Comparative Urban History Preliminary Exam

Please answer one question from each of the sections below in clearly argued essays strongly supported by examples and evidence.

I. Re-envisioning Urban History

Urban planning and reform. Comparing at least two cities (one in the US and one in Europe, for example Haussmann’s Paris and Moses’s New York), explore the meanings of “urban reform”—from the perspective of the reformers and planners on the one hand and from the perspective of urban citizens, including, if relevant, civic opponents of reform, on the other. In particular, if we can know this, what have been the key values motivating plans, resistance, and how plans were experienced?

Cities and public space. Many urban historians have situated “space,” and especially the spaces of the public (including, in some versions, the “public sphere”), at the center of their analyses of the city. Historians have highlighted, for example, questions of power, control, contestation, and transgression—including around issues of class, race, and gender—and the struggles and anxieties these evoke. Choose two or three cities to compare (at least one in the US and one in Europe). Organize your discussion of this problem around three or four key issues or themes (be sure to give concrete illustrations as you discuss general problems).

II. Approaches

Comparative urban history: Create a syllabus in comparative urban history for an intermediate-level undergraduate course. What are the dominant themes for the course and what historical lessons do you hope to impart to students? What are the key books and articles you would assign and how do they address critical questions of the field? Finally, discuss what are the particular challenges of capturing the complexities of teaching comparative urban history given its scope and aims?

Global cities/national cities. Conceptually, how has the transnational/global turn in history affected the study of urban history? Concretely, discuss and analyze, concerning two or three cities (at least one American and one European), the evidence that these cities were, variously, national and transnational spaces (including, possibly, cosmopolitan, global, imperial or other related categories).

III.

City and Countryside William Cronon’s Nature’s Metropolis was first published nearly twenty years ago and offered a compelling thesis as to the relationship between the city (in this case Chicago) and the country. In so doing, Cronon pushed for a strong consideration of the environment in studying cities (that is, urban history). Taking Cronon as one model, discuss how the field of urban history intersects with environmental history? How is the literature in the United States, Europe, or elsewhere similar or dissimilar as to the themes and major topics that are analyzed through the study of the city, its surroundings, and development? In what ways
have urban historians fully realized the possibilities inherent to an environmental approach and what remain potential pathways of exploration?

Urban historians have examined cities to argue for how particular urban spaces become marked as racalized spaces, areas of crime, and of (undesirable) sexual activity. Discuss critical works that not only engage in this type of critical analysis and have also novel ways of better understanding the city in terms of race, sexuality, and gender. How has this approach to the study of the city translated among urban historians studying cities in Europe as well as U.S. cities? Additionally, cite a few works that illuminate critical insights gained through the study of the city and its environs in this fashion.