy, which she has expanded since the 1980s to include a reflection on the changing role of culture. She thus speaks of a "symbolic economy" (Zukin, 1995). While culture generally encompasses the complex meaning and symbolic dimension of social phenomena (and as such is essential for any society), "symbolic economy" fatally reduces it to its economic functions. It thus reflects a profoundly materialistic view of culture and the city. In adopting this perspective, Zukin echoes the work of David Harvey (1982), who traced urbanization processes to structural mechanisms of capital circulation and

accumulation, showing that ('attractive') urban space is a tradable commodity that is particularly well suited to the tying up of surplus capital ("spatial fix"). Building on this, Zukin in her works examines the culturalization of spaces and its influence on the mechanisms of urban capital fixation. In terms of sociology of space, she argues against the backdrop of the aforementioned dichotomy between a powerful network space of flows (of global capital) and a local space of places (of everyday life) as the site of conflictual embedding processes of these global flows.

Since the 1980s — and we also know this from Zukin's earlier work — it has been the creative industries around which an "urban growth machine" (Jonas & Wilson, 1999) was formed to ensure that cities got their piece of the pie of globally circulating capital. However, this has also resulted in a chronic competition between cities. In the cities themselves this has led to the emergence of a hegemonic lifestyle of the culturally interested, cosmopolitan and creative new urban middle class whose presence and willingness to settle there has become the measure of a city's attractiveness (Florida, 2002). Andreas Reckwitz (2017) even interprets this lifestyle as an expression of a "creativity dispositif" that characterizes late modernity as a whole and affects different areas of life "from education to consumption, sport, professional life and sexuality, and conditions their practices" (Florida, 2002, p. 5).

Interestingly, the pivotal theoretical argument in *The Innovation Complex* is basically the same Zukin had already used in her work on the symbolic economy. The only difference seems to be that "creativity" has been replaced by "innovation". Whereas in the past it was the artists, today it is the programmers, the code inventors, and the tech-savvy denizens of cyberspace who perform and enact the leading cultural imaginary for the marketing of urban spaces. That there are parallels here with the creative industries is obvious, but what are the differences between the creative industries of the 1990s and 2000s and the tech industry of today? How do the performative practices of valorizing space differ between artists and code-inventors?

There must be differences both at the level of spatial production and at the level of its legitimation. The artist as a role model of the creative industries stood for an unconventional, countercultural life style for which the lofts offered a stage. In the course of this, factory buildings and industrial complexes were symbolically reinterpreted, and there occurred an aesthetization and culturalization of cities (Reckwitz, 2017) for which SoHo became paradigmatic. Programmers, code-inventors and prophets of the digital age, however, seem to follow a much more instrumental rationality. If you confront them with a problem, you will get a code as an answer. Does this also imply a more instrumental relationship to space? — What is even more, while art and culture could once be dismissed as luxuries, it is much harder to dismiss technological innovation today. Whereas in the past one could ask 'Who doesn't *want* to be creative?', the question today is 'Who can actually *afford* not to be innovative?' In Chapter 7, on "Talent, Meritocracy, and Academic Capitalism", Zukin (2020, pp. 169–198) hints at the differences between the once dominant "creativity dispositive" (Reckwitz, 2017) and the now ruling *innovation dispositif*. It turns out that at universities that follow the *innovation dispositif* the humanities and social sciences are in the danger of becoming redundant, while the new fields of digital humanities and technology, patent development and start-up funding are being massively expanded. What does this mean for a world characterized by ambivalences, ambiguities and diversity, when the dominant thinking of code logic operates only in the mode of 1 and 0, yes or no? What are the social and spatial implications of the spread of this *innovation dispositif*?

In the second part of my paper I propose to place the spatial logic of network capitalism, which Zukin describes in a multifaceted way, in the context of a more complex model of theoriz-

ing socio-spatial relations. Recent research literature shows that, in addition to the logics of the "space of flows" and the "space of places" (Castells, 1996), there are other modes of spatializing the social that could serve as heuristics for interpreting Zukin's findings. Based on the analysis of different "turns" within social spatial studies, Jessop et al. (2008) present their "TPSN framework" which aims at integrating the "spatial lexicons" of territory (T), place (P), scale (S), and network (N) into a multidimensional model of theorizing socio-spatial relations. They argue that these four dimensions should not be viewed as being isolated but as mutually constituting and intertwined. In terms of methodology, they suggest creating "thick descriptions" of spatial phenomena that "involve the dynamic articulation of at least two or more among the four dimensions" (Jessop et al., 2008, p. 392). While the social theoretical foundation of the "TPSN framework" remains relatively vague, the Berlin-based CRC "Refiguration of Spaces" (which I am part of) proposes to study global social change as a result of opposing, mostly conflictual spatializations of social relations (Knoblauch & Löw, 2021). We also formulate four ideal types of spatialization: territory, place, network and trajectory. In terms of social theory, we assume a dialectical interplay between space and the social (Knoblauch & Steets, 2022). More specifically, we suppose that, first, any social practice is both shaped by spatial institutions and "material objectivations" (Steets, 2016) and informed by collective imaginations of space and, second, that space – whether it takes the form of territory, place, network or trajectory – is a product of social practice.

While *territories* follow a *logic of boundary*, bring about a homogenization within the space and are imagined as extended areas, *network* spatializes along a *logic of linkage*. That is, in the network heterogeneous elements, e.g. places, are related to each other in such a way as to be mutually functional for each other. In the spatial figure of the network, real spatial distances between places as well as their territorial location are irrelevant. What counts is solely the function of a place for a network. Late modern capitalism, whose value creation comes about through an interplay of the circulation and spatial fixation of capital, follows the spatial logic of the network in an exemplary way. *Trajectories*, in turn, follow a *logic of traversal* and thus can fulfill classical modern instrumental reason more clearly than networks. They connect points of origin and destination (e.g. of a journey, a migration route, or a chain of goods) and are organized to ensure the most efficient and, in this sense, linear transport of circulating elements (e.g. of people, goods, or knowledge). Finally, *places* follow a *logic of the simultaneity of heterogeneous elements*. The way in which history and the world are referred to at places, the way in which the most diverse "thens and theres" connect and manifest themselves in the "here-and-now" (Massey, 2005, p. 140), turns territorial sections of the earth's surface into distinguishable places. Our diagnostic thesis is that the four different modes of spatializing the social produce all sorts of tensions that vary historically and may turn into conflicts. For example, while the period of state formation since the 18th century was strongly dominated by the spatial figure of the territory, with the different phases of globalization, especially with the economic and technological globalization of the past thirty years, the spatial logic of the network has become more and more dominant (Castells, 1996). Today we observe conflicts especially between network, territory and place, triggering a social change that we describe as a "refiguration of spaces" (Knoblauch & Löw, 2021).

Against this background, Zukin's findings can be read as results of spatial conflicts: *First*, these are characterized by the conflict between network and place. As late modern network capitalism, with its logic of spatial fixity, rewards "singularities" (Reckwitz, 2020), not only places gain importance but also practices of *making (particular) places*. Zukin aptly describes this as a local urban growth machine. The conflict arises from the fact that in the case of the

"innovation complex" the logic of place as a lifeworld experience of social diversity and heterogeneous elements (Zukin, 2010) is subordinated to the linking logic of the network and thus to the value chains of network capitalism. Places (like the neighborhoods of SoHo or Williamsburg) are then, in extreme cases, only functional for the network by successfully fixing capital. Places as life-worldly spaces creating identity for their inhabitants and an everyday horizon of familiarity and authenticity become obsolete according to this logic.

Zukin's findings, *secondly*, can also be read as a conflict between network and territory or, in other words, between the network space of late capitalism and the territorial space of the state. Territorial spaces follow a logic of boundary, forming extended areas and sharply distinguishing between inside and outside. The United States as a nation state would be an example. At the same time, and importantly, territories generate homogeneity and (at least a promise of) social equality within. This, in turn, has consequences for the way in which places exist. For, places are simply qua location part of territories. That is, they do not compete with other places of the same territory for belonging to that territory (state). This conveys a kind of ontological security. In contrast, integrating a place into a network requires enormous linkage efforts. Places are never inherently relevant sites of network capitalism. They must continually prove themselves as attractive sites of capital fixation. As Zukin impressively shows, this is true even for a city as iconic as New York. Linkage efforts are incredibly energy-intensive and have high social costs, as evidenced by increasing social inequality. The state can no longer compensate for these social inequalities and thus loses its legitimacy as a guarantor of at least equal opportunity to achieve the American dream.

*Third*, the interplay of network and trajectory opens the view on the infrastructures of the innovation complex. As mentioned above, trajectories follow a logic of traversal and thus, more clearly than networks, a classical-modern instrumental reason. In the present case, however, the logic of trajectories does not seem to contradict the logic of networks but to complement it. This is most obvious in Zukin's metaphor of the "pipeline" (Zukin, 2020, p. 169): In addition to co-working spaces and coding boot camps, it is the universities that ('willingly'? — who can afford not to be innovative?) produce a most inexhaustible pool of tech talent and knowledge which is then — via "pipeline" — linearly and as efficiently as possible fed into the tech companies. The Tata Innovation Center at Cornell University is emblematic of this (Zukin, 2020, pp. 183–186). According to Zukin, it is "an architectural manifestation as a vertical pipeline for tech talent. Cornell's studios, classrooms, and meeting rooms are on the bottom; coworking space for startups is in the middle; and offices on the top floors are there for established companies of any kind that want access to highly educated tech talent and their intellectual property" (Zukin, 2020, p. 185).

Zukin (2020) writes in her introduction: "This is not just a story about New York" (p. 23). By this she means that the production of places in network capitalism can be observed worldwide — and that New York is just a particularly iconic example of this. This is certainly true. Nevertheless, I think that the assumption of the dichotomy between "space of flows" and "space of places" (Castells, 1996) that characterizes neo-Marxist urban studies should be re-conceptualized more complexly in order to understand the contradictions and catalyzing effects of different logics of social spatialization. In this sense, too, Zukin's book is not just a story about a *place* called New York. It is also a story about New York's relationship to the American state (*territory*), to the supply chains of goods, technology, and talents (*trajectory*) and, last but not least, to the entanglements and (ultimately also) disruptions of global capitalism (*network*).

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