Comparative Urban History Preliminary Exam (Spring 2012)

Please answer three of the questions below, with clearly argued essays strongly supported by examples and evidence. You need not address every particular sub-question posed. These are meant as suggestions as you consider how to develop the argument and evidence in directions you consider most essential.

1. a) Cities and public space. Discuss the concept of “public space” in analyses of urban life in the past and present. 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). Also, please be sure to address Lefebvre’s theoretical framework for considering the “rights to the city” as that framework has impacted the work of urban theorists/historians in the past 15 years.

OR

1. b) Margins and undergrounds. How have marginalized spaces and people, “undergrounds” of various sorts, figured in scholarship on the city. Do these challenge or reinforce grand narratives about the urban process and the urban experience? Specifically, how have questions about race, gender, and sexuality shaped recent studies of urban space and urban history?

2. Urban planning and reform. Comparing three cities, 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, on the other.

3. 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, the evidence that these cities were, variously, national and transnational spaces (including, possibly, cosmopolitan, global, imperial or other related categories). How has the emergence of the “mega-city” influenced or shaped recent scholarship in urban studies?

4. Mass culture and the city. Explore how the development of mass-circulation newspapers, and perhaps other forms of public mass culture, changed the way urban life was viewed, lived, and understood. Among the key interpretive questions you might wish to explore: How did this development change the way cities are consumed and navigated? What was the relationship between the “textual city” and the material city? What was the relationship between the “visual city” and the material city? What is the status of “reality” in an often spectacularized culture of urban life? Put another way, how have various forms of representation mediated our knowledge and understanding of cities and their histories? Select three cities to illustrate your arguments.

5. Teaching urban history. Create a syllabus in comparative urban history for an advanced undergraduate course. What are the dominant themes for the course? Is there (should there be) a unifying argument? What themes might you use to give structure to such a course? (Put differently, are there particular historical lessons that you would hope students would derive from the course?). Give examples of some of the key books and articles you would assign and explain why. How do they address critical questions in the field?