

# Jane Jacobs: Political Economist of the City

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AS A YOUNG FRENCH magistrate, Alexis de Tocqueville toured the United States in the early 1830s, intending to return to Paris to write a book about the management of U.S. prisons. Instead, his trip inspired him to produce a very different book—*Democracy in America*—which is still regarded as among the most insightful studies of American culture. Similarly, Jane Jacobs, an American-born citizen of Canada who died last April after a career devoted to the intellectual and passionate study and advocacy of cities, may eventually be remembered less for her chosen subject than for its reflection of the culture of an epoch.

The life and work of Jacobs intertwined across the centuries with that of De Tocqueville in several ways, ranging from the superficial to the profound. Both were cosmopolitan by nature and transcended nationality; both saw penetratingly into the fabric of American society, formulating perceptions that resonated far beyond the circles of the learned. Both labored in the shadow of Thomas Jefferson, who brought back to America from France, where he had represented his country as ambassador, deep misgivings about cities. To him, they were dirty, overcrowded, and sordid, and he was not eager to see such large concentrations of people and commerce duplicated in his young country, which was shaped by what he believed to be sound agrarian lifestyles and values. However, he came to change his mind, conceding that cities were economically indispensable. When De Tocqueville and Jacobs later formed their own respective conclusions, both regarded urban culture as a force of enormous importance for the larger society. But De Tocqueville agreed with the earlier Jefferson, viewing the city as a threat. For Jacobs, cities were the cardinal

economic development sources that drive the rise, prosperity, and decline of civilizations.

Born Jane Butzner in 1916, in Scranton, Pennsylvania, Jacobs moved to New York City after high school, supporting herself at various jobs while finding her way as a freelance writer. She attended classes, including studies in economics and politics, at Columbia University but did not graduate. In 1944, she married architect Robert Jacobs. In 1952, hired by the magazine *Architectural Forum*, she began developing her own perspective on the urban scene. Her 1961 book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, written in compelling journalistic prose, made its subject urgent and accessible even to readers with no previous knowledge of urban issues. It struck a nerve, drawing a wide audience and establishing Jacobs as a controversialist and an intellectual celebrity. Heaping scorn on America's urban redevelopment practices of the preceding decade, she argued that they had ruinous social, aesthetic, and economic consequences. For Jacobs, the New York neighborhood of Greenwich Village presented a desirable model of spontaneous community life: dense, colorful, diverse, and full of character, it remained free from the controls of bureaucratic planners.

The 1960s in the United States were marked by great social unrest and transformation in the areas of race relations, civil rights, gender politics, parenting, concepts of patriotism and war, lifestyles, and interpretations of America's place among nations. A

sense of generational conflict and of daring rebellion against conventional practices and accepted authorities was in the air.

From this cultural ferment, Jacobs emerged as one of the crusaders blazing a new trail for the country.



Her milieu encompassed the young baby boomers of the time, who have subsequently gone on to build their own careers with nostalgic reverence for the heroes of their youth. Her status as an iconoclast was further defined by her confrontations with two very different figures: New York's powerful urban planning administrator, Robert Moses, and the preeminent urban critic and philosopher Lewis Mumford. Her clash with Moses—over his expressway plans and his project style based on wholesale alterations of landscapes, neighborhoods, and skylines—earned her headlines as an activist able to translate ideas into practical results, even when this meant being arrested for her public protest actions. Her dispute with Mumford, on the other hand, was carried out only with words, but as career theater it may have been more important to her reputation,

since it presented the intelligentsia of the period with the entertaining spectacle of a literary newcomer challenging a giant of America's national intellectual stage.

Jacobs proved to have staying power. In a substantial series of publications including *The Economy of Cities* (1969), *Cities and the Wealth of Nations* (1984), *Systems of Survival: A Dialogue on the Moral Foundations of Commerce and Politics* (1992), *The Nature of Economies* (2000), and *Dark Age Ahead* (2004), she found, as Mumford had, that city studies alone provided an insufficient outlet for her creative drive. Broadening her scope over the years, Jacobs extended her urban opinions into a sustained conceptual scheme that spanned economics, ethics, and the philosophy of history.

The general thrust of this thought process is illustrated by three key aspects of Jacobs's work: her opposition to large-scale planning; her belief that cities are the fundamental engines of economies; and her dislike of attempts to bring elements of the country into the city, as in the Garden City program of Patrick Geddes and Lewis Mumford. The first of these three clearly relates to practical urban planning and other social issues, from which the other two elements are derived.

Jacobs's antipathy toward large-scale centralized planning is best understood by seeing her in the context of the 1960s, when she found her voice. During this period and after, many people became disillusioned with huge-scale urban planning and administration. Some of the most dramatic events of recent world history contributed to this change. The First World War involved the ambitions of empires to extend their dominions, carrying over into the 20th century the desire of 19th-century planners to manipulate the lives of millions by redrawing maps. The rise of Nazi Germany was a disastrous ascent of social engineers and planning

administrators, as was the emergence of the Soviet Union. The latter was for many years accompanied by the idealistic hopes of numerous intellectuals who later, with horror, saw their utopian expectations morph into the atrocities of Stalin, the threats and anxieties of the Cold War, and at last the economic collapse and political dismemberment of Moscow's transnational domains.

The Berlin Wall and the apartheid regime in South Africa provided powerful symbols of the follies of arrogant planners who aspired to force populations and infrastructures to conform to artificialities prescribed by massive bureaucratic institutions. The industrialized democracies also were dissatisfied with large-scale planning. The British Empire—a remarkable example of global centralization—was dissolved; the colonies of European powers won their independence one by one; President Dwight Eisenhower warned Americans against the dangers of a military-industrial complex, founded on sweeping national designs, directing the growth of the U.S. economic and military establishments; a generation of Americans rebelled against what they construed as the imperialistic blueprints of the United States in Southeast Asia and elsewhere. Britain, after a succession of governments devoted to national planning, delivered power for over 11 years to Margaret Thatcher, an apostle of individualism and minimally planned development, while the United States found in Ronald Reagan's similar ethos a counterweight to the social and economic interventionism of Franklin Roosevelt.

The story of our time over the past 100 years has thus played out through the mass media as an epic struggle against the mentality of a monumental plan. This saga can be projected from the macrocosm of national and international politics to the microcosm of urban policy. Jacobs did just this. Her works celebrate the human, the serendipitous, the vernacular, the multifarious, the

idiosyncratic, and the organic as features of urban vitality and success, in contrast with the machinations of planning bureaucrats out to shape and reshape the urban landscape from their desks and drawing boards, but achieving only dehumanization and ultimate failure.

Jacobs's skepticism toward comprehensive planning resulted in her view that cities drive national economies, and not vice versa. She disdained the interventionist approach of British economist John Maynard Keynes, whose model of centralized government manipulation of national financial activity influenced President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal and successive other administrations in the United States, Britain, and elsewhere. Not only the Keynesian planners, but the entire profession of economists, Jacobs boldly argued, had erred egregiously by regarding national economies as machines that they could regulate at will. Their great mistake, she held, lay in their underestimation of the pivotal role of cities in a nation's prosperity. Satisfied that this insight allowed her to extend her belief beyond urban issues and apply it to a much broader canvas, she set out to win recognition as a general economic theoretician, an armchair archeologist, an ethicist, and a philosopher. The title of her book *Cities and the Wealth of Nations: Principles of Economic Life*, with its deliberate echo of Adam Smith's 1776 treatise *The Wealth of Nations* (one of the seminal texts of the modern world), announced her heroic reach for recognition as a philosophical innovator and prophetic teacher.

Jacobs's doctrine forms a highly coherent, interlinked system. Like her economic theories, her interpretation of the relationship between country and metropolis resulted from her opinion of large-scale planning, which was in turn a cornerstone of her economics. She characterized rural society as dispersed population, with limited access to evolving

knowledge resources and with subservience to habits of the past; to a uniform, repetitive way of life, and to a slavish adherence to limited in-

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frastructures in order to survive. The rituals, folkways, and ponderous livelihood cycles of the agrarian landscape constituted, for her, a kind of rustic counterpart to the heavy hand of the bureaucratic city planner.

This counterpart was, in her opinion, so charismatic that it had convinced generations of economists to include rural country, towns, and villages along with cities in the composition of a national economy. Jacobs believed, contrary to this, that the city was of paramount importance, and only from it—not the country—came all of the economic energies necessary to sustain civilizations. This conviction put Jacobs at loggerheads with the warning of urban critics like Mumford that cities threatened to develop into sprawling monstrosities whose steady advance needed to be controlled by regional plans and urban designs.

In developing her theory of the economic dominance of the city, Jacobs reversed an ancient notion in the history of ideas—that city life is the antithesis of human creativity. Jacobs came forward as a contrarian apologist for the urban experience. Biological imagery is strong in her work, as it is for other writers who have built their philosophies on notions of spontaneity, like French metaphysician Henri Bergson and German philosopher of history Oswald Spengler, who saw civilizations as plantlike organisms that live and die.

Jacobs is particularly reminiscent of Herbert Spencer, who achieved immense popularity in the 1900s with a series of books that ostensibly set out to popularize Darwinian science but that actually outlined a personal, imaginative picture of the world. Like Spencer, Jacobs was not a college graduate but a gifted autodidact, and similarly was irritated by the formalities of the scholarly community whose language and libraries she shared, but whom she may have resented. Jacobs seems to have taken a distinct pleasure in tweaking the noses of the entire profession of academic economists, and the brash forcefulness with which she asserted her theories may have been, to some extent, compensation for an inability to mimic a more conventional form of learned expression.

Yet, it is precisely in this alienation from convention that Jacobs's strengths lay. As economic inquiry became increasingly specialized, its gain in depth came at the expense of breadth. Economics has become a sharper discipline, but narrower in scope in that it has become progressively detached from the humanities and speculative learning of which it was once a part. Jacobs's work is a valuable and timely antidote to this trend.

Urban policy is among the most complex fields of governance. While scientific techniques are crucial to its success, they alone cannot guide it. To solve urban problems requires the generous vision of the humanities. Jacobs brought such vision to her subject with brio and intensity. It is impossible to read her and not be enthralled by her expansive perspective on urban challenges and the interdisciplinary responses that they demand. She presents a convincing case for the relevance to urban issues of a wide range of public policy and scholarly discourses that many people do not readily associate with metropolitan studies. Jacobs is a political economist in the grand tradition, animated by wide learning,

possessed of a humanist sensibility, and unafraid to ask large questions.

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### Three key aspects

characterized Jacobs's work: her opposition to large-scale planning; her belief that cities are the fundamental engines of economies; and her dislike of attempts to bring elements of the country into the city.

Indeed, as she took stock of the body of her writing, she decided in her later years to publish her observations on the art of politics. The relevance of her thought to the changing winds of politics in our age is evident throughout her work, which appeals for different reasons to a diverse array of readers of very different political persuasions.

Jacobs's work, though oddly old-fashioned in some respects, is presciently modern in its attunement to many 21st-century currents. Even though her understanding of the role and procedures of planning and economic development was flawed, the provocative questions that she asked are more important than the answers she offered. The suggestive value of her work outweighs the truth or falsity of any of its specific content. Her place in the pantheon of great urban thinkers is secure. **U**

**N. J. SLABBERT** is U.S. representative of the Belgium-based Truman Group, which focuses on geopolitical and economic analysis for business and government leaders.