

Urban theory in anti-theoretical times

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Abstract

This commentary engages with Robert W. Lake's cautionary piece 'on resisting the seductions of theory'. It highlights points of agreement with Lake's argument, particularly on the place of theory within urban analysis, before outlining two broader concerns the piece raises. The first has to do with where and by whom theory is 'done'; the second with how Lake's argument sits in a crudely anti-theoretical moment in which the risks of taking certain theoretical positions are more serious than the danger of going out of intellectual style.

Keywords

urban theory, understanding, analysis, social change

I found much to agree with in Robert W. Lake's counsel on 'resisting the seductions of theory', but my disagreements started with the opening lines. Lake (2025: 8) begins:

Theory carries a bifurcated workload in the academic enterprise. One wing of the intellectual project elevates theory as a form of knowledge expressing a Truth about the world that transcends the merely practical or applied. An alternative claim celebrates theory as the route to Understanding when faced with the complexity and contingency of the experienced world.

This stylised account of 'the academic enterprise' is offered, I think, as a provocation, but it can be hard to enter a dialogue with a position when you don't recognise its basic premise. In the interests of dialogue, though, in what follows I highlight my points of agreement (and rueful recognition), before putting forward two concerns: one about

where and by whom theory gets done; the other about the place of such an argument in what are crudely anti-theoretical times.

Two points of agreement, with caveats

Lake's piece reads as a kind of 'advice for young urbanists'; his account of changing theoretical vogues in urban studies will be familiar to any reader who has spent more than a little time in the field, whether riding various conceptual bandwagons or left by the wayside of the passing parade. Shifts in intellectual fashion are not, of course, peculiar to urban scholarship, and it's salutary to read

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Lake's own theoretical *vitae*. He writes as a lapsed empiricist, recovering phenomenologist, one-time Marxisant fellow-traveller, and born again Deweyan pragmatist.

Two aspects of Lake's arguments chimed strongly with me, and are worth repeating here. The first is his warning against theory taking precedence in urban research. When this happens, substantive analysis becomes an occasion for running one's (or, more usually, someone else's) theoretical line. The conceptual standpoint is given primacy, with the urban case serving as an illustrative instance of it. It is the opposite of theory-testing, a set piece *demonstration* of theory which subsumes the empirical case under the theoretical gotcha. Urban contexts, urban problems – and above all urban actors – become an example or a representative on earth of the theory at hand. This is often the problem of theory as a proper name (doing a Marx, a Foucault or a Deleuze): the application of oven-ready theory to a more or less pliant empirical setting. Lake offers us an example from his own research, recalling how in the late 1970s he drew on David Harvey's 'work to theorise the epidemic of property tax foreclosures in Pittsburgh not as a destabilising event in the precarious lives of neighbourhood residents but as evidence of a structural crisis in the circulation and accumulation of surplus value' (Lake, 2025: 9). The point is well-taken, but couldn't it be *both*?

The second argument that resonates is the issue Lake has with treating theory as a form of intervention in and of itself. While theoretical work might be the basis for both critical analysis and practical action, he is of course right to argue that it doesn't take the place of either. These points seem to me good challenges for thinking about what we do when we do urban research and analysis. The larger framing of Lake's argument, however, can read as if the author is fighting older battles (including some going back several centuries), and largely with straw people. I admit to being piqued by Lake's styling of 'Truth' and 'Understanding' as the flags under which two academic camps carve up the theoretical territory. I accept this is caricaturing the field for the sake of an argument (sorry, dialogue).

It's also true that there was a trend for capitalising certain heavyweight abstract nouns well into the 1980s (see also 'the State' and 'the Market') – an easy way to give your work a kind of portentous, even German-looking, world-historical seriousness. But this is a set-up. These are not two recognisable 'wings' of any 'academic enterprise', and there are no points of reference to help anchor them. Lake might have some urbanists in mind whom he could sign up to either standard, but more common approaches to the uses of theory involve a little from column A, a little from column B, and the question of how any of it helps you think about a given urban issue.

It is noticeable that Lake's own approach to theory is grounded in philosophy, and specifically philosophies of knowledge. This is a different order of theory from the conceptual debates in urban studies he wants us to resist. Moreover, Lake's own theoretical commitments are evident. His approach to the uses and seductions of theory, and to how urban scholars might better spend their time, is grounded in traditions of American pragmatism, Dewey and Rorty in particular. The arguments against the seductions of theory, that is, come from a definite theoretical standpoint. This isn't a criticism: it would be hard to take up such a position – or write such a piece – without having a theoretical read on it. And Lake shows his workings very clearly. One of the clever strengths of his piece is that, in the conclusion, Lake wards off various criticisms before a reader is able to make them. This feels a bit like an author getting all their sides of the 'dialogue' in before their interlocutors have a chance to get their pants on. On first reading Lake's piece, I noted: 'this is the theory you have when you're not having a theory'. Right at the last, in the final endnote, Lake leaves us with: '[t]hroughout the preceding discussion, I am explicitly not propounding a theory about not having a theory' (p. 16). I'm not so convinced, but Lake got me there again and Rorty has his back on this one. It might be said, in fairness to any readers of the piece who feel a bit sheepish for putting David Harvey or Cedric Robinson in their recent conference paper, Lake does name-check his own guy, Richard Rorty, *a lot*.

So yes, ‘Truth’ and ‘Understanding’ bothered me, but I do want to make a simple case for understanding as a central purpose of theoretical work. Myfanwy Taylor (2024) makes a very nice point about the strengths of ‘weak theory’, the kind that emerges from bringing together what you learn from research, urban practice, and other people’s ideas: in Taylor’s case, for making critical and practical sense of ‘the politics of diverse economies’ she has been working on in a range of urban sites in the United Kingdom. An important part of the work of theory – including, in Taylor’s case, ‘feminist and postcolonial engagements’ and even what Lake might call ‘theoretical abstractions’ – is in helping researchers trace commonalities as well as contrasts across different urban settings, to make sense of the connections between ‘cases’ and to learn from them. To go back to Lake’s early work on property tax foreclosures in Pittsburgh: there are many, many ‘destabilising event[s] in the precarious lives of neighbourhood residents’ in far too many local places – a degree of theoretical abstraction is necessary and can be helpful to make sense of their causes, their consequences, and some of the common links between them.

I don’t doubt that Lake knows all this. The point for him, as for Taylor, is about how to make the ‘shift from knowing to doing’. There is a normative line through Lake’s piece: the point of urban research is to help ‘engender social change’ in the face of ongoing ‘injustice and oppression’ – as Rorty puts it, to play some part in the ‘diminution of the oppression of the weak by the strong’. I’m sympathetic to this view, although it’s not one all potential readers (let alone employers or funders) will necessarily share. Even if you accept this as the purpose of urban research, it raises the question of how you can know – in any given urban context – who are the weak and who the strong? How do you even choose your context in the first place? How do you recognise ‘injustice and oppression’ when you see them? Doesn’t it partly depend on who you end up in ‘dialogical community engagement’ with? Knowing whose side you’re on, and why, depends on an understanding of the urban situation that is inevitably, if not primarily or exclusively,

theoretical. Selecting your research problems, like choosing your battles, is a process that is informed by one’s conceptual understanding of what the problem is, why it’s a problem, and for whom.

The bottom line of Lake’s argument – don’t get hung up on your (most current) theory, and don’t think it’s the beginning and endpoint of academic work – simply doesn’t need to go another few rounds with Cartesian dualism to stand as good advice. But let me turn to the disagreements.

The place of theory

In this piece, Lake treats theory as something that largely happens in academic settings – in conferences, in graduate theses, and on the published page. It’s certainly the case that academic environments give more time and space (as well as greater credence) to the seductions of theory. But these are hardly the only places where theory gets ‘done’, and academics are not the only people who do it. Lake has a laudable concern for the work of collaboration, of academic and other researchers working on equal terms – and for shared purpose – with activists, local residents, service users, practitioners, officials, and so on, around *their* problems, rather than in service of academics’ preferred theories. Subduing one’s theoretical urges is seen as a prerequisite for engaging with other urban actors on an equal and open basis. But it does tend to imply a division of labour in which academics do theory and everybody else has (real) problems. The version of theory the piece sets out is a uni-directional one, sidelining the ways in which theory comes from other social and organisational sites. I am thinking here of my colleague Mahvish Ahmad’s (2023) argument, in another research setting, for the rich seams of anti-colonial theory developed in what she calls ‘movement texts’; in her specific account, in the circulation of *Jabal*, the bulletin of the Balochistan People’s Liberation Front in Northeastern Pakistan during the mid-1970s. Produced, as Ahmad (2023: 54) puts it, ‘at great risk during a counterinsurgency campaign launched by then Prime Minister Zulfikar

Ali Bhutto, possession of the pamphlet was considered treasonous and grounds for arrest.’ Lake writes (p. 15) of the ‘personal and psychic costs’ involved in giving up one’s academic theory habit, but Ahmad’s work points to the much greater costs of certain types of theoretical engagement in particular historical and political contexts, then and now.

Ahmad is arguing against ‘overly restrictive understandings of what constitutes social theory’, and who gets to author it (2023: 54). As she and her colleagues put it in the larger project of which this piece forms part, too often documents such as *Jabal* are treated as primary sources for analysis rather than theoretical interventions in themselves, ‘producing a division between who does politics and who does theory’ (Ahmad et al., 2024: 10). In Lake’s account, the danger is that ‘doing theory’ is a distraction or a displacement from ‘doing politics’ – that is, of what he calls ‘creating a better future’ (Lake, 2025: 8). It’s right that *only* doing the former may be of limited wider relevance, but the idea that it’s possible to do the latter without it seems fanciful. In the interests of positive social change, Lake urges us to step away from the theory and instead offer ‘hypotheses for improvement to be tested against their consequences in the future’ (p. 13), even as he recognises those consequences will never be fully knowable. Social change can be a long time coming, and too often it doesn’t come at all, but some of the consequences of theories about the world and its possible futures are found in the forming of solidarities, in intellectual and social empowerment, and in creating unwitting resources of hope for futures that may be far distant, or emerge in quite different places.

Urban research in anti-theoretical times

The other point over which I take issue with Lake’s piece is spurred by the wider social and political context in which it appears. Some of the scholarship Lake commends is focused on ‘situational’ or ‘conjunctural’ analysis, and the current conjuncture is one that is deeply hostile to certain kinds of

theory, in ways which have consequences for relations between ‘weak’ and ‘strong’. For some time now, some of the bodies of theoretical argument that Lake mentions have been under concerted attack by powerful political actors and their supporters in business, various media, public institutions and private organisations. These attacks have taken practical form in the removal of books from classrooms and library access, disciplinary processes and job losses, de-funding, harassment, threats of deportation and now Executive Orders. Lake (2025: 16) is right that ‘the historical record is replete with abhorrent practices – slavery, imperialism, white supremacy, eugenics, religious fanaticism and more’ – that were grounded in and justified by academic theory, but he seems to treat these as movements of the past (‘of their day’) in a context where none of them has disappeared and some are making a strong comeback. Meanwhile, ‘queer theory’, ‘racial capitalism’, ‘three or four waves of feminist theory’, ‘today’s theoretical critique of settler colonialism’ – which appear across the article as instances of recent or current theoretical vogues – are subject to intellectual and anti-intellectual attacks that target individuals, groups, movements, organisations, policies and services in regressive and frightening ways, and certainly in ways I would see as deepening ‘injustice and oppression’.

In such a conjuncture, Lake’s distinction between ‘the seductions and distractions of theory’ and the ‘problems of actual life’ (p. 9) seems a more serious misstep than the simplified rendering of Truth and Understanding. His piece calls on urbanists and others to ‘engage in a dialogical effort to build the world we collectively wish to inhabit’ (p. 12). It’s an estimable aim, but it comes at time when prospects for versions of a world that any ‘we collectively’ will find inhabitable are grim. Who knows? In writing in 1979 about ‘the circulation and accumulation of surplus value’, Lake might have been more right than he thinks. His provocation is one in which there is much to agree with, and even more to disagree with. This seems a good basis for dialogue. But don’t give up on your theories: you – even ‘we’ – might still need them.

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