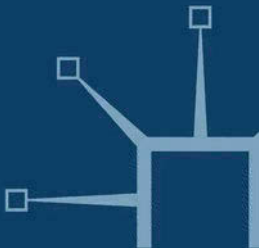


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Work/Life City Limits

Comparative Household Perspectives

Helen Jarvis



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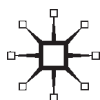
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Helen Jarvis

University of Newcastle, UK

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To my daughter Miriam

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1

The Personal *is* Political

A day in the life



Slowing down: a day out with the kids in London

Riding the Washington State Ferry one evening rush hour, I overheard a conversation between a man and a woman (lets call him Bob and her Jean), both in their late 30s. They were acquainted through travelling the same ferry each day between jobs in downtown Seattle and homes on Bainbridge Island. Jean asked Bob about his new job. Bob was enthusiastic but uncertain of the future. Having switched firm four times in as many years he typified the new breed of ‘portfolio-worker’¹: what he gained in experience of new people and projects he lost in

time and energy spent securing the next contract. Bob asked Jean about her commute, wondering how she managed to get her daughters to day-care and kindergarten and still make the 8 am ferry. Jean acknowledged she continually watched the clock and feared something inevitably failing in this fragile arrangement. She had to manage her domestic and professional lives as if no conflict existed between them. With mobile phone and Filofax in hand,² she variously struck deals and kept track of family members – from her car, on the ferry and from duplicate offices at home and downtown. Her routine typified the complex integration of ‘work’ and ‘life’ popularly described as a ‘balancing act’.

Watching Bob, Jean and a crowd of smartly dressed commuters position themselves with expert knowledge at the quickest point of exit; I wondered how this stretched out, stressful existence could be reconciled with a quality of life clearly prized but little enjoyed on the island. With this thought in mind, I made my way through the pedestrian tunnel and out to the parking lot vista greeting visitors to the small town of Winslow. It was 1995 and I was over from London touring parts of the US West Coast. Earlier I had visited friends in San Francisco where I used to live as a student. I had driven through neighbouring Silicon Valley where my parents first emigrated from Britain in 1981 (before bidding a retreat to Oregon in the 1990s for a less pressure-cooked retirement). I had been shocked to witness the pace of new development in the Bay Area, with traffic in a permanent state of gridlock. Now I hoped to squeeze in the briefest of visits with my sister Kathryn who lived with her husband and two young children on the island, a popular suburb for working parents who commuted to Seattle by ferry.

It had been difficult to find a time when Kathryn would be home. Her marathon schedule was the stuff of legend. Friends did not believe me when I told them she camped out in the lab where she worked three nights a week. This practice began when she was lured away from an established downtown biotechnology firm with the prospect of potentially lucrative stock options. Steep commercial rents and lack of suitable laboratory space forced the new firm to set up business in Bothell, a small sub-division north of Kenmore (one of the case study areas featured in this book). Faced with more than three hours commuting by ferry and car each day, Kathryn negotiated an unorthodox four-day week – leaving home very early each Monday morning, not to return again until Thursday evening.

Kathryn had been sleeping in the office (in the shower room, in the sick bay, wherever she could find a suitably dark and quiet corner) for

nearly a year by the time I caught up with her. It was not ideal. Her husband complained because he had to fit his full-time local government job (and the driving around it entailed) between trips to and from day-care. He also had to supervise the evening meal and bedtime routine. Kathryn spent each Friday preparing meals to freeze for the coming week. She left a lot of lists. The kids were stoic; while Kathryn was not allowed to make long distance calls from the office she arranged for her husband to phone her at fixed times, morning and night, so she could chat to them about their day. The janitors complained that Kathryn presented an obstacle to efficient cleaning. Working for a minimum wage, the only way they could earn a living was to work all hours of the night at a furious pace to move on quickly to the next job. Added to the pressure of working long hours for low pay the janitors also faced a long commute. Two good salaries were the passport to secure even modest housing in the vicinity of the new high-tech businesses. Restricted by low wages to more affordable but peripheral housing south of Seattle, the janitors had to travel for over an hour each day in a van pool. The boss too had started to complain because, as the company began to prosper, he thought the sleeping bag bag image was bad for business.³

It is tempting to regard this sort of spatially fragmented lifestyle and a culture of long working hours as being peculiar to the USA, especially world-class cities and affluent professionals. Yet this trend is far more pervasive than suggested by this one illustration. While problems of urban sprawl and social exclusion are endemic in the USA, a growing mismatch between where people live, work, go shopping and send their children to school is increasingly apparent across the entire English speaking advanced world (the UK, Australia, New Zealand and Canada) (Giuliano and Narayan 2003; Timmermans et al. 2002; Cervero and Wu 1998; Kasarda and Ting 1993). This is evident in widespread concern for the social and environmental costs of congestion, pollution, childhood obesity, and road safety. At the same time the Continental European tradition of generous holidays and shorter working hours appears to be under threat. The French Prime Minister has made it known he wants to abandon the hard won 35 hour week and instead allow businesses to arrange their own working time arrangements up to the European Union 48 hour limit (Fagnani and Letablier 2004).

Similarly, the German government proposes a reduction in the number of statutory public holidays to help improve its competitiveness abroad. It is debateable whether European universal welfare systems are

in the process of being dismantled or if they are simply being reformed in the wake of global competition (Taylor-Gooby 2001; 2001a). Rather than engage with this question of European policy transformation (see instead Taylor-Gooby 2004) this book highlights what might be considered the 'worst case scenario' – where the USA has a very poor record for poverty reduction, income equality, environmental protection and social integration (Goodin et al. 1999).

Two similar extremes?

Different versions of capitalism are practised across the world. Will Hutton (1996) identifies separate European, American and Japanese types, while Adair Turner (2001) differentiates between a European and an American (more particularly US) model. Comparisons are typically drawn between the weak welfare state and long work hours of the USA and strong welfare and short hours of most European states (Hayden 1999: 172). Viewed this way the USA symbolises the 'laggard' model of welfare development (Kudrle and Marmor 1984: 81) while the UK is the European anomaly. On domestic affairs the UK government claims to be 'neither European nor American' but instead promotes 'flexibility too often neglected in Europe combined with fairness too often neglected in America' (Brown 2003). The UK and USA have shared a common ideology with respect to economic liberalism and a 'rolling back' of state control ever since Margaret Thatcher famously declared in 1987 there was 'no such thing as society – just individuals and families'. Both seek to reduce public spending through an emphasis on self-help and self-reliance: 'care in the community' (by unpaid wives and mothers) is the euphemism applied to this approach in the UK (Himmelweit 1995; for the home as the locus of long-term care in Canada see England 2000). In many cases these measures appear to endorse the traditional family (Brenner 1993, cited in Somerville 2000: 137). This pattern of inequality contrasts with social democratic welfare regimes which emphasise collective responsibility (in the performance of care and by redistributing the costs of care work) and the promotion of more democratic gender relations. This point is taken up again in the next chapter.

A shift toward economic liberalism certainly describes the extreme cases of the USA and UK better than it does Continental Europe at the present time. But concern must be raised that a dominant set of economic values (competitiveness, entrepreneurialism, flexibility, unequal affluence over general sufficiency) are crowding out alternative systems of governance. Peck and Tickell suggest this hegemony in the way they

identify a 'rolling-back' of state bureaucracy in the 1980s followed by a 'rolling out' of neo-liberalism across the globe throughout the 1990s (Peck and Tickell 2002). Arguably the micro-social implications of this process are less well understood than the macro-economic patterns (to review the literature calling for fine-grained urban feminist analysis see Bondi and Rose 2003).

It is with the aim of better understanding this threat to collective responsibility and social democratic values that two similarly extreme cases of market orientation are selected for close scrutiny in this book. Associated with this is a second aim to critically examine the extent to which middle class working families in market-oriented societies would prefer, and are able, to resist the treadmill of working long hours, parenting intensively and consuming voraciously. A third aim is to highlight 'differences between the British and American pursuit of market-oriented policies' (Jacobs 1992: 43) by focusing on specific urban contexts. Together these aims require a research approach which looks beyond headline differences in policy and aggregate working hours data to reveal the hidden realm – elsewhere dubbed 'the secret life' – of individual preference formation and household decision-making (Jarvis et al. 2001). Before telescoping down to this fine-grained household analysis in Chapters Three and Four, it is first necessary to understand the global processes of restructuring which have altered the way cities and families function today.

Three spheres of restructuring

Over the past 30 years the profile of the urban economy has changed strikingly across the developed world. Most scholars date this from the first OPEC oil crisis in 1973 when a quadrupling of petroleum prices precipitated global economic downturn. Dismantling protective trade barriers exposed deficiencies of underinvestment and lack of training in established manufacturing and heavy industries (Sayer and Walker 1992). This process of restructuring saw good skilled manual jobs lost to increased automation, mass unemployment, and new international divisions of labour – including the transfer of labour intensive production by multinationals to low cost less developed countries (Logan and Swanstrom 1990: 7; Wallace 1990: 152). Firms in North America and North Western Europe responded to this crisis by seeking competitive advantage in high-value, high-tech sectors (Atkinson and Meager 1986; Gallie et al. 1998). States responded by replacing Keynesian job-creation initiatives, and support of welfare provision, with monetarism

reinforced by a neo-liberal mode of social regulation (Pacione 1997: 3; Jessop 2002). Accelerating this highly uneven flow of capital accumulation was the expansion and differentiation of consumer expectations, particularly relating to labour-saving domestic appliances, novel electronic gadgets and the personal computer.

This shift from manufacturing to the production of ideas and provision of services had a marked spatial impact within, as well as between, competing nations. Whereas the 'old' economy prospered alongside the nineteenth century industrial city, this 'new economy' increasingly favoured more cosmopolitan post-industrial cities and metropolitan regions. Some areas recovered from de-industrialisation far more successfully than others in part because they could boast superior social, cultural and environmental assets (Lever 2002). It is by this subtle measure of attractiveness to skilled workers and venture capital that, by virtue of their competitiveness, some cities are 'successful' while others remain moribund (Begg 2002). Yet the five 'successful' cities featured in this book (introduced in the next chapter) tell another story. Behind the veneer of competitiveness there are profound signs of stress. Evidence that success is double edged is witnessed in the frustration and discomfort of unreliable and crowded public transit, traffic in a state of gridlock, workers commuting long distance to reach a home they can afford or a school they are prepared to send their children to.

To understand this paradox it is important to make connections between three discrete spheres of restructuring. First is the sphere of employment. This governs both the distribution and quality of jobs and the supply of labour by gender, race and class. Second is the sphere of gender relations. This is of crucial significance because, from a household perspective, gender, identity and power effectively mediate aspects of decision-making and behaviour central to daily life. Third is the sphere of housing and urban structure. This concerns the location of homes in relation to jobs and how people co-ordinate journeys to work with routine circulation and pressure to be available to businesses operating 24/7 (24 hours a day, seven days a week). A great deal has been written about the transformations which have occurred in these spheres *individually* but little about the way they overlap through the mutual constitution of social, economic and environmental structures of constraint. This is because debates concerning the future of cities and urban 'liveability' typically occur in isolation from those concerning work/life balance. It is therefore worth rehearsing each of these transformations in turn so as to assemble all three together within a single volume, as a first step towards a more integrated analysis in the following chapters.

Flexible labour

One of the most significant transformations over the last half-century has been growth of women's employment. This, together with more varied household types associated with delayed marriage, longer life expectancy and the advent of birth control, combines powerfully with a fundamental shift in the global economy. The decline of heavy industry and manufacturing brought with it a permanent loss of skilled blue-collar jobs previously paying large numbers of men a family wage. Jobs gained in the service sector, though numerically significant, have provided no straightforward replacement for those lost. In the UK, for instance, the shift from manufacturing to service sector job concentration contributed to a drop in full-time employment from 21 million in 1952 to 19 million in 1995 (Hakim 1996: 74). Moreover, most new jobs in the growing service-producing sector today require skills that are socially constructed as 'feminine' and attract low wages and non-standard working hours. Others in the knowledge and ideas based 'new economy' also break with traditional terms of full-time, permanent employment. Workers are expected to cultivate transferable skills as protean or 'portfolio' workers. A combination of increased job insecurity and exposure to economic risk motivates the majority of couples to believe that both partners have to work if living standards are to be maintained (Somerville 2000: 6). In the 1950s more than 70 per cent of American families maintained a 'traditional' structure whereby economically inactive wives stood by breadwinning husbands. By 1980 this figure had fallen to 15 per cent (Rowbotham 1997: 455).

Not only has the economic base changed, so too has the human resource base shaping labour market supply. Advanced economies are commonly experiencing a shrinking working age population relative to elderly and other non-working populations (Evans 1992: 132). Nancy Folbre (2001: 102) points out that while in 1930 the proportion of the US population over age 65 represented 5.4 per cent, in 1990 this had risen to 12.5 per cent and is projected to constitute 20 per cent by the year 2050. In order to maintain national productivity, governments depend increasingly on the continuing (uninterrupted) participation of 'prime-age' women in paid employment and thus rising numbers of dual income and multi-job households (Levy and Michel 1991). This demographic reality combines with the neo-liberal state in the assumption of a 'universal worker' model⁴ (Lewis 2002). Somerville (2000: 231) points to the impact this has had on middle class families

in particular where, until relatively recently, a male breadwinner earning a family wage coupled with a full-time homemaker signified high social status.

One consequence of restructuring is the apparent concentration of income, power and status in the hands of a college-educated, often-times 'creative', or entrepreneurial, middle class, while at the same time reducing opportunities for poorly educated or otherwise disadvantaged minority groups (Brooks 2000; Florida 2002). Another is the rising number of two worker and multi-job households. Yet the nature of uneven labour market development in both countries is such that employment combinations include underemployment (low wage); overemployment (extension of working hours whether to generate a living wage or to demonstrate commitment to a particular career); and precarious employment (periodic unemployment, reduced hours, job-hopping) (Atkinson 1987). Together these characteristics of restructuring contribute both to overall growth in the number of dual-earning households as well as growing *diversity of experience* within this sub-population. Another explanation originates in uneven housing market development and pressure on workers to be increasingly geographically mobile. These features are discussed in more detail in Chapter Five. As a consequence of growing house price divergence between dynamic and moribund urban areas, for instance, most first-time buyers and those trading small apartments for family homes require significantly more than one income to secure the necessary finance. Downs (1989) observes that young families without two earners appear to be falling behind in their efforts to achieve upward mobility in the USA. In Britain, the Low Pay Unit calculates that there would be one million more households living in poverty, if both partners were not working (LPU 1994). Some scholars see a distinct polarisation of advantaged and excluded labour market extremes while others point to the superior purchasing power of an expanded professional consumer class (for more on this debate see Sassen 1991; Hamnett 1994; Butler and Robson 2003). Whatever the local pattern, income inequality is made worse by the concentration of employment characteristics in symmetrical household structures. Because most couples are from the same occupational class, the population is increasingly divided between 'resource rich' dual career households, 'multiple job' low-income households and 'employment deprived' no earner households (McRae 1986; Jarvis 1997). Will Hutton describes this pattern in terms of a '30-30-40 society' (Hutton 1995).⁵ The implications of growing inequality are discussed in more detail in Chapter Five.

Gender dynamics

Women in the UK and the USA have entered the labour market in growing numbers but the impact of this restructuring has been uneven, incomplete and contradictory (Dex and Shaw 1986). Women are popularly observed to experience 'role strain' carrying a 'dual burden' of paid employment and unpaid domestic and caring work. Outside the home women frequently work alongside other women in jobs which look remarkably like those of caring, domestic and emotion work performed unpaid at home. This describes a horizontal segregation of jobs and occupations constructed either as 'women's work' or 'mother friendly' (Glover 2002). Vertically too, women are concentrated in jobs outside the boardroom (Schwartz 1994). This points to the way jobs are not gender neutral but instead culturally constructed as appropriate for either men, or women, and the gender identities of both jobs and workers are negotiable and contestable. Work and the performances of workers are 'constituted and maintained by sets of social practices that embody socially sanctioned but variable characteristics of masculinity and femininity' (McDowell 1999: 135; Nicholson 1990; Stichter and Parpart 1988). Bridget Pfau-Effinger (1993; 1998) adopts this approach to explain the transmission of gender norms through moral negotiations in relation to overlapping public and private spheres: home, work, family, neighbourhood, and community engagement. She emphasises cultural (geographical) variation by scrutinising what constitutes the normatively sanctioned 'best' or 'right' course of action in a given situation. This recognises that people build moral identities and reputations (as the 'good enough' mother, the loyal worker or supportive spouse) on the basis of particular competencies and resources (Lawler 2000; Gardiner 1997). It suggests too that 'the limits on women's everyday activities are structured by what society expects women to be, and therefore to do' (Standing 1999: 16). People negotiate these identities and reputations in relation to others. Thus when relationships are changed, for example through divorce, people may respond by renegotiating their identity (Smart and Neale 1998).

Despite what Sheila Rowbotham (1997: 585) describes as women's 'long trek into (almost) equal citizenship in the public sphere', most men in the UK and USA 'continue to avoid the second shift' at home (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003: 9; Lewis 1992). Similarly, Nancy Folbre (2001: 17) observes that as a consequence of a 'liberal and highly individualistic form of feminism in the USA (...) even women who earn considerably more than their husbands seldom persuade

their guys to put more hours into family work'. Consequently, the symmetrical family Young and Willmott (1973) predicted 30 years ago is far from democratic. Blair and Lichter (1991) found that American women in the early 90s performed three times as much domestic labour than American men. Better educated women appeared more able to control the allocation of domestic labour but their second shift was reduced more by the use of labour-saving technology and paid help than by increases in men's housework. Gershuny and Robinson (1988) found similar results for the UK. The feminisation of domestic labour appears to be etched deeply into the male-female dyad. Here the contrast is with same-sex couples with children where the research suggests that the practice and management of housework is far more democratic (Dunne 1998; 1997). There is some evidence in recent analysis of time-use diaries to suggest that men in dual earning couples are more willing than in the past to share in tasks like childcare and cooking and that differences which once existed between working class and middle class men are diminishing (Sullivan 2000). Nevertheless a wealth of literature on the subject suggests that change is slow and, overall, women have made far greater progress toward equal breadwinning than men have picked up their share of caring, cooking, cleaning and organising the household (Pilcher 2000; Kramer 2000).

This latter point concerning women's disproportionate burden of household *management* needs to be emphasised as it is an issue highlighted in the household narratives. It is with respect to everyday co-ordination (checking that family members are where they need to be, picked up when necessary, escorted to clubs and parties wearing the right outfit or carrying an appropriate gift for each event) that feminised social reproduction work is least visible and most undervalued. Ironically, just as women's time availability for this managerial work is shrinking, they face a growing range and rising standard of domestic and parenting expectations (see Galinsky and Friedman 1995).⁶ As one interviewee wryly claimed, she is 'the conductor and the first violinist', orchestrating family personnel and events while working full-time, deprived of the luxury of losing herself in her paid work but instead always with one eye on the clock and a list of 'things to do' running through her head. This multi-tasking is stressful and largely incompatible with the sort of single-minded concentration demanded by most top jobs. The popular expectation that fathers are entitled to compartmentalise their lives in a way mothers are denied helps explain the persistent gender gap in wages. Women in the UK and USA earn 72–73 per cent of the wage rate of men, a gap which is only partially

explained by differential investments in human capital (education, experience and hours worked) (England 1992; McDowell 1999: 126). Chapters Three and Four go on to examine the implications of flexible labour market policies from a household perspective as another way to highlight these gendered inequalities.

Urban split

Most textbooks identify broadly similar processes of urban change for all advanced economies. These chart a course of urbanisation, accompanied by suburbanisation and 'counterurbanisation', as well as more recent evidence of reurbanisation through gentrification and state sponsored inner city regeneration (Champion 1989; Johnson and Beale 1998). Urbanisation associated with industrialisation essentially represents the migration of people and jobs from rural areas and small towns to metropolitan areas. Yet planners and environmentalists in most advanced economies have for some time shared a common concern for the *loss* of population from cities (Champion et al. 1998) and the negative impact widespread decentralisation has on transport behaviour and the environment (Garreau 1991). The dominant shift through employment restructuring has been from central business districts to new industrial spaces creating auto-dependent suburban corridors, 'technopoles' and 'technoburbs' (Fishman 1987). At the same time, urban residents (particularly middle class families) have for half a century pursued a course of residential mobility and housing choice favouring suburban and non-metropolitan locations. This revealed preference is strongly associated with the quest for affordable detached family housing, especially at a life-stage of family formation (Germain and Rose 2000). In the USA it is popularly dubbed 'white flight' because white middle class parents in particular have long used geographical distance, and the purchase of a home in an environment populated by families of like race and class, to improve the chances their offspring have of attending 'good' schools and achieving a level of cultural capital denied to children growing up in minority population neighbourhoods experiencing 'blight' and 'decay' (see for instance Suarez 1999: 9–43). This splintering of jobs and homes away from traditionally compact urban areas exacerbates problems of auto-dependence, sprawl and pollution.

Running alongside this trend of decentralisation is another of limited reurbanisation. By this process selected cities act as magnets for a distinctly urban professional population where cultural cachet is attached to the renovation of run-down vintage properties in once

working class neighbourhoods. Neil Smith (2002) argues that the transfer of de-industrialised inner city areas to professional owner occupiers is now 'thoroughly generalised' in the practices of urban regeneration. Consequently it is less meaningful to apply the term gentrification, which 'initially emerged as a sporadic, quaint and local anomaly in the housing market (of 'global' cities)' to large-scale demolition and commercial redevelopment. This argument is developed in Chapter Four with specific reference to a 'live-work' property type designed to combine activities of living and working under one roof.

Arguably the changes that have occurred in recent decades in employment, gender relations, and urban structure are mutually constitutive. By way of example, the normalisation of the dual earning household tends to reduce housing and labour market mobility while at the same time increasing routine transport circulation. Couple households with both partners working full-time are less likely to migrate between labour markets than the traditional male breadwinner structure. Co-earning women, particularly those in full-time professional careers, better resist being the 'trailing spouse' in situations of migration for male spouse promotion (Jarvis 1999; Boyle et al. 1999). Alternatives to the wholly moving household include dual-location living. This is used as a temporary or permanent strategy so couples can live together while maintaining careers in different locations (Hardill 2002: 27). The more usual solution of course is for one spouse or both to increase the length or complexity of their journey to work.

Four conceptual themes

Working families across the advanced world face very similar dilemma's in the way that they have to reconcile competing responsibilities at home, at work, towards family, friends and communities. This is apparent in the universal resonance of the term work/life reconciliation. While it enjoys widespread currency the work/life reconciliation debate is for the most part too narrowly confined. Largely neglected is the existence of a material world: where people shop, socialise, feel vulnerable; how they communicate with others and move about and what prevents them from doing either as freely as they would wish. Exceptions to this narrow view are local time use initiatives such as '*i tempi della città*' in Modena (discussed further in Chapter Seven). Nevertheless, while these make significant strides in reducing temporal friction (between shift working and crèche

opening hours for instance) (Pillinger 2001) they pay little attention to unequal household resource distributions (time not being available to all in equal measure) and uneven development. Instead, time usually assumes the dominant frame of reference: the duration and timing of events and the ability to synchronise these with others. It is popularly identified with 'famine', 'squeeze' and accelerated use (Hochschild 1989; 1997; Schor 1992; Robinson and Godbey 1999; Gershuny and Sullivan 2001). Yet as this introductory chapter illustrates, time-use studies remain one-dimensional where they neglect important geographical considerations – such as *where* suitable (affordable) homes and nurseries and schools are relative to *actual* employment opportunities for two working parents, given limited resources of time, personnel, transport and finance.

This book addresses these gaps in understanding by fusing together two debates which are usually confined by disciplinary divisions to exclusive discourses and separate policy prescriptions. The aim is to initiate a conversation between urban studies (especially the new urbanism expanded upon in the following chapter) and social policy (notably working hours and childcare). Few attempts have been made to map reconciliation behaviour onto the land-use functions of the material city. Instead the trend has been for sociologists to focus on conditions and divisions of work, employment and public policy (see for instance Gornick and Meyers 2003; Beck 2000), while urban planners focus on settlement patterns, and the role of technology, emphasising mechanisms to achieve sustainable development and improve urban quality of life (see for instance Blower 1993; Marshall 2000; Thorns 2002). The problem with a discipline specific approach is it artificially separates aspects of human behaviour and withdraws this from its material setting: it depopulates the physical ecosystems (of scarce resources and waste sinks) which ultimately support human life. Neither debate takes sufficient account of the transcendent influences of rising consumer expectations and increased spatial mobility. These limitations are here addressed by an integrated approach to everyday life in dynamic cities. To make sense of the many multiple points of interconnection highlighted by this approach it is useful to draw on four conceptual themes: the material situation of everyday life, the practical limits to co-ordination (in terms of distances travelled, hours worked, risks taken, debt carried), time-space-matter, and rising neo-liberalism. Each theme represents a different 'cut' through the integrated nature of everyday life; a way of opening up to scrutiny the particular local contexts and co-ordination dilemmas explored in Chapters Three to Six.

Everyday life and the material city

One of the main themes of this book, explored in depth in Chapters Two and Three, is the material situation of everyday life in the city – not just ‘the city’ in a general sense but particular cities and neighbourhoods. Analysis at this scale highlights the frustrating obstacles we all experience in our daily life (traffic congestion, parking restrictions, schools closure, getting household appliances repaired). It also reveals the impact routine solutions to co-ordination have on environmental quality (such as pollution and added congestion caused by an increase in the number and length of car journeys to shop, school and work). Moreover, while we are witnessing signs of ‘hyper-mobility’ in travel behaviour (people moving about more frequently and over longer distances) (Adams 1999; Doyle and Nathan 2001), it is evident most people still live intensely local lives based on repeated (usually daily) movement between familiar ‘stations’ or intersections (home, office, supermarket and petrol/gas station en route to children’s school) (Dyck 1990; Skinner 2003). This reminds us too that movement restrictions are more often experienced by women than men, especially those assuming the mantle of caring responsibilities (whether for young children, disabled or elderly relatives) (England 1993; Gilbert 1997; Aitken 2000; Camstra 1996).

All aspects of daily life function according to an infrastructure which can be enabling or constraining. Like that of the streets, tunnels and telephone cables we are familiar with in the built environment, this infrastructure has a material quality, but it also serves to convey local knowledge through institutional regimes and moral rationalities. A material context is evident in the distribution of fixed assets such as housing, schools, shops as well as transit stops and traffic bottlenecks. Institutional regimes encompass all manner of regulation from that functioning within the household to that of the state and the extent to which it regulates behaviour and subsidises private markets. Moral rationalities suggest the collectively realised (geographically uneven) cultural understanding of gender roles, preferences and expectations (Vincent et al. 2004). One group of women, for instance, might view motherhood and paid work as integral, while for another the priority is to be at home with their children regardless of foregone earnings or childcare costs. Thus cultural and moral rationalities explain why narrow assumptions of ‘rational economic (man)’ utility maximisation fail to explain variation in parenting values, working practices and consumption norms (Duncan and Edwards 1999: 273–276). None of these spheres function in isolation, nor is there a clear separation

between the choices people make (whether to commute to a new job) and structures of constraint (such as housing costs and spouse employment). As Nancy Folbre (2001: 6) observes, 'choice is a funny thing, affected by both moral values and by social pressure's. This is why too much choice – or too little social co-ordination of choice – can lead to outcomes that can be just as problematic as having no choice at all'. It is interesting to witness in this regard that as people's lives get busier, filled with fast paced, long hours of paid work, the practice of consumption is growing more complex too. Affluent shoppers are faced with a widening and constantly changing product range. Choosing bread and orange juice in a US supermarket can be very labour intensive – with dozens of grain types, juice concentrations and textures, all with detailed descriptions of production methods and contents to be read and worried over.

With respect to such matters of human agency it has become a cliché to quote Harvard economist James Duesenberry's comment on Becker that 'economics is all about how people make choices; sociology is all about why people don't have any choices to make' (1960: 233). This claim reinforces the sense of opposition between those who assume a world of free agents and those who see agency reduced to, or determined by, external structures such as the state (or poverty). Recent theoretical development maintains that both polar conceptions are untenable. Lawson (1997) for instance views social structure (such as rules, positions and relations) as a precondition for intentional action and consequently attributes the existence of social structure to the continually reproduced, and always evolving, routines and practices of human actions. Social structures come about and endure, whether or not individuals have an awareness of this process (Lawson 1997: 168). Bridging the dualism of structural constraint and human agency has long been the endeavour of critical realists as well as those employing a framework of social theory known as structuration, which is largely attributed to British sociologist Anthony Giddens. The approach of structuration is useful to the aims of this book because it connects up social interaction and material context, taking us back to the intimate (and precarious) relationship between human society and the natural environment. Accordingly, behaviour is understood to be moderated through agent-structure interaction (by a 'duality of structure') and by this process is liable to generate unintended or unacknowledged outcome (Giddens 1984; Gregory and Urry 1985; Jarvis et al. 2001: 90). This duality governs the ongoing process and cycle of market performance as much as it does political systems

and households – reproduced as ‘structures of interaction, with change recognised not as (or not only as) an external happening, the result of an external or exogenous shock, but as an integral part of what the system in question is’ (Lawson 1997: 171).

Practical limits to growth

This brings us to a second theme which connects concepts of urban social cohesion and environmental sustainability in Chapters Two and Six to highlight *practical limits to growth*. It is important to distance this discussion from the original publications bearing this title while at the same time reviving the critically important human-environment interface. Concerns associated with a broad anti-growth movement developed in strength 30 years ago, first (most controversially) in response to the so-called population ‘explosion’ and subsequently with respect to urban containment, environmental conservation and attempts to curb excessive consumption as part of a global restructuring of living standards. Of course it is important to remember that while drawing on the language of containment and capacity the city limits in the title of this book are largely illusory. Few of us live in cities with clearly defined boundaries or edges: medieval city walls or other physical, administrative or symbolic city limits have little relevance to the way cities function today. Nevertheless we all recognise very real parameters to our daily life whether the limitations we encounter are consciously declared or unconsciously felt. This is evident in terms of distances travelled, hours worked, risks taken, debt carried, favours asked and granted (for a sense of emotional ‘limits’ in this respect see Reay 2000). Limits are thus conceived here as the socially constructed outcome of everyday routines and practices which are negotiated, in turn, through the household collective. In this way they are intimately enmeshed in local contexts of urbanisation through the infrastructure of everyday life identified above. This book goes on to argue that there are, or in some cases *should be*, moral limits too, such as consumption based on sufficiency rather than status.

According to O’Riordan (1981) and more recently Pepper (1996), stakeholders value the environment and identify solutions to environmental problems along a continuum from extreme ecocentrism to extreme technocentrism (see also Dowie 1995). The extreme ecocentrist believes natural resources and the capacity of the earth to process waste are *strictly* limited. According to this paradigm nature is to be protected and preserved for its intrinsic value. A strict ‘nature before society’ position such as this was adopted by the earliest claims of