

BLOQUE TEMÁTICO 1

Ciudad global y capitalismo avanzado

Bloque temático 1.

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El concepto de ciudad global constituye un punto de partida indispensable para comprender cómo operan los procesos de gentrificación en el marco del capitalismo contemporáneo. Abordar la gentrificación desde esta perspectiva permite desentrañar sus conexiones con las lógicas de acumulación de capital, las redes globales de flujos financieros y simbólicos, y las políticas urbanas orientadas a la competitividad interurbana, proporcionando una visión estructural y multiescalar que supera interpretaciones localistas.

El término “ciudad global” fue formulado de manera sistemática por Saskia Sassen (1991, 2014), quien identificó una serie de ciudades como nodos estratégicos en la red de la economía mundial, caracterizadas por concentrar funciones de comando, servicios financieros avanzados y actividades de alto valor añadido. Este enfoque subraya que la globalización económica no diluye el papel de las ciudades, sino que las reconfigura como centros donde se articulan flujos de capital, información y personas, generando una polarización socioespacial interna que se expresa en procesos como la gentrificación y la exclusión residencial. En palabras de Sassen, estas ciudades globales se convierten en espacios donde convergen circuitos de acumulación del capital con circuitos de expulsión, en un proceso simultáneo de creación de riqueza y generación de desigualdad.

Complementando esta perspectiva, Manuel Castells (1996) introduce el concepto de “espacio de los flujos”, aludiendo a la red de relaciones e intercambios que caracterizan a la sociedad informacional y que estructuran el espacio urbano en torno a lógicas de conectividad y movilidad del capital y la información. Las ciudades globales, según Castells, se constituyen como nodos de esta red, articulando flujos globales mientras generan dinámicas de fragmentación urbana y exclusión, en tanto los beneficios de la globalización se distribuyen de manera desigual, intensificando procesos de segregación residencial, precarización y desplazamiento de poblaciones de menores ingresos.

Desde la perspectiva crítica, David Harvey (1985, 2003, 2012) aporta una interpretación de la ciudad global como espacio de resolución temporal de las crisis de sobreacumulación del capital, al convertirse el espacio construido en un terreno privilegiado de inversión y especulación. Harvey sostiene que la urbanización está intrínsecamente vinculada a las dinámicas de acumulación capitalista, de modo que la construcción y reconfiguración de infraestructuras urbanas permiten absorber capital excedente, pero al mismo tiempo generan tensiones, desigualdades y conflictos sociales. La ciudad se convierte así en una mercancía, tanto en términos de suelo y vivienda como en sus atributos simbólicos, y la gentrificación emerge como un mecanismo de extracción de rentas a través de la revalorización de espacios previamente depreciados, facilitando la reinversión del capital y la expulsión de poblaciones empobrecidas.

Este enfoque se articula con las aportaciones de Neil Brenner (2004, 2015), quien ha analizado la reescalada del Estado en la gobernanza urbana, mostrando cómo, en el marco del neoliberalismo, se produce una reconfiguración de las competencias estatales orientadas a la atracción de inversiones, la promoción de proyectos de regeneración urbana y la inserción de las ciudades en circuitos de competencia global. Este proceso implica una reterritorialización de las políticas públicas, donde las ciudades, bajo lógicas de competencia y marketing territorial, implementan políticas que fomentan procesos de revalorización urbana y gentrificación como estrategias de “revitalización” y “modernización” de los espacios urbanos.

En esta línea, autores como Peter Taylor (2004) y John Friedmann (1986) han subrayado que la jerarquía de las ciudades en la economía global se refleja en su capacidad de atraer capital, talento y eventos internacionales, lo que genera presiones para transformar barrios en función de las demandas del mercado global y de las clases creativas, facilitando procesos de emburguesamiento cultural y estético. Asimismo, Henri Lefebvre (1970/2014), con su propuesta del derecho a la ciudad, ofrece un marco normativo y crítico para entender cómo la mercantilización del espacio urbano en el capitalismo avanzado contraviene los derechos colectivos de las poblaciones urbanas, convirtiendo la lucha por el espacio en una disputa central de las sociedades contemporáneas.

Estas perspectivas convergen en la idea de que la ciudad global se erige como espacio de acumulación, valorización y extracción de rentas urbanas, pero también como escenario de conflictos, resistencias y disputas por el espacio y la vivienda. En las ciudades globales, los procesos de gentrificación no surgen como dinámicas aisladas, sino que están profundamente imbricados en las estrategias de posicionamiento competitivo en la economía mundial, en las políticas de regeneración urbana orientadas a la atracción de inversiones, y en la creación de paisajes urbanos estéticamente atractivos para sectores de altos ingresos y para el turismo internacional.

Aplicado a esta investigación, el marco de la ciudad global y el capitalismo avanzado permite contextualizar los procesos de gentrificación observados en Chicago, París, Seúl, Ciudad de México, Johannesburgo y Mumbai, ciudades que, con diferentes niveles de inserción en la economía global, participan en las dinámicas de atracción de capital, producción simbólica del espacio y desplazamiento de poblaciones locales. Este enfoque estructural y multiescalar permite conectar la revalorización de los barrios con procesos globales de acumulación de capital y con las políticas locales que facilitan la transformación urbana bajo el paradigma neoliberal, generando escenarios de conflicto y desigualdad que serán analizados en los estudios de caso de esta tesis.

Este bloque del marco teórico fundamenta la necesidad de analizar la gentrificación en la ciudad global como expresión paradigmática del capitalismo avanzado, vinculada a la producción del espacio urbano como mercancía, a la búsqueda de rentabilidad del capital y a las disputas que surgen en torno a la vivienda y el derecho a la ciudad. De este modo, se aporta un marco de interpretación crítico y comparativo que permite comprender la gentrificación como un proceso que trasciende las fronteras locales, insertándose en las lógicas globales que reconfiguran las ciudades contemporáneas.

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Importancia de incluir el Bloque temático 1 en el marco teórico

Incluir el bloque "Ciudad global y capitalismo avanzado" en el marco teórico es fundamental para comprender la gentrificación no como un proceso local y aislado, sino como una manifestación estructural de las dinámicas del capitalismo contemporáneo en las ciudades insertas en la economía global.

Este bloque permite situar las transformaciones urbanas en el contexto de la globalización, mostrando cómo las ciudades funcionan como nodos estratégicos de flujos de capital, información y personas (Sassen, Castells), y cómo estas dinámicas presionan la revalorización del suelo urbano y la transformación de barrios en espacios de rentabilidad. Además, aporta claves para entender cómo la urbanización se convierte en un mecanismo de resolución de crisis de sobreacumulación de capital (Harvey), generando desigualdades y desplazamientos que caracterizan los procesos de gentrificación.

Incorporar este bloque es clave para analizar por qué la gentrificación se ha convertido en un fenómeno recurrente en ciudades como Chicago, París, Seúl, Ciudad de México, Johannesburgo o Mumbai, y cómo estas urbes, con diferentes posiciones en la jerarquía global, comparten patrones de transformación urbana que responden a lógicas de acumulación y competitividad internacional.

Este bloque dota a la tesis de una perspectiva estructural y multiescalar imprescindible para comprender las raíces económicas y políticas de la gentrificación en el contexto del capitalismo avanzado, permitiendo articular los casos de estudio con procesos globales y reforzando la solidez teórica de la investigación.

The World City Hypothesis

John Friedmann

Some fifteen years ago, Manuel Castells (1972) and David Harvey (1973) revolutionized the study of urbanization and initiated a period of exciting and fruitful scholarship. Their special achievement was to link city forming processes to the larger historical movement of industrial capitalism. Henceforth, the city was no longer to be interpreted as a social ecology, subject to natural forces inherent in the dynamics of population and space; it came to be viewed instead as a product of specifically social forces set in motion by capitalist relations of production. Class conflict became central to the new view of how cities evolved.

Only during the last four or five years, however, has the study of cities been directly connected to the world economy.¹ This new approach sharpened insights into processes of urban change; it also offered a needed spatial perspective on an economy which seems increasingly oblivious to national boundaries. My purpose in this introduction is to state, as succinctly as I can, the main theses that link urbanization processes to global economic forces. The world city hypothesis, as I shall call these loosely joined statements, is primarily intended as a framework for research. It is neither a theory nor a universal generalization about cities, but a starting-point for political enquiry. We would, in fact, expect to find significant differences among those cities that have become the 'basing points' for global capital. We would expect cities to differ among themselves according to not only the mode of their integration with the global economy, but also their own historical past, national policies, and cultural influences. The economic variable, however, is likely to be decisive for all attempts at explanation.

The world city hypothesis is about the spatial organization of the new international division of labour. As such, it concerns the contradictory relations between production in the era of global management and the political determination of territorial interests. It helps us to understand what happens in the major global cities of the world economy and what much political conflict in these cities is

about. Although it cannot predict the outcomes of these struggles, it does suggest their common origins in the global system of market relations.

There are seven interrelated theses in all. As they are stated, I shall follow with a comment in which they are explained, or examples are given, or further questions are posed.

1. The form and extent of a city's integration with the world economy, and the functions assigned to the city in the new spatial division of labour, will be decisive for any structural changes occurring within it.

Let us examine each of the key terms in this thesis.

a. *City.* Reference is to an economic definition. A city in these terms is a spatially integrated economic and social system at a given location, or metropolitan region. For administrative or political purposes, the region may be divided into smaller units which underlie, as a political or administrative space, the economic space of the region.

b. *Integration with the world capitalist system.* Reference is to the specific forms, intensity, and duration of the relations that link the urban economy into the global system of markets for capital, labour and commodities.

c. *Functions assigned to it in the new spatial division of labour.* The standard definition of the world capitalist system is that it corresponds to a single (spatial) division of labour (Wallerstein 1984). Within this division, different localities — national, regional, and urban sub-systems — perform specialized roles. Focusing only on metropolitan economies, some carry out headquarter functions, others serve primarily as a financial centre, and still others have as their main function the articulation of regional and/or national economies with the global system. The most important cities, however, such as New York, may carry out *all* of these functions simultaneously.

d. *Structural changes occurring within it.* Contemporary urban change is for the most part a process of adaptation to changes that are externally induced. More specifically, changes in metropolitan function, the structure of metropolitan labour markets, and the physical form of cities can be explained with reference to a worldwide process that affects: — the direction and volume of transnational capital flows: — the spatial division of the functions of finance, management and production or, more generally, between production and control; and — the employment structure of economic base activities.

These economic influences are, in turn, modified by certain endogenous conditions. Among these the most important are: first, the *spatial patterns of historical accumulation* (King 1984); second, *national policies*, whose aim is to protect the national economic sub-system from outside competition through partial closure to immigration, commodity imports and the operation of international capital; and third, certain *social conditions*, such as *apartheid* in South Africa, which exert a major influence on urban process and structure.

2. Key cities throughout the world are used by global capital as 'basing points' in the spatial organization and articulation of production and markets. The resulting linkages make it possible to arrange world cities into a complex spatial hierarchy.

Several taxonomies of world cities have been attempted, most notably by Cohen (1981). In Table 1, a different approach to world city distribution is attempted. Because the data to verify it are still lacking, the present effort is meant chiefly as a means to visualize a possible rank ordering of major cities, based on the presumed nature of their integration with the world economy.

When we look at Table 1, certain features of the classification spring immediately into view.

a. All but two primary world cities are located in core countries. The two exceptions are São Paulo (which articulates the Brazilian economy) and the city-state of Singapore which performs the same role for a multi-country region in South-East Asia.

b. European world cities are difficult to categorize because of their relatively small size and often specialized functions (Hall & Hay 1980). London and Paris are world cities of the first rank but beyond that, classification gets more difficult. By way of illustration, I have included as world cities of the first rank the series of closely linked urban areas in the Netherlands focused on the Europort of Rotterdam, the West German economy centred on Frankfurt, and Zurich as a leading world money market.

c. The list of secondary cities in both core and semi-periphery is meant to be only suggestive. Within core countries, secondary cities tend on the whole to be somewhat smaller than cities of the first rank, and some are more specialized as well (Vienna, Brussels and Milan). In semi-peripheral countries, the majority of secondary world cities are capital cities. Their relative importance for international capital depends very much on the strength and vitality of the national economy which these cities articulate.

Table 1. *The World City Hierarchy*^a

Core Countries ^b		Semi-peripheral Countries ^b	
Primary	Secondary	Primary	Secondary
London* I	Brussels* III		
Paris* II	Milan III		
Rotterdam III	Vienna* III		
Frankfurt III	Madrid* III		
Zurich III			Johannesburg III
New York I	Toronto III	São Paulo I	Buenos Aires* I
Chicago II	Miami III		Rio de Janeiro I
Los Angeles I	Houston III		Caracas* III
	San Francisco III		Mexico City* I
Tokyo* I	Sydney III	Singapore* III	Hong Kong II
			Taipei* III
			Manila* II
			Bangkok* II
			Seoul* II

• National Capital.

Population size categories (recent estimates, referring to metro-region):

I 10–20 million; II 5–10 million; III 1–5 million.

a. *Selection criteria include:* major financial centre; headquarters for TNCs (including regional headquarters); international institutions; rapid growth of business services sector; important manufacturing centre; major transportation node; population size. Not all criteria were used in every case, but several criteria had to be satisfied before a city could be identified as a world city of a particular rank. No city from a country of the 'peasant periphery' was included, though questions might be raised about Bombay. But India, like China, is at the present time only weakly integrated with the world market economy. Also eliminated from consideration were all centrally planned economies which are integrated into the Soviet block and are not part of the capitalist world system.

In principle, it would have been possible to add third- and even fourth-order cities to our global hierarchy. This was not done, however, since our primary interest is in the identification of only the most important centres of capitalist accumulation.

b. *Core countries* are here identified according to World Bank criteria. They include nineteen so-called industrial market economies. *Semi-peripheral countries* include for the most part upper middle income countries having a significant measure of industrialization and an economic system based on market exchange.

The complete spatial distribution suggests a distinctively linear character of the world city system which connects, along an East-West axis, three distinct sub-systems: an Asian sub-system centred on the Tokyo-Singapore axis, with Singapore playing a subsidiary role as regional metropolis in Southeast Asia; an American sub-system based on the three primary core cities of New York, Chicago and Los

Angeles, linked to Toronto in the North and to Mexico City and Caracas in the South, thus bringing Canada, Central America and the small Caribbean nations into the American orbit; and a West European sub-system focused on London, Paris and the Rhine valley axis from Randstad and Holland to Zurich. The southern hemisphere is linked into this sub-system via Johannesburg and São Paulo (see Figure 1).

3. The global control functions of world cities are directly reflected in the structure and dynamics of their production sectors and employment.

The driving force of world city growth is found in a small number of rapidly expanding sectors. Major importance attaches to corporate headquarters (Cohen 1981; United Nations 1982), international finance (Kindleberger 1974; Jao 1979; Meyer 1984), global transport and communications (Port Authority of New York and New Jersey 1982; Jacobson 1984; and the article by Rimmer in this issue); and high level business services, such as advertising, accounting, insurance and legal (Noyelle & Stanback 1984).² An important ancillary function of world cities is ideological penetration and control. New York and Los Angeles, London and Paris, and to a lesser degree Tokyo, are centres for the production and dissemination of information, news, entertainment and other cultural artifacts.

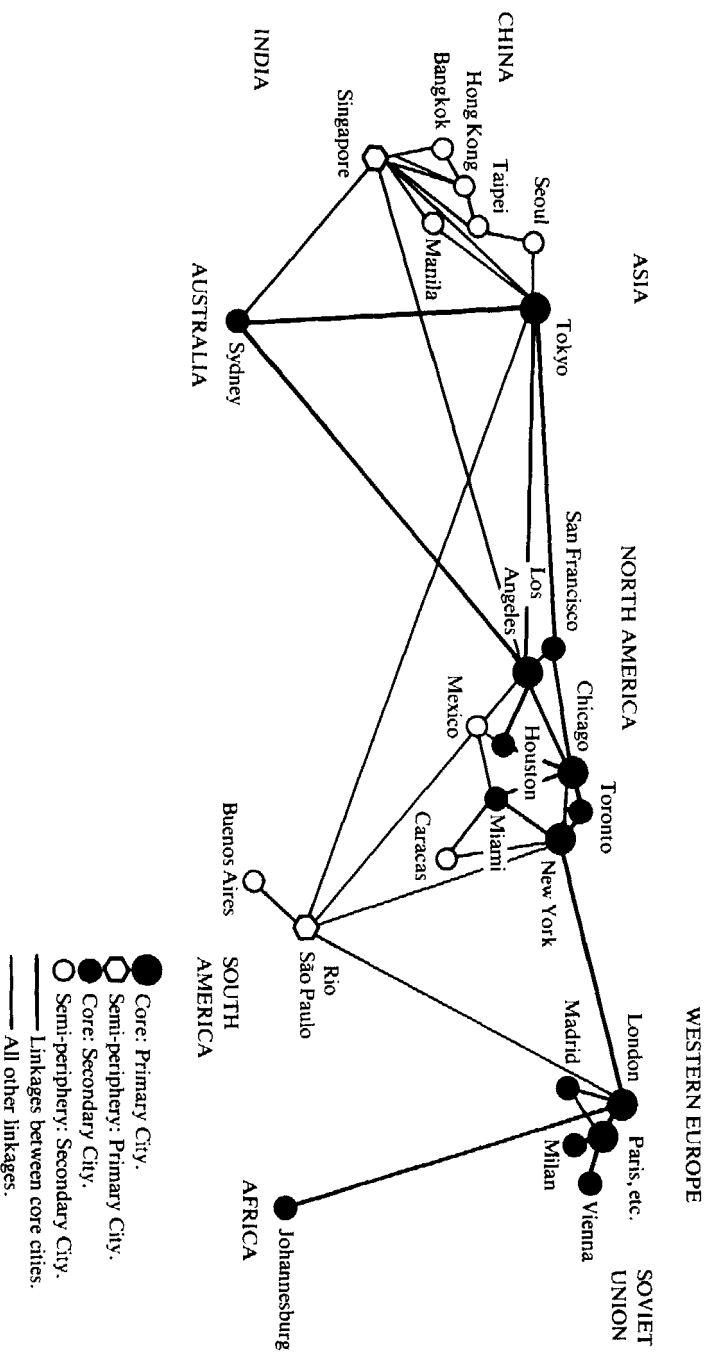
In terms of occupations, world cities are characterized by a dichotomized labour force: on the one hand, a high percentage of professionals specialized in control functions and, on the other, a vast army of low-skilled workers engaged in manufacturing, personal services and the hotel, tourist and entertainment industries that cater to the privileged classes for whose sake the world city primarily exists (Sassen-Koob 1984).

In the semi-periphery, with its rapidly multiplying rural population, large numbers of unskilled workers migrate to world city locations in their respective countries in search of livelihood. Because the 'modern' sector is incapable of absorbing more than a small fraction of this human mass, a large 'informal' sector of microscopic survival activities has evolved (Kannappan 1983).

4. World cities are major sites for the concentration and accumulation of international capital.

Although this statement would seem to be axiomatic (for empirical

Figure 1. *The Hierarchy of World Cities*



evidence, see Thrift 1984), there are significant exceptions. In core countries, the major atypical case is Tokyo. Although a major control centre for Japanese multi-national capital, Japanese business practices and government policy have so far been successful in preventing foreign capital from making major investments in the city (see the article by Rimmer in this issue).

In the semi-periphery, the economic crisis since 1973 has led to massive international indebtedness, originally incurred in the hope of staving off economic disaster in the teeth of a world-wide recession of unprecedented depth and duration. A combination of declining per capita incomes, slow growth in the core of the world economy, IMF-imposed policies, the high cost of capital, capital repatriation, capital flight and obligatory loan repayments in some cases amounting to more than 35 per cent of export earnings have contributed in a number of Latin American countries to a *net export* of capital (Iglesias 1984). If this trend, extraordinary for the post-war period, should persist, the semi-periphery is bound to backslide into peasant-peripheral status. Although strenuous attempts are being made to reverse this tidal drift into economic insolvency, declining living standards for the middle classes, immiseration for the poor and the collapse of the world economic system as it presently exists, the outcome is not at all certain.

5. World cities are points of destination for large numbers of both domestic and/or international migrants.

Two kinds of migrants can be distinguished: international and interregional. Both contribute to the growth of primary core cities, but in the semi-periphery world cities grow chiefly from interregional migration.³

In one form or another, all countries of the capitalist core have attempted to curb immigration from abroad. Japan and Singapore have the most restrictive legislation and, for all practical purposes, prohibit permanent immigration. Western European countries have experimented with tightly controlled 'guest worker' programmes. They, too, are jealous of their boundaries. And traditional immigrant countries, such as Canada and Australia, are attempting to limit the influx of migrants to workers possessing professional and other skills in high demand. Few if any countries have been as open to immigration from abroad as the United States, where both legal and illegal immigrants abound.

In semi-peripheral countries, periodic attempts to slow down the

flow of rural migrants to large cities have been notably unsuccessful (Vining 1985). Typically, therefore, urban growth has been from 1.5 to 2.5 times greater than the overall rate of population increase, and principal (world) cities have grown to very large sizes. Of the thirty cities in Table 1, eight have a population of 15 ± 5 million and another six a population of 7.5 ± 2.5 million. Absolute size, however, is not a criterion of world city status, and there are many large cities even in the peasant periphery whose size clearly does not entitle them to world city status.

6. World city formation brings into focus the major contradictions of industrial capitalism — among them spatial and class polarization.

Spatial polarization occurs at three scales. The first is global and is expressed by the widening gulf in wealth, income and power between peripheral economies as a whole and a handful of rich countries at the heart of the capitalist world. The second scale is regional and is especially pertinent in the semi-periphery. In core countries, regional income gradients are relatively smooth, and the difference between high and low income regions is rarely greater than 1:3. The corresponding ratio in the semi-periphery, however, is more likely to be 1:10. Meanwhile, the income gradient between peripheral world cities and the rest of the national economies which they articulate remains very steep. The third scale of spatial polarization is metropolitan. It is the familiar story of spatially segregating poor inner-city ghettos, suburban squatter housing and ethnic working-class enclaves. Spatial polarization arises from class polarization. And in world cities, class polarization has three principal facets: huge income gaps between transnational élites and low-skilled workers, large-scale immigration from rural areas or from abroad and structural trends in the evolution of jobs.

In the income distribution of semi-peripheral countries, the bottom 40 per cent of households typically receive less than 15 per cent of all income and control virtually none of the wealth (World Bank 1984: Table 28). These data refer to countries that, overall, have low incomes when measured on the scale of a Western Europe or the US. In many of the primary cities of the core, however, the situation is not significantly better. In Los Angeles and New York, for example, huge immigrant populations are seriously disadvantaged.

In the semi-periphery, the massive poverty of world cities is

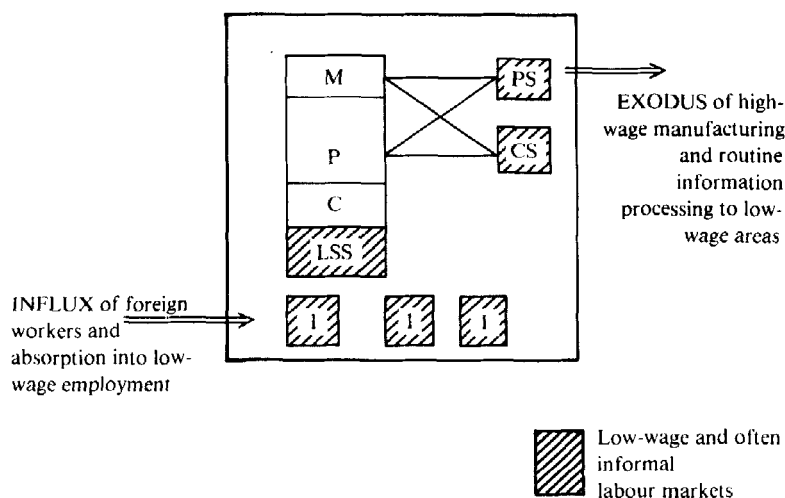
underscored by the relative absence of middle-income sectors. The failure of semi-peripheral world cities to develop a substantial 'middle class' has often been noted. Although there are important salaried sectors in cities such as Buenos Aires, their economic situation is subject to erosion by an inflationary process that is almost always double-digit and in some years rises to more than 200 per cent! Middle sectors have also become increasingly vulnerable to unemployment.

The basic structural reason for social polarization in world cities must be looked for in the evolution of jobs, which is itself a result of the increasing capital intensity of production. In the semi-periphery, most rural immigrants find accommodation in low-level service jobs, small industry and the 'informal' sector. In core countries, the process is more complex. Given the downward pressure on wages resulting from large scale immigration of foreign (including undocumented) workers, the number of low-paid, chiefly non-unionized jobs rises rapidly in three sectors: personal and consumer services (domestics, boutiques, restaurants and entertainment), low-wage manufacturing (electronics, garments and prepared foods) and the dynamic sectors of finance and business services which comprise from one-quarter to one-third of all world city jobs and also give employment in many low-wage categories (Ross & Trachte 1983; see also Sassen-Koob's article in this issue).

The whole comprises an *ecology* of jobs. As shown in Figure 2, the restructuring process in cities such as New York and Los Angeles involves the *destruction* of jobs in the high-wage, unionized sectors (EXODUS) and *job creation* in what Sassen-Koob calls the production of global control capability. Linked to these dynamic sectors are certain personal and consumer services (employing primarily female and/or foreign workers), while the slack in manufacturing is taken up by sweat shops and small industries employing non-union labour at near the minimum wage. It is this structural shift which accounts for the rapid decline of the middle-income sectors during the 1970s.

7. World city growth generates social costs at rates that tend to exceed the fiscal capacity of the state.

The rapid influx of poor workers into world cities — be it from abroad or from within the country — generates massive needs for social reproduction, among them housing, education, health, transportation and welfare. These needs are increasingly arrayed

Figure 2. *World City Restructuring in Core Countries**Production of Global Control Capacity:*

M Management élites

P Professional business services*
(predominantly male)

C Clerical (predominantly female)

LSS Low-skilled, blue collar services
(predominantly male and/or foreign/ethnic)

PS Producer services (low-wage)

primarily catering to management élites and upper echelons of professional business services (employment predominantly female and/or foreign)

CS Consumer services (low-wage)

I Low-wage occupations in manufacturing industry (predominantly foreign and/or female)

*Many professional business services engage increasingly in international trade serving their clients, the transnational corporations, both at home and abroad. They include accounting, advertising, banking, communications, computer services, health services, insurance, leasing, legal services, shipping and air transport, and tourism. In 1981, US service exports equalled 50 per cent of merchandise exports and were still rising (see Sassen-Koob's article in this issue).

against other needs that arise from transnational capital for economic infrastructure and from the dominant élites for their own social reproduction.

In this competitive struggle, the poor and especially the new immigrant populations tend to lose out. State budgets reflect the general balance of political power. Not only are corporations exempt from taxes; they are generously subsidized in a variety of other ways as well. At the same time, the social classes that feed at the trough of the transnational economy insist, and usually insist successfully, on the priority of their own substantial claims for urban amenities and services. The overall result is a steady state of fiscal and social crisis in which the burden of capitalist accumulation is systematically shifted to the politically weakest, most disorganized sectors of the population. Their capacity for pressing their rightful claims against the corporations and the state is further contained by the ubiquitous forces of police repression.

* * *

The following essays illustrate several facets of world city analysis. Sassen-Koob studies the relation between employment restructuring in New York City, local labour markets and foreign immigration. Inquiring into the impact of 'the production of global control capacity' on New York City's labour force, she first reviews the dramatic economic restructuring taking place throughout the world and traces its specific effects on the city's economy. With this portrayal as a background, she describes the recent changes in New York's job supply and labour markets, giving particular attention to how these transformations have affected patterns of immigration from abroad and growing internationalism of the city's labour force. She concludes that (1) the rise of high-level control functions typical of current economic restructuring is accompanied by a massive expansion of low-wage jobs across a wide spectrum of employment sectors; and (2) the new spatial and socio-economic arrangements lead to a growing polarization of interests and the potential for heightened conflict, as middle-income occupations decline and the upward mobility of immigrant labour is effectively blocked.

Rimmer finds that Tokyo may indeed be regarded as a link in a system of world cities, though its internal structure corresponds as much to influences of history and national policy as it does to influences that result from its dominant global position. Thus, his

investigation of Tokyo's world city status results in the confirmation that Japan's urban development and its economic landscape is significantly affected by its role in the global economic system, despite Japan's selective insulation from the 'outside world'. Rimmer confronts and assesses the problematic of delineating world city boundaries when dealing with the powerful 'Tokaido' megalopolis image. After careful data analysis, he concludes that only Tokyo itself fulfils world city criteria, particularly with reference to its role as a world-wide financial and distribution centre. Rimmer not only provides us with the immediate spatial and social consequences of world city status, but also identifies the resulting implications for planning in Tokyo.

Kowarick and Campanario, finally, show in their analysis of São Paulo how the city's economy disintegrates under the multiple impacts of dependent development and global crisis. São Paulo is perhaps the best example of a primary, semi-peripheral world city, an enormous urban complex of production and economic control and an integral part of the international economy. Kowarick and Campanario's special contribution, beyond providing important details concerning the role of how multinationals have integrated São Paulo into the international economy, is their documentation of the contradictions between the 'success' of being a world city and the human price that so many of its inhabitants must endure. Here we have a vivid revelation of the cost of internationalism. The authors remind us that despite the seeming inevitability of global economic forces, 'fate is not traced beforehand'. The struggles of people, caught in the trap of relative territorial immobility and the mobility of international capital, are a part of the dynamic which will shape both the world cities and the capitalist world economic system.

NOTES

I wish to thank Edward Soja and Goetz Wolff for the close reading they have given the earlier version of this paper and for their many helpful suggestions.

1. See Browning and Roberts (1980), Cohen (1981), Portes and Walton (1981), Friedmann and Wolff (1982), Walton (1982), Soja, Morales and Wolff (1983), Ross and Trachte (1983), Thrift (1984), Hill and Feagin (1984), Glickman (1984), and the article by Sassen-Koob in this issue.

2. The sectoral theory of economic growth, such as that of Colin Clark which culminates in the growth of the 'secondary' sector of manufacturing, must therefore be at least partially revised. So far as metropolitan economies are concerned, manufacturing has become less important than in the past, and the so-called

quaternary sector of advanced business services now accounts for most of the observed differential growth in income and employment (Gershuny, 1983).

3. This is not to claim that international labour migrations do not occur elsewhere as well. Most significant are labour flows to the oil-rich countries of the Arabian peninsula and the migrations from the countries of the Sahel to the coastal states of West Africa.

Capital cities of the peasant periphery frequently display social, economic, and physical characteristics that are structurally similar to those of world cities in the semi-periphery. What they often do *not* have in common is the latter's economic power.

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URBAN WORLDS

The 'Urban Age' in Question

NEIL BRENNER and CHRISTIAN SCHMID

Abstract

Foreboding declarations about contemporary urban trends pervade early twenty-first century academic, political and journalistic discourse. Among the most widely recited is the claim that we now live in an 'urban age' because, for the first time in human history, more than half the world's population today purportedly lives within cities. Across otherwise diverse discursive, ideological and locational contexts, the urban age thesis has become a form of doxic common sense around which questions regarding the contemporary global urban condition are framed. This article argues that, despite its long history and its increasingly widespread influence, the urban age thesis is a flawed basis on which to conceptualize world urbanization patterns: it is empirically untenable (a statistical artifact) and theoretically incoherent (a chaotic conception). This critique is framed against the background of postwar attempts to measure the world's urban population, the main methodological and theoretical conundrums of which remain fundamentally unresolved in early twenty-first century urban age discourse. The article concludes by outlining a series of methodological perspectives for an alternative understanding of the contemporary global urban condition.

Introduction

Foreboding declarations about contemporary urban trends pervade early twenty-first century academic, political and journalistic discourse. Among the most widely recited is the claim that we now live in an 'urban age' because, for the first time in human history, more than half the world's population today purportedly lives within cities. Across otherwise diverse discursive, ideological and locational contexts, the urban age thesis has become a form of doxic common sense around which questions regarding the contemporary global urban condition are framed.

While thinkers as diverse as H.G. Wells, Patrick Geddes and Oswald Spengler had predicted the worldwide explosion of urbanization since the turn of the twentieth century (Madden, 2012), eminent demographer Kingsley Davis (1955) appears to have been the first scholar to predict, on strictly empirical grounds, the advent of an urban transition on

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a world scale. Although urban historian Adna Weber (1899) had pioneered the statistical investigation of city population growth in diverse national contexts at the turn of the twentieth century, it was only in the 1940s that the size of the world's entire urban population became a topic of sustained research and debate among demographers, sociologists and historians (Davis, 1972). Louis Wirth (1969 [1937]: 144) opened his classic 1937 text on urbanism by speculating on this question, and Kingsley Davis devoted a major portion of his career over the next several decades to its systematic empirical exploration (Davis, 1945; 1955; 1959; 1965; 1969; 1972). Davis himself generally adopted a rigorously scientific tone, but his data, methods and analyses were quickly appropriated to frame speculations regarding the global urban predicament. In a typical example, in the inaugural issue of *Urban Affairs Quarterly*, architect and UN housing analyst Ernest Weissmann (1965) built upon Davis' demographic data to anticipate a *fin de siècle* world-scale urban transition. Adopting an apocalyptic tone that would soon become *de rigueur* in such projections, Weissmann argued that over 60% of the world's population would be urban as of 2000, that the resultant 'urban crisis in the world' would require a 'rate of construction . . . over 40 times that of the past', and that this situation would in turn 'harbor dangers for human progress no less frightening than atomic warfare' (Weissmann, 1965: 66, 69; *passim*).

UN research teams had been systematically tracking global population levels since 1951, and began to produce worldwide data coverage as of 1968 (Davis, 1972: 5). It was only from the mid-1980s onwards, however, that UN analysts began to anticipate a world-scale urban transition in their regular reports on human settlement trends. An issue of a UNESCO magazine from 1984 on 'The urban explosion' articulated an early version of this claim:

The universalization of urbanism is a new fact. Before the year 2000, for the first time in the history of humanity, the world will have more town dwellers than country dwellers . . . This demographic and urban evolution is taking place in the context of an economic crisis and the imbalance in population distribution will be accompanied by an increasing gap in the distribution of wealth (Glissant, 1984: 24, 25).

During the following decade, this prediction was repeated within the UN's regular reports on *World Urbanization Prospects*, and by the mid-1990s it had become the framing observation around which the United Nations Center for Human Settlements (UN-Habitat) opened its second *Global Report on Human Settlements* (UN-Habitat, 1996: xxi). During the early 2000s, a series of UN studies declared the dawn of this 'urban age' to be imminent, and in 2007 two major UN agencies framed their yearly reports around the following dramatic assertions:

In 2008 the world reaches an invisible but momentous milestone. For the first time in history, more than half its human population, 3.3 billion people, will be living in urban areas (UNFPA, 2007: 1).

Sometimes it takes just one human being to tip the scales and change the course of history. In the year 2007, that human being will either move to a city or be born in one. Demographers watching urban trends will mark it as the moment in which the world entered a new millennium, a period in which, for the first time in history, the majority of the world's people will live in cities (UN-Habitat, 2007: 1).

Since the mid-2000s, the thesis of an urban age has also gained considerable international prominence and resonance through the work of The Urban Age Project, a multi-sited conference series and research initiative organized through the Cities Programme at the London School of Economics (LSE) and funded through a major grant from the Deutsche Bank's Alfred Herrhausen Society. The LSE-Deutsche Bank project has, to date, produced two graphically striking and widely distributed volumes, *The Endless City* and *Living in the Endless City* (Burdett and Sudjic, 2006; 2010) both of which are framed with direct reference to the UN agency demographers' assertions. Although the

LSE-Deutsche Bank volumes contain a range of substantive arguments and place-specific narratives regarding the contemporary global urban condition, the overarching thesis of an urban age is its central framing device. As the volumes' editors explain:

Given that more than half the world's population is now living in cities — a number that is likely to reach 75 percent by 2050, while it was only 10 percent in 1900 — . . . urban questions have become truly global ones, with significant consequences for the future of our planet (Burdett and Rode, 2006: 8).

The urban age thesis is also prominently represented on the cover images of both LSE-Deutsche Bank volumes through a series of numbers, percentages and symbols that highlight the 50% global urban population threshold that is claimed to have recently been crossed. These pictorial illustrations of the urban age thesis serve as powerful, accessible branding devices through which the LSE-Deutsche Bank project represents its perspective on global urban research and practice (see Figure 1).

But the urban age thesis is not only the province of UN demographers and the LSE-Deutsche Bank research team. Since the late 1990s it has been embraced with increasing frequency in international urban scholarship and policy research, often by influential thinkers and practitioners, as a convenient metanarrative for framing a wide variety of investigations within or about cities. Thus, in the early 2000s, Rem Koolhaas' Harvard research team opened its *Mutations* report with a page-sized, large-font rendition of the UN's urban age thesis (see Figure 2).

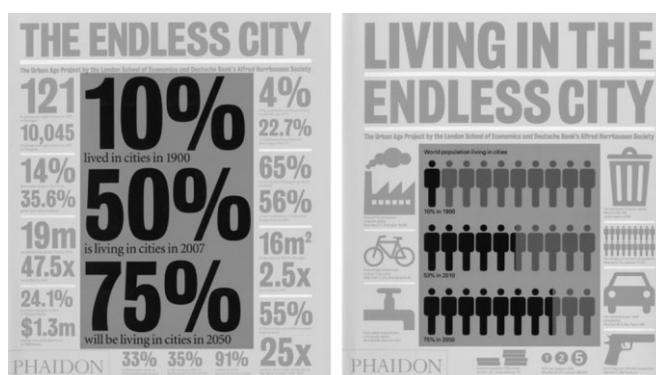


Figure 1 The urban age as a branding device (source: Burdett and Sudjic, 2006; 2010: cover images, © Phaidon Press, reproduced by permission)

At the outset of
the twentieth century,
10% of the population
lived in cities

In 2000,
around 50% of the
world population
lives in cities

In 2025,
the number of
city-dwellers
could reach
5 billion individuals
(two thirds of them
in poor countries)

Source: Global Urban Observatory

Figure 2 The urban age as framing metanarrative (source: Koolhaas, 2000: 1-2, © Actar, reproduced by permission)

Similarly, Manuel Castells (2002: ix) introduces a volume on urban inequality and community action in the developing world by suggesting that:

Our blue planet is fast becoming a predominantly urban world. Probably around the time you are reading this book, we will be crossing the threshold of 50 percent of the world's population living in urban areas, up from 37 percent in 1970 . . . The forces behind this process of accelerated urbanization appear to be irreversible.

The claim is dutifully repeated by the editors of a 2008 special issue of the respected journal *Science*:

Cities are now home to more than half the world's 6.6 billion humans. By 2030, nearly 5 billion people will live in cities (Ash *et al.*, 2008: 739).

The trope is also repeated by researchers working for consulting firm McKinsey in a report on the economic role of cities:

The world is in the throes of a sweeping population shift from the countryside to the city . . . for the first time in history, more than half of the world's population is now living in towns and cities (McKinsey Global Institute, 2011: 3).

Even the fiercely critical urbanist Mike Davis opens *Planet of Slums* (2006: 1) with his own formulation of the UN's declaration:

Sometime in the next year or two, a woman will give birth in the Lagos slum of Ajegunle, a young man will flee his village in west Java for the bright lights of Jakarta, or a farmer will move his impoverished family into one of Lima's innumerable *pueblos jóvenes*. The exact event is unimportant and it will pass entirely unnoticed. Nonetheless it will constitute a watershed in human history, comparable to the Neolithic or Industrial revolutions. For the first time the urban population of the earth will outnumber the rural.

As the above quotations indicate, the urban age thesis is today repeated with monotonous regularity across diverse discursive, institutional and political terrains, including by some of the most influential urban intellectuals of our time (Gleeson, 2012). Indeed, countless additional examples of this seemingly omnipresent discursive trope could be enumerated from international organizations (including the UN, the World Bank and the World Health Organization), research reports by governmental and non-governmental agencies, international scholarly journals, magazine and newspaper articles, as well as from planning, design and consultancy documents, conference dossiers and public presentations by politicians, developers, architects and urbanists around the world. The urban age appears, in short, to have become a *de rigueur* framing device or reference point for nearly anyone concerned to justify the importance of cities as sites of research, policy intervention, planning/design practice, investment or community activism. Much like the notion of modernization in the 1960s and that of globalization in the 1980s and 1990s, the thesis of an urban age appears to have become such an all-pervasive metanarrative that early twenty-first century readers and audiences can only nod in recognition as they are confronted with yet another incantation of its basic elements.

This article argues that, despite its long history in urban demography and its increasingly widespread influence in contemporary scholarly and policy discourse, the urban age thesis is a flawed basis on which to conceptualize contemporary world urbanization patterns: it is empirically untenable (a statistical artifact) and theoretically incoherent (a chaotic conception). This critique is framed against the background of postwar attempts to measure the world's urban population, the main methodological and theoretical conundrums of which remain fundamentally unresolved in early twenty-first century urban age discourse. The article concludes by outlining a series of methodological perspectives for an alternative understanding of the contemporary global urban condition.

Background: the postwar debate on urban population thresholds

Since the 1950s, when systematic research on the world's urban population was first attempted, analysts wrestled with a fundamental empirical and theoretical problem: how to determine the appropriate spatial boundaries of the areas whose populations were to be measured. Given the relentless dynamics of sociospatial restructuring that have continually reworked the boundaries, scale and morphology of urbanization since the nineteenth century, it would seem futile to impose statistical or analytical fixity upon any settlement space, urban or otherwise, for even the most basic demographic calculation. Yet is not precisely such a fixity required in order to measure the size of a population at any scale? Since the earliest attempts to measure the world's urban population, this thorny issue has been confronted through diverse methodological strategies, but it has never been adequately resolved. Demographic approaches attempt to solve this fundamentally spatial problem — where to draw the boundaries of an urban(izing) territory? — by converting it into a numerical one — how many inhabitants are required, within a *predefined* jurisdictional unit, to justify its classification as 'urban'? Thus emerged the debate on urban population thresholds (UPTs), which began in the 1930s and persists up to the present (Schnore, 1964; Bloom *et al.*, 2010; Montgomery, 2010).

Kingsley Davis was one of the earliest contributors to such debates. In one of his most influential confrontations with this challenge, derived from his pioneering efforts to construct a World Urban Resources Index with his colleagues at Columbia University, he initially worked with a rather loose, contextually embedded notion of 'cities' as having substantially larger populations than smaller 'towns' and surrounding areas during a given historical period (Davis and Hertz Golden, 1954; Davis, 1955). While Davis suggested that the relevant UPT would vary historically, he ventured a definition of 'genuine urbanization' as a situation in which 'a substantial portion of the population lived in towns and cities' (Davis, 1955: 433). This notion was formalized as: ' $U = P_c / P_t$ ' (U = urbanization; P_c = population of cities and P_t = total population); the key insight was that urbanization rates could fluctuate 'independently of the absolute number of people living in cities' because they were contingent upon absolute (national) population size (Davis and Hertz Golden, 1954: 7). On this basis, reflecting on the period of capitalist modernization that ensued following the first industrial revolution, Davis introduced what is probably one of his better-known analytical maneuvers: he proposed a primary definition of cities as places containing a population of 100,000 or more, and a secondary one based on a smaller population threshold of 20,000. Based on this, in an adventurous foray into what was then largely uncharted statistical terrain, he and his colleagues produced some of the first estimations of world urban population since 1800, as well as some forecasts regarding future trends. A half century prior to the urban age declarations of UN-Habitat and the LSE-Deutsche Bank team, Davis (1955: 434) confidently proclaimed that 'the human species is moving rapidly in the direction of an almost exclusively urban existence'. A decade later, he was even more specific in his prediction: 'At the 1950–1960 rate the term "urbanized world" will be applicable well before the end of the century' (Davis, 1965: 52; see also Davis, 1972: 121).

But why a UPT of 100,000 and not a smaller or larger one? Davis offered no theoretical justification for his choice: he simply demonstrated what such a criterion, as well as his secondary one of 20,000, would entail in empirical terms for the urban measurements in question, both at a world scale and among the major world regions (Davis, 1955: 434, Figure 2). From the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s, along with his colleagues at Columbia's Bureau of Applied Social Research and Berkeley's Institute of International Studies, Davis intensified his efforts to fine-tune and deploy this scheme in the interest of creating a data set with basic units that would be suitable for cross-national comparisons. Despite several important technical and empirical modifications to the original formula, the specificity of such units was bracketed, or treated merely in passing. Their definition was understood primarily as a methodological challenge — as

a 'problem of comparability' (Gibbs and Schnore, 1960: 160) resulting from a lack of standardized cross-national data and 'the technical problems presented by this deficiency' (Davis, 1959: 1–2).

And yet, even as Davis' statistical calculations appeared to reify the urban condition based on a relatively arbitrary UPT, he occasionally articulated a more nuanced understanding of the historical-geographical transformations that were unfolding around him. He thus concluded one of his early studies by insisting that 'one must guard against assuming that cities will retain their present form' (Davis, 1955: 437). In a speculative but prescient passage that pointed beyond the confines of a purely demographic approach, he succinctly outlined the dramatic processes of metropolitan expansion and dispersion that were already profoundly altering inherited urban and regional configurations during the early postwar period in which he was writing. In so doing, he considered the possibility that 'rurality' might disappear entirely in conjunction with the consolidation of a totally 'new kind of urban existence': 'At the periphery, it may well be that the metropolis and the countryside, as the one expands and the other shrinks, will merge together, until the boundaries of one sprawling conurbation will touch those of another, with no intervening pure countryside at all' (*ibid.*). In subsequent writings, Davis reiterated this acknowledgment with reference to intensifying 'suburbanization and fringe development' in the 'advanced societies', which he considered to cause 'the entire process of urbanization [to] become ambiguous' (Davis, 1965: 44). However, Davis left to others the task of reconciling such insights and predictions with his own, far more influential statistical estimations, the coherence of which hinged upon a tightly circumscribed, if not static, understanding of human settlement space.

The spatial essence of Davis' conceptualization was succinctly captured in a map produced by the UN's Division of Economic and Social Affairs, typical of several such maps produced by prominent urban social scientists during this time (for example, Berry, 1961: 580, Figure 1; Hoyt, 1966 [1962]: 329), which built extensively on Davis' data and methods (UN-DESA, 1969). Embedded within a text that repeatedly underscored the limitations of extant UN urban data in light of comparability problems as well as ongoing dynamics of sociospatial and demographic restructuring, the map nonetheless represented the state of knowledge on world urbanization by adopting a uniform UPT of 20,000 for all national data sets. Continental and subcontinental land masses were coded according to national urbanization levels as recorded in 1960 (see Figure 3).

From a contemporary point of view, three key aspects of this representation of world urbanization are particularly striking. First, the map contains no attempt to represent urban or rural areas, or even major cities. While the UN researchers considered the urban/rural divide to be a quantitative fact, demonstrable through hard demographic data, they appeared to consider the task of demarcating its precise spatial boundaries to be irrelevant, whether within or among states or continents. Consequently, the bulk of the world map is empty — the only lines of demarcation are national borders, subcontinental divisions and continental land masses. Second, the map articulates a vision of urbanization in which national territories and, through an aggregation technique, continents and subcontinents, are viewed as the natural scales of urbanization. In this manner, the UN researchers spatialized Davis' conceptualization of urbanization rates as a proportional measurement (city population growth as a proportion of national population growth). Within this framework, the geographical locations and spatial boundaries of cities and metropolitan regions were inconsequential; what mattered was their differential population sizes relative to those of larger units (national territories, subcontinents, continents). Third, although the map represents urbanization levels as an encompassing property of large-scale territories, its authors recognized that the 'urban' phenomena contained within the latter were, in practice, quite heterogeneous, even in purely demographic terms. Differences among cities whose populations exceeded the specified UPT of 20,000 were not captured in the map; nor were similarities among such putatively urban locations and those settlements that, owing to their lower population levels, were classified as non-urban or rural. In this way, the quest to code entire

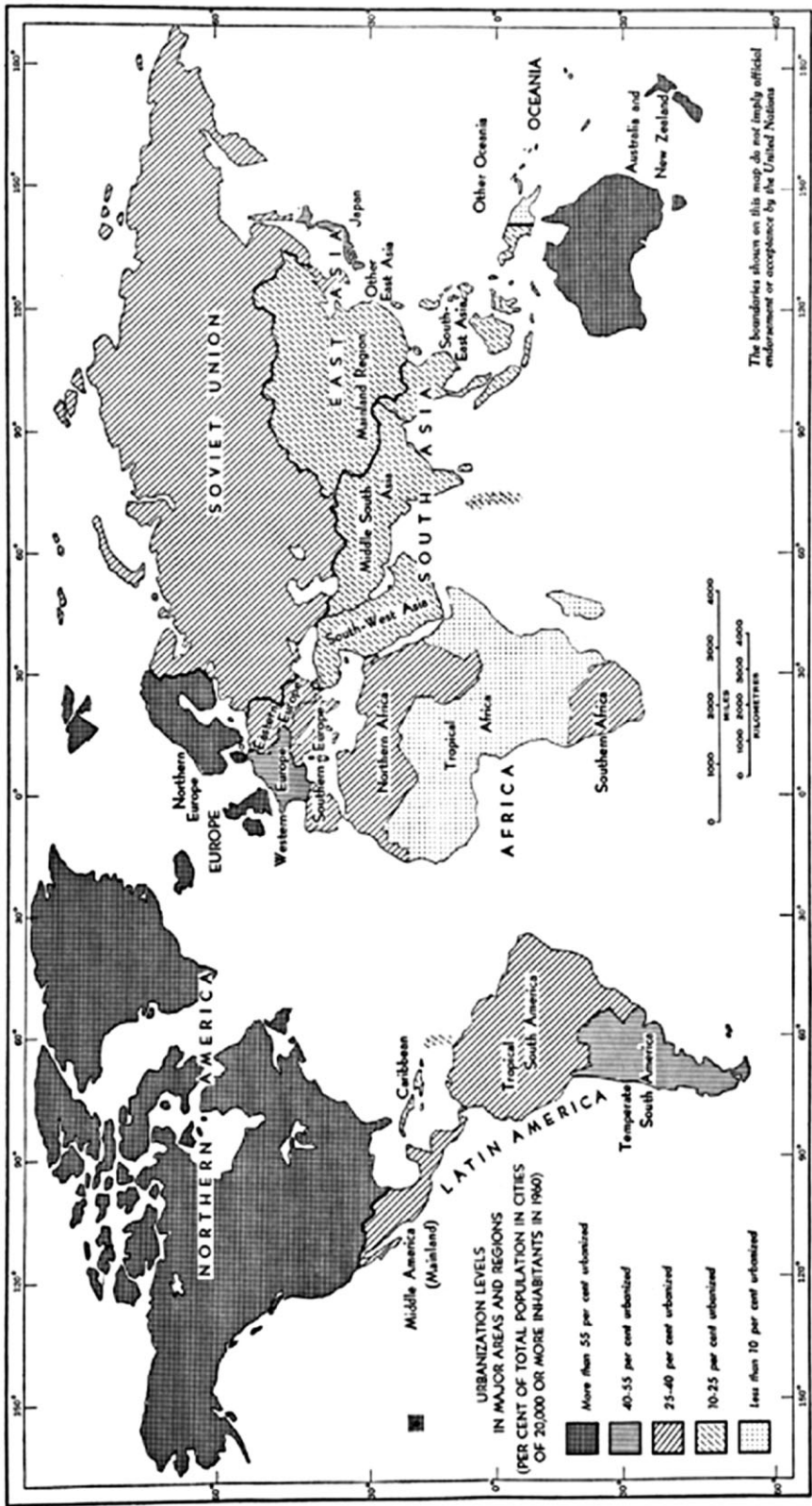


Figure 3 The UN applies Kingsley Davis' territorialist approach to world urbanization (source: UN-DESA, 1969: 30, map 1)

territories according to aggregate urbanization levels entailed a rather dramatic statistical and cartographic simplification of *de facto* patterns of internal sociospatial differentiation. However, for the UN-DESA research team, this homogenizing representation of national, subcontinental or continental territories was considered appropriate, given the need to grasp differential urbanization patterns on a *world* scale. While contemporary urban age metanarratives are grounded upon updated data, we argue below that they have reproduced in nearly identical form the underlying conceptual orientations, geographical imaginaries and representational strategies associated with this methodologically territorialist model of world urbanization from the 1960s.

The theoretical imperative: postwar critiques of urban demography

In contrast to Kingsley Davis' empirical and methodological confrontation with the problem of defining the urban (population) unit, Louis Wirth (1969 [1937]) had insisted on its fundamentally theoretical character nearly two decades earlier. Even at that time, population-based definitions of cities had achieved such prominence among urban historians, sociologists and demographers that Wirth was motivated to open his major theoretical statement on urbanism with a frontal attack on them. In broad empirical terms, Wirth recognized the practical need for such definitions, but on a theoretical level he considered them ahistorical and indeterminate. Whether the relevant UPT was set at 2,500, 4,000, 8,000, 10,000, 25,000 or 100,000, Wirth maintained, a purely population-based definition of the urban condition was 'obviously arbitrary', since 'no definition of urbanism can hope to be satisfying if numbers are the sole criterion' (Wirth, 1969 [1937]: 145). In so far as UPT definitions always relied upon the boundaries of extant local and regional administrative units, they had to be viewed as artifacts of juridical convention rather than as indicators of sociologically meaningful circumstances.

Moreover, Wirth argued, given the constant flow of people across such boundaries, population-based definitions of urban areas provided no more than a rough, and often highly misleading, indication of urbanity. Ostensibly 'non-urban' settlement units located on the fringes of metropolitan centers often had more in common with the latter areas than with larger towns situated in more isolated regions. He thus curtly dismissed the demographers' apparent assumption that 'urban attributes abruptly ceased to be manifested beyond an arbitrary boundary line' (*ibid.*: 146). In a formulation that is strikingly reminiscent of Marx and Engels' (2000 [1848]: 248–9) characterization of the capitalist world economy in *The Communist Manifesto*, Wirth (1969 [1937]: 143–4) insisted that the twentieth-century urban condition had to be understood with reference to thickening webs of connectivity among dispersed, differentiated, expanding and unstable constellations of metropolitan social organization, and increasingly, to an emergent worldwide horizon towards which urbanization processes were radiating:

The degree to which the contemporary world may be said to be 'urban' is not fully or accurately measured by the proportion of the total population living in cities. The influences which cities exert upon the social life of man [*sic*] are greater than the ratio of the urban population would indicate, for the city is . . . the initiating and controlling center of economic, political, and cultural life that has drawn the most remote parts of the world into its orbit and woven diverse areas, peoples, and activities into a cosmos.

However, despite Wirth's recognition of the spatially expansive, boundary-superseding dimensions of urbanization, his theory of urbanism was almost completely insulated from such insights, and from the largely uncharted analytical and empirical terrain they opened up (Brenner, 2012). His theory was instead premised on the assumption that social life continued to be — indeed, necessarily *is* — organized into coherently bounded spatial envelopes ('human settlements') that could be neatly

typologized, and whose demographic properties (including his classic triad of size, density and heterogeneity) engendered distinctive forms of social behavior within those boundaries. In other words, even if UPTs could not be relied upon to classify the spatial unit in question, Wirth continued to presuppose that this unit would naturally be characterized by certain sociospatial properties — discreteness, coherence and boundedness. It is this element of Wirth's theory that has been canonized in twentieth-century urban sociology, but we shall see that his critique of urban demography and, more generally, his insistence on the fundamentally theoretical character of the urban question are far more relevant to contemporary discourse on the world urban condition.

The Marxian interventions of the young Manuel Castells (1977 [1972]) in the 1970s resonate in unexpected ways with Wirth's earlier critique of urban demography. Although he dismissively characterized Wirth's theory of urbanism as a culturalist account of intra-national spatial diffusion, Castells opened *The Urban Question* with a ferocious critique of urban demography that was essentially identical to that which the Chicago School sociologist had presented four decades previously. Surveying at some length the various UPTs that had been embraced by previous urban scholars, as well as by the United States Census Bureau and the European Conference of Statistics, Castells (*ibid.*: 10) bluntly rejected them as expressions of a 'statistical empiricism'. Like Wirth, Castells doubted the reliability of 'criteria of administrative practice' for analytical purposes, since they could not adequately capture 'the acceleration of the rhythm of urbanization throughout the world' (*ibid.*: 11, 15). Despite his otherwise sharp disagreements with Wirth, Castells (*ibid.*: 101–12) likewise insisted that the only viable delimitation of the urban unit would have to occur on theoretical grounds. Because of the 'almost complete lack of correspondence between [juridical and] political frontiers and the specificity of their social content' (*ibid.*: 235), as well as the constantly changing form and scale of urbanization processes under modern capitalism, Castells unwittingly concurred with Wirth that purely empirical and territorial definitions of the urban — including those associated with UPTs — would remain doomed to arbitrariness, inconsistency and nearly immediate obsolescence. While the influence of the young Castells' proposed theoretical solution to this problem has long since waned, his emphasis on the intrinsically theoretical character of the urban is, like that of his erstwhile sociological antagonist Wirth, a highly salient analytical reference point for contemporary urban studies, especially in relation to the urban age thesis.

The sharply critical epithets launched by Wirth in the 1930s and redeployed by Castells in the 1970s against the use of UPTs in the study of urbanization — *arbitrary*, *empiricist*, *ahistorical* — apply with striking accuracy to contemporary versions of the urban age thesis. Accordingly, in what follows, we subject early twenty-first century urban age discourse to a contemporary critique. This critique is intended to apply to the broad constellation of urban age references, discourses, metanarratives and projects that were surveyed at the outset of this article. However, because the UN's collection of urban data continues to be treated by 'end-users . . . as if it is absolute truth' (Cohen, 2004: 25) and remains the authoritative bibliographical reference for contemporary proclamations of an urban age, it is given specific attention here.¹

1 The UN has regularly updated its data and, to a lesser extent, its methods of data collection in various ways since the late 1960s (for an overview see Champion, 2004). The most recent collection of UN urban data is available in the 2011 revision of its series *World Urbanization Prospects* (UN-DESA-PD, 2012); an online version of the report provides the raw data files as well as a variety of maps and graphs based on the latter. While this discussion subjects several key aspects of the UN's approach to severe criticism, it should be acknowledged that the organization's long-term commitment to the collection of worldwide urban data has contributed a valuable starting point for analyses of planetary urbanization patterns. Despite the problems discussed below, the most recent version of *World Urbanization Prospects* includes useful data on city-size distributions and city population levels for some of the world's largest metropolitan regions since the 1970s. The

Urban age as statistical artifact

Before returning to the theoretical critiques of urban demography developed by Wirth and Castells, some major empirical problems with the urban age thesis require attention. Foremost among these is the continued lack of agreement on what needs to be measured, and at what spatial scale, in analyses of world urbanization. Across national contexts, including in the UN's data sets, there is no standardized definition of the urban unit on the basis of which population size, density or other proposed indicators of urbanization levels are to be measured. In effect, the same problems of data compatibility and boundary demarcation that vexed Kingsley Davis and his colleagues in the 1950s and 1960s remain completely unresolved in the urban data sets that have been assembled regularly by the UN Population Division from the early 1970s through to the most recent revision of *World Urbanization Prospects* in 2011 (UN-DESA-PD, 2012).

The problem has been discussed extensively among UN demographers and statisticians since the 1950s, leading the organization to issue and regularly update general guidelines regarding the appropriate means to delineate localities (for a detailed overview, see Champion, 2004). Nonetheless, UN researchers have recurrently concluded that national statistical offices are best positioned to determine how the 'urban/rural boundary' should be demarcated. The UN's continued reliance on such 'state-istics' for its supposedly global urban analyses is unsurprising since, as Peter J. Taylor (2002: 1) notes, 'large-scale data collection on human activities has its origins in state needs and continues to be dominated by states'. To the degree that the UN has proposed a technical resolution to this conundrum, its recommendations resonate closely with those introduced by Kingsley Davis in the mature phase of his work on the topic in the late 1960s at Berkeley — namely, the combination of population size indicators with subsidiary ones pertaining to density, labor market structure and infrastructural outlays.² But even if implemented consistently, such strategies would still hinge on data resolved at the scale of (subnational) state administrative units, albeit now recombined in an effort to account for *de facto* patterns of agglomeration and land use within adjacent juridical units. In practice, however, even these modest proposals for enhancing cross-national data compatibility have proven impossible to implement owing to the persistence of nationally specific census practices and the UN's continued reliance on such state-centric data for its analysis of urbanization. Consequently, as Champion (2004: 41) concludes, 'the bottom line is that the world's major source of published international comparative statistics on urban population — the United Nations — is still using essentially the same "spectacles" as it adopted half a century ago'.

Those weathered 'spectacles' have generated an extremely blurry vision of the global urban condition. In particular, the wildly divergent criteria of urbanity used by national census bureaus — whether administrative, population-based or otherwise — have profoundly skewed the UN's estimations of the world urban population. Evidence of these problems is readily available in the UN's own data tables and analytical reports,

challenge, we argue, is to devise new methods of data collection and analysis that more effectively illuminate the long-term trajectory of sociospatial restructuring under capitalism. Confronting this challenge entails a significant labor of *(re)conceptualization* in relation to the fundamental nature of urbanization itself (Lefebvre, 2003 [1970]; Diener *et al.*, 2006; Schmid, 2006; Brenner and Schmid, 2011; Schmid, 2012; Brenner, 2013). To the degree that influential authors and organizations appropriate the UN's data and analyses uncritically, as though they were offering an unmediated window into 'raw facts' of the global urban condition, the need for this labor of reconceptualization is obscured.

- 2 In the late 1960s, researchers from the UN Population Division appear to have directly appropriated the new measurement techniques that were being developed in Kingsley Davis' research lab during this time. In a terse footnote to the book-length culmination of his decades-long investigation, Davis (1972: 6, note 6) indicates as much, suggesting that UN statisticians had adopted his Berkeley research team's methodological innovations without proper attribution after several visits by high-ranking UN officials to his lab.

and they have also been examined extensively by critical demographers (Bocquier, 2004; Champion, 2004; Champion and Hugo, 2004; Cohen, 2004; Satterthwaite, 2007; Montgomery, 2010; Satterthwaite, 2010). As of the 2001 revision of *World Urbanization Prospects* (UN-DESA-PD, 2002), 109 UN member countries (38%) used administrative criteria as the sole or primary basis for their urban definitions. This meant that some municipalities or localities were declared to be urban regardless of population size or other indicators, while others, often large and densely settled, were excluded by administrative fiat. This also meant that significant population clusters located on the peri-urban fringes of large metropolitan settlements, but positioned outside the city's official administrative borders, were often classified as 'non-urban'. In the same data sample, population size was used as the sole or primary criterion for 98 national urban classifications (34%) — but UPTs varied quite widely across national contexts, from as little as 100 in Uganda, 200 in Iceland and Sweden, or 400 in Albania up to 2,000 in Angola and Cuba, 5,000 in Botswana and Zambia, and 10,000 in Benin and Italy (Brockerhoff, 2000: 6; Cohen, 2004: 26; Bloom *et al.*, 2010: 22–3; Uchida and Nelson, 2010: 41).³

These problems have been further intensified in so far as many countries frequently change their official urban classifications, whether with reference to individual city boundaries or more general settlement typologies. Such definitional recalibrations may produce dramatic fluctuations in national and — in highly populous countries such as China, India, Brazil or Nigeria — *world* urban population levels entirely as a result of classificatory modifications. An equally serious problem relates to the timing of census data collection, which varies considerably across national states. Consequently, the population data used in the UN's urban analyses are often derived from divergent years. No less than 38% of the data used in the UN's 2001 *World Urbanization Prospects* were more than 8 years old (this figure was 56% for African countries); 43% of the global urban data were between 3 and 8 years old (Cohen, 2004: 27). The use of such varied indicators and classificatory schemata has generated some counterintuitive statistical outcomes. In a detailed overview, Satterthwaite (2010: 84, 85) lists several typical examples:

Mexico can be said to be 74 or 67 per cent urban in 2000, depending on whether urban centres are all settlements with 2,500 or more inhabitants or all settlements with 15,000 or more inhabitants. China's level of urbanization in 1999 could have been 24%, 31% or 73% depending on which of three official definitions of urban populations was used . . . [I]n 1996, 18 per cent of Egypt's population lived in settlements with between 10,000 and 20,000 inhabitants and that had many urban characteristics including significant non-agricultural economies and occupational structures. These were not classified as urban types — although they would have been in most other nations. If they were considered urban, this would mean that Egypt was much more urbanized, causing major changes to urban growth rates.

The case of India adds an additional layer to the confusion: its national census bureau neglects to classify a huge number of small- and medium-sized towns with populations exceeding 5,000 as urban; if it were to do so, the country's urban population would instantly exceed the fabled 50% threshold (Satterthwaite, 2010: 84). Many additional examples could be enumerated, but the basic problem is evident: '[T]he units in which city populations are expressed can vary across all of the relevant dimensions: across countries, within countries and over time for a given city' (Montgomery and Balk, 2011: 93). Consequently, 'the scale of the world's urban population is strongly influenced by the urban criteria used within the largest population nations' (Satterthwaite, 2010: 85).

Given these systemic problems of data comparability within the UN's 'state-istics', is there any salvageable *empirical* content to the notion of an urban age? Clearly,

3 The remaining 28% of countries used economic criteria, other criteria, or failed to list their basis for classification (Champion, 2004: 34–35; Bloom *et al.*, 2010: 23).

populations are growing and changing around the world; their distribution across the sociospatial landscape is constantly being reshuffled; and so too is the territorial morphology and demographic composition of politico-administrative units across the world interstate system. Thus, even if its precise contours and timing may be difficult to measure, might a world urban transition nonetheless be unfolding, signaling some qualitative shift in the 'way of life' experienced by most people on the planet? Or, is the UN's famous prediction that a 50% global urban threshold has been crossed merely an artifact of inadequate 'state-istical' procedures that assimilate fundamentally heterogeneous conditions under a crudely simplistic classificatory scheme?

From a strictly empirical point of view, there are two main strategies for confronting these questions. The first involves recognizing the limits of extant UN data collection techniques, abandoning the notion of a rigid 50% global UPT, and postulating a broad *trajectory* of rural-to-urban sociospatial reorganization across all or most states in the world system, thus yielding aggregate evidence of an ongoing world-scale transition. Satterthwaite (2010: 85) suggests such a resolution as follows:

[T]he world's level of urbanization is best understood not as a precise figure (50 per cent in 2008) but as being between 45 and 55 per cent, depending on the criteria used to define urban areas. It might be that the much-discussed transition to more than half the world's population living in urban areas actually took place some years ago, with its recognition delayed by various governments deliberately understating their urban populations by classifying most small urban centres as rural.

In this approach, the notion of a worldwide rural-to-urban transition is preserved, but its precise timing and sociospatial expressions are considered to be more fluid than in official UN analyses — it is, in effect, understood as a long-term, world-scale secular trend rather than as a conjunctural transformation. However, as in UN documentation, the urban/rural distinction and the notion of a discrete urban 'unit' are perpetuated. The main modification here is a greater level of reflexivity and flexibility in interpreting the heterogeneous forms of data that are subsumed under the urban age postulate.

A second, potentially more radical strategy involves abandoning the UN's approach to data collection with its dependence on state-centric sources, and elaborating new, spatially disaggregating approaches based on remote sensing techniques (Potere and Schneider, 2007; Potere *et al.*, 2009; Montgomery and Balk, 2011). Such satellite-based data sources have been under development since the early 1990s and are now being mobilized with increasing technical sophistication in several US and European labs, research institutes and universities, including Columbia University's Earth Institute, the Oak Ridge National Lab and the European Environmental Agency. Major initiatives along these lines include, among others, the generation of nighttime lights satellite data by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and other government agencies, the development of new forms of georeferenced population data (the Global Rural-Urban-Mapping Project [GRUMP], the Gridded Population of the World [GPW] and the Landsat Global Population Database), and the elaboration of georeferenced data sets on global land cover (for instance, CORINE Land Cover and MODIS Urban Land Cover). The major attraction of such approaches is that they permit the investigation of changing patterns of agglomeration, population distribution, land cover and land use that are no longer completely reliant on national census data. The new array of mapping possibilities that flow from such techniques are productively complicating the representation of planetary urbanization processes (Potere and Schneider, 2007; Angel, 2011).

Whether recent developments in remote sensing might facilitate theoretically innovative interpretations of the global urban condition is a question that requires more sustained exploration elsewhere (Brenner and Katsikis, 2013). Here our concern is less to evaluate the empirical viability of the aforementioned two strategies than to suggest that both must be subjected to the same standard of theoretical reflexivity upon which

Wirth and Castells had so forcefully insisted in their critical assessments of mainstream twentieth-century urban demography. From this point of view, the limitations of the contemporary urban age thesis cannot be effectively transcended by means of empirical maneuvers alone, be it through creative reinterpretations of the UN's census-based data or through the construction of georeferenced mappings of key indicators such as population density, land cover or nighttime light patterns. Like both Wirth and Castells, we contend that an intractable theoretical problem is hidden 'behind false evidence' (Castells, 1977 [1972]: 234) within any purely data-based approach to urban research — namely, the *qualitative* significance of the label 'urban' as an analytical basis for demarcating and interpreting sociospatial transformations. In the absence of theoretical reflexivity regarding this fundamental question, even the most sophisticated forms of urban data, georeferenced or otherwise, represent no more than inchoate heaps of information — in effect, early twenty-first century forms of the 'statistical empiricism' that Castells (1977 [1972]: 10) had so ferociously decried four decades ago.

Urban age as chaotic conception

If the empirical edifice of the urban age thesis is unstable, its theoretical foundations are obsolescent, having been eroded through the dramatic forward-motion and geographical reorganization of the urbanization process which the thesis purports to be documenting. The basic problem is the *de facto* sociospatial fluidity and relentless dynamism of the urban phenomenon under modern capitalism: its endemic tendency to explode inherited morphologies of urbanism at all spatial scales; to create new, rescaled formations of urbanized territorial organization; and, as Wirth (1969 [1937]: 143–4) presciently recognized, to promote the 'urbanization of the world' by intensifying sociospatial independencies across places, territories and scales. The resultant, unevenly woven urban fabric (Lefebvre, 2003 [1970]) is today assuming extremely complex, polycentric forms that no longer remotely approximate the concentric rings and linear density gradients associated with the relatively bounded industrial city of the nineteenth century, the metropolitan forms of urban development that were consolidated during the opening decades of the twentieth century or, for that matter, the tendentially decentralizing, nationalized urban systems that crystallized across the global North under Fordist-Keynesian capitalism (Hall and Pain, 2006; Schmid, 2006; Soja and Kanai, 2006; Soja, 2010; Brenner and Schmid, 2011; Merrifield, 2011; Schmid, 2012; Brenner, 2013). As Soja and Kanai (2006: 59) explain:

urbanism as a way of life, once confined to the historical central city, has been spreading outwards, creating urban densities and new 'outer' and 'edge' cities in what were formerly suburban fringes and green field or rural sites. In some areas, urbanization has expanded on even larger regional scales, creating giant urban galaxies with population sizes and degrees of polycentricity far beyond anything imagined only a few decades ago . . . [I]n some cases city regions are coalescing into even larger agglomerations in a process that can be called 'extended regional urbanization'.

Merrifield (2011: 468–9) characterizes the transformation in closely analogous terms:

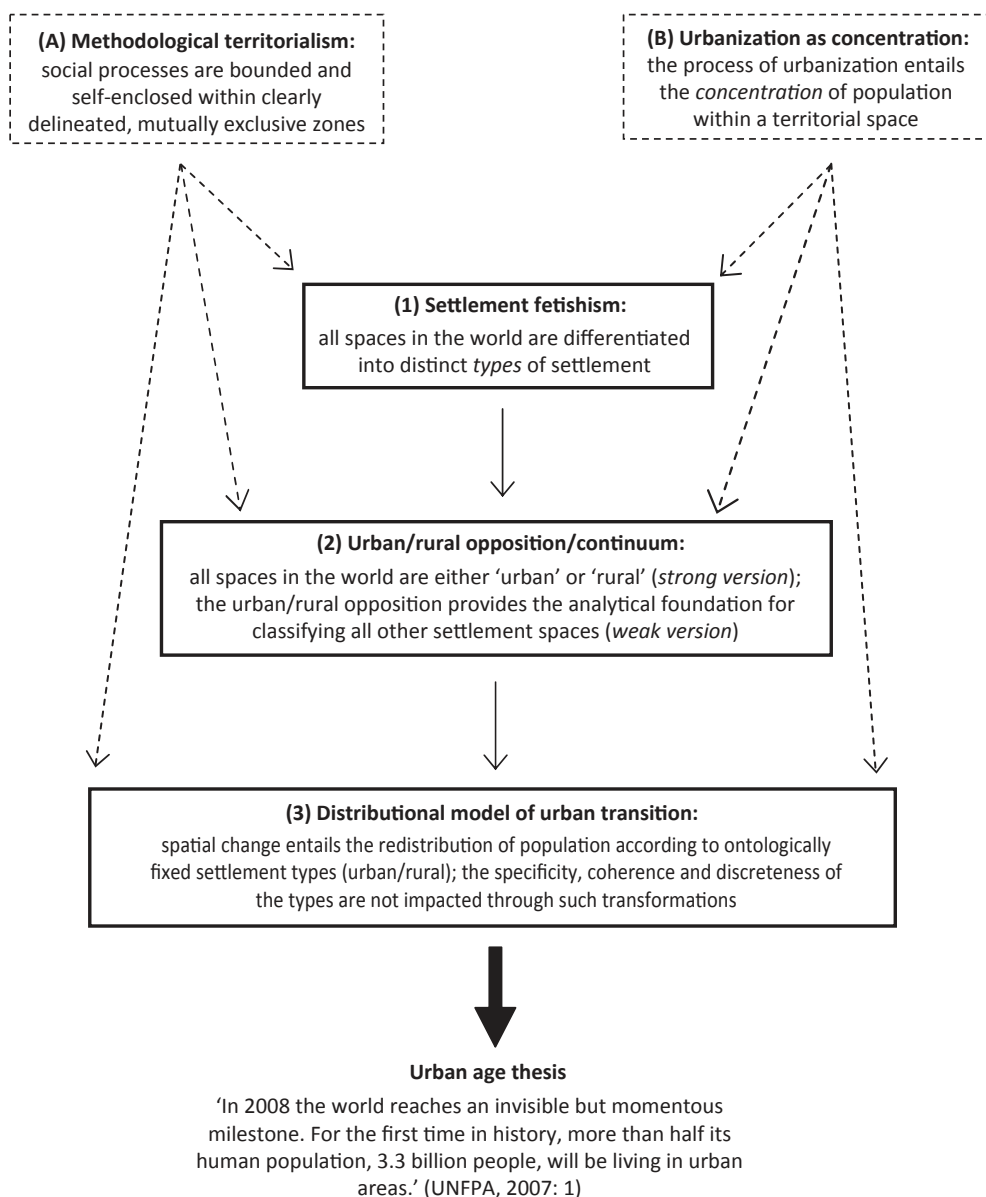
The urbanization of the world is a kind of exteriorization of the inside as well as interiorization of the outside: the urban *unfolds* into the countryside just as the countryside *folds* back into the city . . . Yet the fault-lines between these two worlds aren't defined by any simple urban-rural divide, nor by anything North-South; instead, centers and peripheries are *immanent* within the accumulation of capital itself . . . Absorbed and obliterated by vaster units, rural places have become an integral part of post-industrial production and financial speculation, swallowed up by an 'urban fabric' continually extending its borders, ceaselessly corroding the residue of agrarian life, gobbling up everything and everywhere in order to increase surplus value and accumulate capital.

Kingsley Davis (1955: 437) explicitly recognized these powerful tendencies towards expanded urbanization and ‘shrinking rurality’ already in the 1950s, but continued to conceptualize the ‘city’ (or, eventually, the metropolitan region) as the basic unit within which the demographic dynamics of urbanization were contained, both analytically and geographically. Concomitantly, like most postwar social scientists, Davis persisted in labeling the inchoate realm located ‘outside’ or ‘beyond’ the expanding city using the traditional notion of the rural, even though he clearly recognized that its coherence and discreteness were being steadily compromised through metropolitanization, suburbanization, megalopolis formation and various forms of industrial, residential and infrastructural decentralization. Remarkably, contemporary declarations of an urban age replicate this methodological opposition by embracing the identical conceptual framework and geographical imaginary that Davis had relied upon — in particular, the core assumption that global settlement space can and must be divided neatly into urban or rural containers. On this basis, the thesis posits an ineluctable shift of population, in both relative and absolute terms, to the urban side of this dualism.

While urban age discourse is usually put forward as a set of empirical claims regarding demographic and social trends, the latter are premised upon an underlying theoretical and cartographic framework whose core assumptions, once excavated and scrutinized, are deeply problematic. Figure 4 presents a stylized overview of the key elements within this framework and their links to broader methodological tendencies in nineteenth- and twentieth-century urban social science (see Figure 4).

Urban age discourse is articulated in diverse methodological forms and ideological guises, but the elements presented in this figure can be viewed as its theoretical foundation. First (A), the theory is methodologically territorialist in so far as, like many entrenched traditions of twentieth-century social science, it assumes the territorial boundedness, coherence and discreteness of the spatial units in which social relations unfold (Taylor, 1994; Brenner, 2004). Methodologically territorialist approaches presuppose rather than examine or explain the historical construction and reconstitution of territorial boundaries at any spatial scale; they ignore the historical specificity and political instrumentalities of territory as a form of sociospatial organization (Elden, 2010); and they often bracket the role of non-territorial sociospatial processes such as place-making, networking and rescaling that likewise figure crucially in the structuration of political-economic relations (Jessop *et al.*, 2008). Second (B), urban age theory conceptualizes urbanization primarily or exclusively with reference to the concentration of population within cities or urban settlements. While this conceptualization is fairly standard within most major twentieth-century traditions of urban studies (Soja, 2000; Gans, 2009), it can be argued that such understandings bracket the ways in which the formation of cities and urban zones is premised upon and in turn triggers a range of large-scale, long-term sociospatial transformations beyond the agglomeration itself, across less densely settled places, territories and scales (Berger, 2006; Soja, 2010; Brenner and Schmid, 2012; Brenner, 2013). The aforementioned intellectual influences have impacted diverse strands of twentieth-century social-science and urban studies, but in the contemporary notion of an urban age they have converged to form a particularly obfuscatory vision of the global urban condition.

As Figure 4 indicates, the intellectual core of the urban age thesis is (1) the methodologically territorialist assumption that the world is divided into discrete types of settlement, the classification of which facilitates understanding of major demographic and socioeconomic trends. On this basis, (2) the urban/rural opposition is presented as the analytical foundation for such classifications, an assumption that in turn hinges upon the largely uninterrogated claim (B) that certain unique social conditions obtain within cities or agglomerations that do not exist elsewhere. In most urban age discourse, this opposition is understood in zero-sum terms: all of settlement space must be classified as either urban or rural; the extension of the former thus entails the shrinkage of the latter. Although this conceptualization is most commonly traced to Wirth’s (1969 [1937]) influential theory of urbanism, his analysis was in fact, as noted above, reflexively



Note: Dashed lines and arrows indicate a contributing influence; bold lines and arrows indicate a core theoretical assumption.

Figure 4 Conceptual architecture of the urban age thesis

attuned to the role of urbanization in intensifying interspatial interdependencies and reorganizing territorial organization across the world. Occasionally, urban age arguments are grounded upon weaker versions of this assumption, with the urban/rural opposition used to demarcate a continuum of settlement types rather than being presented as an either/or ontological choice (see UN-DESA, 1969: 66). But even within this more differentiated approach, the urban/rural opposition serves as an epistemological anchor for the exercise of classifying purportedly distinct types of settlement space. Whether presented as a dualism or as a continuum, this model engenders (3) a distributional notion of urban transition in which sociospatial change is said to occur through the

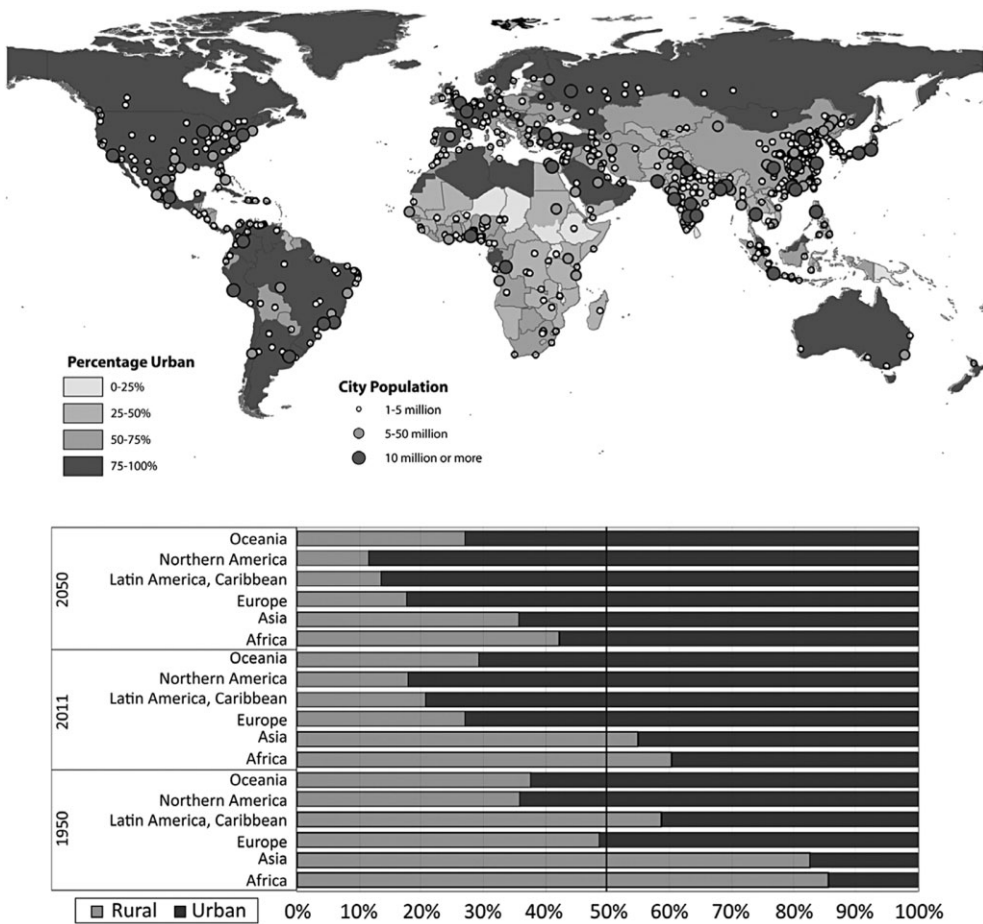


Figure 5 The ontological division of settlement space into urban and rural zones in recent UN data and images (source: redrawn from UN-DESA-PD, 2012: http://esa.un.org/unpd/wup/Analytical-Figures/Fig_2.htm and http://esa.un.org/unpd/wup/Maps/maps_urban_2011.htm, accessed 14 June 2012)

reapportionment of populations from rural to urban settlement types. The possibility that these entrenched envelopes of settlement space might themselves be deconstructed or transformed through the process of sociospatial restructuring is thereby excluded from consideration by definitional fiat.

Some version of this constellation of assumptions is presupposed in all contemporary versions of the urban age thesis, but they are on display in a particularly pure form in Figure 5, which is drawn from the most recent edition of the United Nations publication *World Urbanization Prospects* (UN-DESA-PD, 2012).

These visualizations of the UN's most recent set of urban data embody, paradigmatically, the theoretical and cartographic framework associated with the notion of an urban age. The bottom portion of Figure 5 represents the evolution of global population geography through the application of a binary urban/rural classification to each global region in 1950, 2011 and 2050, respectively. In this understanding, the distribution of global population may shift, like the sands in an hourglass, but the containers in which populations are located remain ontologically fixed. The urban/rural opposition is thus conceived as a constant, unchanging feature of global settlement space, one that applies universally across social formations and time periods. The top

portion of Figure 5 spatializes this set of assumptions in the form of a world map depicting urbanization levels in all national territories. Despite its updated data and its slightly modified visualization technique, this map is analytically identical to that produced by UN researchers in 1969 (see Figure 3 above; UN-DESA, 1969). As in the 1960s, urbanization is still represented as a property of national territories, which are once again graphically coded according to their respective percentage levels of urban (non-rural) population. While the top portion of Figure 5 also depicts the locations and population levels of some of the world's largest cities, its main purpose is to classify national territories using the dualistic urban/rural cartography outlined above.⁴

In the 1950s, the urban/rural dualism offered a conceptual reference point for empirically oriented UN demographers concerned with understanding observed differentials in infant mortality and fertility rates among populations in different settlement types (Champion and Hugo, 2004: 5). Today, however, this dualism and the broader concept of an urban age to which it has been attached have come to serve a broader academic and sociocultural purpose. The sense that cities are changing and growing with unprecedented speed and intensity; that more of the world's habitable territory is becoming 'urban'; that the erstwhile countryside is being eroded or degraded and that these tendencies represent something of a milestone in global human development — these sweeping generalizations, however simplistic, appear to offer a workable 'cognitive map' (Jameson, 1988) for navigating a rapidly restructuring worldwide sociospatial landscape defined by turbulence, uncertainty and rampant crisis tendencies, at once social, spatial and environmental. Consequently, the popularity of the urban age thesis, whether in scholarly, political and corporate discourse or in everyday life, would appear to be connected to the ways in which, however crudely, it gestures towards naming and beginning to interpret what are indeed widely experienced as profound, even epochal, transformations of urban sociospatial organization around the world.

Our claim, however, is that this cognitive map obfuscates much more than it reveals about contemporary urbanization processes. Particularly in light of the wide-ranging and disruptive sociospatial transformations outlined by Soja and Kanai (2006) and Merrifield (2011) in the passages quoted above, the theoretical cartography associated with the notion of an urban age functions as a chaotic conception, in the precise technical sense defined by Sayer (1992: 138): it 'divides the indivisible and/or lumps together the unrelated and the inessential, thereby "carving up" the object of study with little or no regard for its structure and form'.

First, the urban age thesis *divides the indivisible* in so far as it treats urban and rural zones as fundamentally distinct, thereby ignoring the pervasive imprint of urbanization processes on settlement spaces that, whether based on criteria of population size, administrative classification or otherwise, are officially categorized as rural. The invocation of an analytical or ontological divide among these purportedly distinct types of spaces prevents exploration of their structuration by some of the same political-economic processes, including capital accumulation, state regulation, the privatization of common resources (including land), financialization, migration and socioenvironmental degradation/transformation. Once such an analysis is undertaken, the use of the designation 'rural' becomes highly problematic (Halfacree, 2004), at least as a category of social scientific analysis. Increasingly, the urbanization process has become a global condition rather than simply a 'way of life' that is confined to certain types of settlement space as opposed to others (Lefebvre, 2003 [1970]; Soja, 2010; Merrifield, 2011). This emergent planetary formation of urbanization is deeply uneven and variegated, and emergent patterns and pathways of sociospatial differentiation within and across this worldwide urban fabric surely require sustained investigation at various geographic

4 Formally identical recent visualizations of the UN's urban population data include a time-series approach produced by UNICEF (2012) and a color-coded mapping by a journalist from *The Guardian* (Scruton, 2007).

scales (Schmid, 2006; 2012). However, because of its reliance on a long outdated urban/rural dualism, the notion of an urban age is a crude instrument for this purpose.

Secondly, the urban age thesis *lumps together the unrelated and the inessential* owing to its inadequate specification of what specific phenomena are meant to be contained within each term of the urban/rural dualism. As used within urban age discourse, both of these categories are generalized to the point of meaninglessness; each refers to extremely heterogeneous conditions within and among national territories. For the most part, the notion of the rural used within urban age discourse is simply a 'black box': it refers to the residual zones of settlement that are purportedly 'not urban', but this is done without specifying what features these spaces might share across contexts, whether in terms of population size, density or composition, land use, labor markets, or any other indicators. More problematically still, in contrast to this pervasive black-boxing of the rural, the notion of the urban used within urban age discourse is radically *overspecified*. The concept of the urban associated with the urban age thesis is used to refer to so many divergent conditions of population, infrastructure and administrative organization that it loses any semblance of analytical coherence. While the notion of an urban age is generally meant to imply a worldwide shift towards an encompassing, worldwide urban condition, its evidentiary base encompasses a vast spectrum of settlement conditions, ranging from small- and medium-sized towns to regional centers, metropolitan cores, large city-regions and sprawling megacities with populations exceeding 10 million (Montgomery, 2010). Yet there 'is little in common between small market towns in areas with stagnant economies in (say) Argentina, China and India and Buenos Aires, Shanghai and Delhi' (Satterthwaite, 2010: 96). Given the sweeping heterogeneity of settlement configurations and transformative processes that are subsumed under the notion of an urban age, it is highly questionable whether any meaningful theoretical content can be ascribed to it.

We thus return to the theoretically reflexive orientation towards the urban question emphasized by both Wirth and Castells many decades ago. As both authors insisted, without reflexive theoretical specification, the concept of the urban will remain an empty abstraction devoid of substantive analytical content and thus a blunt tool for deciphering or illuminating the nature of the conditions, processes and transformations to which it is applied. Unless the proponents of the urban age thesis can explicate what specific phenomena — sociospatial, demographic, administrative or otherwise — unify the ostensibly unrelated or inessentially connected zones of settlement that obtain with its sweepingly vague categorization of settlement space, then this crucial methodological condition has not been met; the term will remain no more than an empty abstraction.

Conclusion: towards an investigation of planetary urbanization

Even when they are grounded upon chaotic conceptions, hegemonic understandings of major social processes may have wide-ranging impacts, for they mediate expert and popular discourse, representation, imagination and practice in relation to matters of considerable consequence for the organization of political-economic relations. Accordingly, as Wachsmuth (forthcoming) argues, the ideological dimension of urbanization requires sustained analysis and deconstruction by critical urban theorists, especially under conditions in which entrenched formations of sociospatial organization are radically reorganized to produce new landscapes of urbanization whose contours remain blurry, volatile and confusing, and are therefore particularly subject to fetishized forms of narration, representation and visualization (see also Goonewardena, 2005).

It would be extremely valuable, therefore, to track the ways in which the notion of an urban age has been disseminated and naturalized among powerful actors and institutions across the world urban system, and has, by consequence, influenced any number of

policies related to the global urban condition.⁵ For instance, Satterthwaite (2010: 95–6) suggests that the skewed data associated with the urban age thesis have had particularly problematic ramifications in policy debates related to urban poverty, public health and greenhouse emissions in the global South. One could also readily envision a range of related policy areas, including labor markets, housing, education, transportation, infrastructure development and energy provision, in which the theoretical precepts associated with this thesis (and, indeed, any other model that delineates a rigid urban/rural divide) have engendered distorted, confused and misleading understandings of the multiscalar forces shaping contemporary urbanization patterns around the world (McGee, 2008).

A more wide-ranging analysis of the practical effectivities of the urban age thesis would be of considerable interest and import at every conceivable spatial scale, not least for those committed to promoting more socially just and ecologically viable forms of urbanization in both North and South. For the moment, however, such an endeavor has only just begun to be pursued in relation to specific places and policy regimes in which the urban age thesis has garnered explicit attention among policymakers, for instance, owing to the intense local publicity generated through the LSE-Deutsche Bank's traveling conference initiatives in Southern megacities (Anand and Rademacher, 2011).

Can an alternative cognitive map of emergent urbanizing formations be constructed, one that supersedes the manifold limitations and blind spots associated with urban age discourse and other contemporary ideologies of urbanization? The urgency of this task is blunted by the entrenched empiricism that dominates so much of contemporary urban social science and policy discourse, leading researchers to emphasize concrete investigations and associated visualizations rather than interrogating the underlying conceptual assumptions and cartographic frameworks around which they are organized. This problem has been long recognized by radical spatial theorists, but it continues to impede theoretical innovation in early twenty-first century urban studies owing to the persistence of stubbornly entrenched spatial ideologies that treat the urban as a pre-given, self-evident formation to be investigated or manipulated. However, as Ananya Roy (2009: 820) has argued in a powerful critique of the hegemony of Euro-American urban theories: 'It is time to blast open theoretical geographies, to produce a new set of concepts in the crucible of a new repertoire of cities'. In a similar vein, Jennifer Robinson (2011: 19) has recently called for a 'rich and fragmented array of ongoing conversations across the world of cities' that will serve to unsettle parochially defined theoretical certainties. We strongly support these calls to supersede inherited urban epistemologies, but wish to connect them, in particular, to a new conceptualization of urbanization processes both within and beyond those settlement spaces that are demarcated as 'cities'.

While it is not possible here to elaborate our alternative approach to such an endeavor in detail, we conclude by outlining a series of epistemological guidelines that follow from the preceding critique of the urban age thesis. Our own current work on planetary urbanization is grounded upon these precepts, but we believe they could productively inform a variety of heterodox engagements with the urban question under early twenty-first century conditions.

- *The urban and urbanization are theoretical categories.* The urban is not a pre-given, self-evident reality, condition or form — its specificity can only be delineated in theoretical terms, through an interpretation of its core properties, expressions or dynamics. It is essential, therefore, that twenty-first century debates on urban questions reflexively embrace the need for conceptual abstractions related to the changing form and geography of urbanization processes. Without this recursive work of theory, the field of urban studies will be poorly equipped to decipher the nature and

5 For a brilliant example of how to track this process of interspatial policy transfer and mutation across scales and territories in the context of contemporary neoliberalization tendencies, see Peck and Theodore (2010) and Theodore and Peck (2012).

implications of the complex, multiscalar transformations they aspire to understand. Urban age discourse represents a particularly egregious expression of the latter tendency and its associated intellectual and cartographic hazards.

- *The urban is not a universal form but a historical process.* In contrast to inherited concepts of the urban as a definitionally fixed unit or static form, its meanings and expressions must be understood to evolve historically in relation to broader patterns and pathways of global capitalist development. Thus conceived, urbanization is a process of continual sociospatial transformation, a relentless ‘churning’ of settlement types and morphologies that encompasses entire territories and not only isolated ‘points’ or ‘zones’ within them. As Lefebvre (1970 [2003]) insisted, the study of urban forms must be superseded by the investigation of urbanization *processes* at all spatial scales.
- *The sociospatial dimensions of urbanization are polymorphic, variable and dynamic.* Much of twentieth-century urban studies embraced a methodologically territorialist cartography in which the urban was treated as a distinct, relatively bounded settlement type, assumed to be separate from purported non-urban zones located beyond or outside it. Urban age discourse represents only the most recent, influential exemplar of this long entrenched methodological tendency. Such territorialist and settlement-based understandings of cityness had a basis in the morphologies of industrial and metropolitan urbanization during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but even then they represented only partial, one-sided depictions of a polymorphic, variable and relentlessly dynamic landscape of urbanization. However, given the accelerated differentiation of urban landscapes across the world since the 1980s (Brenner and Schmid, 2011; Schmid, 2012), it is clear that settlement-based understandings of the urban condition have now become obsolete. The urban cannot be plausibly understood as a bounded, enclosed site of social relations that is to be contrasted with non-urban zones or conditions. It is time, therefore, to explode our inherited assumptions regarding the morphologies, territorializations and sociospatial dynamics of the urban condition.
- *Urbanization involves both concentration and extension.* Once urbanization is seen as a process that transforms diverse zones of the world, another entrenched methodological tendency must be superseded, namely the exclusive or primary focus of urban scholars on agglomerations, the densely settled zones (cities, metropolitan regions, megacity regions, and so forth) in which population, economic activities and infrastructural systems are clustered. In this model, which underpins not only the urban age thesis but much of twentieth-century urban theory, the non-urban realm is interpreted simply as an empty field, as an indeterminate outside that serves to demarcate the urban condition from its purportedly exurban or rural ‘other’. However, throughout the history of modern capitalism, this terrain has been neither empty nor disconnected from the process of agglomeration; it has actually evolved dynamically through a complex, constantly thickening web of economic, social and ecological connections to the heartlands of urban concentration across every zone of the world economy. Though largely ignored or relegated to the analytic background by urban theorists, such transformations — materialized in densely tangled circuits of labor, commodities, cultural forms, energy, raw materials and nutrients — simultaneously radiate outwards from the immediate zone of agglomeration and implode back into it as the urbanization process unfolds. Within this extended, increasingly worldwide field of urban development and infrastructural equipment, agglomerations form, expand, shrink and morph continuously, but always via dense webs of relations to other places, whose historical patterns and developmental pathways are in turn mediated ever more directly through their modes of connection/disconnection to the hegemonic zones of urban concentration. These observations suggest a

methodological starting point for a radically reinvented approach to (capitalist) urbanization: the development of the concept of *extended urbanization* to complement and reposition the emphasis on agglomeration processes that has long underpinned urban research.⁶ Such a concept, we believe, has major implications for periodizations of urbanization since the emergence of industrial capitalism, and it also has considerable potential to guide research on the early twenty-first century urban condition.

- *Urbanization has become a planetary phenomenon.* Today, urbanization is a process that affects the whole territory of the world and not only isolated parts of it. The urban represents an increasingly worldwide, if unevenly woven, fabric in which the sociocultural and political-economic relations of capitalism are enmeshed. This situation of planetary urbanization means that even sociospatial arrangements and infrastructural networks that lie well beyond traditional city cores, metropolitan regions, urban peripheries and peri-urban zones have become integral parts of a worldwide urban condition.⁷ Concomitantly, the urban/rural opposition that has long underpinned the epistemology of urban concepts has been profoundly destabilized, at once in social science, planning practice and in everyday life. There is, in short, no longer any *outside* to the urban world; the non-urban has been largely internalized within an uneven yet planetary process of urbanization. Under these conditions, the urban/rural binarism is an increasingly obfuscatory basis for deciphering the morphologies, contours and dynamics of sociospatial restructuring under early twenty-first century capitalism.
- *Urbanization constantly produces new differentiations.* Urbanization is a process of constant transformation and leads continuously to the production of new urban configurations and constellations. Zones of urbanization, and the urban condition more generally, should not be treated as homogeneous — neither in the contemporary era nor during earlier historical periods. Rather, urbanization processes produce a wide range of sociospatial conditions across the world that require contextually specific analysis and theorization. As discussed above, the urban age thesis encloses each side of the urban/rural divide within an analytical black box. It focuses on the distribution of population among the two boxes rather than exploring their substantive contents, conditions of emergence or developmental pathways. As such, each term within the dualism is no more than an empty abstraction since neither is adequately attuned to the massive patterns of differentiation and variegation that characterize urbanization processes. Consequently, and rather urgently, these black boxes must now be opened, and their contents explored. Today's planetary urban universe reveals a wide variety of differentiated and polarized situations, conditions and contestations that require contextually specific yet theoretically reflexive investigation.
- *A new vocabulary of urbanization is needed.* Inherited analytical vocabularies and cartographic methods do not adequately capture the changing nature of urbanization processes, and their intensely variegated expressions, across the contemporary world.

6 The term 'extended urbanization' was introduced by Monte-Mór (2004; 2005) and has been more recently deployed by Soja (2010). While we draw upon their vocabulary, our conceptualization is specific to the theoretical framework developed here and elsewhere for investigating the *problematique* of planetary urbanization. For a more detailed account see Brenner and Schmid (2012).

7 We have begun to explore this proposition through a series of investigations of several 'extreme territories' of urbanization – the Amazon, the Arctic, the Himalayas, the Gobi desert, the Pacific Ocean, the Sahara desert, Siberia and the atmosphere – in the Urban Theory Lab at the Harvard GSD. This work, which combines spatialized political economy, critical cartography and geo-comparative analysis, is intended at once to illuminate ongoing transformations in these remote zones of the world economy *and* to forge new theoretical categories for the study of urbanization.

Emergent patterns and pathways of planetary urbanization therefore require the development of new analytical approaches, methods and concepts, including experimental and speculative ones, as well as new visualizations of evolving sociospatial and sociometabolic conditions. In short, a new lexicon of urbanization processes and forms of territorial differentiation is required in order to grasp the unstable, rapidly changing geographies of early twenty-first century capitalism.⁸

The analytic maneuvers proposed here are no doubt contentious, and they surely require further, more detailed elaboration elsewhere. While many readers may object to the admittedly radical methodological consequences we have derived from our critique of urban age discourse, we hope that our proposals will help stimulate a wider debate regarding how best to conceptualize the contemporary global urban condition. From our point of view, such a debate is long overdue not only among urbanists, but among all scholars, practitioners and activists concerned with understanding, and thereby reshaping, the sociospatial fabric of our shared planetary existence.

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8 Several projects to develop such a vocabulary are under way; these build upon the concepts, methods and cartographic strategies developed in an earlier investigation of the urban fabric of Switzerland produced by ETH Studio Basel (Diener et al., 2006). More recently, the research project on 'Patterns and pathways of planetary urbanization', organized through the ETH Future Cities Laboratory Singapore, is comparing urbanization processes in nine large urban areas (Tokyo, Hong Kong/Shenzhen, Singapore, Kolkata, Istanbul, Lagos, Paris, Mexico City and Los Angeles). By exploring the wide variety of contemporary urbanization processes, this project is intended to destabilize inherited concepts of the urban and to productively expand our urban imagination (see Schmid, 2012).

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Towards a new epistemology of the urban?

Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid

New forms of urbanization are unfolding around the world that challenge inherited conceptions of the urban as a fixed, bounded and universally generalizable settlement type. Meanwhile, debates on the urban question continue to proliferate and intensify within the social sciences, the planning and design disciplines, and in everyday political struggles. Against this background, this paper revisits the question of the epistemology of the urban: through what categories, methods and cartographies should urban life be understood? After surveying some of the major contemporary mainstream and critical responses to this question, we argue for a radical rethinking of inherited epistemological assumptions regarding the urban and urbanization. Building upon reflexive approaches to critical social theory and our own ongoing research on planetary urbanization, we present a new epistemology of the urban in a series of seven theses. This epistemological framework is intended to clarify the intellectual and political stakes of contemporary debates on the urban question and to offer an analytical basis for deciphering the rapidly changing geographies of urbanization and urban struggle under early 21st-century capitalism. Our arguments are intended to ignite and advance further debate on the epistemological foundations for critical urban theory and practice today.

Key words: urbanization, urban age, postcolonial urbanism, planetary urbanization, extended urbanization, reflexivity, critical urban theory, rural

Introduction: a crisis of urban epistemologies

A dramatic wave of urban restructuring has been unfolding across the planet since the long 1980s. Following the crisis of national-developmental models of territorial development, the collapse of state socialism and the subsequent intensification of global economic integration, a variety of contradictory urban transformations has been under way. The causes, contours, contexts, interconnections and implications of such transformations are widely debated, and remain extremely confusing in the wake of the

global financial and economic crises of the late 2000s and early 2010s. However, even as contextually specific patterns of urbanization endure and proliferate, at least three macro-trends appear to be consolidating, each of which challenges long-entrenched assumptions regarding the nature of the urban:

- (1) New geographies of uneven spatial development have been emerging through a contradictory interplay between rapid, explosive processes of urbanization and various forms of stagnation, shrinkage and marginalization, often in close proximity to one another.

In contrast to the geographies of territorial inequality associated with previous cycles of industrialization, this new mosaic of spatial unevenness cannot be captured adequately through areal models, with their typological differentiation of space between urban/rural, metropole/colony, First/Second/Third World, North/South, East/West and so forth (see also Merrifield 2013; Robinson 2014). Today, divergent conditions of wealth and poverty, growth and decline, inclusion and exclusion, centrality and marginality, mutually produce one another at all spatial scales, from the neighborhood to the planetary. Under these conditions, new approaches to understanding and influencing processes of uneven spatial development under capitalism are urgently needed (Peck 2015a).

- (2) The basic nature of urban realities—long understood under the singular, encompassing rubric of ‘cityness’—has become more differentiated, polymorphic, variegated and multiscalar than in previous cycles of capitalist urbanization. Even though the phrase, ‘the city’, persists as an ideological framing in mainstream policy discourse and everyday life (Wachsmuth 2014), the contemporary urban phenomenon cannot be understood as a singular condition derived from the serial replication of a specific sociospatial condition (e.g. agglomeration) or settlement type (e.g. places with large, dense and/or heterogeneous populations) across the territory. Indeed, rather than witnessing the worldwide proliferation of a singular urban form, ‘the’ city, we are instead confronted with new processes of urbanization that are bringing forth diverse socioeconomic conditions, territorial formations and socio-metabolic transformations across the planet. Their morphologies, geographies and institutional frames have become so

variegated that the traditional vision of the city as a bounded, universally replicable settlement type now appears as no more than a quaint remnant of a widely superseded formation of capitalist spatial development (Brenner and Schmid 2014).

As we have argued elsewhere (Brenner and Schmid 2011), the formation of large-scale megacities and polynucleated metropolitan regions is only one important expression of this ongoing reconstitution of urbanizing landscapes (see also Soja and Kanai [2006] 2014). Its other key expressions include, among others: (a) the unprecedented densification of inter-metropolitan networks, requiring colossally scaled infrastructural investments (from highways, canals, railways, container ports, airports and hydroelectric dams to undersea cables, tunnels, pipelines and satellite fleets) stretching across territories and continents as well as oceanic and atmospheric environments; (b) the restructuring and repositioning of traditional ‘hinterlands’ through the installation of new export processing zones, global sweatshop regions, back office locations, data processing facilities and intermodal logistics terminals; (c) the remaking and spatial extension of large-scale land-use systems devoted to resource extraction, the production and circulation of energy (including fossil fuels), and water and waste management; (d) the profound social and environmental transformation of vast, erstwhile ‘rural’ areas through the expansion of large-scale industrial agriculture, the extension of global agrobusiness networks, and the imposition of associated forms of land grabbing and territorial enclosure; and (e) the operationalization of erstwhile ‘wilderness’ spaces, including the rainforests, deserts, alpine regions, polar zones, the oceans and even the atmosphere

itself, to serve the relentless growth imperatives of an accelerating, increasingly planetary formation of capitalist urbanization.

- (3) Closely intertwined with the aforementioned trends, the regulatory geographies of capitalist urbanization have likewise been undergoing profound, rapid mutations. Since the accelerated expansion of industrialization in the 19th century, the urban process has been largely subsumed within and regulated through the hierarchical institutional frameworks of consolidating national states and nationally coordinated imperial systems. Since that period, including within major empires and colonial regimes, national states instrumentalized major urban regions in relation to the broader project of establishing territorially integrated markets and creating relatively uniform, standardized frameworks of national territorial organization within which industrial development could unfold. However, the tumultuous transformations of recent decades decisively shattered this entrenched national-developmental model of urban and territorial regulation, leading to a significant reconstitution of inherited geographies of urban governance (Brenner 2004; Schmid 2003).

Although some of its elements have longer historical lineages, including within mercantile capitalism and the colonial empires of high industrial capitalism, the contemporary period has seen the proliferation of new geographies of urban governance that are no longer neatly subsumed within a singular, encompassing territorial framework of state power at any spatial scale, national or otherwise. Instead, an intensely variegated, polarized, multiscalar and relatively uncoordinated landscape of territorial and networked governance has emerged through (a)

the consolidation of neoliberalized, market-oriented transnational rule-regimes; (b) the proliferation of national state projects of deregulation, liberalization, privatization and austerity; (c) the worldwide diffusion of place-marketing campaigns and locational policies intended to attract inward capital investment into subnational zones; (d) the establishment of a 'new metropolitan mainstream' in which local and regional governments increasingly prioritize economic growth, property-led investment in flagship mega-projects, urban renewal and gentrification over job creation, social redistribution, equity and participation (Schmid 2012); (e) the construction of new forms of inter-local networking and policy transfer to disseminate putative 'best practices' in response to persistent social, economic and environmental crises within urban regions (Peck and Theodore 2015); and (f) the ongoing explosion of political struggles over access to the basic resources of social reproduction such as housing, water, food, education, health care and security. Under these conditions, diverse regulatory agencies, coalitions, movements and actors struggle not only to influence the production of places, but to reshape the broader institutional and territorial frameworks through which urbanization processes are being managed at every spatial scale.

The terrain of the urban has thus been subjected to a high-intensity, high-impact earthquake through the worldwide social, economic, regulatory and environmental transformations of the post-1980s period. Not surprisingly, in conjunction with ongoing efforts to decipher these wide-ranging transformations, the field of urban studies has also been experiencing considerable turbulence and fragmentation. In an apparent parallel to the field-transforming

epistemological crises of the late 1960s and early 1970s, which fundamentally challenged the entrenched orthodoxies of mainstream urban sociology, positivist urban policy research and quantitative urban geography, the intellectual foundations of urban studies are today being profoundly destabilized.

Since its origins in the early 20th century, the field of urban studies has been regularly animated by foundational debates regarding the nature of the urban question, often in quite generative ways. The intensification of such debates in recent times could thus be plausibly interpreted as a sign of creative renaissance rather than of intellectual crisis. Today, however, the intense fragmentation, disorientation and downright confusion that permeate the field of urban studies are not merely the result of methodological disagreements (which of course persist) or due to the obsolescence of a particular research paradigm (Marxism, regulation theory, global city theory or otherwise). Instead, as the national-developmental configuration of postwar world capitalism recedes rapidly into historical memory, and as the politico-institutional, spatial and environmental impacts of various neoliberalized and authoritarian forms of urban restructuring radiate and ricochet across the planet, a more intellectually far-reaching structural crisis of urban studies appears to be under way.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the epistemic crises of urban studies involved foundational debates regarding the appropriate categories and methods through which to understand a sociospatial terrain whose basic contours and parameters were a matter of broad consensus. Simply put, that consensus involved the equation of the urban with a specific *spatial unit* or *settlement type*—the city, or an upscaled territorial variant thereof, such as the metropolis, the conurbation, the metropolitan region, the megalopolis, the megacity, the megacity-region and so forth. Even though radical critics such as Manuel Castells fiercely criticized established ways of understanding this ‘unit’, and offered an alternative, substantially reinvigorated

interpretive framework through which to investigate its production, evolution and contestation, they persisted in viewing the unit in question—the urban region or agglomeration—as the basic focal point of debates on the ‘urban question’ (Castells [1972] 1977; see also Katznelson 1992). Across otherwise deep methodological and political divides and successive epistemological realignments, this largely uninterrogated presupposition has underpinned the major intellectual traditions in 20th-century urban studies. Indeed, it has long been considered so self-evident that it did not require acknowledgment, much less justification.

Today, this entrenched set of assumptions—along with a broad constellation of closely associated epistemological frameworks for confronting and mapping the urban question—is being severely destabilized in the wake of a new round of worldwide sociospatial restructuring. Of course, the ‘power of agglomeration’ remains as fundamental as ever to the dynamics of industrialization; the spatial concentration of the means of production, population and infrastructure is a potent generative force that continues to ignite waves of capital accumulation and to reshape places, territories and landscapes at all spatial scales (Soja 2000; Krätke 2014; Scott and Storper 2014). Despite this, however, the erstwhile boundaries of the city—along with those of larger, metropolitan units of agglomeration—are being exploded and reconstituted as new forms of urbanization reshape inherited patterns of territorial organization, and increasingly crosscut the urban/non-urban divide itself (Schmid 2006, [2012] 2014; Brenner 2013, 2014a, 2014b; Brenner and Schmid 2014).

The contemporary crisis of urban studies is thus not only an expression of epistemic perplexity (though the latter is still abundantly evident). From our point of view, rather, it stems from an increasing awareness of fundamental uncertainties regarding the very sites, objects and focal points of urban theory and research under contemporary capitalism. In a world of neatly circumscribed, relatively

bounded cities or urban 'units', whose core properties were a matter of generalized scholarly agreement, urban researchers could burrow into the myriad tasks associated with understanding their underlying social, economic and cultural dynamics, historical trajectories, inter-contextual variations and the various forms of regulation, conflict and struggle that emerged within them (Saunders 1986). However, under contemporary circumstances, these basic conditions of possibility for urban research appear to have been relativized, if not superseded.

For this reason, we argue, the question of the epistemology of the urban—specifically: *through what categories, methods and cartographies should urban life be understood?*—must once again become a central focal point for urban theory, research and action. If the urban is no longer coherently contained within or anchored to the city—or, for that matter, to any other bounded settlement type—then how can a scholarly field devoted to its investigation continue to exist? Or, to pose the same question as a challenge of intellectual reconstruction: is there—*could* there be—a new epistemology of the urban that might illuminate the emergent conditions, processes and transformations associated with a world of generalized urbanization?

Urban ideologies, old and new

Some four decades ago, Lefebvre ([1970] 2003, 191, n. 3) argued not only that a new understanding of the urban was required, but that the urban was itself becoming the *episteme* of our time, the condition of possibility for understanding major aspects of contemporary global economic, social and political life: 'We can say that the urban [...] rises above the horizon, slowly occupies an epistemological field, and becomes the episteme of an epoch' (for further discussion, see also Prigge 2008). In this sense, Lefebvre suggested, the reconceptualization of the urban was becoming an

essential epistemological and political precondition for understanding the nature of society itself. This proposition appears more apt than ever today. Whether in academic discourse or in the public sphere, the urban has become a privileged lens through which to interpret, to map and, indeed, to attempt to influence contemporary social, economic, political and environmental trends.

Paradoxically, however, rather than directly confronting the radically transformed conditions for urban theory and research, the mainstream of contemporary discourses on global urbanism has embraced a strong, even triumphalist, reassertion of a traditional, universal, totalizing and largely empiricist concept of 'the city'. Within this mainstream framework, the nature of contemporary urban restructuring is narrated simply as an increasing importance of cities to worldwide social, economic, political and ecological processes. The question of what 'cities' and the 'urban' are, and how their constitutive properties and geographies may be changing in qualitative terms, is thereby effectively 'black-boxed'.

The most influential contemporary meta-narrative of the global urban condition is surely the notion of an 'urban age', which was first introduced several decades ago by United Nations (UN) demographers, and which has more recently been popularized in public and scholarly discourses on the growth of urban settlements and associated social, regulatory and environmental hazards (Burdett and Sudjic 2006; Davis 2006; UN-Habitat 2007). According to this city-centric perspective, for the first time in human history, more than half the world's population now lives within cities. With the putative crossing of this 'threshold' or 'milestone' in 2007, the city is said to have been generalized into the universal form of human settlement; it is now thought to represent the most elemental spatial unit for humanity's future. Across otherwise diverse discursive, ideological and institutional contexts, the urban age thesis has become a form of doxic common sense framing

contemporary discussions of the global urban condition. It is repeated incessantly, mantra-like, in scholarly papers, research reports and grant proposals, as well as in the public sphere of urban, environmental and architectural journalism. In effect, the assertion that we have crossed the ‘fifty per cent urban threshold’ has become the most quoted, but therefore also among the most banal, formulations in contemporary urban studies (for historical contextualization and detailed critique, see Brenner and Schmid 2014).

As has been noted by many researchers, the demographic data on which the urban age hypothesis hinges are deeply inadequate; they are derived from nationally specific census agencies which define the city and the urban using a myriad of inconsistent, unreliable and incompatible indicators (Satterthwaite 2010). Moreover, within the major strands of urban age discourse, the city is defined with reference to an arbitrarily fixed population size, density threshold or administrative classification, which is in turn taken as the main indicator demarcating the presumed boundary between urban and non-urban areas. Even when these indicators are further elaborated, for instance, with reference to commuting patterns, catchment areas and economic activities, the notion of cityness used within this discourse is still fundamentally empiricist. It presupposes that the city can be defined through (some combination of) statistically measurable variables describing conditions (coded as either ‘urban’ or ‘non-urban’) within a bounded administrative zone. With a few exceptions (i.e. Angel 2011), the coherent bounding of the zone in question is simply presupposed based upon extant administrative jurisdictions; the diverse economic, political and environmental processes that are reworking the ‘structured coherence’ (Harvey 1989) of inherited urban formations are not acknowledged or analyzed (Brenner and Katsikis 2014). Additionally, through its contention that ‘the city’ has become the universally dominant, endlessly replicable form of global human settlement, urban age discourse

drastically homogenizes the variegated patterns and pathways of urbanization that have been emerging in recent decades across the world economy (Schmid [2012] 2014). Just as problematically, by equating the urban exclusively with large and/or dense population centers, urban age discourse renders invisible the intimate, wide-ranging and dynamically evolving connections between contemporary shifts in city-building processes and the equally far-reaching transformations of putatively non-urban landscapes and spatial divisions of labor alluded to above.

Several parallel or derivative metanarratives of the contemporary global urban condition have been popularized in close connection to the overarching ideology of the urban age (for a critical overview, see Gleeson 2014). These variations on urban age discourse involve a variety of normative, methodological, strategic and substantive concerns; they include, among others, the following main streams:

- *Urban triumphalism.* Several recent, popular books have presented cities as the engines of innovation, civilization, prosperity and democracy, across historical and regional contexts (see, e.g. Bruggmann 2010; Glaeser 2011). According to these triumphalist perspectives, contemporary cities represent the latest expressions of a time-tested sociospatial formula that has enabled the progressive historical development of human society, technology and governance. This set of arguments represents an important extension of urban age discourse because it connects the UN’s basic demographic propositions to broader, qualitatively elaborated arguments concerning the role of cities in unleashing humanity’s economic, social and cultural potentials.
- *Technoscientific urbanism.* There has also recently been an outpouring of influential new approaches that mobilize the tools of natural science, mathematics and ‘big data’ analysis to analyze, and often to predict, inter- and intra-urban spatial

arrangements (Bettencourt and West 2010; Batty 2013). Such neo-positivist, neo-naturalist approaches represent a revival of important strands of postwar systems thinking in geography, planning and design discourse, which had been closely aligned with national state projects of urban social engineering and territorial control. Contemporary discussions of 'smart cities' represent an important parallel strand of technoscientific urbanism, in which information technology corporations are aggressively marketing new modes of spatial monitoring, information processing and data visualization to embattled municipal and metropolitan governments around the world as a technical 'fix' for intractable governance problems (Greenfield 2013; Townsend 2013). In the current context, technoscientific aspirations to reveal law-like regularities within and among the world's major cities often serve to naturalize the forms of socio-spatial disorder, enclosure and displacement that have been induced through the last several decades of neoliberal regulatory restructuring and recurrent geoeconomic crisis (Gleeson 2014). Despite their more elaborate methodological apparatus and their capacity to process huge data assemblages, these technoscientific urbanisms replicate, and indeed reinforce, the basic urban age understanding of cities as universally replicable, coherently bounded settlement units. The law-bound understanding of urbanization it embraces is used not only for epistemological purposes, to justify a universalizing, naturalistic research agenda, but as part of a broader technoscientific ideology that aims to depoliticize urban life and thus 'to assist the cause of sound management' (Gleeson 2014, 348).

- *Debates on urban sustainability.* An additional metanarrative of the contemporary global urban condition focuses on the key role of cities in the deepening planetary ecological crisis. Here, cities are viewed at once as the 'front lines' where

environmental crises are most dramatically experienced, and as techno-social arenas in which potential responses are being pioneered (for critical review, see Satterthwaite 2004). Discussions of urban sustainability are often linked to the two aforementioned strands of contemporary urban discourse insofar as they celebrate cities as the most ecologically viable arrangements for human settlement (Girardet 2004; Meyer 2013) and/or propose new technoscientific 'solutions' for re-engineering urban metabolic processes, often through architectural and design interventions under the rubric of an 'ecological urbanism' (Mostafavi and Doherty 2011). In many cases, the proposed visions of a future urban ecological order entail the construction of 'premium ecological enclaves' (Hodson and Marvin 2010) that are substantially delinked from extant infrastructural systems, and thus intensify inherited patterns of territorial exclusion. Emergent strategies to enhance urban 'resilience' in the face of climate change and associated socio-natural disasters contain similar hazards insofar as they normalize contemporary forms of market-oriented governance and associated processes of territorial stigmatization (Fainstein 2014; Slater 2014). Research on urban sustainability remains heterogeneous in methodological, thematic and political terms, and several scholars have recently made important critical interventions that link this *problematique* to uneven spatial development, neoliberalization and struggles for environmental justice (Rees and Wackernagel 1996; Atkinson 2007, 2009; Elmqvist 2014). However, the main thrust of recent debates on urban sustainability has been to promote a vision of cities as bounded, technologically controlled islands of ecorationality that are largely delinked from the broader territorial formations in which they are currently embedded. In this way, urban age discourse is translated into a city-centric techno-environmentalism that often justifies and even celebrates

the enclavization of settlement space as the optimal means to ensure human survival under conditions of deepening planetary ecological crisis.

- *Debates on megacities.* One additional sub-stream of urban age discourse has involved discussions of megacities, generally understood as a specific settlement type that has been consolidated across the ‘Third World’ or the ‘global South’ under conditions of rapid urbanization, hypercongestion and resource scarcity (UN-Habitat 2007). The megacities discussion partially tempers the universalizing thrust of urban age discourse by emphasizing the specificity of urban settlements in poorer countries, whether due to colonial legacies, earlier strategies of import-substitution industrialization, the impacts of contemporary forms of structural adjustment policy or, most prominently, the proliferation of ‘informal’ settlement patterns within dense city cores and around metropolitan fringes. However, in many ways, urban age approaches articulate directly to, and reinforce, discussions of mega-cities: the latter, with their pervasive crises of employment, housing, public health and environment, are commonly represented as the unplanned, and possibly unplanable, spatial units in which the contemporary ‘urban transition’ is unfolding; they are thus the most elementary units of the contemporary ‘planet of slums’ (Davis 2006; for a strong counterpoint, see Roy 2005). Therefore, even if discussions of megacities emphasize the distinctiveness of such spaces relative to Euro-American or Northern urbanisms and the worldwide system of global cities, they preserve the basic emphasis on the city as a bounded settlement type that underpins each of the major strands of urban age discourse.

These various versions of urban age discourse must be understood as a powerful series of ideological interventions into rapidly churning, fragmenting fields of urban

restructuring. Precisely under conditions in which the very foundations of urban life are being radically reconstituted, such mainstream discourses on global urbanism strongly reassert a universalizing, totalizing and often naturalistic epistemological outlook that subsumes all dimensions of the urban process under the encompassing lens of cityness, understood as a transcendental settlement form that has now been generalized worldwide. Across the diverse politico-institutional and geographical contexts in which these discourses are mobilized, their ‘common wrapping is a bright universalism’ (Gleeson 2014, 351) that masks the proliferating crisis-tendencies and contradictions of contemporary capitalism.

In a striking parallel to the long-discredited modernization theories of the postwar period, the various strands of this metanarrative are now being used as discursive frames to legitimate a wide range of neoliberalizing proposals to transform inherited urban built environments. The simple message that the city has assumed unprecedented planetary importance has thus come to serve as an all-purpose, largely depoliticized ideological rubric around which, in diverse contexts, aggressively market-oriented and/or authoritarian contemporary projects and prescriptions of urban transformation are being narrated, justified and naturalized. At once in the public sphere, in planning and design discourse, and in scholarly arenas, such universalizing, totalizing and city-centric ideologies serve to reassert the viability of all-too-familiar urban epistemologies even as their historical and sociospatial conditions of possibility are being superseded in practice (for further reflection on this apparent paradox, see Wachsmuth 2014).

Reflexive epistemological openings

In contrast to the unapologetically self-assured universalism of urban age ideologies, the core agendas of critical urban social science have become rather disjointed in

recent years. Writing at the turn of the millennium, Soja (2000, xii) observed:

‘[T]he field of urban studies has never been so robust, so expansive in the number of subject areas and scholarly disciplines involved with the study of cities, so permeated by new ideas and approaches, so attuned to the major political and economic events of our times, and so theoretically and methodologically unsettled. It may be the best of times and the worst of times to be studying cities, for while there is so much that is new and challenging to respond to, there is much less agreement than ever before as to how best to make sense, practically and theoretically, of the new urban worlds being created.’

Nearly 15 years later, this statement remains an apt characterization of the intellectual landscape of critical urban studies: it is still filled with creative, energetic and eclectic responses to dynamically changing conditions, but it is also still quite fragmented among diverse epistemological frameworks and a wide range of ontological assumptions.

Although this situation of intellectual fragmentation results from some productive forms of epistemological, conceptual and methodological experimentation, it is also problematic insofar as it limits the field’s collective capacity to offer convincing, accessible alternatives to the dominant urban ideologies of our time. Particularly in light of the broad appeal of simplistic urban age reasoning to scholars, designers and policy-makers, and its continued instrumentalization in the service of neoliberalizing and/or authoritarian forms of urban governance and environmental engineering, the development of such critical counterpositions is a matter of increasing urgency for all those committed to developing more adequate ways of interpreting—and, ultimately, of influencing—the patterns and pathways of contemporary urbanization.

One of the hallmarks of any form of critical social theory, including critical urban theory, is epistemological reflexivity (Horkheimer [1968] 1972; Bourdieu 1990; Postone 1993;

see also Brenner 2009). This entails an insistence on the situatedness of all forms of knowledge, and a relentless drive to reinvent key categories of analysis in relation to ongoing processes of historical change. Rather than presupposing a rigid separation between subject (knower) and object (the site or context under investigation), reflexive approaches emphasize their mutual constitution and ongoing transformation through social practices and political struggles, including in the realm of interpretation and ideology. In Archer’s (2007, 72) more general formulation, a reflexive approach to social theory involves ‘a subject considering an object in relation to itself, bending that object back upon itself in a process which includes the self being able to consider itself as its own object’.

In the context of critical urban studies, this philosophical requirement involves not only the constant interrogation of changing urban realities, but the equally vigilant analysis and revision of the very conceptual and methodological frameworks being used to investigate the urban process. For any reflexive approach to urban theory, therefore, the categories and methods of urban analysis are important focal points of inquiry: understanding their conditions of emergence and intelligibility, as well as the possibility of their destabilization or obsolescence, represent essential, ongoing and potentially transformative research tasks. Simply put, reflexive approaches to urban theory must constantly subject their own categories and methods to critical interrogation, even as the latter are being mobilized in ongoing research endeavors.

During the last decade, amidst the deepening intellectual fragmentation of urban studies outlined above, a notably reflexive strand of critical urban scholarship has been consolidated under the rubric of postcolonial urban studies. In a wide-ranging series of interventions, the main protagonists of this tradition of urban research have revealed the ways in which inherited urban epistemologies have been implicitly derived from

the Euro-American experience of capitalist urbanization. This, they argue, has been used unreflexively as a normalizing template for (mis)interpreting processes of urban development across the ‘global South’. The very recognition of such normalizing Euro-American or ‘metrocentric’ assumptions requires their ‘provincialization’ (Bunnell and Maringanti 2010; Parnell and Robinson 2012; Sheppard, Leitner, and Maringanti 2013) and underscores the urgency of elaborating alternative categories for understanding the contextually specific patterns and pathways of urbanization that have emerged, for example, in East and Southeast Asia, Latin America, Africa or the Middle East.

In general, postcolonial urban theorists present their work as a critique of the naturalized Euro-American epistemologies associated with the major traditions of academic urban social science extending from the early 20th-century Chicago School of urban sociology to the Los Angeles School of urban geography and the global city theories of the late 20th century. However, insofar as they call into question any model of urban theory that claims universal validity, the reconceptualizations proposed in this tradition also offer a theoretically reflexive counterpoint to the ideological totalizations of urban age discourse. Rather than adopting a singular ontological position regarding the underlying essence of cityness or the urban, postcolonial urbanisms have embraced a broadly nominalist approach to producing ‘new geographies of theorizing’ (Roy 2009; Robinson 2014) under early 21st-century conditions. Its main orientations and commitments include: (a) skepticism regarding authoritative, universalizing knowledge claims about any aspect of the urban experience; (b) attention to contextual particularities and local experiences within places; (c) an analysis of the inter-place relations or ‘worlding’ processes that constitute sociospatial configurations, whether within cities or at larger spatial scales; and (d) an exploration of the diverse lines of influence through which local, apparently parochial urbanisms

(whether relating to spatial organization, design, planning or policy) circulate beyond their contexts of emergence and are thereby transformed into ‘prototypes’ that are at once implemented and reconstituted elsewhere (see, e.g. Robinson 2006; Roy 2009; Parnell and Robinson 2012; Roy and Ong 2012; Mabin 2014; Parnell and Oldfield 2014).

Since the publication of Jennifer Robinson’s (2006) forceful intervention in her now-classic book *Ordinary Cities*, the core intellectual frameworks of postcolonial urbanism have been undergoing a period of maturation and consolidation. It would probably be premature, however, to suggest that this approach has now established a fully fledged urban epistemology or a new research paradigm because, as with most other emergent frameworks within critical urban studies, it contains many distinct strands of theory-building, methodological experimentation and substantive research, as well as several competing epistemological orientations (see, e.g. Simone 2009; Kipfer and Goonewardena 2013). Nonetheless, especially in light of the pervasively fragmented character of contemporary critical urban theory, the time is ripe for the theoretically reflexive interventions and theory-driven research forays that have recently been elaborated by postcolonial urbanists. Particularly in the last few years, in a series of provocative manifestos and agenda-setting theoretical articles, several postcolonial urban thinkers have pursued the goal of systematically reinventing the epistemological basis for grappling with urban questions (see, especially, Roy 2011, 2014; Robinson 2011, 2014; Sheppard, Leitner, and Maringanti 2013). In this way, they respond directly to the question posed above: under contemporary conditions, can there be a new epistemology of the urban?

Our own developing investigations of planetary urbanization partially overlap with the substantive research foci of postcolonial urbanism. Our work is likewise animated by an overarching concern to develop new

ways of understanding emergent urban conditions and ongoing urban transformations. Similarly, and in stark contrast to some contemporary approaches that pursue ontological or quasi-metaphysical speculations regarding the nature of the urban, we endorse a nominalist approach that permits an open-ended interplay between critique (of inherited traditions of urban theory and contemporary urban ideologies), epistemological experimentation (leading to the elaboration of new concepts and methods) and concrete research (on specific contexts, struggles and transformations). It is thus in a spirit of comradely dialogue that we offer below our own set of critical reflections on the possible foundations for a new epistemology of the urban under 21st-century conditions. However, despite our shared commitment to epistemological reflexivity and conceptual reinvention, several of the theses presented here stand in some measure of tension with certain methodological tendencies within postcolonial urban studies.

First, because of its concern to ‘provincialize’ the universalizing, (over)generalizing thrust of ‘northern’ theory, much of postcolonial urban studies has emphasized the specificity, distinctiveness or even uniqueness of cities beyond the West. Although several scholars (e.g. Roy 2009, 2014; Robinson 2011, 2014) have recently introduced productively relational concepts designed to illuminate inter-place transformations, the trope of contextual specificity pervades much of contemporary postcolonial urban research, in part due to the influence of parallel arguments in the fields of subaltern historical studies and postcolonial cultural theory (Chibber 2013). The appropriately deconstructive concern to ‘speak back against, thereby contesting, mainstream global urbanism’ (Sheppard, Leitner, and Maringanti 2013, 896) thus often translates into a methodological injunction to reveal the distinctiveness of particular places within the ‘global South’, often in rhetorical contrast to a putatively overgeneralized ‘northern’ model, such as that of the global or neoliberal

city (see, e.g. Seekings 2013; for critical discussion, see Peck 2015b). Many of those accounts present thick descriptions—for instance, of everyday life and subaltern struggle—as theoretically self-evident counterpoints to the apparent totalizations of Euro-American frameworks (for a critical discussion, see Mabin 2014; see also Brenner, Madden, and Wachsmuth 2011).

Clearly, such ‘strategic essentialisms’ (Roy 2009) have been generative in both methodological and empirical terms, especially as a reflexive counterpoint to mainstream global urban ideologies. However, they also contain certain intellectual hazards, not the least of which is the risk of prematurely retreating from essential conceptual tools, such as those of geopolitical economy, state theory and regulation theory, as outdated vestiges of ‘northern’ epistemologies (see also Mabin 2014). The idea of specificity is logically intelligible only in relation to an encompassing notion of generality against which it is defined; it is thus best understood as a relational, dialectical concept, one that presupposes a broader totality, rather than as a demarcation of ontological singularity (Schmid 2015a). In a capitalist world system that continues to be shaped profoundly by the drive towards endless capital accumulation, by neoliberalizing and/or authoritarian forms of global and national regulatory restructuring, by neo-imperial military strategies, and by various interconnected forms of exploitation, dispossession and socio-environmental destruction, contextual specificity is enmeshed within, and mediated through, broader configurations of capitalist uneven spatial development and geopolitical power. This ‘context of context’ (Brenner, Peck, and Theodore 2010; Peck 2015b) is not merely a background condition for urban development, but represents a constitutive formation—a self-forming, internally contradictory and constantly evolving whole—in and through which the ‘geo-positionality’ of local places is inscribed and mediated (Sheppard 2009). Theorizing the production of such multi-layered spatial configurations—not only

contexts, but the context(s) of those contexts—in processual, multiscalar terms thus remains an urgent task for contemporary critical urban theorists.

For these reasons, rather than equating the project of postcolonial urbanism simply with a commitment to concrete, regionally situated or place-based studies derived from a ‘southern’ positionality, it may be most productive, as Robinson (2014, 61) has recently proposed, to understand such methodological positions as ‘interim moves’ anticipating ‘more sustained formulations for building global urban analyses’ (see also Roy 2014). The theses presented below are intended to contribute to that collective project, which would connect the deconstructive epistemological critiques and conceptual innovations of postcolonial urban theory to the equally urgent task of deciphering the evolving, and increasingly planetary, ‘context of context’ in which contemporary forms of neoliberal capitalist urbanization are unfolding across the North/South divide.

This point connects to a second methodological tendency in postcolonial urban theory from which our own epistemological orientations significantly diverge—namely, its tendency to treat ‘the city’ as the privileged terrain for urban research. To be sure, in contrast to the totalizing, empiricist settlement fetishism of urban age ideology and other mainstream discourses of global urbanism, postcolonial urban studies embraces a reflexively relational approach to the construction of cityness. Rather than reifying the city as a generic, universal settlement type, this approach is productively attuned to the multiple sociospatial configurations in which agglomerations are crystallizing under contemporary capitalism, as well as to the transnational, inter-scalar and often extra-territorial webs through which their developmental pathways are mediated or ‘worlded’ (see, e.g. Roy 2009, 2014). And yet, despite its sophisticated methodological foundations, the bulk of postcolonial urban research and theory-building has, in practice, focused on cities, *tout court*.

In effect, even though a ‘southern’ lens is being mobilized within this literature to reconceptualize the geographies of the urban, its concrete sites of investigation have remained relatively familiar local or metropolitan units—the great population centers of Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, South and Southeast Asia, East Asia and the Middle East. In a form of stubbornly persistent ‘methodological cityism’ (Angelo and Wachsmuth 2014), major strands of postcolonial urban studies still demarcate their research terrain with the same conditions—large, dense and heterogeneous settlements—upon which the inherited field of Euro-American urban studies has long focused its analytical gaze. The broader landscapes of urbanization, which extend far beyond the megacities, metropolitan regions and peri-urban zones of the postcolonial world, are not completely ignored within this literature (as illustrated, for example, in its concern with the geographies of migration). But nor, however, are they brought into explicit or reflexive focus when postcolonial urbanists frame their research agendas and conceptual cartographies (for further elaborations, see Robinson 2014). We argue below that such landscapes of ‘extended urbanization’—understood as fundamental conditions of possibility for the production of historically and geographically specific forms of ‘cityness’—must be analyzed and theorized centrally within any updated epistemology of the urban for the 21st century. Today, such zones can no longer be understood as elements of a ‘rural’ outside that impacts the city and is in turn effected by it; rather, they are now increasingly internalized within world-encompassing, if deeply variegated, processes of planetary urbanization.

The epistemological orientations presented below are intended to contribute to the collective project of illuminating the great variety of urbanization processes that are presently reshaping the planet. These theses are closely connected to our developing theorization of planetary urbanization, but they

are not intended to elaborate that analysis in any detail. Instead, our proposals are meant to demarcate some relatively broad epistemological parameters within which a multiplicity of reflexive approaches to critical urban theory might be pursued. We aim not to advance a specific, substantive theory of the urban, but to present a general epistemological framework through which this elusive, yet seemingly omnipresent condition of the contemporary world might be analytically deciphered, even as it continues to evolve and mutate before our eyes, thereby changing yet again the epistemic foundations for its future interpretation. This discussion is thus intended as a *meta*-theoretical exercise: instead of attempting to nail down a fixed definition of the essential properties of the urban phenomenon ‘once and for all’, it involves developing a reflexive epistemological framework that may help bring into focus and render intelligible the ongoing reconstitution of that phenomenon in relation to the simultaneous evolution of the very concepts and methods being used to study it. Any rigorously reflexive account of the urban requires this meta-theoretical moment.

Thesis 1: the urban and urbanization are theoretical categories, not empirical objects

In most mainstream traditions, the urban is treated as an empirically self-evident, universal category corresponding to a particular type of bounded settlement space, the ‘city’. While such empiricist, universalistic understandings continue to underpin important strands of urban research and policy, including contemporary mainstream discourses on global urbanism, we argue that the urban, and the closely associated concept of urbanization, must be understood as theoretical abstractions; they can only be defined through the labor of conceptualization. The urban is thus a theoretical category, not an empirical object: its demarcation as a zone of thought, representation, imagination or

action can only occur through a process of theoretical abstraction.

Even the most descriptively nuanced, quantitatively sophisticated or geospatially enhanced strands of urban research necessarily presuppose any number of pre-empirical assumptions regarding the nature of the putatively ‘urban’ condition, zone or transformation that is under analysis (Brenner and Katsikis 2014). Such assumptions are not mere background conditions or incidental framing devices, but constitute the very interpretive lens through which urban research becomes intelligible as such. For this reason, the ‘urban question’ famously posed by Castells ([1972] 1977) cannot be understood as a theoretical detour, or as a mere intellectual diversion for those interested in concept formation or in the field’s historical evolution. Rather, engagement with the urban question is a constitutive moment of theoretical abstraction within all approaches to urban research and practice, whether or not they reflexively conceptualize it as such.

Since the early 20th century, the evolution of urban studies as a research field has been animated by intense debates regarding the appropriate conceptualization of the urban—its geographical parameters, its historical pathways and its key social, economic, cultural or institutional dimensions (Saunders 1986; Hartmann et al. 1986; Katznelson 1992). These debates have underpinned and animated the succession of research paradigms on urban questions across the social and historical sciences, and they have also been closely articulated to broader developments, controversies and paradigm shifts within the major traditions of social theory, planning and design. In each framing, depending on the underlying epistemological perspective, conceptual grammar, cartographic apparatus and normative-political orientation, the urban has been equated with quite divergent properties, practices, conditions, experiences, institutions and geographies, which have in turn defined the basic horizons for research, representation and

practice. Such demarcations have entailed not only diverse, often incompatible, ways of understanding cities and agglomeration, but also a range of interpretive methods, analytical strategies and cartographic techniques through which those conditions are distinguished from a ‘non-urban’ outside—the suburban, the rural, the natural or otherwise. In this sense, rather than developing through a simple accretion of concrete investigations on a pre-given social condition or spatial arrangement, the field of urban studies has evolved through ongoing theoretical debates regarding the appropriate demarcation, interpretation and mapping of the urban itself.

The urban is, then, an essentially contested concept and has been subject to frequent reinvention in relation to the challenges engendered by research, practice and struggle. While some approaches to the urban have asserted, or aspired to, universal validity, and thus claimed context-independent applicability, every attempt to frame the urban in analytical, geographical and normative-political terms has in fact been strongly mediated through the specific historical-geographical formation(s) in which it emerged—for example, Manchester, Paris and classically industrial models of urbanization in the mid-19th century; Chicago, Berlin, London and rapidly metropolitanizing landscapes of imperial-capitalist urbanization in the early 20th century; and Los Angeles, Shanghai, Dubai, Singapore and neoliberalizing models of globally networked urbanization in the last three decades. As Gieryn (2006, 6) explains, the city is both ‘the subject and the venue of study—scholars in urban studies constitute the city both as the empirical referent of analysis and the physical site where investigation takes place’.

This circumstance means that all engagements with urban theory, whether Euro-American, postcolonial or otherwise, are in some sense ‘provincial’, or context-dependent, because they are mediated through concrete experiences of time and space within particular places. Just as crucially, though,

conditions within local and regional contexts under modern capitalism have long been tightly interdependent with one another, and have been profoundly shaped by broader patterns of capitalist industrialization, regulation and uneven sociospatial development. The recognition of context dependency—the need to ‘provincialize’ urban theory—thus stands in tension with an equally persistent need to understand the historically evolving totality of inter-contextual patterns, developmental pathways and systemic transformations in which such contexts are embedded, whether at national, supranational or worldwide scales.

In all cases, therefore, theoretical definitions of the urban and the historical-geographical contexts of their emergence are tightly intertwined. This proposition applies whether the urban is delineated as a local formation or as a global condition; the contexts of theory production must likewise be understood in both situated *and* inter-contextual terms. Any reflexive approach to the urban question must make explicit the venue of its own research practice (be it a specific place, an urbanizing territory or a broader socioeconomic network) and consider the implications of the latter for its own epistemological and representational framework.

Such definitional debates and theoretical controversies are not only derived from specific contexts of urbanization; they also powerfully impact those contexts insofar as they help clarify, construct, legitimate, disseminate and naturalize particular visions of sociospatial organization that privilege certain elements of the urban process while neglecting or excluding others. These often-contradictory framing visions, interpretations and cartographies of the urban (as site, territory, ecology and experience) mediate urban design, planning, policy and practice, with powerful consequences for ongoing strategies and struggles, in and outside of major institutions, to shape and reshape urbanized landscapes. It is essential, therefore, to connect debates on the urban

question to assessments of their practical and political implications, institutional expressions and everyday consequences in specific contexts of urban restructuring. Such a task may only be accomplished, however, if the underlying assumptions associated with framing conceptualizations of the urban are made explicit, subjected to critical scrutiny and revised continually in relation to evolving research questions, normative-political orientations and practical concerns.

Thesis 2: the urban is a process, not a universal form, settlement type or bounded unit

Across significant strands of the social sciences and the design disciplines, the urban is treated as a fixed, unchanging entity—as a universal form, settlement type or bounded spatial unit ('the' city) that is being replicated across the globe. By contrast, following Lefebvre's ([1970] 2003) methodological injunction, we interpret the urban as a multiscale *process* of sociospatial transformation. The study of specific urban forms, types or units must thus be superseded by investigations of the relentless 'churning' of urban configurations at all spatial scales. This apparently simple proposal entails a series of far-reaching consequences for many of the core epistemological operations of urban theory and research.

First, the urban can no longer be understood as a universal *form*. Apparently stabilized urban sites are in fact merely temporary materializations of ongoing sociospatial transformations. Such processes of creative destruction (see Thesis 3 below) do not simply unfold within fixed or stable urban 'containers', but actively produce, unsettle and rework them, and thus constantly engender new urban configurations. Simply put, the urban is not a (fixed) form but a process; as such, it is dynamic, historically evolving and variegated. It is materialized within built environments and

sociospatial arrangements at all scales; and yet it also continually creatively destroys the latter to produce new patterns of sociospatial organization (Harvey 1985). There is thus no singular morphology of the urban; there are, rather, many processes of urban transformation that crystallize across the world at various spatial scales, with wide-ranging, often unpredictable consequences for inherited sociospatial arrangements.

Second, the urban can no longer be understood as a settlement *type*. The field of urban studies has long been preoccupied with the task of classifying particular sociospatial conditions within putatively distinct types of settlement space (city, town, suburb, metropolis and various sub-classifications thereof). Today, however, such typologies of urban settlement have outlived their usefulness; processes of sociospatial transformation, which crisscross and constantly rework diverse places, territories and scales, must instead be moved to the foreground of our epistemological framework. In such a conceptualization, urban configurations must be conceived not as discrete settlement types, but as dynamic, relationally evolving force fields of sociospatial restructuring (Allen, Cochrane, and Massey 1998; Massey 2005). As such, urban configurations represent, simultaneously, the territorial inheritance of earlier rounds of restructuring and the sociospatial frameworks in and through which future urban pathways and potentials are produced. The typological classification of static urban units is thus considerably less productive, in both analytical and political terms, than explorations of the various processes through which urban configurations are produced, contested and transformed.

Third, the urban can no longer be understood as a *bounded* spatial unit. Since the origins of modern approaches to urban theory in the late 19th century, the urban has been conceptualized with reference to the growth of cities, conceived as relatively circumscribed, if constantly expanding, sociospatial units. Such assumptions have

long pervaded mainstream urban research, and they are today powerfully embodied in the discourses on global urbanism promoted by the UN, the World Bank and other major international organizations. In light of the above considerations, however, our analyses of urban configurations must be systematically disentangled from inherited understandings of cityness, which obfuscate the processes of ‘implosion-explosion’ that underpin the production and continual restructuring of sociospatial organization under modern capitalism. It is misleading to equate the urban with any singular, bounded spatial unit (city, agglomeration, metropolitan region or otherwise); nor can its territorial contours be coherently delineated relative to some postulated non-urban ‘outside’ (suburban, rural, natural, wilderness or otherwise). Conceptualizations of the urban as a bounded spatial unit must thus be superseded by approaches that investigate how urban configurations are churned and remade across the uneven landscapes of worldwide capitalist development.

In sum, the process-based approach to the urban proposed here requires a fundamental reorientation of urban research. No longer conceived as a form, type or bounded unit, the urban must now be retheorized as a process that, even while continually reinscribing patterns of agglomeration across the earth’s terrestrial landscape, simultaneously transgresses, explodes and reworks inherited geographies (of social interaction, settlement, land use, circulation and socio-metabolic organization), both within and beyond large-scale metropolitan centers.

Thesis 3: urbanization involves three mutually constitutive moments—concentrated urbanization, extended urbanization and differential urbanization

If the urban is no longer to be conceived as a universal form, as a specific settlement type or as a bounded unit, inherited understandings

of urbanization must likewise be completely reinvented, for they are largely derived from or intertwined with precisely this triad of naturalized epistemological assumptions. The notion of urbanization may initially appear to resonate productively with the processual epistemological orientation emphasized in Thesis 2. In practice, however, all major theories of urbanization are seriously limited by their exclusive focus on what Burgess ([1925] 1967) classically described as ‘the growth of the city’. This is not merely a matter of empirical emphasis, but flows from a fundamental epistemological commitment—namely, the conceptualization of urbanization with exclusive reference to the condition of agglomeration, the spatial concentration of population, means of production, infrastructure and investment within a more or less clearly delineated spatial zone.

Without denying the importance of spatial clusters to urbanization processes, we argue that a more multifaceted conceptualization is today required which illuminates the interplay between three mutually constitutive moments—(i) concentrated urbanization, (ii) extended urbanization and (iii) differential urbanization. These three moments are dialectically interconnected and mutually constitutive; they are analytically distinguished here simply to offer an epistemological basis for a reinvented conceptualization that transcends the limitations and blind spots of mainstream models.

Since Friedrich Engels famously analyzed the explosive growth of industrial Manchester in the mid-19th century, the power of agglomeration has been a key focal point for urban research. Although its appropriate interpretation remains a topic of intense debate, the moment of *concentrated urbanization* is thus quite familiar from inherited approaches to urban economic geography, which aim to illuminate the agglomeration processes through which firms, workers and infrastructure cluster together in space during successive cycles of capitalist industrial development (Veltz 1996; Storper 1996;

Scott 1988; Krätke 2014). Obviously, large agglomerations remain central arenas and engines of massive urban transformations, and thus clearly merit sustained investigation, not least under early 21st-century capitalism. However, we reject the widespread assumption within both mainstream and critical traditions of urban studies that agglomerations represent the privileged or even exclusive terrain of urban development (Scott and Storper 2014). In contrast, we propose that the historical and contemporary geographies of urban transformation encompass much broader, if massively uneven, territories and landscapes, including many that may contain relatively small, dispersed or minimal populations, but where major socio-economic, infrastructural and socio-metabolic metamorphoses have occurred precisely in support of, or as a consequence of, the everyday operations and growth imperatives of often-distant agglomerations. For this reason, the moment of concentrated urbanization is inextricably connected to that of *extended urbanization*.

Extended urbanization involves, first, the operationalization of places, territories and landscapes, often located far beyond the dense population centers, to support the everyday activities and socioeconomic dynamics of urban life. The production of such operational landscapes results from the most basic socio-metabolic imperatives associated with urban growth—the procurement and circulation of food, water, energy and construction materials; the processing and management of waste and pollution; and the mobilization of labor-power in support of these various processes of extraction, production, circulation and management. Second, the process of extended urbanization entails the ongoing construction and reorganization of relatively fixed and immobile infrastructures (in particular, for transportation and communication) in support of these operations, and consequently, the uneven thickening and stretching of an ‘urban fabric’ (Lefebvre [1970] 2003) across progressively larger zones, and

ultimately, around much of the entire planet (see Thesis 5 below). Third, the process of extended urbanization frequently involves the enclosure of land from established social uses in favor of privatized, exclusionary and profit-oriented modes of appropriation, whether for resource extraction, agrobusiness, logistics functions or otherwise. In this sense, extended urbanization is intimately intertwined with the violence of accumulation by dispossession (often animated and enforced by state institutions) through which non-commodified modes of social life are destabilized and articulated to global spatial divisions of labor and systems of exchange (Ajl 2014; Sevilla-Buitrago 2014).

The moment of extended urbanization has been partially illuminated in classic accounts of city-hinterland relations, which have explored not only the making of operational landscapes to support population centers, but the ways in which the very process of metropolitan development has hinged upon massive, highly regularized inputs (of labor, materials, food, water, energy, commodities, information and so forth) procured from agglomerations as well as various types of ‘non-city’ spaces, both proximate and remote (Harris and Ullman 1945; Jacobs 1970; Cronon 1991; for discussion, see Katsikis 2015). More recently, accounts of extended urbanization have emphasized the progressive enclosure, operationalization and industrialization of such landscapes around the world—including rainforests, tundra, alpine zones, oceans, deserts and even the atmosphere itself—to fuel the rapid intensification of metropolitan growth in recent decades (Schmid 2006; Brenner 2014a, 2014b; Soja and Kanai [2006] 2014; Monte-Mór 2014a, 2014b).

Throughout the *longue durée* history of capitalist industrialization, the geographies of extended urbanization have been essential to the consolidation, growth and restructuring of urban centers. Rather than being relegated to a non-urban ‘outside’, therefore, the moment of extended urbanization must be viewed as an integral terrain of the

urbanization process as a whole. Thus, without abandoning the long-standing concern of urbanists to understand agglomeration processes, we propose to connect that familiar *problématique* to a wide-ranging set of sociospatial transformations that have not typically been viewed as being connected to urbanization.

Concentrated and extended urbanization are inextricably intertwined with the process of *differential urbanization*, in which inherited sociospatial configurations are continually creatively destroyed in relation to the broader developmental dynamics and crisis-tendencies of modern capitalism. Lefebvre ([1970] 2003) captured this distinctive tendency within capitalist forms of urbanization through the vivid metaphor of ‘implosion-explosion’, a formulation that has been appropriated in diverse ways in recent years by critical urban thinkers (Brenner 2014a, 2014b; Schmid, Stanek, and Moravánszky 2015). For our purposes here, rather than equate ‘implosion’ exclusively with concentrated urbanization and ‘explosion’ with extended urbanization, the metaphor offers a useful basis for demarcating a third, differential moment of urbanization based upon the perpetual drive to restructure sociospatial organization under modern capitalism, not only within metropolitan agglomerations but across broader landscapes of extended urbanization.

Consistent with the process-based conceptualization of the urban presented in Thesis 2, the differential moment of urbanization puts into relief the intense, perpetual dynamism of capitalist forms of urbanization, in which sociospatial configurations are tendentially established, only to be rendered obsolete and eventually superseded through the relentless forward motion of the accumulation process and industrial development (Harvey 1985; Storper and Walker 1989). Just as crucially, as we suggest below (Thesis 7), differential urbanization is also the result of various forms of urban struggle and expresses the powerful potentials for radical social and political transformation

that are unleashed, but often suppressed, through capitalist industrial development (see Lefebvre [1974] 1991 on differential space; and Lefebvre 2009 on the ‘politics of space’).

The creative destruction of sociospatial arrangements within large urban centers has long been recognized in radical approaches to the periodization of urban development (Gordon 1978; Harvey 1989). In such approaches, successive configurations of the urban built environment are thought temporarily to internalize the underlying contradictions of capitalism associated, for instance, with class struggle, property relations, over-accumulation and the political control of surplus value. To the degree that inherited built environments can no longer effectively manage the struggles and conflicts engendered through such contradictions, it is argued, they are radically remade, or creatively destroyed, until a new formation of the urban is produced. In this sense, despite major disagreements regarding the underlying causes of crisis-induced urban restructuring, radical theories of the capitalist city have already developed a relatively elaborate account of the interplay between concentrated and differential urbanization since around 1850 (Soja 2000).

By contrast, we currently have only a limited grasp of how—via what mechanisms, struggles, patterns and pathways—the landscapes of extended urbanization have been creatively destroyed during the history of capitalist development, whether in relation to waves of concentrated urbanization or, more generally, in relation to broader regimes of capital accumulation and modes of territorial regulation. The cycles of urban development explored by radical scholars under the rubric, for instance, of the mercantile, industrial, Fordist-Keynesian and neo-liberal city (Harvey 1989) have only rarely been connected, either empirically or analytically, to the sociospatial dynamics and crisis-tendencies within the broader landscapes of extended urbanization (for some suggestive openings, however, see Jones 1997; Bayat

and Denis 2000; Thompson, Bunnell, and Parthasarathy 2013; McGee [1991] 2014). However, it can be argued that the geographies of extended urbanization have likewise been undergoing intensive processes of creative destruction throughout the history of capitalist industrial development, generally in relation to major waves of crisis-induced restructuring and political struggle within urban centers and the broader territorial economies in which the latter are embedded (Moore 2008, 2011). Such transformations have been intensifying, deepening and broadening around the world since the long 1980s, with far-reaching social, environmental and political consequences for the future of capitalism, and indeed, humanity as a whole (Luke 2003).

Figure 1 offers a stylized summary of the three core moments of urbanization under capitalism. We reiterate that these 'moments' refer not to distinct morphological conditions, geographical sites or temporal stages, but to mutually constitutive, dialectically intertwined elements of a historically specific process of sociospatial transformation. Just as distant flows of material, energy and labor underpin the everyday dynamics of large metropolitan agglomerations, so too do the growth imperatives and consumption demands of the latter directly mediate the construction of large-scale infrastructural projects, land-use reorganization and sociocultural transformations in apparently 'remote' operational landscapes. As the fabric of urbanization is progressively, if unevenly, stretched, thickened, rewoven and creatively destroyed, new centers of agglomeration (from mining and farming towns and tourist enclaves to logistics hubs and growth poles) may emerge within zones that previously served mainly as operational hinterlands (Storper and Walker 1989). The urban fabric of modern capitalism is thus best conceived as a dynamically evolving force field in which the three moments of urbanization continually interact to produce historically specific forms of sociospatial organization and uneven development. A framework that

reflexively connects the three moments of urbanization demarcated here may thus offer some productive new interpretive perspectives not only on the historical and contemporary geographies of capitalist industrial development, but also on some of the socio-ecological conditions that are today commonly thought to be associated with the age of the 'anthropocene' (Crutzen 2002; for a critical discussion, see Chakrabarty 2009; Malm and Hornborg 2014).

Thesis 4: the fabric of urbanization is multidimensional

The epistemology of urbanization proposed above explodes inherited assumptions regarding the geographies of this process: they are no longer expressed simply through the city, the metropolitan region or inter-urban networks, and nor are they bounded neatly and distinguished from a putatively non-urban 'outside'. But this systematic analytical delinking of urbanization from trends related exclusively to city growth entails a further epistemological consequence—the abandonment of several major sociological, demographic, economic or cultural definitions of urbanization that are directly derived from that assumption. Thus, with the deconstruction of monodimensional, city-centric epistemologies, urbanization can no longer be considered synonymous with such commonly invoked developments as: rural-to-urban migration; expanding population levels in big cities; the concentration of investments and economic capacities within dense population centers; the diffusion of urbanism as a sociocultural form into small- and medium-sized towns and villages; or the spreading of similar, 'city-like' services, amenities, technologies, infrastructures or built environments across the territory. Any among the latter trends *may*, under specific conditions, be connected to distinctive patterns and pathways of urbanization. However, in the epistemological framework proposed here, their analytical

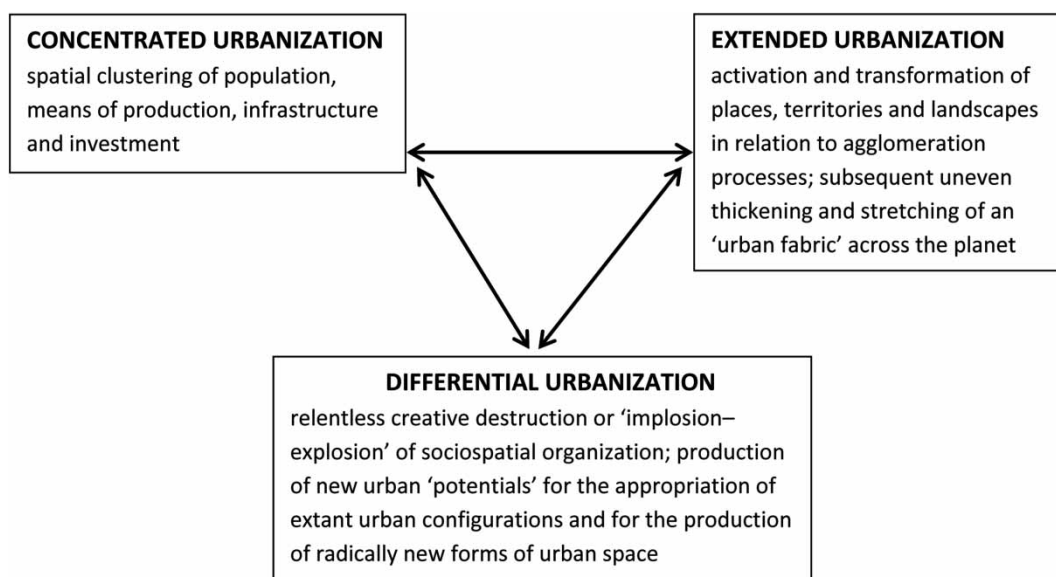


Figure 1 The three 'moments' of urbanization.

demarcation as such no longer hinges upon the definitionally fixed assumption either (a) that they necessarily originate within specific settlement units (generally, big cities) or (b) that they necessarily result from the replication of formally identical urban settlement types, infrastructural arrangements or cultural forms across the entire territory.

What is required, instead, is a multidimensional understanding of urbanization that can illuminate the historically specific patterns and pathways through which the variegated, uneven geographies of this process, in each of its three constitutive moments, are articulated during successive cycles of worldwide capitalist development. To facilitate such an analysis, building upon Lefebvre's three-dimensional conceptualization of space (Lefebvre [1974] 1991; Schmid 2005, 2008, 2015b), we distinguish three further *dimensions* of urbanization—spatial practices, territorial regulation and everyday life. These dimensions of urbanization co-constitute the three moments demarcated in the previous thesis, and together produce the unevenly woven, restlessly mutating urban fabric of the contemporary world (Figure 2).

First, urbanization involves distinctive *spatial practices* through which land use is intensified, connectivity infrastructures are thickened and socio-metabolic transformations are accelerated to facilitate processes of capitalist industrialization. Such spatial practices underpin the production of built environments within major cities as well as a wide range of sociospatial transformations in near and distant zones in relation to the latter.

Second, urbanization is always mediated through specific forms of *territorial regulation* that (a) impose collectively binding rules regarding the appropriation of labor, land, food, water, energy and material resources within and among places and territories; (b) mobilize formal and informal planning procedures to govern investment patterns and financial flows into the built environment and infrastructural networks at various spatial scales; and (c) manage patterns of territorial development with regard to processes of production and social reproduction, major aspects of logistics infrastructure and commodity circulation, as well as emergent crisis-tendencies embedded within inherited

		D I M E N S I O N S		
		SPATIAL PRACTICES	TERRITORIAL REGULATION	EVERYDAY LIFE
M O M E N T S	CONCENTRATED URBANIZATION	The production of built environments and sociospatial configurations to harness the power of agglomeration	Rule-regimes and planning systems governing socioeconomic and environmental conditions associated with the power of agglomeration	The production of social routines, everyday practices and forms of life associated with the power of agglomeration
	EXTENDED URBANIZATION	The activation of places, territories and landscapes in relation to agglomerations; the subsequent creation, thickening and stretching of an 'urban fabric' connecting agglomerations to the diverse sites of socio-metabolic and socioeconomic transformation upon which they depend.	Governance systems oriented towards the sociometabolic and socioeconomic processes that support major urban centers and facilitate the thickening and stretching of an urban fabric across territories.	The social routines, everyday practices and forms of life that emerge (a) as diverse places, territories and landscapes are operationalized in relation to agglomerations, and (b) as a broader urban fabric is thickened and stretched across territories and scales
	DIFFERENTIAL URBANIZATION	Recurrent pressures to creatively destroy inherited geographies of agglomeration and associated operational landscapes	Mobilization of state institutions and other regulatory instruments to promote, manage, accelerate or otherwise influence the ongoing reorganization of urban agglomerations and the broader fabric of extended urbanization	The reorganization of social routines, everyday practices and forms of life in conjunction with the creative destruction of built environments and the urban fabric at any spatial scale

Figure 2 Moments and dimensions of urbanization

spatial arrangements (Brenner 2004; Schmid 2003).

Finally, urbanization mediates and transforms *everyday life*. Whether within dense population centers or in more dispersed locations embedded within the broader urban fabric, urban space is defined by the people who use, appropriate and transform

it through their daily routines and practices, which frequently involve struggles regarding the very form and content of the urban itself, at once as a site and stake of social experience. The qualities of urban space, across diverse locations, are thus also embedded within and reproduced through everyday experiences, which in turn

crystallize longer term processes of socialization that are materialized within built environments and territorial arrangements.

Clearly, this is a broad conceptualization of urbanization: it involves a wide-ranging constellation of material, social, institutional, environmental and everyday transformations associated with capitalist industrialization, the circulation of capital and the management of territorial development at various spatial scales. We would insist, however, on distinguishing urbanization from the more general processes of capitalist industrialization and world market expansion that have been investigated by economic historians and historical sociologists of capitalist development (e.g. Wallerstein 1974; Braudel 1984; Arrighi 1994). As understood here, urbanization is indeed linked to these processes, but its specificity lies precisely in materializing the latter within places, territories and landscapes, and in embedding them within concrete, temporarily stabilized configurations of socioeconomic life, socio-environmental organization and regulatory management. Capitalist industrial development does not engender urban growth and restructuring on an untouched terrestrial surface; rather, it constantly collides with, and reorganizes, inherited sociospatial configurations, including those produced directly through the social relations and political forms of capitalism. Urbanization is precisely the medium and expression of this collision/transformation, and every configuration of urban life is powerfully shaped by the diverse social, political and institutional forces that mediate it.

Thesis 5: urbanization has become planetary

Since the first wave of capitalist industrialization in the 19th century, the functional borders, catchment areas and immediate hinterlands of urban regions have been extended outwards to create ever larger regional units. Just as importantly, however, this dramatic

process of metropolitan expansion has long been premised upon the intensive activation and transformation of progressively broader landscapes of extended urbanization which supply agglomerations with their most basic socioeconomic and socio-metabolic requirements. The patterns and pathways of socio-spatial restructuring that crystallized around the world during the long, violent and intensely contested transition from industrial and metropolitan to territorial formations of urbanization, roughly from the 1830s to the 1970s, require further investigation and interpretation. In contrast to inherited periodizations, which focus almost exclusively on cities and urban form, the framework proposed here would permit the dynamics of city growth during each period to be analyzed in direct relation to the production and reconstitution of historically and geographically specific operational landscapes (mediated through Empire, colonialism, neo-colonialism and various forms of enclosure and accumulation by dispossession) that supported the latter.

For present purposes, we focus on the contemporary formation of urbanization. In our view, a genuinely planetary formation of urbanization began to emerge following the long 1980s, the transitional period of crisis-induced global restructuring that began with the deconstruction of Fordist-Keynesian and national-developmental regimes of accumulation in the early 1970s and continued until the withering away of state socialism and the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and early 1990s. These developments established some of the basic conditions for the subsequent planetary extension of the urban fabric during the last two decades—the deregulation of the global financial system and of various national regulatory systems; the neoliberalization of global, national and local economic governance; the worldwide digital revolution; the flexibilization of production processes and the generalization of global production networks; and the creation of new forms of market-oriented territorial regulation at

supranational, national and subnational scales. These realignments have created a new regulatory framework encouraging speculative urban investment, not only within the property markets and built environments of the world's major cities, but also through the construction of vastly expanded urban networks and infrastructures of resource extraction, agro-industrial cultivation and logistical circulation, all of which have massively contributed to the accelerated enclosure of landscapes around the world to permit intensified, accelerated capital circulation (Harvey 2010; Merrifield 2014).

In the early 1970s, Lefebvre ([1970] 2003) anticipated this situation, advancing the radical hypothesis of the complete urbanization of society. For Lefebvre, this was an emergent tendency that might be realized in the future, but he did not speculate as to when or how it might actually occur, and with what consequences. Today, it is increasingly evident that the urban has indeed become a worldwide condition in which all aspects of social, economic, political and environmental relations are enmeshed, across places, territories and scales, crosscutting any number of long-entrenched geographical divisions (urban/rural, city/countryside, society/nature, North/South, East/West). The dawn of planetary urbanization is being expressed through several intertwined tendencies that have only just begun to come into analytical focus during the early 21st century, but which urgently require the scrutiny of critical urban thinkers.

Perhaps most prominent among these is the remarkable territorial expansion of urban agglomerations, vividly captured through Sudjic's (1993) notion of '100-mile cities', which has blurred and even begun to dissolve the boundaries between many major cities and their surrounding territories or erstwhile 'hinterlands' (Soja and Kanai [2006] 2014). Today, urban agglomerations can no longer be understood simply as nodal concentrations organized around and oriented towards a single urban core.

Instead, they must be reconceptualized as dense force fields of nearly continuous interaction among the various processes associated with concentrated, extended and differential urbanization (Topalovic, Knüsel, and Jäggi 2013).

Equally important, in this context, are several additional waves of socioeconomic and socio-metabolic transformation of the post-1980s period that have significantly rewoven the inherited fabric of urbanization while extending it into new realms that were previously relatively insulated from its wide-ranging imprints. These include (a) a major expansion in agro-industrial export zones, with associated large-scale infrastructural investments and land-use transformations to produce and circulate food and biofuels for world markets (McMichael 2013); (b) a massive expansion in investments related to mineral and oil extraction, in large part due to the post-2003 commodity boom manifested in dramatic increases in global prices for raw materials, especially metals and fuels (Arboleda 2015); and (c) the accelerated consolidation and extension of long-distance transportation and communications infrastructures (including networks such as roads, canals, railways, waterways and pipelines; and nodal points such as seaports, airports and intermodal logistics hubs) designed to reduce the transaction costs associated with the production and circulation of capital (Notteboom and Rodrigue 2005; Hein 2011; Hesse 2013). Under these conditions, erstwhile 'rural' zones around the world are being profoundly transformed: various forms of agro-industrial consolidation and land enclosure are undermining small- and medium-sized forms of food production; new forms of export-oriented industrial extraction are destabilizing established models of land-use and social reproduction, as well as environmental security; and newly consolidated inter-regional migration networks and communications infrastructures are dramatically rearticulating the interdependencies between villages, small towns and larger, often-distant urban centers,

contributing in turn to the production of new forms of everyday experience that transcend the confines of specific places.

Amidst these far-reaching sociospatial transformations, the fabric of extended urbanization is meanwhile also being woven ever more densely, if still quite unevenly, across many relatively depopulated and erstwhile ‘wilderness’ landscapes, from the Arctic, the European Alps and the Amazon to Patagonia, the Himalayas, the Sahara, Siberia and the Gobi desert, as well as through major zones of the world’s seas and oceans (Diener et al. 2006; Guger, Couling, and Blanchard 2012; Urban Theory Lab 2015). While the ecology and topography of these landscapes may still appear relatively pristine or untouched by the ‘footprint’ of industrial capitalism, such impressions are deeply misleading. In fact, for several decades now, strategic places, grids, corridors and concession zones within such territories have been aggressively enclosed and operationalized, usually by transnational corporations under the legal protection of neoliberal and/or authoritarian national states and various kinds of intergovernmental organizations, to facilitate new forms of resource extraction, energy and agro-industrial production, an unprecedented expansion of logistics infrastructures, as well as various additional forms of land-use intensification and environmental plunder intended to support the relentless growth and consumption imperatives of the world’s major cities.

Under contemporary conditions, then, traditional models of metropolis and hinterland, center and periphery, city and countryside, have been exploded. The urban/rural opposition, which has long served as an epistemological anchor for the most basic research operations of urban studies, has today become an increasingly obfuscatory basis for deciphering emergent patterns and pathways of sociospatial restructuring around the world. On the one hand, the geographies of uneven spatial development are today being articulated as an interweaving of new developmental patterns and potentials

within a thickening, if deeply polarized, fabric of worldwide urbanization. The urban is thus no longer defined in opposition to an ontological Other located beyond or ‘outside’ it, but has instead become the very tissue of human life itself, at once the framework and the basis for the many forms of sociospatial differentiation that continue to proliferate under contemporary capitalist conditions. Nor can the rural be understood any longer as a perpetually present ‘elsewhere’ or ‘constitutive outside’ that permits the urban to be demarcated as a stable, coherent and discrete terrain. Instead, this supposedly non-urban realm has now been thoroughly engulfed within the variegated patterns and pathways of a planetary formation of urbanization. In effect, it has been internalized into the very core of the urbanization process.

This proposition may prove controversial, especially if it is misunderstood as a totalizing generalization that ignores the continued differences, whether in social, institutional, infrastructural or environmental terms, between large metropolitan centers and zones characterized, for instance, by low or dispersed population, minimal or degraded built environments and/or relatively poor communications and transportation connectivity (for discussion and debate of this issue, see Catterall 2014; Catterall and Wilson 2014; Scott and Storper 2014). Our claim here, however, is not that ‘rural’ or non-urban zones have totally disappeared; on the contrary, such spaces still exist and may even play decisive roles in the social, political and economic life of certain regions, for instance, in parts of Africa, Southeast Asia or Latin America (see, e.g. Scott 2009). However, the conditions within so-called ‘rural’ zones should not be taken for granted; they require careful, contextually specific and theoretically reflexive investigations that may be seriously impeded through the unreflexive use of generic labels that predetermine their patterns and pathways of development and their form and degree of connection to other places,

regions and territories. Indeed, much contemporary research on putatively rural regions has shown that many such areas are being transformed through and embedded within urbanization processes, precisely through the kinds of accumulation strategies, infrastructural projects and socio-metabolic linkages we propose to theorize under the rubric of extended urbanization (see, e.g. Cloke 2006; Diener et al. 2006; Woods 2009; Alton 2014; Wilson 2014; Monte-Mór 2014a, 2014b). Such studies strongly reinforce our contention that the inherited urban/rural distinction has come to obscure much more than it reveals regarding the entities, processes and transformations being classified on either side of the divide it aspires to demarcate.

Precisely against this background, the concept of planetary urbanization may offer a useful epistemological reorientation. Obviously, it cannot substitute for concrete research on specific zones of sociospatial transformation anywhere in the world. But it does open up an epistemological path through which the latter may be pursued in relation to broader questions regarding the increasingly worldwide, if deeply polarized and uneven, geographies in which even the most apparently 'remote' places, regions and territories are now inextricably interwoven.

Thesis 6: urbanization unfolds through variegated patterns and pathways of uneven spatial development

The emergence of a planetary formation of urbanization does not entail a homogenization of sociospatial landscapes; it is not expressed through the 'globalization' of a uniform condition of cityness (or urban 'sprawl') across the entire planet; and it does not involve the transformation of the earth as a whole into a single world-city, akin to the Death Star in George Lucas' *Star Wars* films or the planet Trantor in Isaac Asimov's science fiction series, *Foundation*.

On the contrary, as conceived here, urbanization under capitalism is always a historically and geographically variegated process: it is mediated through historically and geographically specific institutions, representations, strategies and struggles that are, in turn, conflictually articulated to the cyclical rhythms of worldwide capital accumulation and their associated social, political and environmental contradictions. Rather than being analyzed through monodimensional or formalistic interpretive frames, capitalist urbanization must be understood as a polymorphic, multi-scalar and emergent dynamic of sociospatial transformation: it hinges upon and continuously produces differentiated, unevenly developed sociospatial configurations at all scales. The task for any contemporary urban epistemology is therefore to develop an analytical and cartographic orientation through which to decipher its uneven, restlessly mutating crystallizations.

Capitalist urbanization might best be conceived as a process of constant, if contested, *innovation* in the production of sociospatial arrangements—albeit one that always simultaneously collides with, and thereby transforms, inherited formations of spatial practice, regulatory coordination and everyday life (Schmid 2013). Under capitalism, urbanization is always articulated in contextually embedded sociospatial formations, since it is precisely in relation to, and through collisions with, inherited structures of uneven spatial development that its specific patterns and pathways are forged and fought out. In this way, the abstract, universalizing processes of capitalist industrialization are materialized in historically and geographically specific urban configurations, which are in turn relentlessly transformed through the interplay of accumulation strategies, regulatory projects and sociopolitical struggles at various spatial scales.

The consolidation of a planetary configuration of urban development since the 1980s is thus only the most recent expression of this intense variegation, differentiation and continual reorganization of landscapes. On the

one hand, planetary urbanization is the cumulative product of the earlier *longue durée* cycles of urbanization that have forged, differentiated and continually reshaped the worldwide geographies of capitalism since the mid-19th century. At the same time, this latest formation of urbanization has emerged in the wake of the post-1980s wave of global neoliberalization, financial speculation and accumulation by dispossession that has at once accelerated and intensified the process of commodification and, by consequence, the uneven extension of industrial infrastructures around much of the planet (Thesis 5). However, despite abundant evidence of accelerating urbanization and unprecedented worldwide interconnectivity, the production of planetary urban landscapes during the last three decades has not entailed a simple homogenization of sociospatial conditions. Rather, the dawn of planetary urbanization appears to have markedly accentuated and rewoven the differentiations and polarizations that have long been both precondition and product of the urbanization process under capitalism, albeit in qualitatively new configurations whose contours remain extremely difficult to decipher.

In an attempt to analyze these developments, contemporary urban thinkers have introduced dozens of new concepts intended to designate various putatively ‘new’ urban phenomena (Taylor and Lang 2004; Wolfrum, Nerdinger, and Schauback 2008). While these endeavors productively underscore the changing geographies of the urban in contemporary global society, most have been focused too rigidly upon emergent urban *forms* that appear to have ruptured inherited sociospatial arrangements. These include, for instance, purportedly new kinds of cities (global cities, megacities, edge cities, in-between cities, airport cities, informal cities and the like), regions (global city-regions, megacity-regions, polycentric metropolitan regions and so forth) as well as inter-urban networks, corridors and the like. However, within the epistemological framework proposed here, the constant

search for such ‘new’ urban forms is an intellectual trap: it yields only relatively superficial insights into the modalities and consequences of the wide-ranging transformations that are unleashed through the urbanization process. Creative destruction is the *modus operandi* of capitalist forms of urban development; new urban geographies are thus constantly being produced through the dynamics of differential urbanization, whether within large urban centers or across extended operational landscapes. The essential task, therefore, is less to distinguish ‘new’ urban forms that are putatively superseding earlier spatial morphologies, than to investigate the historically and geographically specific dynamics of creative destruction that underpin the patterns and pathways of urbanization, both historically and in the contemporary epoch.

Much work remains to be done to confront this challenge. A new vocabulary of urbanization is urgently required that would help us, both analytically and cartographically, to decipher the differentiated and rapidly mutating landscapes of urbanization that are today being produced across the planet. While the shifting geographies of agglomeration must obviously remain a primary focus in such an endeavor, patterns of extended urbanization must now likewise be positioned centrally in any sustained effort to elaborate new concepts and methods for deciphering this emergent, volatile and still largely unfamiliar worldwide urban fabric.

Thesis 7: the urban is a collective project in which the potentials generated through urbanization are appropriated and contested

The preceding theses have attempted to clarify in analytical terms some of the foundations for a new epistemology of the urban that could more productively illuminate both historical and contemporary geographies of capitalist urbanization than inherited

frameworks. We conclude with a final thesis that underscores the essentially political character of such epistemological considerations. Here we build upon our previous discussion of differential urbanization (Thesis 3), which emphasized the relentless drive towards creative destruction under capitalism and the powerful potentials for radical socio-spatial transformation associated with it. Such potentials are, we argue, an essential product and stake of urbanization: they are generated through the ‘productive force’ of agglomeration and associated operational landscapes; they are often instrumentalized through capital and state institutions to facilitate historically specific forms of industrialization and political regulation; but they are also reappropriated, redistributed and continually remade through the everyday use and contestation of urban space.

The urban can be productively understood as a *transformative potential* that is constantly generated through processes of urbanization. As both Georg Simmel and Henri Lefebvre paradigmatically recognized in different moments of 20th-century capitalist development, this transformative potential inheres in the social, economic and cultural differentiations that are produced through urbanization, which connect diverse populations, institutions, activities, interactions and experiments in specific sociospatial configurations (Schmid 2015a). The harnessing of such potentials is of central importance in the process of capital accumulation and in technologies of political regulation. At the same time, social movements struggle to appropriate such potentials for everyday uses, social reproduction and cultural experimentation. In precisely this sense, the urban cannot be completely subsumed under the abstract logics of capitalist industrialization or state domination: it is always co-produced and transformed through its users, who may strive to appropriate its actualized or unrealized potentials towards collective social uses, to create new forms of experience, connection and experimentation—in short, to produce a different form of life (Lefebvre

[1974] 1991, [1970] 2003). The definition of the urban is thus not an exclusively theoretical question; it is ultimately a *practical* one: it is necessarily articulated through debates, controversies, struggles, uprisings and revolts, and it is ultimately realized in the pleasures, routines and dramas of everyday life.

In recent years, many radical urban theorists have wrestled with this constellation of issues through explorations of Lefebvre’s ([1968] 1996) classic concept of the ‘right to the city’ (Marcuse 2012). Originally elaborated in the context of the political uprisings of the late 1960s in Paris, this slogan subsequently became an important rallying cry for political mobilizations, which have sought to connect diverse struggles that were related in some way to the urban question (i.e. regarding rights to housing, transportation, education, public health, recreational infrastructures or environmental safety). Since the long 1980s, the demand for the right to the city has become even more widespread around the world, and its political content has meanwhile been differentiated to encompass a variety of normative and ideological positions, policy proposals, movement demands and popular constituencies in diverse local and national contexts across the world (Mayer 2012; Schmid 2012).

Given our arguments and proposals above, however, struggles over the right to the city must be fundamentally reframed—for, as Harvey (2012, xv) notes, ‘to claim the right to the city is, in effect, to claim a right to something that no longer exists’ (for an analogous discussion, see Merrifield 2013). Clearly, struggles over access to urban resources in large cities—and over the collective power to produce and transform them—remain as fundamental as ever, and will continue to shape ongoing processes of urbanization around the world. However, under contemporary conditions of planetary urbanization, the classical city (and its metropolitan and regional variants) can no longer serve as the primary reference point for urban struggles or for visions of ‘possible urban

worlds' (Harvey 1996). Instead, a wide range of new urban practices and discourses are being produced in diverse places, territories and landscapes, often in zones that are geographically removed from large cities, but where new forms of collective insurgency are emerging in response to the patterns of industrial restructuring, territorial enclosure and landscape reorganization sketched above. From Nigeria, South Africa, India and China to Brazil, Mexico and northern Canada, new political strategies are being constructed by peasants, workers, indigenous peoples and other displaced populations to oppose the infrastructuralization and enclosure of their everyday social spaces and the destruction of their established forms of livelihood (see, e.g. Alton 2014; Wilson 2014; Arboleda 2015; and the documentary film, *Millions Can Walk*, Schaub and Musale 2014). The politics of anti-gentrification movements and resistance to corporate mega-projects in dense city cores can thereby be connected, both analytically and politically, to mobilizations against land enclosure, large-scale infrastructures (dams, highways, pipelines, industrial corridors, mines) and displacement in seemingly 'remote' regions (on which, see Merrifield's [2014] analysis of 'neo-Haussmannization'). Rather than rejecting urban life, such mobilizations are often demanding a more socially equitable, democratically managed and environmentally sane form of urbanization than that being imposed by the forces of neoliberal capitalism.

The concept of planetary urbanization proposed here offers no more than an epistemological orientation through which to begin to decipher such struggles, their interconnections across places, territories and landscapes, and the urban potentials they are claiming, articulating and constantly transforming. Such an investigation remains to be undertaken, but the epistemological perspective proposed here requires that it be framed in a manner that attempts to overcome the compartmentalization and fragmentation not

only of urban spaces, but of urban struggles themselves, no matter where they are situated. Just as crucially, rather than being based upon inherited concepts and representations of the urban, such an inquiry would need to illuminate the manifold ways in which the users of urbanizing spaces produce and transform their own urban worlds through everyday practices, discourses and struggles, leading to the formation not only of new urban spatial configurations, but of new visions of the potentials being produced and claimed through their activities (INURA 1998).

The urban is a collective project—it is produced through collective action, negotiation, imagination, experimentation and struggle. The urban society is thus never an achieved condition, but offers an open horizon in relation to which concrete struggles over the urban are waged. It is through such struggles, ultimately, that any viable new urban epistemology will be forged.

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Transatlantic city, part 2: Late entrepreneurialism

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Abstract

The first installment of this two-part paper made a case for a conjunctural approach to urban studies, reserving a special place for the provisional formulation and ongoing revision of midlevel theories – from the entrepreneurial city to austerity urbanism and financialised urban governance – while positioning abstraction and contextualisation as simultaneous, dialogic practices. It follows that such arguments can be developed only so far in the absence of concrete cases, where conjunctural accounts actually gain traction, direction and purpose. Seeking to operationalise some of these methodological principles by way of a situated, single-city case study, this part of the paper returns to the financially challenged casino capital of Atlantic City, tracing its long (and notorious) history of entrepreneurial dealings, from Republican machine control to the ‘experiment’ with legalised gambling that was launched in the mid-1970s, and positioning the structural crisis that preceded the casino pact with the existential crisis that has been generated in the wake of the failure of this distinctive local growth machine. Atlantic City made a very large wager that did not pay off, the unravelling of its much-emulated model of entrepreneurial urbanism dramatising a distinctly ‘late-entrepreneurial’ moment of fiscally mandated governance and political crisis.

Keywords

Atlantic City, emergency management, entrepreneurial urbanism, fiscal crisis, urban governance

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Introduction: Atlantic conjunctures

Part 1 of this paper began with a connection made between the fiscally challenged cities of Detroit and Atlantic City, two places ensnared in different but related ways in the unfolding dynamics of austerity governance (Peck, 2017). While their circumstances are undeniably challenging, these two cities are hardly complete outliers on the moving map of aggravated financial stress in the USA. The extended fallout of the financial crash of

2008, which has been translated into a fiscal, operational, social and political crisis for many cities across the country, exacerbating yet longer-run consequences of neoliberal restructuring, has been uneven but in places truly intense. The crisis has engulfed a substantial number of poor, ‘minority-majority’

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cities (especially those where municipal revenues have been undermined by depressed real-estate values and long-term economic decline), while decisively altering the rules of the game for many more. The experience of no two cities has been the same, of course, and these are particularities that matter. At the same time, it is imperative that local specificities are not only weighed against *but worked into* evolving forms of conjunctural explanation, including those attuned to the effects of contagion and connectivity (inter-city effects, one might say), as well as to the cumulative and combinatorial consequences of *patterned* processes of restructuring, across sites and scales.

The shape-shifting and site-shifting dynamics of neoliberalisation and financialisation are more than mere side effects, background atmospherics, or random contingencies, after all. They are integral to the variegated ways in which restructuring practices and processes take hold, take shape and actually work. Over time and between places, they also condition how these practices and processes are normalised, institutionalised, contested, and transformed. Imperatives of (urban) restructuring do not fall from the sky; they are variously realised, remodelled and resisted *through* site-specific programmes, struggles, experiments and crises. In the US case, the immediate context for the issues examined here, rationales, rubrics and repertoires for handling the lingering consequences of the Wall Street crash of 2008 (as well as for managing the contradictions of deeply financialised, 'late entrepreneurial' urban governance, more generally) are being continuously (re)constructed. Accordingly, profound and systemic changes in the 'operating environments' of US cities have been initiated – institutionally, financially, politically and ideologically. These have included a selective expansion of the machinery for state-imposed emergency management, the targeted imposition of

court-mandated 'plans of adjustment', the staging of demonstration projects and precedent-making interventions, and the expedited diffusion of fast-policy fixes and technocratic reform models. New and deeply consequential narratives of urban crisis and local-state failure are also being constructed in this context, with rationalisations that are part improvised, part recycled and invariably constitutive. Fiscally vulnerable cities find themselves, literally as well as metaphorically, on the receiving end of these developments.

What is being *made of* the fiscal and political crises of places such as Detroit and Atlantic City really makes a difference – locally, of course, but also much more widely too. For example, conservative commentators such as the Manhattan Institute's Stephen Eide have read the ongoing crisis in Atlantic City as an 'isolated [case] of fiscal distress', which in the absence of 'Detroit-level incompetence or corruption' implies that a bankruptcy filing and court-administered debt restructuring 'actually [made] more sense for Atlantic City than it did for Detroit' (2015: 3–4; see also Grossman, 2016; Malanga, 2015). While state governments, think tanks and others have been fashioning new models for urban intervention, calibrated to local circumstances, it is notable that selective applications of fiscal cleansing and state downsizing are deemed to be justified in both of these cases, in order to ring-fence the costs of restructuring and 'adjustment', while sending tutelary messages to other would-be violators in the moral economy of municipal financing. A new strand of distinctly Calvinistic urban narratives now has it that insolvent cities are the authors of their own misfortune, and can only expect to reap the consequences. They certainly should not count on 'handouts' or 'bailouts', either from their more prosperous neighbours or from senior tiers of government. Having had

more than its share of bread and circuses, Atlantic City has lately been recast as a 'free-spending city increasingly dependent on the state' (Malanga, 2015: 125). Its once-celebrated experiment in casino capitalism visibly failing, even after a reboot, enforced austerity and fiscal downsizing must now follow, evidently with scant regard for the prospects for actual 'recovery' or indeed for the conventions of local democracy. For the Manhattan Institute and its ideologically aligned allies in the Republican-controlled statehouses, these are moments that call for unstinting, 'Caesarist' action:

The most serious threats to city budgets – excessive debt, political dysfunction, and soft tax bases – are not going away anytime soon ... To prevent more Detroits, state governments should rein in local officials' ability to make bad fiscal decisions. At least with fiscal policy, if we want stronger cities, we should support more state-imposed constraints on them ... For too long, state governments have cited reverence for local autonomy as an excuse to avoid taking dramatic action when cities face insolvency. But states need to step in, Caesar-like, earlier and more vigorously than they've been doing. Fiscal distress not only threatens a city's ability to perform all basic municipal functions; it also threatens spillover effects, since the consequences of defaults and bankruptcies don't respect local borders. Solvent neighboring communities may find their access to credit suddenly threatened by anxious bond markets. States must confront the tension between local democracy and their responsibility to ensure the welfare of all municipalities, including non-distressed ones. (Eide, 2016: 70, 75)

In this context, the odds have been seriously stacked against 'distressed cities', many of which are poorly placed to negotiate the terms of an impending structural adjustment.

Confronted by alternating threats of an upstate takeover of municipal operations, the 'suspension' of local democracy, and

effective exclusion from the dubious lifeline that is the municipal credit market, Atlantic City has been confronted by a series of unpalatable options, if indeed it has had much of a choice at all. Branded as a failed municipal state, the City of Atlantic City has been subjected to increasingly harsh and uncompromising forms of political and financial discipline. Effectively cornered, the city's Republican mayor and other local elected officials went as far as to liken the State of New Jersey to a fascist dictatorship, casting Governor Chris Christie in the role of a plantation boss. For his part, running short on options for dealing with the crisis, Christie took to playing hard ball: 'I am not going to take responsibility for what happens in Atlantic City if I don't have the authority to fix the problem', the governor said, 'The state is not providing any more money. It's over. The credit card has been cut up and canceled. They [local officials] have to be responsible' (Chris Christie, quoted in Tempey, 2016: 2). Meanwhile, President Trump, who himself placed some large bets on the Atlantic City casino business, losing some and winning others before fashioning a less than graceful exit, now writes off the place as a 'disaster'.¹ How did it come to this?

As a local story with more-than-local implications, Atlantic City's protracted crisis has been unfolding at the stressed nexus of financialisation, emergency governance and state restructuring. As such, the city has become a politically intensified site – if not a critical case – of 'austerity urbanism'. This midlevel theoretical formulation was developed in the immediate aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis in order to capture, in a provisional way, emergent features of the rapidly (d)evolving regime of fiscal retrenchment, budgetary discipline and local-state restructuring in Europe and North America. Systemic in scope yet always uneven in effect, austerity urbanism was initially

conceptualised and explored as a localised and yet also transatlantic phenomenon. It was playing out in different but related ways across a variegated patchwork of institutional geographies, spurring all sorts of social struggles and political dynamics – and apparently adding up to more than the sum of all these moving parts. ‘Austerity’ never described a uniform urban condition, a permanent new stage or an exhaustive social reality, but served instead as a conceptual frame for problematising a shifting and evidently patterned matrix of restructuring projects, social struggles, nascent models, policy relays and regulatory experiments, inviting a dual concern with localised manifestations and combinatorial qualities. As an emergent modality of restructuring, animated by pressing fiscal imperatives but nevertheless exhibiting a distinctly frontal and strategic character, austerity urbanism was associated with a sharp and sustained turn towards regressive redistribution (in both scalar and social terms), with distinctive spaces and spatialities of crisis displacement, with the dumping of costs and risks on marginalised communities, and with the manufacture and purposeful distribution of scapegoating and blame-shifting discourses.

Exploring this terrain while closing in on circumstances in the USA, Part 1 of the paper concluded with the suggestion that austerity urbanism could be understood as a ‘late entrepreneurial’ conjuncture, one marked by the effective exhaustion and practical stagnation of the staple (if not banal) repertoire of entrepreneurial-city interventions, culminating in a tangle of crisis-assisted movements in the direction of postdemocratic, technocratic, and financialised modes of urban governance (Peck, 2017). In the context of the serial underperformance and diminishing returns of the orthodox battery of growth-machine interventions, coupled with the ongoing rollback of redistributive financing arrangements and

intergovernmental transfers, this late-entrepreneurial environment has been associated with, *inter alia*, the intensification of devolved budgetary discipline, in accordance with the ethos of fiscal federalism and the (neoliberally inflected) principle of localised self-sufficiency; the rise to systemic power of bondholder-value metrics and modes of governance; the normalisation of lean methods and models of municipal restructuring; the imposition of invasive forms authoritarian governance, technocratic management, and unilateral (or ‘Caesarist’) intervention; and the widespread adoption of accusatory narratives of urban (fiscal) crisis and local-government failure, many of them drawn in racialised as well as partisan terms (see Peck, 2017: table 1).

The remit of Part 1 of this paper was to explore the shifting political economy of transatlantic urbanism, across the long arc from the entrepreneurial city to austerity urbanism and financialised metropolitan governance, understood both as an extended historical process and as a domain of mid-level theory building (Peck, 2017). The purpose of Part 2 is to delve into the political-economic transformation of Atlantic City itself, as a single-site (but situated) case study of financialised, crisis-mediated, late-entrepreneurial restructuring with causes and implications that extend considerably beyond the city limits. Atlantic City was an entrepreneurial place long before the strategy really had a name, a germinal site of Republican machine politics and the birthplace of one of the more distinctive growth machines of the *pre*-Fordist era. It was the early 20th century rise and prolonged post-war decline of this sometimes lawless, resort-based economy that set the stage for one of the prototypical experiments in neoliberal entrepreneurialism, beginning in the mid-1970s. If the elemental logic of growth machines is to place wagers on future growth, Atlantic City gambled everything with this winner-takes-all model of

extractive capitalism. Seizing a regional monopoly in casino gambling (at the time, outlawed everywhere outside Nevada), the resort city rode a quite spectacular development boom before busting once again. In the process, its casino-based regeneration model passed from an audacious first-mover experiment to an almost commonplace intervention, as dozens of states and scores of localities – evidently lacking politically or fiscally feasible alternatives – crowded into a contested and zero-sum market. Today, Atlantic City vividly symbolises the limits of an entrepreneurial development fix for which it once served as a template. Its growth machine, following a decade of market retrenchment and diminishing returns, is effectively bankrupt, even if the city's local government has, technically speaking, managed to avoid that fate.

The paper's conclusion (re)positions the Atlantic City case with respect to the apparently proliferating dynamics of disciplinary governance and authoritarian, Caesarist politics. Written in the immediate aftermath of the US presidential election, when Donald Trump's victory at the polls coincided with the announcement that Atlantic City would, after all, be taken under the control of the State of New Jersey's Local Finance Board. Remarking on this inauspicious confluence of events, the *New York Times* editorialised that Atlantic City had come to symbolise 'big bets gone bad', echoing the concerns of local residents and casino workers that 'the city's fate [could be] an omen for the new administration of President-elect Donald Trump' (*New York Times*, 2016: A24). Meanwhile, the paper acidly remarked that the man nominally in charge of Atlantic City, Governor Chris Christie, had apparently 'gone missing', having been abruptly demoted from the chair of the Trump transition team as he faced mounting political problems of his own – while at the same time reportedly angling for a cabinet appointment. For his part, the newly elected president, once practically

synonymous with Atlantic City's brash makeover, no longer wished to be associated with this site of financial 'disaster'. 'Atlantic City fueled a lot of growth for me', Trump had earlier disclosed, 'I took a lot of money out of the casinos with the financings and the things that we do' (quoted in Buettner and Bagli, 2016: A1, A16), adding with what might be considered a rudimentary definition of extractive capitalism: 'Atlantic City was a very good cash cow for me ... The money I took out of there was incredible'.

Transforming Atlantic City

The first part of the paper sketched out an approach to this moment of late-entrepreneurial fiscal crisis under the methodological rubric of conjunctural urbanism (Peck, 2017). Understood as a manoeuvre orthogonal to those lateral or 'horizontal' modes of analysis associated with ontologically flatter readings of comparative urbanism (cf. Peck, 2015a), this methodological perspective prioritises the relational *positionality* of cities in the context of uneven regulatory development, spatial divisions of labour, restructuring markets, multiscalar power relations, and so forth, at the same time foregrounding dialogic interconnections between (situated) case studies, (pliable) midlevel concepts and (revisable) theory claims. In tracing the form and effects of neoliberal hegemony, for example, this means taking account of conjuncture, context and contingency 'all the way down', spiralling across the scales and sites of the urban. The identification and positioning of individual cases on what is an always-moving explanatory landscape must, in this sense, be a context-sensitive process too. It follows that the role of case studies, understood in such terms, is not merely to apply, confirm, nuance, complexify, 'disaggregate' or otherwise break down theory claims, in a one-way and purely deconstructive fashion,

but rather to engage in the active reconstruction of these claims, interrogating, adjudicating, and ‘speaking back’ to evolving explanatory frames and frameworks, in a critical and dialogic manner. In the spirit of the extended-case approach, a more specific argument can be made for research designs with the potential for stress-testing, stretching and remaking received theoretical understandings, provisional conceptualisations, and working categories of analysis (see Burawoy, 2009; Peck 2013; Peck and Theodore, 2015). An active and engaged (rather than ambivalent or complacent) posture with respect to theory development is consequently implied, to which empirical inquiries are not simply subordinated but serve instead to (re)animate what are programmatic concerns and problematics – both one case at a time, and cumulatively, across cases. (This is one of the ways in which conjunctural analyses can be placed in constructive conversation with parallel approaches in comparative urbanism.)

Perhaps needless to say, there are no ‘representative’ cases of austerity urbanism or financialised urban restructuring, in the USA or elsewhere, just as the task of case-study selection is never entirely innocent or random, from a theoretical perspective. While there are reasons to believe that the cities are where austerity bites especially hard, this is no blanket process. Individual cases, particular circumstances and situations, will always matter. While conjunctural approaches place a premium on contextualisation, reflexivity and positioning (understood in theoretical as well as empirical terms), in a practical sense it is only with concrete and situated cases that these approaches actually gain traction, direction and purpose. In methodological terms, though, it is not that each and every case is created equal. A consciously conjunctural urban studies might constructively prioritise the following *kinds* of case studies,

in no particular order: first, those ostensibly *atypical cases* that present in such a way as to confound, contort or challenge extant assumptions, normalising conditions, or theoretical expectations, from which they do not simply dissent but instead strive to re-engage; second, *boundary cases* that are positioned around the edges, or outside, the explanatory universe invoked by the conceptual frames and substantive problems at hand, likewise with a concern to stretch, elaborate or reconfigure extant understandings; third, putatively *critical cases*, those that might illustrate, in a frontal or diagnostically significant way, emergent forms and revelatory transformations, or for that matter situations of rupture or crisis, and fourth, *relational cases*, those linked by substantive or processual connection, that facilitate the population, mediation and reciprocal revision of midlevel conceptual frameworks, explanatory domains and analytical categories.

At a minimum, the Atlantic City case that follows qualifies as an example of the latter, given its conjoined status, alongside Detroit, as a manifestly stressed site of fiscally mandated emergency governance. Concretely, this was expressed in the peripatetic presence of the consulting crisis manager, Kevyn Orr, for whom the Jersey coast was the next stop after leaving the Motor City. In a broader sense, Atlantic City has been drawn into relational proximity with Detroit and the new archipelago of structurally adjusted cities across the USA, due to what has been a shared political and processual experience of financialised restructuring, as well as through policy relays and reciprocating narratives played out across what have become overlapping and cross-constitutive fields of regulatory transformation. This said, the jockeying in New Jersey’s state capital and elsewhere to *avoid* a bankruptcy declaration positions Atlantic City outside (or on the fringes of) the non-contiguous universe of chapter-9 restructuring cases, and in this

sense at least in a different category to Detroit, where there is evidence that the precedent-shaping recourse to the federal bankruptcy courts was literally as well as metaphorically *planned for* (see Peck, 2015b; Peck and Whiteside, 2016).

Atlantic City's quite unique economic history could also be said to confer on the place a *prima facie* claim to atypicality. Even if it would encounter, by the 1960s, some fairly common (American) problems of white flight and downtown decay, in no way could this place be confused with some deindustrialised relic of Fordist urbanisation. The product of more than a century of Republican machine politics, Atlantic City's entrepreneurial 'turn' in the 1970s was practically a *sui generis* one, later to shape an identifiable genre of North American entrepreneurial urbanism – legalised gambling as an economic-regeneration fix. Having moved first, the resort town would comprehensively exploit a regional casino monopoly before becoming a 'first loser' under conditions of competitive saturation, arguably representing a critical case of this contagious condition. What stood for a while as a first-generation site of entrepreneurial experimentation would duly become a boundary (or maybe limit) case of financialised late-entrepreneurial restructuring. Today, Atlantic City may (still) look like an atypical place, but it is confronted by intractable challenges of municipal governance and economic regeneration that appear less out of the ordinary when considered in relation to their underlying political-economic drivers and shifting power geometries, to circulating cultural frames and technical devices, and even to some of their tendential effects.

With this provisional positioning in mind, the following is a long-range account of entrepreneurial restructuring, the story of 'a profoundly American beach town that has always wanted to be a big city' (Van Meter, 2003: 1), but did not quite make it. The discussion proceeds in three steps. It begins with the incubation and evolution of an

intensely speculative and 'extractive' mode of urbanisation, one founded on a quite original blend of Republican 'boss' politics, showy tourist development and normalised racketeering in a place that, all along, has been 'dedicated to the fast buck', married to a 'long-time knack of promoting itself beyond its true worth' (Johnson, 2010: xviii). This site of moral and regulatory exception was an unusual kind of boom town during the first half of the 20th century – the world's playground, as it was immodestly known – before suffering an extended bout of structural decline in the decades after the Second World War. It was this developmental vacuum that established the preconditions for the casino pact of the mid-1970s. Second, the discussion turns to the pioneering model of casino-based urban regeneration that was fashioned in Atlantic City, which in spite of its distortions and dysfunctions would soon become a widely emulated strategy, more by virtue of its availability than its efficacy. The subsequent normalisation of this model coincided, appropriately enough, with the saturation of the regional casino market on the East Coast, the serial failures of Atlantic City's gaming palaces foreshadowing the eventual fate of the city itself. Third, in the context of what appears to be an 'autumnal' moment of financialised, late-entrepreneurial urbanism, the paper connects the *de facto* bankruptcy of this original casino growth machine with the city's slide into ad-libbed crisis management and governance-by-emergency. Far from an 'isolated [case] of fiscal distress' (Eide, 2015: 3), this is read as a situated instance of financialised restructuring, a crucible for the realisation and refraction of systemic pressures and a site of acute political intensification.

Extractive urbanism

Atlantic City has been portrayed by some as 'an enterprise built around blue smoke and

mirrors', and by others as 'more of a proposition [or] a ploy' (Anastasia, 2014: 2; Paumgarten, 2015: 58). It was developed during the late 19th century as a tourist destination for the aspirant middle classes of Baltimore, Philadelphia and New York City, a rail-line connection to what had been a small settlement on the Jersey coast enabling the conversion of beachside property holdings into a string of hotels, guest houses, theatres and amusement arcades. There were ups and downs at first, including the bankruptcy of the first railway company, but this would soon become a place where fortunes were being made. What historian Bryant Simon tellingly described as a 'make-believe place ... built on a grand deception', and always attempting to blend the real with the fake, had by 1915 become, in the words of one travel writer, 'the most popular part of the American seashore, the most characteristic ... the most intensely American'.² With an economy 'totally dependent on money spent by out-of-towners' (Johnson, 2010: xv), dedicated to showing its visitors a good time, Atlantic City had to hustle from the start. It was born of speculative intent.

It is entirely fitting, then, that the commercialised version of the *Monopoly* game, developed in the late 1920s, should have been modelled on Atlantic City, appropriating street names such as the Boardwalk, Ventnor Avenue and St. James Place, and in the process popularising the notion of the city as a site of elemental accumulation, a speculative grid.³ During the roaring Twenties, some 99 trains were arriving every day during the summer season, as visitors filled the storied Boardwalk, the piers, bar-rooms and theatres in search of mostly harmless diversions. Foremost amongst these, and one of the resort's signature amusements, was an opportunity for vacationers to ride along the seafront in rolling chairs, typically propelled by African American men who had migrated to Atlantic City in

their thousands in search of seasonal job opportunities in the decades since Emancipation. (The plentiful supplies of cheap labour, upon which the resort's economy relied, also had to be brought in from out of town.) Atlantic City's resident population was one-fourth African-American by 1921, this having become 'the most "Black" city in the north' (Johnson, 2010: 39).

Early on, the all-consuming mission of the city had been defined as 'attend[ing] strictly to the entertainment of our visitors', extending to the quite public operation of brothels and gambling joints, and deregulated access to alcohol – including on Sundays, courtesy of a brazen refusal to recognise state law. This open toleration of corrupt governance, vice, racketeering and drinking on the Sabbath caused the *New York Times* to describe the state of affairs in Atlantic City as '[o]ne of the most remarkable situations that ever existed in an Eastern State' (*New York Times*, 1908: 5). New Jersey's Republican Governor, John Franklin Fort, had complained that 'it is not for the people of one part of the State to [annul] the law of the whole Commonwealth', dismissing claims of local business owners that the city's prosperity depended on the unregulated sale of liquor from more than 200 saloons and bars, and ruing the fact that he lacked the authority unilaterally to remove municipal officials from office (quoted in *New York Times*, 1908: 5; Funnell, 1975).

The open defiance of state and federal laws was by all accounts the governing philosophy of the first of Atlantic City's legendary bosses, Louis ('The Commodore') Kuehnle. This Republican Party power broker liked to boast (with some justification) that it was he who had 'built' the town, over which he exerted almost complete control for some two decades, prior to his incarceration in 1911. The Commodore's downfall, following a series of racketeering and election-fraud scandals, would occasion

nothing more disruptive than a leadership transition within the well-entrenched Republican machine, the reins of power being passed to a no less infamous successor, Enoch ('Nucky') Johnson. During the inter-war years, it was Johnson – portrayed as Nucky 'Thompson' by Steve Buscemi in Martin Scorsese's HBO show *Boardwalk Empire* – who ultimately unified the 'two rings of power' in Atlantic City, constructing an integrated political-economic machine dedicated to the 'singular purpose [and] single mentality' of securing the 'success of the local economy [as] the only ... ideology' (Johnson, 2010: xv).

If the Commodore had installed the governing principle of an 'open town', this state of regulatory exception would enable his successor, Nucky Johnson, to consolidate control over what became one of the most lawless – and profitable – 'wet cities' of the prohibition era. Only after the repeal of prohibition, in the mid-1930s, did it appear that Atlantic City's fortunes might be waning. (Not for the last time, its market position had been predicated on a state of regulatory exception.) After the Second World War, it would fall to the third of the Atlantic City's bosses, Frank 'Hap' Farley, to preside over the protracted unravelling of what had been a brazen model of growth, bringing to an temporary close just under a century of Republican machine control.

The locational advantages on which Atlantic City's resort economy had been built were dramatically eroded after the War, when visitor numbers and tourist-industry revenues began a secular slide. Locally, accelerating white flight to the suburbs compounded the problem. Atlantic City's post-war slump was remarkably 'steep', a report from Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia later explained, because as 'tourism and the resident population declined, many businesses closed and much of the city's housing stock became dilapidated

and was abandoned' (Newburger et al., 2009: v).

In the process, racial divisions were further entrenched in what had been known in some quarters as the 'plantation by the sea', the city's lifeguard and firefighting crews, for example, remaining formally segregated long after the passage of civil-rights legislation (Erlanger, 1988; Johnson, 2010). So, too, was a suspiciously well-remunerated police force. By the end of 1964's disastrous summer season, Frank Sinatra had made his last appearance at the fabled 500 Club, the city had been declared the most crime infested of hundreds of similarly sized jurisdictions by the FBI, and on some measures of poverty and ill-health it now ranked bottom in the state. That same summer, what had been envisaged as a major opportunity to turn around the resort's flagging fortunes backfired in a spectacular fashion when the hosting of the Democratic Party's National Convention turned into a public-relations catastrophe. Instead of serving as an extended, prime-time commercial, as the city's leaders had hoped, blanket media coverage during Convention week vividly exposed the shabby and decrepit state of the resort for the country to see. '[O]ne of those sad gray places of entertainment', was how presidential historian Theodore White described Atlantic City at the time, a place that had been 'overtaken', it was 'rundown and glamourless' (quoted in Johnson, 2010: 161). The world's playground had become, in the rat-pack idiom borrowed for one national newspaper headline, 'strictly Endsville' (Van Meter, 2003: 205).

The city's machine entrepreneurs, however, continued to scheme for another chance for a go around the *Monopoly* board. One of Hap Farley's final public acts, in 1970 and near the end of a 34-year run as a New Jersey state senator and Atlantic City boss, was to initiate a referendum measure to allow the legalisation of gambling in the

city, the prospects of which were promptly undermined when the senator's name kept coming up in FBI wiretap investigations of the East Coast mafia, thereby aggravating public concerns that letting the casinos in would be to practically sanction a mob-involved economy (Demaris, 1986; Sternlieb and Hughes, 1983: 37–38). Farley's proposal failed before reaching the ballot stage, but it did set in train an extended process of political manoeuvring and corporate lobbying that would eventually secure a gambling concession for Atlantic City. A new kind of 'open town' would be constructed amid the ruins of the old.

After another false start (with the failure of a statewide referendum measure in 1974), the ultimately successful legalisation campaign of 1976 was marked by a combination of big spending and even bigger promises. Casino proponents outspent the 'no' campaign by an estimated 60:1, thanks in particular to the efforts of Resorts International, an offshore conglomerate that was angling to develop the first of Atlantic City's gaming halls. But in order to win over New Jersey voters, the reasons to say yes would have to amount to more than a promise to regenerate a depressed resort in one corner of the state; the quid pro quo was that a substantial share of the tax receipts would be channelled into an improved package of benefits for the elderly and disabled, statewide. It worked. Once the referendum passed, the stage was set for what was billed in the Casino Control Act (CCA) as a 'great experiment' in urban policy: the casinos would catalyse a development boom across the tourism, resort and convention economies. There were many that believed that the 'Atlantic City gamble' would pay off. An analyst at the Wall Street firm Paine-Weber went as far as to remark that '[l]egalized casino gambling is the fastest and probably cheapest form of urban renewal yet created by the capitalist system' (quoted in Sternlieb and Hughes, 1983: 128).

Constituted as a different kind of regulatory exception, this time a state-authorised one, Atlantic City was to get a second chance. On the morning after the referendum passed, the headline in the *Atlantic City Press* read 'CITY REBORN'.

A quite different breed of capitalists was about to move in. The owners of Resorts International (James M Crosby and Irvin 'Jack' Davis), having got a start in the gaming industry in the Bahamas in the 1960s, had been scouting potential investment sites in Greece, Yugoslavia, Tunisia, the Philippines and Haiti, before targeting New Jersey's 'Las Vegas East'. The two businessmen were treated like visiting royalty when they toured a series of would-be casino locations in Atlantic City, with the added reassurance of a police escort. Although Crosby and Davis were reportedly shocked at the run-down state of the Boardwalk hotels, they saw the chance to secure windfall gains if the enabling state legislation – over which they would eventually exert 'tremendous influence' (Demaris, 1986; Van Meter, 2003: 256) – could be structured in such a way that competition was kept at bay, at least for a time. They wanted their chance to play monopoly.

Prior to the referendum, Resorts had been snapping up Boardwalk property at firesale prices, prelude to the company moving to 'secure its position in Trenton' (Johnson, 2010: 200), the political capital 90 miles away. These out-of-town interests were going to be very well looked after: CCA rules permitted casinos only along the Boardwalk and in the marina district, where they were to be linked to hotels with 500 or more rooms – a stipulation that 'ensured that Resorts would have the town to themselves for many months' (Van Meter, 2003: 257). In May 1978, the grand opening of the first Resorts casino saw lines of enthusiastic gamblers extending around the block, the house clearing a cool US\$1 million in profits

on its opening night. By the next day, the company's stock price had spiked from US\$2 to US\$210; the initial investment being recouped within nine months, as profitability soared to a level estimated to equal half of that taken by the Nevada casinos combined.⁴ The nine casinos that eventually established operations in Atlantic City in the four years after legalisation – with an aggregate investment of around US\$1 billion and a workforce of 30,000 – would amass US\$3.7 billion in cumulative gross revenues (US\$40,000 per year for every square foot of gaming-floor space), a take 'so large that [it] embarrassed state officials' into rapidly revising the sweetheart tax deal with the gaming companies (Demaris, 1986; Sternlieb and Hughes, 1983: 10, 105–106).

The good news, though, was that the stalled growth machine had not only been restarted, it was now racing. Casino legalisation had unleashed a 'hurricane of land speculation', such that by the early 1980s the resort had become the richest city in the country on some measures, the going rate for prime real-estate exceeding downtown-Manhattan prices; meanwhile, annual visitor numbers ballooned from seven to 30–35 million in the first decade of the casino boom, by which time gaming revenues were making up two-thirds of a reflat municipal tax base (Baker, 1989; Newburger et al., 2009; Steinlieb and Hughes, 1983: 155; Teske and Sur, 1991). By the standards of 1980s urban-economic revitalisation efforts, Atlantic City looked like a remarkable success story. An academic assessment of efforts to turn around the fortunes of 'distressed' cities during that decade, based on a dispassionate reading of the vital economic indicators, duly placed Atlantic City in the top three of 'actually revitalised' metros in the USA, arguing that the resort had been denied the credit it deserved from the economic-development profession. More than this, Harold Wolman and colleagues (1994: 844)

pointed out that the measurably superior *relative* performance of Atlantic City placed in a new light the decidedly modest – if not 'mythical' – achievements of the more celebrated 'turnaround' cities (such as Pittsburgh, Baltimore, Atlanta and Cleveland), drawing the conclusion that 'efforts to copy the policies and development activities of [these supposed] "success stories" may well be misplaced, at least if improving the economic well-being of area residents is the goal'. Atlantic City, on the other hand, had made measurable progress on turning around its fortunes.

Others were less convinced that the Jersey resort's experiment in casino-based development was really paying off. Some with longer memories were saying that this still looked like some version of a Nucky-Johnson economy from the prohibition era, except now the confiscatory mode of development had been afforded state approval. Crucially, there was precious little 'trickle out' from the casinos, which turned out to be efficient machines for extracting revenues, with a minimum of leakage into the surrounding neighbourhoods. Furthermore, local residents had been effectively excluded from the better-paying casino jobs (many of which had been filled by workers transferred from Las Vegas or the Caribbean), while small businesses like restaurants were finding it even harder to get by. (One of the few street-level multiplier effects that could be measured, on the other hand, was a significant spike in the crime rate.) The casino corporations were using the city as a platform for the harvesting of revenues, having been handed the gift of a protected and easy market by the state authorities. A provision in the CCA rules intended to recycle gaming revenues into neighbourhood investments for the benefit of local residents had been effectively nullified by the casino operators, who discovered ways to channel funds back into their own improvement projects. (The

state later sought to plug this loophole, to limited effect, by establishing the Casino Reinvestment Development Authority in 1984.) On top of this, suburbanisation and white flight continued, with most of the gaming-industry workforce opting to commute in, and quickly out again, as downtown streets and neighbourhoods grew visibly seedier by the year. Capital was doing something similar, such that 'a lot of the money that flowed in [to Atlantic City promptly] flowed right back out', symptomatic of an extractive economy for which the prevailing method of casino design served as an apt metaphor, 'boxed off from the city [they had been] designed to keep patrons inside losing money rather than outside spending it' (Paumgarten, 2015: 59).

The men who pulled the rolling chairs along the Boardwalk a century earlier – and who knew better than most that there was no necessary connection between elevated profits at the top and improved circumstances for those at the bottom – would surely have recognised the vestiges of the plantation economy. Colonial modes of operation were hardly alien, after all, to the major player in the decade of 'opening up' Atlantic City, Resorts International, which had built its empire in the 'tax dodgers' paradise' of the Bahamas, an offshore corporate haven with close ties to Wall Street that in a parallel fashion had been 'governed [like] a plantation' (Demaris, 1986: 98–99). So it was that a profile of Resorts' New Jersey outpost, a decade after legalisation, concluded that 'the city behind the Boardwalk remains a slum', charging that the failure of this so-called great experiment in urban regeneration was an indictment more of the state authorities than of the (predictably) profit-focused casinos:

Seen from afar, the Atlantic City skyline has the bulk and reach of a metropolis [but] the skyline is a facade ... The contrast is so severe

as to evoke the image of a colonial capital, where imperialists from across the sea recreated a foreign architecture and culture amid indigenous poverty and dependency. Beyond this conflict of cultures, however, is a failure of government, both local and state ... [There has been] an abdication of responsibility by a state government that has profited handsomely from gambling but whose Governor finds it distasteful. (Erlanger, 1988: A1)

Over the course of a century, Atlantic City elites had deployed a creative repertoire of entrepreneurial methods – some legal, some not – to build and then repeatedly renew a localised growth machine, not least by carving out profitable spaces of (de)regulatory exception in relation to state law. The great experiment with casino gambling had produced some quick wins for the casino operators, but the quest to secure a more sustainable, or redistributive, mode of development for the city as a whole was to remain radically unfulfilled.

Entrepreneurialism, exhausted

Robert Goodman's (1979) *The Last Entrepreneurs* has become an economic-development classic of sorts for its prescient diagnosis of the costs of an accelerating interstate and interurban 'war' for jobs and investment in the USA, in ways that anticipated David Harvey's (1989) theoretical synthesis. A secular increase in the (actual and potential) mobility of capital, coupled with an embrace of competitive deregulation and corporate subsidisation amongst local authorities, had fostered a slash-and-burn economy of investment and disinvestment – likened by Goodman to crop rotation – with consequences that were uniquely divisive: 'As workers compete against each other for the available jobs, they check each others' demands for higher wages or for costly business investments to improve their working or environmental conditions', he wrote,

‘And as politicians compete with each other to attract industry, they escalate the financial, environmental, and antilabor incentives they must each offer’ (Goodman, 1979: 60). This race could surely only lead to the bottom. In the words of the head of economic development for the State of New Jersey, at the time of the launch of the Atlantic City experiment-cum-gamble: ‘What the South has been doing to New Jersey for 15 years, I’m now doing to New York. It’s cutthroat, regrettably, but it’s every state for itself’ (quoted in Goodman, 1979: 9–10).

Goodman’s next book, appropriately enough, would be an exposé of the competitively induced scramble to authorise gambling activities, which had been inaugurated with New Jersey’s pattern-setting embrace of casino capitalism. By the mid-1990s, the strategy of legalising casinos was firmly installed as the ‘economic development policy of last resort’, particularly amongst those depressed or deindustrialised cities that had run out of options; in turn, gaming-industry promoters had learned that these were the places where ‘economic messages’ really resonated, should there be lingering qualms about the official embrace of an activity still tainted by ethical questions and mob connections (Goodman, 1995: 59, 63). Here was the promise of a relatively easy win, by way of a glitzy and eventised model of economic development, the negative externalities of which could be conveniently dispersed and deferred.

The casino’s benefits are usually focused in time and place and receive high-profile media attention: the ribbon-cutting ceremony at a new riverboat, stories about large and growing revenues, about people with new jobs, and about ecstatic jackpot winners. The reality of the casino’s costs, on the other hand, occurs over long periods of time, after the news crews have gone home. These costs are dispersed, usually hidden from view, and difficult to categorize in simple sound bites. (Goodman, 1995: 168)

Ironically, the very limitations of casino gambling as a one-dimensional regeneration model would inexorably lead, for those jurisdictions that became dependent on this activity, to escalating demands for corporate subsidisation. By the early 1990s, in what had become more (not less) of a single-industry casino town, Atlantic City’s operators were insisting that their customers would have to be shielded from what one described as a ‘depressed and deteriorated urban war zone’ outside, the costs of managing the ‘favourable impressions’ of visitors being counted in the form of a program of publicly financed infrastructure improvements.⁵ These were designed to secure safe and rapid transfers between the interstate highway system, the (expanded) airport, the beach, the Boardwalk and the casino hotels. It has been estimated, subsequently, that the Atlantic City casinos have benefited from more than US\$50 billion in publicly funded infrastructure since 1978 (Stanley, 2014).

Casino dependency was clearly coming at a cost. ‘In Las Vegas, they built a city to support the casinos’, Russell Baker (1989: 1) observed, ‘But in Atlantic City, they did it the other way around: They built the casinos to support a city’. Nevertheless, in the aftermath of Atlantic City’s not-so-great experiment, the casino development model was soon ‘proliferating in a copycat pattern, as legislators adopt[ed] an “if-we-don’t-our-neighbor-will” mentality’, the proximate cause of which was the ‘desperate political scramble to find a quick fix for deep-seated economic problems’ (Goodman, 1995: ix). New Jersey’s legalisation measure of the late 1970s was the trigger for an explosion in the number of ‘regional casinos’. By 1994, gambling had been legalised in 23 states, with those experiencing slow growth and fiscal stress leading the way. When Philadelphia authorised riverboat gambling in 1993, Mayor Ed Rendell predicted that it was ‘inevitable’ that casinos would spread across

the land, Eastward from the Vegas strip and Westward from the concession on the Jersey shore, while pointedly adding that '[i]f people are going to gamble away their pay-checks', better they do it in his town than on the Atlantic City Boardwalk (quoted in Johnston, 1993: 1).

What the Council on Casinos would later characterise as an escalating 'border war' – waged by all against all in the pursuit of elusive economic-development gains – bespeaks the collateral damage of this contagious model of interurban undercutting. Casino economics are nothing if not predictably unforgiving: states and localities may try to beat the odds, but the house will come out on top. And so the border wars have predictably instilled 'a downward economic spiral of market saturation, sluggish state revenues, and failing casinos, marked by an ever-growing competition in which each state tries to lure other states' citizens into its casinos' (Council on Casinos, 2013: 28). Atlantic City's purple patch, after all, had coincided with an *absence* of regional competition. As an executive from the gaming division of a major bank recently explained to a commercial real-estate magazine, 'While Atlantic City was once an island of casinos', surrounded by a veritable sea of underserved customers, 'there is now a much more built-out, competitive environment', this having matured into a 'supply-driven industry' (quoted in Balbi, 2015: 4). An equally predictable outcome of this supply-side process of competitive crowding has been overbuilding of gaming-floor space, creating a widespread drag on prices and profits, as the casinos chisel into the market shares of their (regional) competitors, invariably with the assistance of public subsidies.

Donald Trump's now-storied misadventures in Atlantic City are a conspicuous case in point. Trump had been actively monitoring the East Coast gambling market since the 1970s, when Atlantic City was still in his words a 'ghost town', eventually securing his

first license in 1982 (Trump with Schwartz, 1987: 197). By 1986 the operator of two casinos, the Trump Plaza and Trump's Castle, his beloved temples of 'brass, glass, and class', Trump was keeping a watchful eye on the expansion plans of his major competitor, Resorts, which was in the process of building the world's largest casino, the Taj Mahal. Following the unexpected death of Resorts boss James Crosby, Trump saw an opportunity to acquire the project, moving to take the company private when its share price slumped in the stock market crash of 1987. Instead of putting up his own money, Trump was making the most of a unique competitive asset: 'Donald's expertise was leverage' (Demaris, 1986: 380). The entrepreneur's appearance before the New Jersey Casino Control Commission the following year was characteristically full of bluster and bravado, Trump insisting that his personal worth, word and reputation were sufficient to secure prime-market interest rates for the financing of the new project. Testifying under oath before the Commission, in February 1988, Trump had been asked if anything might occur that would throw his ambitious plans for the Taj Mahal off course:

We can have a depression. The world could collapse. We could have World War III. I mean, a lot of things can go wrong. I don't think they will. (quoted in O'Harrow, 2016: 8)

At least some of them eventually did, as the commissioners had feared all along, given what they could see were deteriorating market conditions. But Trump's casino license was granted nevertheless.

Modestly announced as the 'Eighth Wonder of the World', the Trump Taj Mahal opened its doors in April 1990, featuring a performance by Michael Jackson. The operator's luck, however, was already beginning to run out. It transpired that the

Taj would need to gross US\$1.3 million per day, the highest turnover ever generated by a casino, just to remain solvent. It did not. In order to finance the project, Trump had been forced into the junk-bond market, at interest rates of 14%, after the risk assessments of Wall Street analysts diverged from those of the casino's over-confident owner. Registered as the sole shareholder, Trump would take the Taj into bankruptcy in July 1991, its massive losses cannibalising his other operations. In March 1992, Trump Plaza and Trump's Castle were also placed under bankruptcy protection. By his own estimation by 'far and away the number-one player in Atlantic City' at the time, Trump had been seen by many locally as something of a Pied Piper figure, although maybe one that was 'too big to fail' (Steven Perskie, quoted in O'Harrow, 2016: 7). It has since been argued that Trump 'was failing in Atlantic City long before Atlantic City was failing' (Buettner and Bagli, 2016: A1). The three Trump casinos had been carrying US\$1.3 billion in mortgage bonds, with the wider Trump empire in hock to institutional lenders to the tune of US\$2.1 billion, US\$833 million of which was personally guaranteed by the eponymous operator. He would eventually be forced to sell his luxury yacht, the *Trump Princess*, and his Trump Shuttle airline operation, while giving up most (and eventually all) of his interests in Atlantic City casinos, although the Taj Mahal would for many years continue to bear his name. Trump had managed to convince investors and regulators that 'his name had real value', as one of his competitors would later put it, when his strategy all along had apparently been to 'strip out assets', rather than to invest, in a manner that some in the industry described as 'awful to watch'.⁶

Trump's time in Atlantic City, and his exit from the town, were significantly more turbulent and disorderly than have been

suggested in subsequent retellings. 'The casinos have always been a great deal for me', he boasted to one of his biographers; 'How much have I made off the casinos? Off the record, a lot. I put a lot of debt on them and I took the money out and I bought a lot of real estate in New York. So I am very happy with the way things worked out' (quoted in Blair, 2005: 218–219). Later, these financial manoeuvrings would be represented by the presidential candidate, peculiarly, as *qualifications* for high office:

Every company virtually in Atlantic City went bankrupt, and let me tell you, I had the good sense . . . I've gotten a lot of credit in the financial pages [for leaving] before it totally cratered and I made a lot of money in Atlantic City and I'm very proud of it. I want to tell you that, very, very proud of it. By the way, this country right now owes \$19 trillion, and they need somebody like me to straighten out that mess. (quoted in Meyer, 2015: 1)

Trump may indeed have exited the Atlantic City market before it 'cratered', although plainly not under conditions of his own choosing, yet some might say that his expansion plans came too late. The period of rapid revenue growth and oligopolistic profit rates in the Atlantic City casino market was already coming to an end by the late 1980s. According to a 1989 market analysis from Roffman, Atlantic City's nine casinos were teetering like 'houses of cards', aggregate profit rates having slumped from a buoyant 9.3% in 1984 to a wafer-thin 0.5%, the sector's debt load of US\$2 billion exceeding the profit take by a factor of 20 (Laing, 2015; O'Harrow, 2016). Trump's heavily leveraged operations were hardly exceptional, in this sense. The market more or less plateaued after the early 1990s, the casinos eking out incremental growth prior to the extended phase of retrenchment that has occurred since 2006. Figure 1 describes the pattern of rapid rise, normalisation and then dizzying

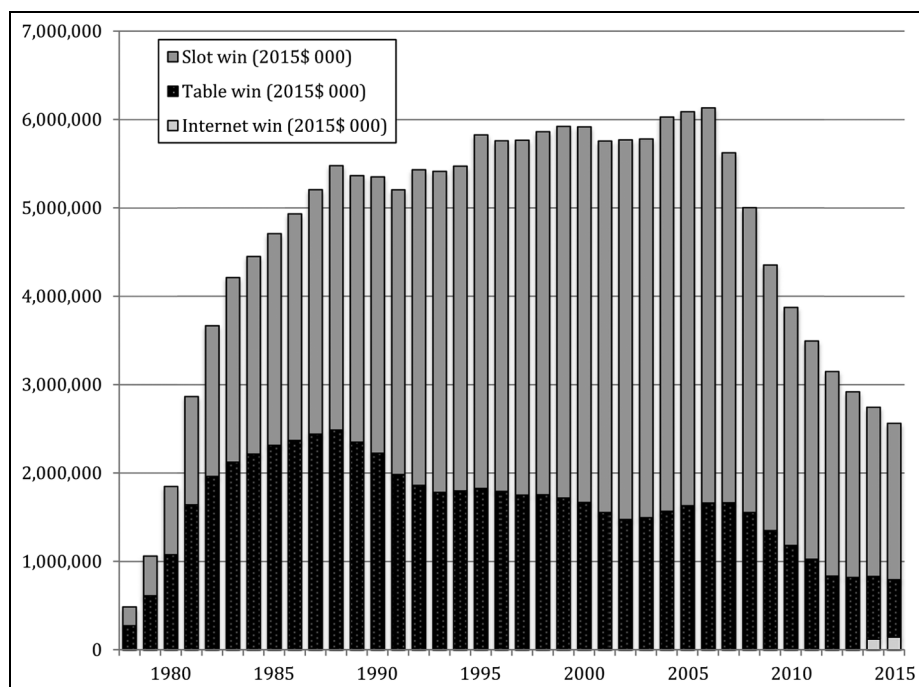


Figure 1. Atlantic City casino win, 1978–2015.

Source: author's calculation, from New Jersey Casino Control Commission data via UNLV Center for Gaming Research; Schwartz (2016).

fall in casino revenues, one that mirrors the changing fortunes of the city as a whole. The reading of analysts at S&P's is that Atlantic City's current travails are fundamentally rooted in increased competition in the regional casino market: 'gaming in the US has moved from being a secular growth industry to a cyclical one [as is clearly] evident in Atlantic City, [where] the expansion of gaming is more likely to drain growth from existing markets and properties than to grow the overall industry' (Amobi, 2014: 9). The days of Atlantic City's East Coast monopoly on casino gambling are long gone, if not entirely forgotten. Amongst New Jersey's immediate neighbours, Pennsylvania now has 13 casinos, Delaware has four, Maryland has six, Connecticut has two and New York has 20.

There is no growth left to fuel Atlantic City's bankrupt growth machine. Reproducing an economy reliant on out-of-town revenues, the casinos are reckoned to derive 90% of their business from the segment of so-called 'convenience' gamblers, which tend as a group to skew older and more working class, the majority being day-trippers arriving by car or charter bus from locations within a 75-mile radius of the Boardwalk (Repetti and Jung, 2014). These are generally lower-stakes gamblers, who are known to be responsive to perks such as free drinks and complimentary rolls of quarters. And they are drawn in particular to the slot machines, which since the late 1980s have accounted for around US\$4 of every US\$5 in profits (Zernike, 2013). These revenues, too, have been shrinking dramatically over the past

decade (Schwartz, 2016). The Atlantic City market is now barely one-quarter of the scale of its rebranded and repositioned Las Vegas counterpart, weighing in at just 6% of the size of the world capital of gambling, Macau (Stanley, 2014). Reduced to the status of a provincial player, hemmed in amongst saturated and declining markets, Atlantic City has had little alternative but to downsize. After losing four of its 12 casinos in 2014, the Wall Street prognosis was that a return to local revenue growth will 'take a long time, if [it is to return] at all' (Amobi, 2014: 5; Liu et al., 2015; Wolfson, 2014). The closure of the Trump Taj Mahal after a bitter labour dispute, on the eve of the presidential election in October 2016, appeared to confirm this prognosis.

Atlantic City's downtown landscape, long dominated by garish casino hotels, now bears the scars of bankruptcy and cumulative overcapacity, looking like the end of an especially long game of *Monopoly* in which a diminished market has been left to a few remaining players (see Figure 2). While the surviving casinos may be able to stabilise their operations around a decent share of the regional market, investors remain skittish, with some comparing the challenge of making money in the blighted city to 'catching a falling knife' – even at a time when casino real-estate can be acquired at bargain-basement rates, dipping as low as three cents on the dollar, and the kind of deal reckoned to be available 'nowhere else in the world', according to a commercial property broker (Balbi, 2015: 2; Stanley, 2014: 2). Prior to his run for the presidency, Donald Trump occasionally suggested that he might one day return, but only with the requisite (publicly subsidised) inducements: 'Before anybody can go to Atlantic City, those taxes have to be reduced dramatically', he has said; 'until that happens you can't make an investment there' (quoted in Stanley, 2014: 2). Subsequently, Trump has

taken the view that the place is simply a 'disaster' (quoted in Buettner and Bagli, 2016: A17).

When in 2009 the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia published its special report on Atlantic City, the effects of what would be a decade along (and ongoing) market slide were not fully apparent, such that the city's 'paradox' was presented at the time as the coexistence of quite resilient casino employment and stubbornly high levels of racialised poverty and unemployment (Newburger et al., 2009: vii). Prior to the experiment in casino-based regeneration, in 1970, the local poverty rate stood at 22% in 1970, nine points above the national average; by 2000, it had risen to 24%, 13 points higher than the national rate (Newburger et al., 2008). The local poverty rate has since surged as high as 36%. Suburbanisation has certainly been a major factor, with the majority of the workforce commuting in to the casinos on the same publicly subsidised highways as the day-tripping gamblers (Simon, 2004). More than this, though, the casino development model itself has had a role in the generation of structural underemployment, weak residential real-estate markets and stunted opportunities for local business growth. From the basic principles of casino architecture, which seek to 'contain' customers and to deter pedestrian exits onto the street, to the ample provision of perks (such as subsidised food and beverages), which likewise function to prevent revenue leakage by holding gamblers close to the tables and slots, local multiplier effects are purposefully minimised. Less than positive externalities, in contrast, are measured in the shape of elevated policing costs and the growth of a predatory agglomeration of pawn brokers, check-cashing outfits and high-interest lenders, while a study commissioned by the National Association of Realtors concluded that the impact of the gaming industry on adjacent housing

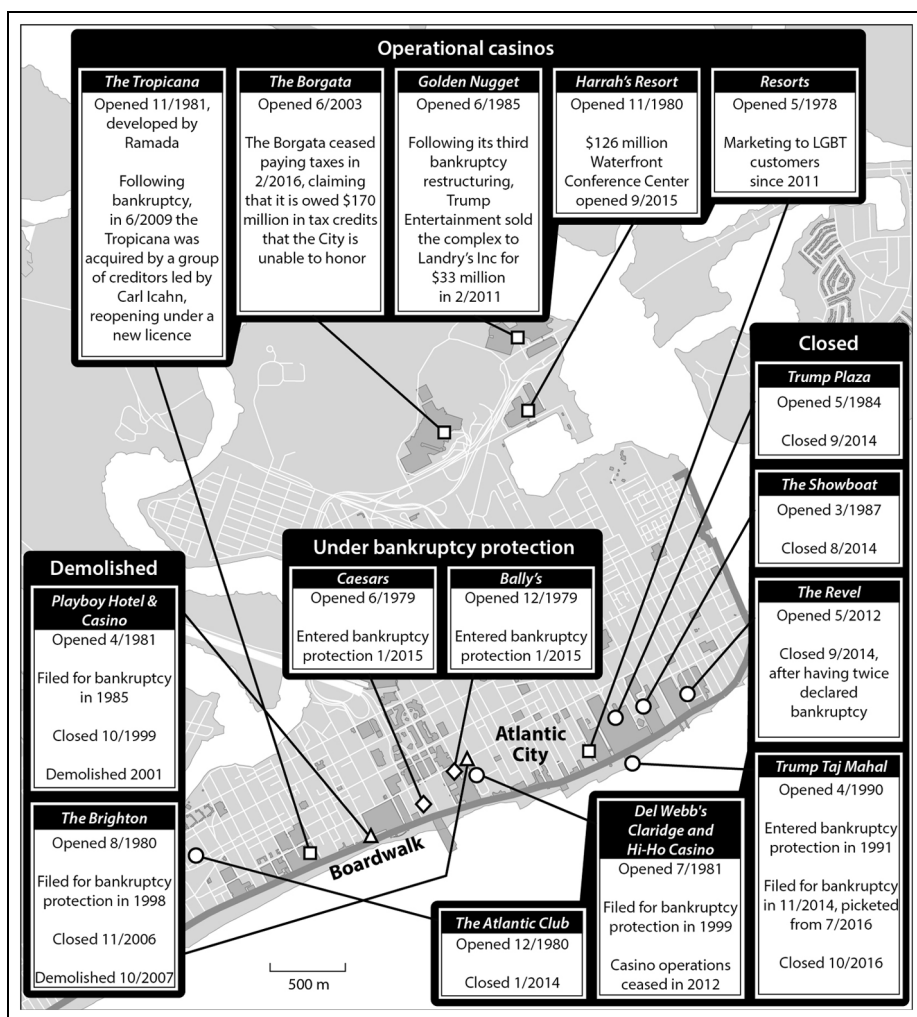


Figure 2. Casino monopoly, Atlantic City edition.

markets was 'unambiguously negative' (Council on Casinos, 2013: 25).

Questions have also been raised about the casino model on the inside. 'Cost-cutting efforts in the wake of saturated markets have undermined one of the stated objectives for passing the 1978 Atlantic City gambling referendum', Figart and Mutari (2014: 92) have pointed out, 'to create good jobs'. The local casino workforce peaked in 1997, following which a secular downsizing dynamic,

with a bulge in layoffs after 2014, shows signs of becoming a new normal.⁷ The legalisation of gambling in New Jersey had been predicated on a social contract of sorts: local jobs and economic regeneration in exchange for state-authorised sin. The embattled US labour movement, for its part, has come to regard hotel and casino towns such as Las Vegas and Atlantic City as its own kind of 'New Detroits', localised strongholds of union power in an industry immune to

offshore outsourcing (Peck, 2016; Ventura, 2003).⁸ As the president of Unite Here's Local 54 in Atlantic City has argued, state legislators had 'allowed a vice to come to the market here ... the trade-off [being] that these would be good jobs [with] decent wages and healthcare, positions that aren't "disposable"', but the subsequent attrition of so much of this employment base, coupled with the erosion of pay and conditions, was tantamount to 'the destruction of the pact between the industry and the state that has existed for 35 years' (quoted in Butler, 2015: 3). Even prior to the wave of post-2014 layoffs, job-market conditions were deteriorating in the Atlantic City casinos, with wages, benefits and union contracts falling under attack, on top of long-run trends towards Taylorisation, work intensification and the utilisation of contingent labour (Figart and Mutari, 2014). Since this time, the Atlantic City casinos have become sites of elevated labour strife, a signature struggle having been that between Unite Local 54 and investor Carl Icahn, the owner of the ill-starred Trump Taj Mahal. After Icahn decided to take the Taj, once again, into bankruptcy protection in 2014, local labour relations are reported to have 'imploded', the owner drawing an analogy between the unions' defence of healthcare benefits and organised crime, while union leaders likened the billionaire's presence in the city to a 'malignancy' (Burleigh, 2015; Butler, 2015).

This story of apparently irreconcilable interests, locked in a dysfunctional and codependent relationship, extends to the realms of state action and local politics too. Steven Perskie – sometime General Assembly member, Democratic party operative, Senior Court judge, chair of the Casino Control Commission, and Vice President of Players International, a riverboat gambling company – knows these intersecting worlds as well as anyone. Perskie has made no bones

about the fact that the granting of gambling concessions, far from being a mere 'experiment', is a Rubicon-crossing moment. In fact, he had recognised these elemental conditions long before the proliferation of regional casinos began in earnest. Called upon to distill the 'word from New Jersey' for the benefit of the residents of Hartford, when the Connecticut city was considering the option of casino legalisation in the early 1990s, Perskie had been characteristically direct:

Casino gambling is not a 'try it and see' experiment ... Once a casino opens and the dice begin to roll, gambling creates an instant constituency. People depend on it for jobs. Governments depend on it for revenues. No-one should promise that the plug can be pulled if gambling doesn't meet expectations. There is no plug. (Perskie, 1992: E4)

As Bryant Simon (2004: 16) has said of this unseemly meld of municipal and corporate rationalities, in which the local state has ingested the logic of casino economics in a fashion reminiscent of Nucky Johnson's racketeering political machine, 'With the coming of the slot machines and green felt tables, local leaders essentially turned [Atlantic City] over to casino executives, letting them serve as urban planners'.

For his part, Perskie did not fault the casinos for their strictly instrumental mode of operation, remarking that 'it's not their job to make public policy', at least not policy shaped in the public interest; instead, echoing Milton Friedman's famous put-down of corporate social responsibility,⁹ he maintained that the 'only responsibility [of the casino operators] was to come in, obey the laws and churn out the money' (quoted in Erlanger, 1988: A1). But casino development is hardly a benign form of public-private partnership. As the Council on Casinos characterised this perverse path of development:

[Casinos] are instituted by the states to create a source of revenue separate from direct taxation, the traditional way of financing government expenses for the common welfare. States typically legalize casino gambling by changing state constitutions. They create regional monopolies for the casinos. They regulate lightly and often in ways that discriminate against other legal businesses. They promote casino gambling through advertising and advocacy by public officials. They tell the public that casinos provide funds for necessary government services without raising taxes. They rescue casinos from bankruptcy. (Council on Casinos, 2013: 26)

Having internalised the rationality of entrepreneurialism, Atlantic City has found itself in a situation of asymmetric dependence on the gaming industry and its uniquely extractive business model. Seeking similar kinds of revenue fixes, neighbouring jurisdictions inadvertently coproduced conditions of chronic overcapacity in what has become a fiercely contested regional market. In this adverse market environment, Atlantic City's casinos have been bouncing in and out of bankruptcy protection for a quarter of a century now, the latest rounds of which have driven the municipality itself into receivership. In this respect, though, the current 'emergency' has been a long gestating one, just as the very particular form of the city's crisis was deeply inscribed in what has been an evidently checkered local history.

Emergency governance

In 2010, newly elected Governor Chris Christie flew down from Trenton by helicopter to deliver a major speech outside Boardwalk Hall. 'Atlantic City is dying', he declared. But the governor had come up with a new plan to revive the resort. This would involve a state takeover of local agencies for tourism development and crime control, ginned up with a US\$30 million marketing

campaign under the banner 'Do AC', as the city government was placed under financial supervision. This was judged to be a brave move for a newly elected small-government conservative, to whom a recently appointed commission had reported, 'it is reasonable to ask if Atlantic City gaming is savable' (quoted in Perez-Pena, 2010: 20). On the other hand, it was in step with the political moment, echoing as it did similarly aggressive moves against an array of cash-strapped cities – many of them low-income, communities of colour, with collapsing subprime real-estate markets – on the part of an incoming cohort of Republican governors (see Peck, 2014; Varghese and Young, 2016).

At first, there were some signs that Christie's five-year development plan, conventional though it seemed, might just have a chance. The governor had persuaded United Airlines to add direct flights to Atlantic City from Houston and Chicago, but the new routes were scrapped after a year because of insufficient demand (Kocieniewski et al., 2016). A much bigger challenge would soon present itself in the shape of the hulking, 47-storey Revel Atlantic City casino, the US\$2.4 billion price tag of which made it the largest construction project in the state's history. In April 2010, the majority shareholder Morgan Stanley decided to walk away from the project, booking losses in the region of US\$1 billion. The Christie administration stepped in with US\$261 million in tax incentives to rescue the heavily leveraged project, the opening of which in the Spring of 2012 was hailed as a 'turning point' by the governor (Zernike, 2013). However, this was the beginning of a new crisis, not a new beginning. Revel started hemorrhaging money immediately, twice declaring bankruptcy before going out of business in the Autumn of 2014. The empty casino was acquired via bankruptcy court at the giveaway price of US\$82 million by Glenn Straub, a Florida-based property

magnate who has since entertained a series of imaginative schemes for repurposing the building, which if nothing else illustrate the challenges of diversifying beyond the gaming monoculture: an indoor water park, a camp for Syrian refugees, a vertical think tank dubbed the 'Tower of Geniuses' and a scaled-down casino inside the oversized carcass of the old. Hardly reassuring, specialists in the commercial property business report that they know of 'no successful conversion of a large resort casino anywhere in the world' (Hurdle, 2014: 6). Today, Revel represents 'a chilling signal of how far Atlantic City has fallen and may yet fall', although some found solace in the fact that 'the building – and you might even say the town – was worth anything at all' (Paumgarten, 2015: 58; Kocieniewski et al., 2016).¹⁰

This was the prelude to Atlantic City's crisis-assisted tumble into emergency management, which began in late 2014. Taking cues from Michigan's experience, especially the so-called 'Pontiac model' (after the troubled city, not the now-defunct General Motors brand with which it remains synonymous), the Governor's Advisory Commission had recommended that an 'Emergency Manager should be appointed immediately with extraordinary supervisory powers', including a brief to downsize the machinery of the municipality and the school board in line with the budgetary 'new normal', while initiating a programme of structural reforms in taxation, in the reorganisation and privatisation of services, and in public-sector staffing, benefits and pensions (Hanson et al., 2014: 2; Seidman and Rosenberg, 2015: A1). The Commission could come up with almost no feasible alternatives to these extreme measures, after the decline of gaming-industry revenues had wrought 'devastating' consequences on the casino-dependent tax base. Notably, municipal spending on local services had remained essentially stable, but 'non-departmental'

spending had ballooned, largely because of the costs of debt servicing as the city had turned to the bond market to cover gaps in its operating budget.¹¹ These were, in effect, crises *of* a financialised growth machine.

In the face of opposition from the mayor and the city council, Governor Christie formally declared the financial emergency in January 2015, his executive order charging the two Kevins (Lavin and Orr, his emergency-manager appointees) to negotiate a 'plan for an adjustment of Atlantic City's debts and the restructuring of its municipal operations', including '*immediate* reforms to property taxation, pension payments, and municipal services in order to rectify its financial condition' (Office of the Governor, 2015: 4, 3, emphasis added).¹² The governor maintained that this move was 'not meant to marginalize or minimize' the roles of the mayor and city council (quoted in Hanna et al., 2015: 1), even as it did precisely that. The move was seen at the time as a 'last-ditch effort to avoid a [yet] more drastic outcome such as a state bailout or bankruptcy filing' (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2015: 7).

The protocols for this unilateral 'power-sharing' arrangement would have to be improvised, sometimes clumsily. During the emergency managers' inaugural press conference, which was described as 'slightly awkward', the mayor was reportedly 'all but ignored'; meanwhile, the man just in from Detroit, Kevyn Orr went to almost comical lengths to skirt around the obvious parallels with 'that area of Michigan that you [the reporters] reference where I have had some experience recently' (quoted in Rosenberg, 2015b: 1–2; Hanna et al., 2015: 1), insisting that there could be no one-size-fits-all procedure for managing such emergencies – even as he literally embodied the principle of learning from Motown. Far less squeamish about such evaluative comparisons (for this is their business), and quite capable of interpreting the (surely calculated) political

signaling effects of Orr's appointment, were the credit-rating agencies. Moody's immediately downgraded Atlantic City's rating by six notches, from merely junk (Ba1) to deep junk (Caa1), denoting speculative status with 'poor standing', a negative outlook and 'very high' credit risk. In this corner of Wall Street, Christie's action was read as a 'sea-change' in New Jersey's fiscal regime, equivalent to 'a paradigm shift in the state's tradition of support for its municipalities' (quoted in Coen 2015b: 1; Allen, 2015: 6).

New Jersey is one of only two states that have had municipal intervention laws on the books since the Great Depression, most having introduced these – as responses to increasingly widespread conditions of localised fiscal crisis – in the period since the 1970s. In doing so, many were following 'New York City's 1975 playbook', the near-bankruptcy of which stands as a signal event in what would become intertwined histories of neoliberalisation and financialisation, during which states have 'continually test[ed] new solutions' (Scorsone, 2014: 3, 10; cf. Hackworth, 2007; Harvey, 2005; Peck and Whiteside, 2016; Sites, 2003). In contrast to Michigan's emergency-manager statute, rated as the most aggressive and invasive in the country (Anderson, 2012; Peck, 2014), New Jersey has long prided itself on a paternalist and proactive approach to the management of local fiscal stress, seeking to avoid municipal defaults and bankruptcy declarations by subjecting local government to continuous financial scrutiny, and intervening early and pre-emptively where necessary (Coen, 2015c; Lipitz et al., 2015; Pew Charitable Trusts, 2015).¹³ As the state's director of local government services has explained to an audience of his peers in the municipal-finance business:

[W]e are very good at oversight of local governments ... we don't let them fudge the revenues ... In New Jersey, a municipality is not

permitted to borrow for operating expenses, generally ... If it really starts running into a wall and has problems with its finances, New Jersey will assist. Over many, many years, in a bipartisan manner, with the state's most conservative governor, as we have today, and with liberal governors in the past, the state has always agreed it will be there for our cities ... [W]e do have the authority in New Jersey to forcibly place a municipality under supervision. It is something we do only as a last resort. Right now we only have one municipality that is under forcible supervision and that is Atlantic City. (Thomas Neff, in Lipitz et al., 2015: 59, 60, 61, 62)

When confronted by the most trying of circumstances, Neff acknowledges that it can be useful if state authorities can threaten the use of a 'hammer', should a negotiated resolution prove to be difficult to come by, especially if 'some knucklehead got elected and let the place run into the ground' (Lipitz et al., 2015: 69), being quick to add that this was not the situation in Atlantic City. Instead, it was 'aggressive casino competition that [had] drained resources out of [that] city', the resulting structural problems being neither the 'fault' of local residents nor their elected representatives.¹⁴

Notwithstanding this candid and sympathetic assessment, the unforgiving rationale of emergency-manager laws since the 1970s has been premised on the 'operating theory' that the root causes of local fiscal stress are endogenous, resting on the presumption of 'local management failures', as opposed to addressing 'structural factors such as the architecture of the state's local public finance system, economic development problems, or underlying social pressures' (Scorsone, 2014: 41, 43, 42). Their effect is to localise the causes of municipal fiscal failure, while also ring-fencing and concentrating many of the costs of adjustment (Anderson, 2012; Peck, 2015b). The blunt instrument that is chapter 9 of the federal bankruptcy code, which has

only been sparingly used since its introduction in the 1930s, has been actively redefined – through a combination of legal precedent and policy practice – in the period since the Wall Street crash of 2008. Finance specialists observe that these ‘once-in-a-generation’ conditions have initiated a somewhat improvised reconstruction of the chapter 9 code, which had been ‘more or less unheard of until recently’, Michigan having been the most ‘aggressive in creating almost a form of quasi-bankruptcy, where a state emergency manager can break existing contracts’ (Lipitz et al., 2015: 55–56; Scorsone, 2014: 40, emphasis added). Likewise, Atlantic City would soon be testing New Jersey’s established institutional machinery to the very limit, taking both the state and the city into uncharted territory.

New Jersey Senate President Stephen Sweeney, the most powerful Democrat in the state (and a likely future gubernatorial contender), was one of those who accused Governor Christie of seeking to ‘force’ a bankruptcy in Atlantic City, in order to drive through measures ‘popular in Republican politics – blow up union contracts, destroy the unions’ (quoted in Seidman and Rosenberg, 2015: 1). Much more pragmatically, Sweeney was also concerned that the emergency-manager appointments had ‘sent a very bad message to the markets’ (quoted in Dawsey and Haddon, 2015: A13). It is no coincidence that public-sector contracts, salaries, working conditions and pensions have been ‘front and centre’ in the latest round of emergency-management interventions and chapter 9 filings across the country (Scorsone, 2014: 17), since the post-2008 fiscal crisis presented a strategic opportunity to take on the public-sector unions and to rewrite (or tear up) existing contracts, both legal and social (Peck, 2014, 2016). In this context, the targeting of municipal services (and workforces) for downsizing and privatisation has become integral to the (still

evolving) neoliberal model of fiscal federalism, and in the aftermath of the financial crash of 2008 and (more particularly) the cumulative resurgence of the Republican Party at the state level since 2010, it has been an energised arena for conservative political agency and advocacy-based networking amongst the states.

At the urban scale, the geography of exposure to such incursions is shaped by partisan politics but more basically by the distribution of localised deficits – in economic growth, in tax revenues and in municipal budgets. Subsequently, those cities that fall under the shadow of emergency rule are deemed to be legitimately (and morally) subject both to the summary judgements of the financial markets and to ‘Caesarist’ actions on the part of state authorities. This combination of bond-market discipline, applied at a distance, and state-level interventions, imposed from on high, can be seen as a manifestation of a normalised (indeed institutionalised) mode of neoliberal meta-governance, enacted across a moving terrain of financial vulnerability. For troubled cities, local-state downsizing and enforced austerity programmes increasingly look like the only option – the *new* last resort – even as the accompanying measures plainly offer little or nothing in the way of constructive assistance. This point has been made by the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, voicing its support for Atlantic City’s mayor while questioning Governor Christie’s underlying motives: ‘A revival [will] require a new economic model, a plan for building it, and the political will to act on it’, the editorial board observed, ‘Certainly Atlantic City has to get its expenses and revenue under control. But its long-term success won’t come from giving someone the power to break contracts and fire employees’ (*Philadelphia Inquirer*, 2015: A10).

For his part now accustomed to ‘expecting the worst’, Mayor Guardian had initially been pleasantly surprised to be treated with

a 'deferential spirit' by the two Kevins, reciprocating in a courteous (if perhaps superfluous) manner by placing the facilities of City Hall at their disposal (quoted in Rosenberg, 2015b: 1). Initially, the emergency managers chose to hole themselves up behind two sets of locked doors on a patch of the state's sovereign territory, in the local offices of the Casino Commission, although they would later accept the mayor's hospitality. Moving into City Hall, the two Kevins were able to work with the assistance of the mayor's staff, but the atmosphere was reported to be tense. 'I don't think anyone wants to use the B word', has been the mayor's optimistic mantra (quoted in Brubaker, 2015: B1). Yet the b-word was being used all over town, as local residents and workers wondered whether Atlantic City would be the 'next Detroit', the threat of bankruptcy hanging like a 'Damocles sword' (Dawsey and Haddon, 2015: A13).

The first report from the emergency manager's office depicted in graphic terms the depth of the municipality's financial problems, although perhaps more telling was its manifest failure to identify realistic remedies, beyond abrupt governmental downsizing. While the proposed measures might address the immediate question of solvency, it was difficult to present them – realistically – as any kind of contribution to 'recovery'. Confronted by unrelenting economic 'headwinds' and a projected deficit of US\$393 million by 2020, it was proposed that there would have to be severe cutbacks in municipal funding, services and staffing levels, amounting to around one-third of the public-sector workforce. In a covering letter addressed to 'the taxpayers of Atlantic City', Kevin Lavin clearly felt that he could not sugarcoat the situation, somewhat forlornly appealing to 'shared sacrifice':

[T]he decline in revenues has exceeded the worst estimates ... Moreover, absent the

continuation of significant state assistance, the City is simply incapable of self-funding even its reduced budget for the coming fiscal year and this incapacity will only continue and worsen throughout the following years. *The City simply cannot stand on its own.* Thus, one thing is clear – there is no reasonable likelihood that these headwinds will abate at any point in the near future. In fact ... all reasonable forecasts confirm that these troubling factors will continue to beset the City for the foreseeable future and, absent immediate and urgent corrective action, the City's ability to function as a thriving and viable municipal enterprise is imperiled. (Emergency Manager, 2015: 6, emphasis added)

The emergency manager's unvarnished fiscal realism, despite being objectively grounded, was not well received. Democratic State Assemblyman Vince Mazzeo lambasted the emergency manager for 'starkly lacking in innovative ideas', while State Senate President Sweeney used the vacuum of this 'failed substitute for real action' as an opportunity to reintroduce his own scheme for buying time (with the casinos advancing payments in lieu of taxes for 15 years), noting that Wall Street's negative assessments of the emergency manager's half measures were only making the 'situation worse' (quoted in Rosenberg and Brubaker, 2015: A1; Rosenberg and Seidman, 2015: B4). Issued within hours, Moody's judgement was blunt: Atlantic City's rock-bottom credit rating of Caa1 would be amended to 'credit negative', with an elevated likelihood of default. Demarcating some of the operational limits of austerity urbanism and emergency management, the markets were taking the view that, in this case, there was just not enough municipal fat left to cut. Moreover, the fact that the majority of Atlantic City's bonds were uninsured, and in the hands of a large number of retail investors, would make for an especially challenging negotiating environment – even outside bankruptcy court (Allen, 2015).

The emergency manager's next move, in the Spring of 2015, was to engage a team of restructuring lawyers, headed by a retired bankruptcy judge, to drive the negotiations, which were expected to become increasingly challenging for all parties. To that point, Mayor Guardian had made much of the fact that there had been no sign of 'unions fighting the city', which elsewhere in the country had become one of the most visible indicators of municipal strife, whereas Council President Frank Gilliam described the comportment of the emergency-management team as 'very cordial, very professional. It's not what we thought it would be. This is not a takeover' (quoted in Allen, 2015: 6). The behaviour of all of the principal parties seemed entirely orderly at the local level. Even when the press dug into the size of the retainers that the two Kevins were receiving, the borderline non-story was that Lavin was being paid US\$135,000 per year.¹⁵ Admittedly, this was US\$32,000 more than the mayor, but perhaps more telling was the fact that those in the restructuring business rated this as no more than a middle-management assignment.

For now, all that Atlantic City could do was muddle through on credit and cutbacks. The City had no alternative but to find ways to continue borrowing from the bond market to fund its continuing operations, at interest rates newly restructured by the state so as to entice a ring of hedge funds (which Trenton officials refused to publicly name). But time was running out. When Donald Trump and Chris Christie stood alongside one another during the Republican presidential-primary debates in the Autumn of 2015, the billionaire dismissed criticisms of his own record of bankruptcies on this part of the Jersey coast by declaring that he had merely been using the laws of the land to the benefit of his businesses. According to this version of events, it was only after his exit that 'Atlantic City has gone bad',

Trump declared, with the addendum 'I'm not blaming Chris, by the way' (*New York Times*, 2015: 21).¹⁶ For Atlantic City, though, things were going from bad to worse. Now only able to borrow at 'near-usurious rates' (Eide, 2015: 3), the City was on the way to losing access to its credit lines altogether. The emergency manager's innocuously titled 'update report' of January 2016 completed the grim picture, acknowledging the efforts that had been made to balance the budget in the short term while reiterating the harsh fiscal fact that:

cost reductions are *not nearly enough* to align the City toward a 'new normal'... The City must continue to identify operational cost savings, not only through layoffs and attrition, but by implementing creative solutions such as regionalization, consolidation, and privatization of municipal services. This provides not only the short-term benefit of reduced operating expenses but will also help relieve the City of associated costs such as pension, health care benefits, and employee-related expenses. (Emergency Manager, 2016: 20, emphasis added)

In order to maintain cash flow, the emergency manager recommended that the City should promptly monetise or sell off its remaining assets, including the Municipal Utilities Authority, Boardwalk Hall, Bader Field municipal airport, and other landholdings; that the police department should be downscaled, following the extraction of additional concessions from the officers' union; that any remaining 'inefficient city services' should be outsourced wherever possible; that planning and development powers should be ceded to the newly established private agency, the Atlantic City Development Corporation (ACDevCo); and that pension rights should be eliminated for lifeguards. These and other initiatives would need to be advanced with 'a sense of urgency for the City to move from its present state of fiscal crisis to long-term

fiscal stability' (Emergency Manager, 2016: 5). The 'new normal', even if it could never be secured by fiscal leeching and municipal shock treatment alone, seemed to be arriving nevertheless. In Trenton, a bipartisan consensus had been solidifying around a plan for a state 'takeover' of Atlantic City, as a means of averting a bankruptcy (the latter now an option that Mayor Guardian had begun publicly to contemplate, as the City started to default on its debts).

Lavin completed his emergency-management assignment in January 2016, his parting observations being that the city would remain 'adrift', stumbling 'from one fiscal and cash crisis to the next' in the absence of decisive action, the principal obstacle to which he identified as the 'parochial politics' not of Atlantic City *but of Trenton*.¹⁷ Meanwhile, up in the state capital, State Senate President Sweeney (D) had been pushing the option of a 15-year state takeover, mixing populism, pragmatism and one more roll of the dice for the casino-based model of entrepreneurialism in his assertions that 'New Jersey taxpayers [should not have to] send more state dollars to bail out Atlantic City', the 'recalcitrant' leaders of which were in 'denial of its dire financial position', having persisted with a 'bloated budget that is completely unacceptable and unsustainable' (Sweeney, 2016: 1–2). In addition to his scheme for a tax treaty with the Atlantic City casinos, Sweeney's legislative compromise would grant new gambling concessions in the north of the state as a means to fund a non-profit development corporation with a charge to turn 'Atlantic City into a year-round family vacation destination along the lines of Baltimore's Inner Harbor' (2016: 1). Viewed, perhaps, as a least-bad alternative to bankruptcy, Sweeney's proposal won the support of the casino workers union, the president of Unite Here Local 54 stating that 'we do not have the luxury of continuing down the path we have been on,

of adapting from one crisis to the next' (Bob McDevitt, quoted in Johnson, 2016b: 3).

By now an experienced crisis manager, Mayor Guardian came out swinging against the takeover proposal, likening it to a 'Pearl Harbor' moment for the city (even though many had seen this one coming), while insisting that local leaders were more than willing to make, mixing his metaphors, the 'tough decisions needed to stem the tide of this devastating financial tsunami' (quoted in Johnson, 2016b: 2). Returning to Trenton after pulling out of the presidential race, Governor Christie was coming under pressure for having vetoed three rescue packages for Atlantic City, later offering up what amounted to his second five-year plan under the euphemistic rubric of 'cooperation' that would see the state assume financial control for a period of five years.¹⁸ Christie's first five-year plan had been an orthodox package of economic-development measures; this one was about fiscal crisis management. After all, what was at stake here was not only the future of Atlantic City, but borrowing costs for municipalities across the state, New Jersey's own credit rating having slumped to amongst the worst in the country (behind only Illinois) during Christie's term of office. It was well known that Detroit's bankruptcy had unnerved the bond markets, 'nobody really want[ing] to buy Michigan paper' at the time (Allen, 2015: 6).

Prohibited under state law from initiating its own bankruptcy proceedings, the City of Atlantic City was left with no alternative but to 'cooperate' with Trenton. This was described by Michael Cerra of the New Jersey League of Municipalities as 'uncharted territory' (quoted in Johnson, 2016b: 4). For State Senate President Sweeney, it meant that the 'day of reckoning is quickly approaching' (Sweeney, 2016: 1). The credit-rating agencies were taking the view that the city was sliding inexorably towards default and possible bankruptcy,

noting that the failure of each one of the remaining casinos would drain an additional US\$8–15 million from the depleted municipal budget (Coen, 2016b). What had begun as a financial crisis was devolving into an ‘existential’ question – the viability of the city itself (Kocieniewski et al., 2016; McGeehan, 2016a). Adopting an increasingly intransigent line, Christie charged that Mayor Guardian ‘just [has] not had the guts to do his job’ (quoted in McGeehan, 2016a: A17). Legislative machinations in Trenton, led by Sweeney, included plans to transfer the powers to renegotiate debts and contracts to state overseers while unilaterally restructuring and rightsizing municipal government. Nominally a ‘partnership’ arrangement, in the view of Mayor Guardian and local elected officials this was tantamount to a hostile takeover: ‘far from partnership [this is the] worst’, the mayor charged, observers having never seen him so angry; ‘Some would say [that the state’s actions are] even fascist’.

We cannot stand here today and accept any bill with the broad, overreaching powers as the one presented to us [by the state]. It is unacceptable. The civil rights of our citizens are being trampled on . . . [S]o much time has been lost, [and] the City of Atlantic City has now been put in a position of running out of money within the next two months. (Mayor Guardian, quoted in McGeehan, 2016b: A22)

A spokesperson for Governor Christie passed off these remarks as ‘posturing’ on the part of a local administration seeking a ‘bailout’, if not a handout, the state later threatening to withhold scheduled financial assistance to the city unless there were immediate concessions to its proposed ‘fiscal austerity plan’. Meanwhile, the mayor declared in hearings on the takeover proposal that the state’s actions were ‘depriv[ing] the residents of Atlantic City of even the most modest elements of self-government’ (quoted in

Parry, 2016b: 1). The hearings in Trenton would be disrupted after community activists packed the state senate chamber, the testimony of Steve Young, president of the Atlantic City chapter of the National Action Network, being abruptly terminated by security staff when the community activist was forcibly removed in handcuffs. Protesters objected that their city was being treated like a ‘third-world country’, while Mayor Guardian complained that, after making ‘significant’ cuts across every one of the City’s departments, he was now being pressured to accept a ‘one-sided surrender’ by state authorities, apparently on a mission to ‘abolish local government’ (quoted in Johnson, 2016a: 1). Once again, he compared the state’s actions to those of a ‘fascist dictatorship’. As the long-time Atlantic City resident and elected official Ernest Coursey pointedly said in relation to the state’s plan, ‘Don’t come in here with a hostile takeover, a plantation mentality’ (quoted in Hernandez, 2016: 1). Nonetheless, at the close of the hearings, the takeover proposal passed on a vote of 9–1 in the New Jersey Senate Budget Committee.

Conclusion: Caesarism 2.0

Caesars, the second of Atlantic City’s casinos, first opened its doors in 1979 (initially trading as the Boardwalk Regency, as the Casino Control Commission investigated the license application of the Caesars Corporation). Boasting 3400 slot machines and more than 500 hotel rooms, this repurposed Howard Johnson’s motor inn had been given a completely new look – a post-modern entertainment machine with an Ancient Roman aesthetic. One of the largest of the city’s casinos, what became known as Caesars would have a good run, expanding over the years to incorporate a new hotel tower, the Centurion, a 1100-seat showroom named Circus Maximus, and an expanded

parking structure, with Roman accents. Caesars Atlantic City made it through the shakeout of 2014, but at the beginning of the following year Caesars Entertainment, the Nevada-based gaming conglomerate that owns the facility, filed for bankruptcy protection in order to divest some US\$10 billion in debts. The holding company had earlier been forced to shutter its massive entertainment complex in Tunica, Mississippi, one of the poorest towns in the country, for a while the biggest casino between Atlantic City and Las Vegas (with a sprawling, 2200-acre site comprising a 1200-room hotel, a golf course, an RV park and a shooting range). Celebrated for a time as the 'Tunica Miracle', the Mississippi resort had succumbed to intensifying competition from gambling concessions in neighbouring Oklahoma, Missouri and Arkansas (cf. Sparks, 2007). Contested regional markets are likewise an ongoing concern for Caesars' Atlantic City operation, which has struggled to maintain its revenues and customer base as a leading rival, the Borgata, aggressively pushed its local market share from 19% to 31% between 2008 and 2016 (Cooke, 2016).

One of Atlantic City's survivors, Caesars will continue to make what it can of a diminished local market. In this respect at least, the owners may have seen glimmers of opportunity in the closure of the troubled Trump Taj Mahal in October 2016. Earlier that year, the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit had found in favour of the operator, Carl Icahn, ruling that the Taj did not need to honour previous labour agreements in its negotiated exit from bankruptcy (Nurin, 2016), the trigger for a protracted labour dispute that saw picket lines in front of the casino for most of the summer. (The union was seeking a pay increase and the restoration of healthcare benefits for some 1000 cleaners, waiting staff and cooks at the Taj.) Labour leaders accused Icahn of being willing to 'burn the

Trump Taj Mahal down', rather than negotiate with the strikers, which turned into an accurate prediction when the operator opted to close the facility, with the loss of 2800 jobs, declaring that there was 'no path to profitability' (McGeehan, 2016c: A18). There are those who have seen, in these confrontational tactics, a premonition of Trumponomics – and not without reason. During the election campaign, Trump indicated his wish to appoint Icahn as his Treasury Secretary, with a brief including the renegotiation of trade relations with China, an offer that the 80-year-old magnate later declined.¹⁹ Of the nine members of Trump's (pre-election) panel of economic advisors, six had ties to the gaming industry, including John Paulson, a major shareholder in Caesars Entertainment.

When New Jersey voters went to the polling stations on presidential election day, in November 2016, they had been confronted with more than one fateful choice. Also on the ballot was the proposal to expand casino gaming in the north of the state, justified as a means to finance a rescue package for Atlantic City. (What better illustration could there be of the paucity of politically feasible options for revenue generation? The costs of a failed casino development model in one part of the state would be subsidised by the perverse replication of that same strategy in another.) Vigorous campaigns mounted both for and against the casino expansion proposal had shattered previous records, with more than US\$24 million being spent by the two sides combined. A leader of the yes campaign, Jeff Gural, who planned to open a casino in partnership with Hard Rock International on the outskirts of New York City, had been arguing that Atlantic City's days were done: 'It's so illogical ... just ridiculous,' he said in response to the protests of no campaigners, 'letting all this revenue leave the state', the recent closure of the Trump Taj Mahal confirming his view

that New Jersey would continue to lose out in the interstate competition for gaming dollars in the absence of new concessions (quoted in Parry, 2016a: 1). Meanwhile, the no campaign – a broad coalition of community organisations, unions, small businesses and residents – had been citing estimates (from credit-rating agencies and elsewhere) that the legalisation of gambling in the north of the state would lead to the closure of between three and five of Atlantic City's seven remaining casinos. These arguments proved to be persuasive, the referendum initiative being rejected by New Jersey voters (who also went decisively for Hillary Clinton over Trump) by the largest margin in state history.

The failure of the referendum proposal may have been a temporary reprieve for Atlantic City's remaining casinos, but it caused another shoe to drop in Trenton. The day after the presidential election, the state's Local Finance Board unanimously approved a takeover plan under which the head of the board, Timothy Cunningham, assumed far-reaching powers to sell off Atlantic City's remaining assets, to renegotiate contracts with unions and suppliers, to cut services and to fire city employees. Cunningham confessed that this 'incredible responsibility' had been causing him to lose sleep (McGeehan, 2016d: A16). There would have been little sympathy from the mayor, who on his own account had been losing sleep for months over the question of which of the two profoundly unpalatable options – structural adjustment through the bankruptcy courts, or structural adjustment by way of a state takeover – would be least bad for the city, 'a very tough question that I ask God to answer every night', Guardian had said, while adding: 'He has not given me an answer yet' (quoted in Hetrick, 2016: 1). Meanwhile, another higher power – this one acting in accordance with an earthly and unforgiving 'rule of reason' – had decided to

act. Atlantic City would now be governed from Trenton.

The mayor and his officials had spent months, before and after the appointment of the two-Kevins emergency-management team, 'looking under every stone to find ways we can either reduce costs or bring in income' (Donald Guardian, quoted in Rojas, 2016: A18), running up against repeated default deadlines, negotiating bridge loans with the state, liquidating and monetising assets, and manoeuvring to maintain access to the credit markets, while enduring accusations from the governor and others that the City was guilty of 'wasteful spending and mismanagement' (Chris Christie, quoted in Rojas, 2016: A18). The City had engaged the services of no fewer than three private advisory firms, in the months preceding the takeover, to restructure its bond-debt obligations and to assist in the formulation of a mandated five-year plan for the restoration of financial stability, consultants that the mayor credited with acquiring a 'firm grasp on the inner workings of our municipal government' (quoted in Coen, 2016a: 1). Meanwhile, day-to-day crisis management continued, in the face of unmanageable mandates. Forced to shut down 'non-essential' services, for example, the mayor had protested:

If you have lost a loved one and you want to bury them, you need the death certificate; I think that's an essential service. If you're getting married, you need the license. That's an essential service. (Donald Guardian, quoted in Tempey, 2016: 3)

When Governor Christie had initiated what he called 'the final countdown', in May 2016, his diktat had given the City 150 days to 'demonstrate fiscal responsibility', balancing the budget by 2017 and putting in place a binding recovery plan, an ultimatum justified on the grounds that 'Atlantic City's government has not demonstrated the

competence to properly manage the people's money without state guidance', bluntly summarised as: 'no more blank checks' (Office of the Governor, 2016: 1). The countdown came to an end when state officials rejected the City's plan for self-administered restructuring on the grounds of a failure to display 'prudent fiscal management', Trenton determining that there was no prospect of 'achiev[ing] financial stability' (McGeehan, 2016d: A16). The City of Atlantic City had been declared a failed municipal state. Mayor Guardian had said all along that, should the city be forced into default, it would be 'a Chris Christie bankruptcy', albeit one that 'Atlantic City [would have] to pay for' (quoted in Hetrick, 2016: 1). In the aftermath of the state's takeover, Christie has effectively assumed 'ownership' of the Atlantic City crisis, politically speaking – that is, unless he manages to achieve his own form of scale-jumping by joining the incoming Trump administration in some capacity. Christie's ambitions were not being helped, however, by his notable *lack* of visibility, in the days following the presidential election and the Atlantic City takeover announcement, when he was exposed to some highly unflattering media coverage.²⁰

The state's assumption of what has been widely characterised as 'absolute power' over Atlantic City – including the authority unilaterally to 'restructure debt, dictate austerity restraints and sell off ... city assets' – has been such as to leave radically unclear what, if any, token capacities and residual responsibilities might be 'retained' at the local level (McGeehan, 2016d: A16; *New York Times*, 2016: A24). The new Caesarism represents uncharted territory in this respect. This said, those ideological first-responders in the conservative think tanks, whose task it is (repeatedly) to come up with rationales and rubrics for such unprecedented circumstances, continue to pay lip service to the

'cherished ideal' of local autonomy, while contending that cities deemed by state overseers and by the bond markets to have abused that responsibility should expect nothing less than stern and disciplinary interventions. As a prophylactic measure, designed to prevent 'more Detroits', state governments are therefore implored to:

rein in local officials' fiscal recklessness ... [Recall that] cities go unmentioned in the Constitution, and they have no sovereign rights to assert against state encroachments ... [W]hen cities face insolvency ... states need to step in, Caesar-like, earlier and more vigorously than they've been doing. (Eide, 2016: 70, 75)

So it is that Christie has found himself in 'total control [of Atlantic City] in an arrangement reminiscent of Michigan's emergency manager law' (Tempey, 2016: 1), the bitterly contested legal provision that has become indelibly associated with Detroit's court-authorised structural adjustment, with Flint's water contamination crisis, and much more. This said, it is hardly sufficient to declare Atlantic City 'Detroit with a boardwalk' (Anastasia, 2014), and leave it at that. These relationally conjoined cases of austerity urbanism warrant consideration side by side, and weighed *with* (rather than just against) proper consideration of the path-dependent particularities and situational specificities displayed in each site. Together, the two cities can be seen to be actively shaping (just as they must for some time endure) a fiscally mandated and externally enforced 'new normal'. Both having been subjected to unforgiving discipline, imposed from outside and indeed from 'above', these are also prominent test beds and forcing houses for that disciplinary code itself. It is here that financialised rules of the game are being abruptly imposed, but it is also where they are being forged, manipulated and modelled.

Returning to the arc described in Part 1 of this paper, from entrepreneurial urbanism as an emergent form, through an extended period of regulatory normalisation, to the crisis-assisted ascendancy of constitutively financialised and imperative modes of urban governance (Peck, 2017; Peck and Whiteside, 2016), Detroit and Atlantic City are clearly cutting their own paths along this variegated terrain. An instance of simple convergence this is not, even though there is ample evidence of constitutive connections and processual continuities.

The case documented here featured one of the truly original instances of entrepreneurial invention – the casino development fix – the subsequent emulation of which roughly coincided with the shift from a protected monopoly to a saturated market. New Jersey's 'experiment' in casino legalisation was a wager on economic growth, an attempt to *grow* Atlantic City out of its long trajectory of post-war decline, conferring on the city the status of an entrepreneurial first-mover before versions of this strategy diffused, through competitive contagion and fast-policy borrowing, into what by the mid-1990s had become a clichéd 'economic development policy of last resort' (Goodman, 1995: 59). While casino legalisation initiated a localised economic boom of sorts in Atlantic City, this characteristically extractive mode of development ensured that few of the benefits of growth 'trickled out', and neither have they proved to be especially durable. The city's crisis, when it came, has been precipitous, its taxable 'value' collapsing from US\$21 billion to just US\$6 billion in the three years since 2013. A sign of the late-entrepreneurial times is that here the goal of pursuing local economic development seems to have been all but abandoned; instead of growing the local economy, the new imperative is to shrink the local state.

In this context, the politically produced fact that Atlantic City 'cannot stand on its own' (Emergency Manager, 2015: 6) should be read as an indictment both of entrepreneurial urbanism and of fiscal federalism, not some morbid symptom of municipal malfeasance, 'wasteful spending and mismanagement' (Chris Christie, quoted in Rojas, 2016: A18).

How does the story end? We do not know. A new chapter in Republican machine politics is being written. Having been gifted a ring-fenced casino market, back in the 1970s, Atlantic City must now live through years of ring-fenced financial restructuring – both decisive interventions having come at the hands of the state authorities. In this late-entrepreneurial moment, the bankruptcy of a local growth machine has resulted in something between a fiscal and an existential crisis. Marc Pfeiffer, an observer with the benefit of almost four decades of experience in local-government financing in the State of New Jersey, has said of the Atlantic City takeover: 'The city is not dead [but] they haven't been able to get their expenses under control to live within their circumstances' (quoted in McGeehan, 2016d: A16). But this is an entirely 'new process', he went on to emphasise, 'We've never done a process like this before'.

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Notes

1. In a Republican presidential-primary debate, Trump declared that, 'Atlantic City is a disaster [but] I did great ... My timing was great' (quoted in Buettner and Bagli, 2016: A17).
2. Simon (2004: 7); Harold Rhodes, quoted in Simon (2004: 7); see also Funnell (1975).
3. As Atlantic City's mayor, Donald Guardian, said on the occasion of the board game's (official) 80th anniversary, 'The concepts of capitalism, money, buying up properties, raising the rent, buying out your competition kind of remain today' (quoted in Parry, 2015: 1; see also Pilon, 2015).
4. The makeover of the hotel purchased by Resorts had been a tellingly superficial one, barely exceeding a new paint job, recarpeting and the installation of hundreds of mirrors, intended to distort the customers' experience of both space and time. 'Two months ago this was a shit house', a seasoned comedian had quipped from the refurbished stage, 'Now it's a shit house with carpet' (Van Meter, 2003: 259).
5. MJ Reife, *New Jersey Casino Journal*, quoted in Goodman (1995: 11).
6. David Hanlon, formerly of Merv Griffin's Atlantic City, quoted in Buettner and Bagli (2016: A17).
7. Measured from this 1997 peak, the employment record of the Trump operations was rated as 'the worst' of the Atlantic City casinos, according to a bankruptcy lawyer's study (Brickley and Berzon, 2016).
8. The private-sector union membership rate for Atlantic City is indeed comparatively high, at 22.5% (compared with 15.2% in Las Vegas, and less than 13% for the most unionised major cities in the country). 2014 data from www.unionstats.com; Barry Hirsch and David Macpherson; estimates are based on Current Population Survey (CPS) using BLS methods.
9. According to Friedman, 'there is one and only one social responsibility of business – to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits so long as it stays within the rules of the game, which is to say, engages in open and free competition, without deception or fraud' (2002 [1962]: 112).
10. Due to reopen in 2017 under the name TEN, it is said that the resurrected Revel will combine a small casino with a beach-sports facility, a zip-line, equestrian and cycling facilities, a rock-climbing wall, three movie theatres and a heliport.
11. US\$345 million in new bond debt had been incurred by Atlantic City since 2010, debt service accounting for 15% of the overall municipal budget (Office of the Governor, 2015).
12. Answerable to the Governor, the emergency manager was 'authorized to *consult, in his discretion*, with all stakeholders, including the Mayor and Council of Atlantic City, the Atlantic County Executive and the governing body of Atlantic County, representatives of bondholders, judgement creditors, other creditors, collective bargaining representatives of municipal employees and organizations, and such other persons and parties as necessary to secure the long-term financial stability and viability of Atlantic City and its economy' (Office of the Governor, 2015: 4, emphasis added).
13. New Jersey law requires municipalities regularly to submit financial plans for approval by the state, empowering a Local Finance Board to assume the active supervision of local governments in fiscal distress, with responsibilities including service restructuring; the hiring and firing of public employees; the renegotiation of service and labour contracts; and debt reorganisation. Camden filed for chapter 9 bankruptcy protection without state approval in 1999, withdrawing the petition after receiving a US\$62-million rescue package, later to be placed under state supervision between 2002 and 2010. It remains on the watch list of the ratings agencies, along with Newark, Union City, Harrison, Paterson and (ironically) Trenton, the state capital (see Coen, 2015a).

14. Neff continued: 'I would argue that the problems in Atlantic City are not so much the officials' faults ... or the people who happen to reside there, it is just aggressive casino competition that otherwise drained resources out of the city that was relying on casino work. It happened relatively quickly, and it is not their fault. So the state has an obligation to be helpful to the extent it can and to try and right things there' (quoted in Lipitz et al., 2015: 70).
15. Orr's fees raised a few more eyebrows, at US\$950 per hour, albeit with a discount of 25% for timely payment (Rosenberg, 2015a).
16. After withdrawing from the presidential race, Christie would later pledge his support to the Trump campaign, being one of the first Republican officeholders of any stature to do so.
17. Kevin Lavin (quoted in Johnson, 2016b: 1). After leaving Atlantic City, he would move to a new role as co-president of Ankura Consulting Group, which promises to 'guide [its public and private sector clients] through the turbulence back to stability', with a service offering based upon bankruptcy/corporate restructuring, corporate investigation, forensic accounting, geopolitical risk assessment, expert testimony and management consulting services (see <https://ankuraconsulting.com/about-ankura/>, accessed 11 November 2016). Here, Lavin is described as having 'played a leading role in many of the largest restructurings around the globe', with a roster including Lehman Brothers, Puerto Rico's Power and Highway Authorities, Global Crossing, Extended Stay Hotels, the City of Philadelphia and the City of Atlantic City.
18. 'You can call it whatever you want to call it', Christie said of the so-called partnership deal, while Sweeney tried to strike a more conciliatory tone in his parallel statement that, 'We have to fix this government ... It's not Atlantic City's fault, but they're spending three dollars and taking one in' (quoted in Aregood, 2016: 1).
19. Icahn declared his lack of interest in the position on the morning after Trump's election victory, having reportedly left the presidential victory party in the early hours in order to place a US\$1 billion bet on US equities, as the markets went into a temporary free-fall on news of the result.
20. As the *New York Times* (2016: A24) editorialised: 'Hard-pressed taxpayers find it telling that as state officials take over the city, Gov. Chris Christie has gone missing, distracted by what seem to be more promising odds in Washington ... Mr. Christie jumped from being a loser in the primaries to instant Trump loyalist. Now he is one of those crowding up at the winner's window in Washington, although he may miss the big Trifecta payoff'. Gail Collins' (2016: A31) assessment, after reviewing the governor's various political woes, was that the diminished Christie was effectively 'toast'.

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Predatory Formations Dressed in Wall Street Suits and Algorithmic Math

SASKIA SASSEN

This article examines how assemblages of complex types of knowledge and technologies—including algorithmic mathematics, law and accounting, and high-level logistics—have generated complex predatory formations. The complexity of these formations tends to camouflage their predatory character. Further, such formations are systemic in nature. They are not produced by an elementary seizure of power. Predatory formations are often beyond the reach of ordinary policy responses, in good part because they tend to assemble elements of separate domains into novel configurations. The focus here is on one of the more powerful and complex predatory formations, (high) finance. And the effort is to explain how even the most sophisticated financial instruments require certain elementary and brutal steps, resulting in highly degraded socio-economic outcomes. The sub-prime mortgage developed in the early 2000s differentiates itself from the original 1970s concept in that its aim was not to enable access to housing. Its aim was and is to use the actual physical good (the house) to develop an asset-backed security for the financial system itself.

ONE OF the major challenges in struggles for a more just society is the rise of complex predatory formations. In using this type of formulation, my effort is to emphasise some distinctions often lost even in the critical scholarship about today's political economy, in both global and national approaches. Here I provide a brief description of what I mean by such types of formations, which I have developed in great detail elsewhere (2008: chs 4 and 5, 2014 chs 1 and 3). A first point is that the complexity of these formations easily camouflages their predatory character: there is often no self-evident brutality as we might see it in a sweatshop. On the contrary, the key components include elements from some of the most admirable forms of complex knowledge and technologies we have generated: elements, and only that, from advanced versions of law and accounting, from specific technical

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capacities, from algorithmic mathematics, from high-level logistics and so on. These formations include powerful elites and owners of capital, but also these are partial factors in their functioning; one way of understanding this partial character is that even if we eliminated such owners and managers, we would not ipso facto eliminate these predatory formations. Major capital owners and major managers matter in the current shaping of economies, but by themselves they could not have achieved the extreme concentration of wealth and unaccountable power they now have across the world. This mix of elements and its guiding logics has led to escalated systemic capacities for massive capture at the top, environmental destruction on a scale we have not seen before, and a significant rise in the expulsion of people from reasonable life options even in rich countries.

An important feature of these predatory formations is that they are systemic. They are not elementary power grabs. They are constituted through the incorporation of elements from key domains and capabilities of our current leading economies and societies; as already mentioned, they include pieces of diverse core forms of knowledge and organisational alignments. We might contrast this systemic aspect with the image of an invader who comes, grabs and leaves with the loot rather than using what was grabbed to build something new in situ. Further, their existence also signals that simply getting rid of the rich is not enough to neutralise these formations. These formations are mostly beyond the reach of the usual policy responses, especially given the tendency in policy-making towards constructing silos for each policy domain. In sharp contrast, the emergent formations that concern me here cut across such domains and basically reassemble pieces of each domain into novel formations. Contesting or eliminating such complex mixed assemblages of core elements would require the will to disassemble them or destroy them, though there is always the possibility of auto-destruction since they tend to abuse their own power.¹

Here I will focus on a few key elements of one of the major predatory formations of our times that is also among the most complex ones: (high) finance. The usual way of understanding finance is through a particular set of high-end components: some of the most advanced uses of digital technologies, the mathematics of physics rather than the more elementary math of standard economics, practitioners which include some of the best minds and so on.² This is correct as far as it goes, but it is, I argue, an incomplete representation of the domain. The notion I develop in this article, to wit, that we can link finance with extreme degradation, as has been done, for instance, with corporations that outsource manual work (e.g., Aneesh, 2009; Beneria & Feldman, 1992; U.S. Department of State, 2015; World Bank, 2015), is not part of the general scholarship about finance nor is finance usually linked to degraded manual labour. In this, finance is also a contrast with many advanced economic sectors where we can make such links easily, notably the degraded and unhealthy moments in the production of advanced electronic components.

To incorporate physical degradation in the case of the financial sector requires expanding the understanding of finance so we can get at a far more inclusive assemblage of elements than is usual in studies of finance. Further, this expanded assemblage can include some very elementary components rarely associated with

finance. Constructing such an expanded domain for finance makes visible that even extremely complex and sophisticated financial instruments can actually include some very elementary and brutal steps in their production process and highly degraded socio-economic outcomes. My effort here is, then, to capture a more encompassing operational field for finance: an assemblage of algorithmic math and advanced technologies that finds the grist for its mill by incorporating very modest elements at the other extreme of the knowledge and technical vector.

There are other such much admired and respected domains typically represented by complex forms of knowledge, which can also be shown to function in a far more expansive operational space than is usual, a space that can include extreme degradation—that is, that includes elements typically left out of the description, understanding and content of that domain. I argue that we need to re-position such domains in ways that allow us to capture the full operational space through which they are constituted. The tendency is to go in the opposite direction: separate the most complex moment of knowledge and sophistication from other moments that often contain elementary physical degradation.

We need to recover the full geographies of our leading contemporary economic sectors. Elsewhere (2014), I have examined a range of advanced sectors through the framing of such expanded operational fields. Seen from the other end—the degraded moment—we can see a similarly unilateral focus in much research on such practices as outsourcing.

The question I examine in this article actually plays out in diverse domains. One such formation includes the familiar practice we call outsourcing. There is a vast body of research and information on outsourcing and its exploitative and brutal features. I add to this focus on the actual tasks and workers the larger formations within which these function. The execution of that outsourcing includes brilliant engineering, logistics, lawyering, accounting and negotiations with host governments to push for weakening some of their laws and environmental standards. Further, one of the key logics, mostly unrecognised because the focus is on the brutality of outsourcing, is that stock markets register a firm's willingness to outsource as a positive indicator that can, hence, raise stock values (Sassen, 2014, ch 1) because it shows that the firm is willing to cut whatever costs it can in order to raise profits. In short, the argument I develop here for financial instruments also holds for other types of advanced economic sectors. Another example is the world of the cargo ship-making industry. Building these huge ships involves extraordinary engineering, advanced materials science, specialised knowledge about oceanic streams and physics. But when the ships become obsolete, they are often taken to countries with much low-wage labour, notably India, and dismantled by hand—an extremely exploited workforce, with no proper protections essential to this work (protections from cuts, toxic materials, etc.) and with no regard to the poisonous environment. In short, an extraordinary product of complex forms of knowledge contains within it a zone of extreme degradation of workers and the environment.³

In what follows, I focus on one specific case in finance. It captures the extent to which finance is actually bi-modal. We cannot fully understand finance if we keep

representing it only through its most advanced components. The case I discuss here contains two extremes: an admirably complex instrument applied to a simple x in a brutal way in order to secure a positive outcome for finance. This is a different assemblage of elements from the more familiar ones we see, for example, in studies of outsourced work in low-wage countries, a focus that dominates the larger subject.

From Consumption to Extraction

Over the last 30 years, finance has inserted itself in more and more domains of traditional banking. It has taken over functions from traditional banking that should have stayed there. Beyond banking, it has gained control over the logics organising many large corporations via its critical role as an intermediary economic sector—for instance, facilitating the merger of two large corporations, providing financing and specialised advice to firms that want to expand their global network of affiliates. Increasingly, it is also one of the best sectors for negotiating on behalf of client firms for better conditions by a host government. In short, besides the core financial function, the leading financial firms in any country today have economic and political roles. Finance has become a critical vector especially in the economies of developed countries.

It is this expanded operational space that leads me to argue that we need a sharp differentiation between finance and traditional banking. One way of conceiving of this difference can be simply put as follows. Traditional banking sells something it has (money) for a price (interest). Finance sells something it does *not* have, and therein lies both its complexity and brilliance, as well as its danger to other sectors: to do what it does, finance needs to develop instruments that allow it to invade other sectors in order to extract value from them, or, more concretely, to extract the grist for its mill. At its most brutal and innovative, I argue that finance is an extractive sector: once it has extracted what there is to extract, it moves on, leaving behind destruction. Yes, in this it is similar to mining, albeit dressed in much finer clothes. In contrast to finance, traditional banking gains when its borrowers grow, do well and keep borrowing. At its best, traditional banking enables others, while finance, at its best, destroys others to enable itself.⁴

Extraction, this extreme aspect of finance, is present in a broad spectrum of its sub-sectors. It is a process that has gone through many phases. Elsewhere (1991, 2008, 2014), I have examined in great detail how finance evolved from the 1980s to the current period. At the beginning, in the 1980s, one dominant phase was the proliferation of mergers and acquisitions of major traditional corporations. The highly specialised services, most notably finance, were the key intermediaries. What stood out in that period were the massive profits of the intermediaries and the frequent losses of the two firms that finance (and other intermediary sectors) helped merge. It became clear that the intermediaries were extractive sectors that could not lose even if the firm resulting from the merger went bankrupt. Since then, finance has gone through several phases of quite extraordinary innovations and

inventions. It wound up accumulating hitherto unheard of values, ranging from US\$630 trillion right before the 2008 crisis to well over US\$1 quadrillion today.⁵

Here I want to focus in some detail on a specific type of financial operation, one marked by the deployment of its complex instruments to execute a brutally elementary extraction: the so-called sub-prime mortgage innovation sold to about 15 million mostly modest-income households in the USA, of which 14 million wound up losing their homes according to the US Federal Reserve Bank.⁶ At the other end, many high-level investors secured high profits by buying and promptly selling the instruments representing those mortgages—which, strictly speaking, contained only bits of each of the houses represented. Those who kept the mortgages on their roles, usually more traditional firms, had significant losses and many went bankrupt. This particular instrument has now spread to Europe where, overall, millions of households have now also lost their homes in countries as diverse as Hungary and Germany. The sub-prime mortgage is often described as the source of the 2008 crisis. This is only true as an ironic component of the crisis: the sub-prime mortgage crisis produced a crisis of confidence among financial firms and major investors. Its value was too small (maximum US\$800 billion dollars) to generate a crisis in a sector whose overall value stood at US\$630 trillion. It was the credit-default crisis of 2008, valued at US\$62 trillion that created the 2008 financial crisis.

The sub-prime mortgage crisis is a case that makes visible several key features easily rendered invisible in operations where the sites for extraction are powerful firms, investors or governments. Altogether, the elements in play are a very specific type of socio-technical assemblage. My aim is to bring to the fore the institutional spaces of finance through the notion of an operational field, rather than focus only on firms and markets. The argument is that global finance has de-bordered the narrowly defined notion of financial firms and markets, and financial institutions generally. It is not so much about institutions as about a larger assemblage of institutional, technical and geographic components (Sassen, 2008a: chs 4, 5, 7, pp. 348–365; see also Aneesh, 2006, 2009 on such a type of analysis for other sectors). These components include, among others, a broad range of financial and non-financial institutions, different types of jurisdictions, technical infrastructures and public and private domains. Housing, the focus here, fits into the case of private domains, a vast domain where housing is a very minimal component, especially given the modest property values in play. These features bring to the fore the aggressive pursuit of profits by finance, no matter how modest the assets, and, further, the extent to which finance is, as per my analysis, an extractive sector that leaves behind devastation.

Modest Housing Feeds a Leveraged Instrument

The 1980s saw the financial industry produce multiple innovations that allowed the securitising of all sorts of debt (for a discussion of the issues and the pertinent bibliography, see Sassen, 1991, ch 4). These innovations also addressed small debts, notably individual consumer debt, through the bundling of millions of such small debts, from auto loans to credit card debt. At that time, mortgages were mostly

owned by highly regulated institutions and benefited from government protections. The deregulations that began in the 1980s and multiplied after that became the critical step to enable a vast expansion in what could be securitised. In the case of mortgages, securitisation meant they had to be pulled out of their long-time protective encasements (Aalbers, 2008; Gotham, 2006; Miles, 2007; Newman, 2009).

In the 2000s, housing became the instrument for yet another of the many innovations produced by the financial sector (Aalbers, 2009, 2012).⁷ This innovation lengthened the distance between the financial instrument and the underlying asset (housing) to an extreme that is usually associated with high-risk innovative finance. This is not the first time the financial sector has used housing for such an instrument. The first residential mortgage-backed securities were produced in the late 1970s. The original intention was quite reasonable: to generate an additional source for funding the mortgages of modest-income households, besides the traditional one of bank deposits.

What I focus on here is different and has little connection to that older instrument. The sub-prime mortgage developed in the early 2000s was a particular kind of distortion of that original 1970s concept in that its aim was not to enable access to housing. Its aim was and is to use the actual physical good (the house) to develop an *asset-backed security*. Conceptually, I situate the current disastrous outcome for these households—millions losing their homes—as one component in the design of the instrument rather than as an accident or unforeseen effect. The instrument's purpose for the financial sector had nothing to do with the provision of housing. Housing was used to meet the demand from the high-level investment sector for an actual asset in the securities they were buying: they did not want yet another derivative based on an interest rate in turn based on another derivative, and so on, in an endless chain of elusive probabilities.

The conceptual setting for this proposition comes from an older book (Sassen, 2008a, chs 1, 8 and 9) where I develop a theory of change that has as one core dynamic the fact that condition *x* or capability *y* can shift organising logics and, thereby, actually change valence even if it may look the same. Thus, in the case of the focus in this article, I posit that specific capabilities, that is, sub-prime mortgages, were shifted to a different organising logic from that of the older 1970s type mortgages, and that this specific shift led to the elimination of supports for mortgage holders because the new logic of the financial sector did not reside in the provision of housing but in the expansion of securities markets. Thus, the expanding market for asset-backed securities—that is, the organising logic—marked the house as a material asset that could be made into an asset-backed security (and, further, spliced into multiple bits to expand the number of such securities), mixed up with high-grade debt (to ensure a good rating) and deployed immediately, that is, sold to investors. This operation could be executed, at the limit, in a few days or weeks, after which the asset-backed security passed on to a new owner who could operate under a similar logic. Billions were made in this way all based on very modest assets. As in a game of musical chairs, those who got hit by the crisis were those who still owned those securities.⁸

Elsewhere (2014: chs 1 and 3), I argue that the organising logic of this post-Keynesian period is now making legible its shape: at the centre of this logic is not the ‘valuing’ of people as consumers, but the extraction of value through a proliferation of complex instruments. The particular case of the sub-prime mortgage crisis can be conceptualised as one instance of systemic expulsion through the extension of an advanced mode of capitalist relations of production, in this case, specifically the financialising of non-financial domains; this financialising includes largely major economic sectors such as commodities, for example, oil and metals, and corporate real estate. Out of these well-established markets emerged the possibility of extending this particular type of financial instrument to modest-income households. Further, the latter market can go worldwide given low levels of home ownership in many countries (e.g., Sassen, 2008b, 2011, chs 2, 5 and 8) and the fact that even if households fail to pay the mortgage, financial profiteers will have made their sales of asset-backed securities.⁹ In short, this is an assemblage of elements that has benefitted from brilliant minds in order to execute a very elementary extraction.

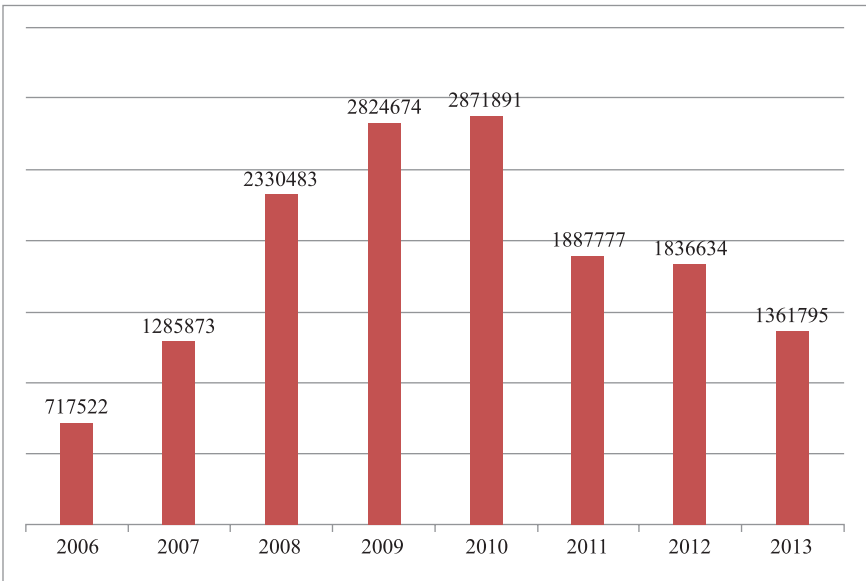
On the occasion of his departure from Federal Reserve, Bernanke, the retiring head, described many positives. But at one point he emphasised two conditions he described as intractable and the source of much malaise. One of these two was the fact of 14 million households losing their homes. The other was the proliferation of ‘dark pools’—private trading networks owned and run by major banks over which central banks have little power and about which they know very little (Sassen, 2014, pp. 142–145). I mention this to set a larger stage for what might be incorrectly seen, and has been so seen, as a private problem of a few million modest-income households.

When Modest Neighbourhoods Become a Strategic Space for Global Finance

Modest neighbourhoods became a strategic space in this process, pushing the role of urban space as a source of profit well beyond the gentrification dynamic. The asymmetry between the worlds of investors (only some will be affected) and homeowners (once they default, they can lose the house and whatever they have already paid on it regardless of what investor happens to own the instrument at the time) creates a massive distortion in the housing market and the housing finance market.¹⁰ Most investors can escape the negative consequences of home mortgage default because they buy these mortgages in order to sell them; there were many winners among investors for several years and only a few losers before the crisis broke in August 2007. But homeowners unable to meet their mortgage obligations cannot escape default. The fact that investors could have a positive view of sub-prime mortgages (poor-quality instruments) was bad for potential homeowners. We see here yet another sharp asymmetry in the position of the diverse players ‘enacting’ an innovation.

The following graphs show the numbers involved in what became a catastrophic event, reaching its high point in 2005 and 2006. The figures in Figure 1 are for foreclosures, which is basically a notice. They are based on data from the Fed, which

FIGURE 1
Number of US Properties with Foreclosure Filings (2006–2013)

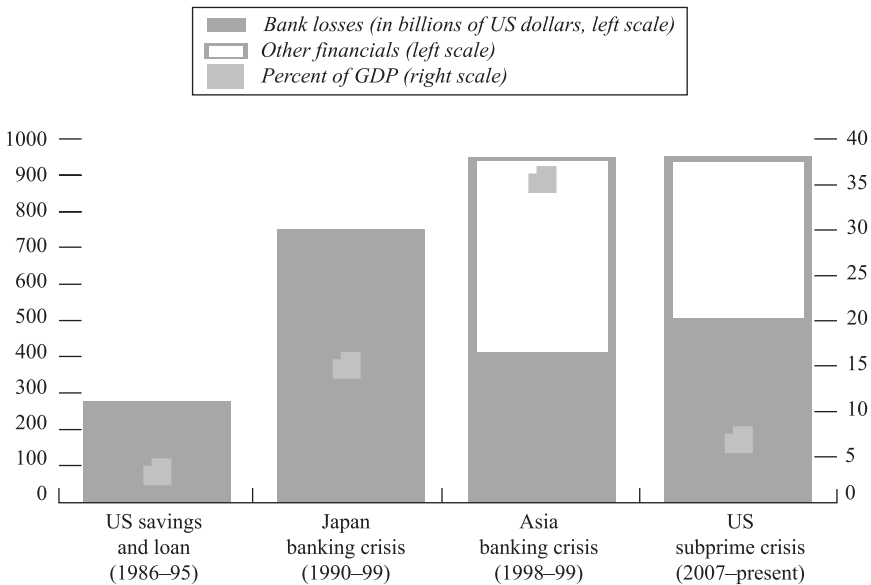


Source: Consolidated data from the Federal Reserve Bank, organised by RealtyTrac (2008, 2009, 2010, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2016).

shows that most of these became a loss of the house mostly ending in evictions. As already mentioned, in his final public overview of the state of it all, Bernanke said that over 14 million households had lost their homes. Figure 2 shows that this sub-prime mortgage crisis accounted for a significant debt compared to a series of other types of debt each of which contributed to a crisis. We should clarify that debt is a different measure than the ‘value of finance as measured by outstanding derivatives’ which, as indicated earlier in this text, by 2007 stood at US\$630 trillion. Against this context, the losses of US\$800 billion on the sub-prime mortgage crisis are minimal from the perspective of finance. Nonetheless, it added to the growing discomfort in the financial system about dubious quality of debt, and helped accelerate, and even tip finance into crisis, with the US\$62 trillion credit-default crisis. Clearly, these more recent crises operate at orders of magnitude that represent a massive scale-up in the numbers.

Extending mortgages to modest-income households, in itself a worthy objective, became a dangerous innovation. Since creditworthiness is not the issue with these mortgages, but numbers sold is, the likelihood that a borrower would eventually be unable to pay the mortgage was high. As with home equity loans, lenders often pushed these mortgages onto households, without full disclosure of the risks and changes in interest rates involved, and without taking account of the capacity of a household to meet the monthly mortgage payments.

FIGURE 2
Comparison of Financial Crises



Source: World Bank and IMF staff estimates (IMF, 2008). Note that ‘present’ here is 2008. Retrieved February 2016, from <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/gfsr/2008/01/PDF/chap1.pdf>. Reproduced by permission of the International Monetary Fund.

Under these conditions, sub-prime and similar kinds of mortgages for modest-income households became a mechanism for extracting something from those households, a sort of primitive accumulation (Sassen, 2011). At its most brutal, the object of this extraction was a contract (the mortgage agreement) that represented an asset. And all that was needed, given financial engineering, was for the household to sign that contract—nothing more and nothing less. As already explained, the key aim was securing the contract, not the actual payment of the mortgage; the intermediaries securing the contracts each needed to get 500 such contracts signed per week to make it all work.

The available evidence does suggest that race and locality are among the variables at work in this process. Newman (2009) provides an important datum in this regard: a significant share of those who got sub-prime mortgages could have qualified for regular mortgages, a fact that eventually led to lawsuits, but the financial sector had by then succeeded in its narrow utilitarian objective.

Tables 1–3 capture the 2000–2007 period and the moment when the abuse of the concept of the sub-prime mortgage has exploded, and the sellers are aggressively seeking and getting those signatures in 2006 and 2007. Table 1 shows the extreme difference between Manhattan (one of the richest counties in the whole country despite having significant pockets of poverty) and other New York City counties.

TABLE 1
New York City, Rate of Sub-prime Lending by Borough, 2002–2006 (in per cent)

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Bronx	14.2	19.7	28.2	34.4	27.4
Brooklyn	9.2	13.9	18.4	26.1	23.6
Manhattan	1.3	1.8	0.6	1.1	0.8
Queens	7.7	12.6	17.8	28.2	24.4
Staten Island	7.2	11.1	13.9	19.9	17.1
NYC Total	7.0	10.8	14.9	22.9	19.8

Source: Furman Center for Real Estate & Urban Policy, 2007a, State of New York City’s housing and neighbourhoods (<http://furmancenter.org/research/sonychan/2007-report/>, accessed 8 February 2016).

TABLE 2
Ten New York City Community Districts with the Highest Rates of Sub-prime Lending, 2006

<i>Sub-borough Area</i>	<i>Percentage of Home Purchase Loans Issued by Sub-prime Lender</i>
University Heights/Fordham (Bronx)	47.2
Jamaica (Queens)	46.0
East Flatbush (Brooklyn)	44.0
Brownsville (Brooklyn)	43.8
Williamsbridge/Baychester (Bronx)	41.6
East New York/Starrett City (Brooklyn)	39.5
Bushwick (Brooklyn)	38.6
Morrisania/Belmont (Bronx)	37.2
Queens Village (Queens)	34.6
Bedford Stuyvesant (Brooklyn)	34.2

Source: Furman Center for Real Estate & Urban Policy, 2007a, State of New York City’s housing and neighbourhoods (<http://furmancenter.org/research/sonychan/2007-report/>, accessed 8 February 2016).

TABLE 3
Rate of Sub-prime Lending by Race in New York City, 2002–2006 (in per cent)

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
White	4.6	6.2	7.2	11.2	9.1
Black	13.4	20.5	35.2	47.1	40.7
Hispanic	11.9	18.1	27.6	39.3	28.6
Asian	4.2	6.2	9.4	18.3	13.6

Source: Furman Center for Real Estate & Urban Policy, 2007a, State of New York City’s housing and neighbourhoods (<http://furmancenter.org/research/sonychan/2007-report/>, accessed 8 February 2016).

Thus, in 2006, less than 1 per cent of mortgages sold to Manhattan homebuyers were sub-prime compared to 27.4 per cent in the Bronx. This table also shows the sharp rate of growth over the years of sub-prime mortgages in all boroughs except Manhattan. Table 2 provides a more detailed map of neighbourhoods within boroughs. Table 3 shows that whites were the least likely to get sub-prime mortgages and that African Americans had a disproportionately high incidence of such mortgages as a share of all the mortgages bought by each of the four groups listed. One pragmatic interpretation is that minoritised households were far less likely to own a house already, so they became those easiest to persuade to sign. Whites, who have a far higher average income than all the other groups in New York City, were far less likely to have sub-prime mortgages than all other groups. Thus, of all mortgages bought by Whites in 2006, 9.1 per cent were sub-prime, compared with 13.6 per cent for Asians, 28.6 per cent for Hispanics and 40.7 per cent for Blacks. This table also shows the much lower growth rate in sub-prime lending from 2002 to 2006 among Whites compared with the other groups. In the most acute period, 2003–2006, it doubled from 4.6 per cent to 9.1 per cent for Whites, but basically tripled for Asians and Hispanics, and quadrupled for Blacks.

The costs extended to whole metropolitan areas. The loss of property tax income for municipal governments varied across different types of cities and metro areas. One study of ten metro areas with the largest losses of real gross municipal product (GMP) for 2007 due to the mortgage crisis estimates their total economic loss at over US\$45 billion (Global Insight, 2007). New York City losses were estimated at US\$10 billion, Los Angeles at US\$8.3 billion and Dallas, Washington and Chicago each at about US\$4 billion.

Conclusion

The Innards of an Insidious Instrument of Enormous Complexity

This insidious instrument is part of a longer history of specific types of innovations. The outcome of these complex creations and manipulations was disastrous for over 14 million households in the United States.

Two features of the innovation at issue here—the so-called sub-prime mortgage—make these sub-prime mortgages radically different from traditional mortgages. One is the extent to which these mortgages function as a financial item that can be bought and promptly sold. In a fast-moving market of buying and selling, ownership of the instrument may last for just 2 hours. Thus, when an investor has sold the instrument, what happens to the house itself becomes irrelevant to that investor; indeed, the lenders and sellers of sub-prime mortgages who went bankrupt in the 2007 sub-prime mortgage crisis were those who had not sold mortgages they had issued and, perhaps, were going to sell soon. Those who did sell them to other investors made significant profits. Further, these mortgages were mostly divided into hundreds of slices, which were then mixed up with high-grade debt and distributed across diverse investment packages; they could then be

sold as asset-backed securities, no matter how thin and how dubious that slice of a mortgage representing an actual material asset—which might not even have been a whole house but just a thin slice of the house. Often, there is no single component in such a package that actually represents the whole house. In sharp contrast to the business side, the owner loses the house if unable to meet the mortgage payments for a few months no matter who owns the instrument—the original seller or some other intermediary. There is always some investor or ‘servicer’ who owns it and hence can make claims, no matter how many times the mortgage has changed hands in the financial world. When the crisis hit, some of these holders lost all the value they had put into acquiring the mortgages or for developing them.

The second difference from traditional mortgages is the fact that the source of profit for the investor is not the payment of the mortgage itself plus interests. It is, rather, the desirability of having an actual asset (in this case, a bit of a house) backing the security in a period of extreme speculation when asset-backed securities had become rare in the high-finance circuit. And the aim of the innovation is to delink investor profits from the creditworthiness of the sub-prime mortgage borrower—the investor could benefit even if the mortgaged household went bankrupt, as long as that investor in turn had sold it. The critical condition to make it work for the high-finance investment circuit is securing a large number of sub-prime mortgage contracts to reach the volumes needed, and then sell those mortgages to other investors. Again, it was only those investors who hung on to the mortgages who suffered losses.

These two features suggest that the estimated 2 billion modest-income households that exist worldwide are a potential global market for what has become a dangerous instrument not aimed at helping such households but rather at filling a demand in the high-finance circuit (Sassen, 2008b, 2014). This population sector can become a major target because the source of profit is not the payment of the mortgage itself but the sale of a highly liquid financial package with a bit of material asset—a little piece of the little house! What counts is not the creditworthiness of the ‘little’ borrower but crossing a threshold in terms of numbers of mortgage contracts sold to, and often pushed onto, households. It is one of the most radically brutal uses of modest-income households I have seen in the financial sector.

NOTES

1. A fuller development of this methodology and conceptualisation can be found in Sassen (2008a, chs 1 and 9, 2014).
2. There is a rapidly growing scholarship on financial institutions and markets that has made critical contributions to our understanding of high finance. Representatives of diverse approaches are, for example, MacKenzie, Muniesa and Siu (2007), Knorr Cetina and Preda (2013), Eichengreen (2010), Zaloom (2006), Fisher and Downey (2006), Krippner (2011) and the special issue of the journal *Globalizations* (2010).
3. There is an extensive scholarship that has over the decades documented this type of tension between countries with high technical capacities that use degraded labour in poorer countries and in that process also destroy the natural wealth of poor countries (Galeano, 1997; *Globalizations*, 2010; Jubilee Debt Campaign UK, 2013; Mignolo, 2007; Quijano, 2000; Sassen, 2008b).

4. It can be argued, and I have done so (2014, ch 3), that, in principle, if an economy or a government could materialise that fictitious uber-value of finance into an actual operational field—clean-up of toxic dumps, building of good social housing, restoring infrastructure—it would be great. But the profits would be too small to persuade finance of the desirability of such general benefit projects.
5. These figures correspond to what is the standard measure for finance: the value of outstanding derivatives. For a full evolution of this history of innovations and inventions in the financial sector since the 1980s, see Sassen (1991, ch 4; 2014, ch 3).
6. There is by now a considerable critical scholarship on this subject, for example, Gotham (2006), Immergluck (2011), Langley (2006), Schwartz (2009) and Shiller (2008). None of this scholarship frames it the way I am framing it here: showing us something about the full operational space of finance, notably its capacity to include extremes at each, the high end and the low end.
7. There is a theorised analysis of some of the foundational intersections of urban space and profit that provides a more generic set of narratives, far less focused on the specifics of instruments, as I do here (see, e.g., Corbridge, Martin & Thrift, 1994; Newman, 2009; SAIS Review, 2009; Sassen, 1982, 1991, 2013).
8. There is a very informative and critical scholarship focused on mortgages, including the sub-prime type, including with an international perspective (see, e.g., Aalbers, 2009, 2012; Gotham, 2006; Hammel, Moos, Kabahizi & Wyly, 2009; Langley, 2006; Miles, 2007).
9. One feature that unwittingly undermined this aim, and which became catastrophic for investors once some of these mortgages failed, was that it became impossible to isolate the mortgage slice because it was mixed with so many diverse types of debt. And this in turn was due to the fact that this mixing with high-value debt aimed at hiding the low value of the slice of ‘asset’.
10. I find it important to remind us all that the governments and corporations of the Global North have long deployed equivalent tactics in the Global South, albeit in very different domains and through very different instruments. But debt was always one of those, even if it was a simpler type of debt that made itself quite visible (e.g., IMF, 2008, 2015; Jubilee Debt Campaign UK, 2013; Sassen, 1982, 1991, 2014, ch 1; UNCTAD, 2015; UNDP, 2014; United Nations Statistics Division, 2015).

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Debating planetary urbanization: For an engaged pluralism

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Abstract

This essay reflects on recent debates around planetary urbanization, many of which have been articulated through dismissive caricatures of the core epistemological orientations, conceptual proposals, methodological tactics, and substantive arguments that underpin this emergent approach to the urban question. Following consideration of some of the most prevalent misrepresentations of this work within this special issue, I build upon Barnes and Sheppard's (2010) concept of "engaged pluralism" to suggest more productive possibilities for dialogue among critical urban researchers whose agendas are too often viewed as incommensurable or antagonistic rather than as interconnected and, potentially, allied. The essay concludes by outlining nine research questions whose more sustained exploration could more productively connect studies of planetary urbanization to several fruitful lines of inquiry that have been explored within postcolonial, feminist and queer-theoretical strands of urban studies. While questions of positionality necessarily lie at the heart of any critical approach to urban theory and research, so too does the search for intellectual and political common ground that might help orient, animate and advance the shared, if constitutively heterodox, project(s) of critical urban studies.

Keywords

Planetary urbanization, critical urban theory, engaged pluralism

I

The specter of universalizing theory appears to be haunting contemporary urban studies. According to many of the contributors to this special issue of *Society & Space*, that specter is today associated with theories of planetary urbanization. In their view, such theories

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embody the latest in a long line of Eurocentric, masculinist, and heteronormative epistemologies that perpetuate the hubristic “god-trick” of denying their own embeddedness within the social processes they aspire to understand. The result is an all-encompassing, transcontextual, and neocolonial metanarrative that, it is claimed, ignores the power-laden realities of difference, place-specificity, everyday life, struggle, and experience.

Despite the repetition of such assertions across many pages of this volume, Christian Schmid and I have not offered any of our proposals in a spirit of universalization or intellectual colonization. Nor have we produced, or advocated for, a finished, comprehensive, transcontextual, or ahistorical theory of the urban or urbanization. In politico-epistemological terms, we share much common ground with many of our critics who work in feminist, queer, and postcolonial traditions of critical theory. We likewise insist upon the social constitution and political mediation of all knowledge-formations. We likewise reject the positivist/technoscientific contention that knowledge can be constructed from some disembodied Archimedian point exterior to social relations, power hierarchies, spatial politics, and political struggle. We likewise connect all essentializing, transhistorical knowledge-claims to formations of power, domination, exclusion, and normalization. There can be no critical theory, we likewise insist, without systematic recognition that all knowledge is situated, embodied, embedded, contested, and mediated through power relations (Brenner, 2016). Much like our critics, then, Christian Schmid and I vigorously reject any and all epistemologies that are derived from naïve realism and oriented towards the generation of context-independent validity-claims.

Readers of our critiques of historical and contemporary “urban age” ideologies (Brenner and Schmid, 2014, 2015a) will also be aware that we likewise harbor major anxieties regarding the dangers—both intellectual and political—of proliferating ideologies of universalism in contemporary urban discourse. Indeed, a centrally animating concern of our work has been to critique the overgeneralized, acontextual concepts of “the” city that have long underpinned the *episteme* of modern urban thought. The idea of urban space as a singularity, a dense, bounded spatial unit whose existence and developmental dynamics can be comprehensively explained, promoted, and managed through an appeal to transcontextual covering laws, today remains as robust as ever. Such conceptions are such deeply engrained “habits of mind” (Dewey, 1922; Peirce, 1877) within the urban studies establishment that those dissident thinkers who challenge them—whether from postcolonial, assemblage-theoretical, or neo-Lefebvrian perspectives—are often dismissed or ridiculed as being confused, ignorant, particularist, and/or anti-theoretical (Storper and Scott, 2016).

Meanwhile, universalizing ideologies of “the” city—especially in positivist, technoscientific, entrepreneurial, eco-managerial, and/or neoliberal variants—remain powerfully operative conceptual tools for analysis, mapping, policy, planning, and practice in international organizations such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and the World Economic Forum (WEF), among multilateral development banks, in national and local governmental agencies, and in nongovernmental organizations oriented towards confronting diverse social, infrastructural, and ecological crises. This “debilitating city-centrism” (Cairns, 2018) has recently been entrenched, for example, through the rollout of mainstream global urban policy frameworks such as those associated with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the *New Urban Agenda* (Habitat III) presented in Quito in 2016, in the Paris Agreement of the United Nations Convention on Climate Change (IPCC), as well as in a host of national and local policy innovations designed to implement or respond to the latter (Barnett and Parnell, 2016; Parnell, 2016). Such city-centric, depoliticizing “simplification projects” (Scott, 1995) are also being aggressively promoted by a range of corporate actors and property developers for whom the construction of “global

cities,” “smart cities,” “creative cities,” “sustainable cities,” “eco-cities,” and the like is seen as the optimal pathway for ensuring continued economic growth without disrupting the currently hegemonic formation of neoliberalized, financialized accumulation by dispossession (Kaika and Swyngedouw, 2014; Sheppard et al., 2013; Soederberg and Walks, 2018). These universalizing ideologies of the urban scarcely receive mention in this volume. Instead, the broad argumentative arc of this issue of *Society & Space* may leave many readers with the impression that the so-called “planetary urbanists” represent the most significant contemporary intellectual obstruction to the development of more heterodox, contextually sensitive, hermeneutically attuned, and explicitly politicized approaches to urban knowledge, policy, and practice.

Against this background, the editors’ invitation to reply to the texts assembled here presents Christian Schmid and myself with an extremely unwieldy and, in many ways, unpalatable task. On the one hand, it is not obvious how to engage in meaningful intellectual dialogue with critics who are inclined to present our core arguments in such polemical, simplified, or superficial ways. In some cases, denunciatory references to our writings appear to serve mainly as a rhetorical foil against which to highlight the contributions of other (important) research projects. In several such texts, it is not readily clear how a focus on or engagement with the debate on planetary urbanization advances the research in question, except by way of positioning the latter as doing “something else” than what we have purportedly done or proposed. Elsewhere, our ideas seem to function mainly as “cannon fodder” in an apparently intensifying struggle for recognition among competing paradigms in the field of critical urban studies (on which more below). Insofar as so many of the contributors flatten our epistemological commitments into those associated with the very positions we have been concerned to critique, how can we engage with their narratives in ways that advance discussion in mutually productive directions? After reading many of the essays, one is tempted simply to repeat the refrain, “It just isn’t so,” and to hope that future readers will form their own judgments by taking the time to peruse some of our texts for themselves. This is the assertively defensive approach that we adopted in our online response to Walker’s (2015) scattershot polemic in an earlier round of academic “combat and caricature” (Brenner and Schmid, 2015b).

On the other hand, amidst the sound and fury of these polemics, there are clearly some important issues under debate that cannot be explored effectively through the adoption of purely defensive postures. Even where we believe our ideas are being misrepresented, caricatured, or pilloried, it behooves us to pay close attention to the methodological, epistemological, substantive, and political questions being raised in such contributions. In thus proceeding, we may be presented with an opportunity not only to gain a deeper understanding of key concepts, methods, and research fields with which we have not adequately engaged, but to reconsider some of our own previously developed proposals in that light. Moreover, to the degree that certain misreadings are now apparently becoming rampant, it is incumbent upon Christian Schmid and myself to reflect on how some of our own intellectual choices—for instance, regarding style of argumentation, conceptual grammar, intellectual genealogy, methodological tactics, and citation practices—may have contributed to the latter. From this point of view, even the most dismissive, bellicose, or fantastical critiques presented herein may actually harbor an opportunity for us, and perhaps for others who are developing broadly allied agendas, to reflect upon, revise, and perhaps even reinvent our approach to the *problematics* with which we are concerned. But how to excavate such latent opportunities for autocritique and learning within a scholarly atmosphere that is imbued with so much negative energy?

In writing and rewriting this essay, I experimented with various strategies for dealing with these issues. After much deliberation, I concluded that it would be intellectually disingenuous to try to ignore the question of how our project is being (mis)read, especially in a scholarly exchange in which Christian Schmid and I often cannot recognize our own ideas in the grotesquely distorted simulacrum of our work that is being promulgated across many of these pages. But I also fully acknowledge that an indignant catalogue of misreadings is not likely to advance the cause of dialogue or mutual understanding: it would probably make for pretty tedious reading, and serve mainly to stoke the flames of a debate that has already unfolded in what are, at least from my point of view, needlessly polemical directions. More importantly, such a response would not speak very effectively to what is arguably the key question at stake in these epistemological debates: How can we most effectively decipher and influence emergent patterns and pathways of urban transformation?

Accordingly, this essay pursues two interconnected goals—first, to address succinctly certain distortions of our arguments that are repeated in many contributions to this special issue; and second, to consider the prospects for a more productive dialogue among the participants in this debate, one that would mine the seams of various shared (or at least allied) epistemological, substantive, and political agendas rather than unleashing further rounds of polemical non-debate that emphasize maximal disagreement. To this end, in the next section, I briefly outline some of the core misinterpretations/misrepresentations that are repeated across many contributions to this special issue. I consider this initially defensive mode of engagement to be a necessary yet radically insufficient step towards the unfolding of a more meaningful dialogue among the debate's contributors. As a modest step in pursuit of the latter goal, the rest of my essay builds upon the conception of “engaged pluralism” proposed by Barnes and Sheppard (2010) to reflect upon the prospects for dialogue and even intellectual progress among scholarly communities that embrace apparently opposed “local epistemologies.”

2

Based on a reading of many contributions to this special issue, it would be easy to reach any or all of the following conclusions: (a) Christian Schmid and I are completely unreflexive about questions of positionality in sociospatial theory; (b) we are working in a white, masculinist, Eurocentric, and heteropatriarchal tradition that is indifferent to questions of gender, sexuality, race, and difference; (c) our work is directly antagonistic to such concerns—that is, the frameworks we are developing actively impede productive engagement with them; and (d) we embrace a homogenizing, universalizing, and intellectually imperialistic conception of urbanization.

There is currently a tendency to articulate such criticisms through general assertions about our alleged positions (or, in some cases, on the basis of second- or even third-hand references to the work of others who have made such general assertions), rather than through an engagement with our texts, and through the consequent, grounded elaboration of specific arguments in support of such conclusive dismissals. For example, the claim that our work on planetary urbanization is “totalizing” is repeated regularly in discussions of our work among some of our feminist and poststructuralist colleagues, as if it were an established truism. But what exactly is meant by this claim and the conception of “totalization” it presupposes?¹ Can it really be grounded with reference to specific arguments we make in our writings (for further discussion, see Buckley and Strauss, 2016; Goonewardena, 2018; Schmid, 2015, 2016, 2018)? How can such readings be reconciled with our arguments (a) that planetary urbanization is variegated, uneven, volatile, contradictory, and emergent; (b)

that this process assumes specific forms across divergent spatiotemporal contexts; (c) that we need a plurality of conceptualizations, methodological approaches, analytical perspectives, and cartographic strategies through which to decipher its manifold manifestations; and (d) that our understanding of emergent urban transformations currently remains severely underdeveloped? Such readings also tend to ignore the explicitly nominalist, anti-universalizing orientation of our critique of contemporary triumphalist “urban age” ideologies, of inherited conceptions of “the” city as a singular, generic settlement type, of entrenched modernist understandings of urbanization as a unilinear rural-to-urban “transition,” and of mainstream, naïve empiricist approaches to geospatial visualization.

Aside from the misleading, simplistic polemics on the question of “totalizing” theory, several other inaccurate assertions about our position have been repeated by many critics, including throughout many contributions to this volume. Here is a short list of some of most prevalent caricatures or misreadings that are now in circulation, often in combination with one another:

- We have never claimed to be studying something called “planetary urbanism”; nor have we ever used this label to describe the epistemology of the urban we have been developing. In fact, Christian Schmid and I have never used the term “planetary urbanism” in any of our writings. The term “urbanism” is one we have used only with considerable precision, generally to describe contemporary mainstream urban ideologies; the specific discourses, practices, and ideologies of urban design; and with reference to Wirth’s (1938) famous sociological theorization.² Our work is focused on the *problematique* of urbanization, capitalist urbanization in particular. We view planetary urbanization as the contemporary formation of the latter, and we argue that its consolidation generates new conceptual, analytical, methodological, and political challenges for those trying to decipher, represent, and influence its variegated spatiotemporal dynamics. The tendency, especially but not exclusively among some critics, to label us and our collaborators as “planetary urbanists” amounts to affirmatively identifying our research agenda with the very processes we are concerned to decipher, criticize, and supersede. It is formally equivalent to describing critics of capitalist urbanization as “capitalist urbanists,” critics of neoliberal urbanization as “neoliberal urbanists,” critics of heteropatriarchal forms of urbanization as “heteropatriarchal” urbanists, and so forth.
- We have never asserted that cities no longer exist or are no longer important. In fact, we have consistently emphasized that concentrated urbanization (the process of agglomeration and its wide-ranging consequences) remains a constitutive dimension of urbanization; it is, accordingly, a central analytical, representational, and political focus in our work. We have, however, questioned the long-entrenched obsession among many urban scholars with demarcating a neat boundary between city and non-city spaces in a world of increasingly generalized urbanization and rapidly imploding/exploding urban transformations. We have also called into question the naturalized, monist, singular, diffusionist, and transhistorical conception of “the” city that has long underpinned the major traditions of urban theory. We thus critique the epistemological framework of city-centric and city-dominant urban theory (McGee, 1971; see also Angelo and Wachsmuth, 2015; Cairns, 2018).
- We have never argued that planetary urbanization flattens, evens out, or supersedes differences among places (or territories, landscapes, scales, or ecologies). In fact, we have constantly emphasized the constitutively uneven, variegated nature of capitalist urbanization, including in its planetary configuration. As Schmid explains in his

contribution to this special issue (2018; see also Schmid et al., 2018), our proposed conceptualization of urbanization as planetary is intended to decenter inherited approaches to the urban question that begin with the idea of “the” city as a bounded spatial unit and then look “inwards” towards its neighborhoods, built environments and social fabric (as, for example, in classic Chicago School models), or “outwards” towards the metropolis, the region, the territory, and the world (as, for example, in more recent theories of global city formation). We invert that intellectual starting point and the analytical frameworks, methodological tactics, and cartographic visions that flow from it, using a planetary (re) orientation as the impetus for a foundational reframing of the urban question as such. This radical reframing immediately alters the sociospatial lens through which uneven spatial development is understood—for instance, by relativizing inherited geographical dualisms such as urban/suburban/rural/wilderness—but it in no way entails the absurd claim that sociospatial, institutional, and ecological differentiation no longer exist or no longer matter. The question, for us, is not whether urbanization generates uneven spatial development, but how most effectively to conceptualize, represent, and influence its contemporary manifestations.

- We have never claimed that planetary urbanization has the same causes or assumes the same forms in the cities, regions, and territories of the Global North and those in the Global South.³ In fact, we have emphasized repeatedly that planetary urbanization is a constitutively uneven, variegated process, one that is necessarily articulated through contextually specific patterns and pathways. It is thus false to suggest we are attempting to impose northern or Euro-American theory upon spaces to which it does not apply. Despite some differences of epistemology, conceptual apparatus, and method with some of our colleagues working in postcolonial streams of urban studies, we strongly support their injunction to develop specific theoretical conceptual tools and analytical insights from diverse experiences and geographies of urban transformation around the world. Indeed, our exploratory proposals to develop new insights into emergent geographies of urbanization through the investigation of recent industrial transformations in erstwhile hinterland zones are analogous, in methodological terms, to the injunctions of postcolonial urban thinkers such as Jennifer Robinson (2014, 2016) and Ananya Roy (2012, 2016) to transcend conventional assumptions about the appropriate “sites” of urban theorizing. We approach this project of theoretical “dislocation” via different routes, but we share a closely allied critical agenda: in Roy’s (2009: 820) suggestive phrase, “to blast open” the entrenched theoretical geographies of the urban question in relation to emergent, early 21st-century transformations.
- We have never presented our approach to planetary urbanization as a “theory of everything.” The claim that urbanization has become planetary does not mean that all aspects of planetary existence are somehow derived from, or explicable with reference to, urbanization; that other scales of urbanization no longer exist or matter; or that our knowledge of this process is now (or ever could be) comprehensive. Nor have we ever proposed that studies of planetary urbanization require the subsumption or colonization of other fields of research (for instance, political ecology, agrarian studies, or rural sociology). And we have certainly never advanced the intellectually imperialistic view that the reinvented approach to urban theory we are proposing could somehow supplant other forms of knowledge, within or beyond the field of urban studies, academic or otherwise. Our texts repeatedly emphasize the metatheoretical nature of our intervention; the challenges of reconstructing the field of urban studies as a collective, multifaceted, politicized, open, and ongoing research endeavor; the need for plural, heterodox epistemologies; the

Box 1. Urban theory without an outside?

Considerable confusion on these issues has been generated by attempts to interpret my formulation “urban theory without an outside” (Brenner, 2013, 2014a, 2014b) as a masculinist call for a universalizing epistemology of the urban that would encompass, subsume, or supersede other perspectives in urban studies. Indeed, this formulation appears to have become a lightning rod of sorts for many of the poststructuralist critiques of our work presented in this volume and elsewhere. The notion of an “urban theory without an outside” was not, in fact, an attempt to homogenize urban knowledge into an encompassing, universalizing framework. During the first stages of our project on planetary urbanization, this formulation was presented to serve two rather precise analytical functions:

First, it was introduced in the context of a detailed discussion of earlier attempts to stabilize the concept of the urban through implicit references to a putatively “non-urban” spatial realm located “outside” or “beyond” city boundaries. In this sense, I proposed, urban theory has long attempted to demarcate its discrete site and object of analysis in opposition to a “constitutive outside,” variously characterized as suburban, hinterland, countryside, rural, or wilderness. In other words, across otherwise diverse scholarly traditions, it is through an implicit but epistemologically constitutive contrast to its supposed spatial “other” that the putative coherence of the urban realm has been defined. It is on this basis, I argued, that “the” city could be conceived as a discrete, distinctive, and bounded settlement type or territorial unit.

Second, the formulation was intended to suggest that this epistemological maneuver is not an adequate basis for demarcating the rapidly imploding-exploding urban *problématique* under early 21st-century capitalism. Urbanization processes are being consolidated, stratified, and differentiated across the planet. Under these conditions, the inherited inside/outside dualism offers an impoverished conceptual and cartographic foundation for deciphering the essential dimensions of these transformations, whether in abstract analytical terms or with reference to specific contexts of sociospatial restructuring. The claim here is not that a uniform, seamless urban fabric is being “rolled out” evenly across the earth, but rather that our ability to grasp emergent geographies of urbanization will be massively constrained if we continue to conceive the world as a patchwork of bounded settlement units, with the urban understood as one generic “type” among the latter.

In this sense, the notion of “urban theory without an outside” is, equally, a critique of the idea of the urban as having a coherent, discrete *inside*. It is precisely a call to supersede the inside/outside dualism that has long been naturalized in urban studies, and thereby, to begin to explore the mutations of an imploding-exploding urbanization process that has increasingly been, in Lefebvre’s terminology, “planetarized.” It is also an attempt to pose the speculative, but potentially quite generative question: What might the project(s) of urban theory look like if we supersede city-centric, methodologically territorialist demarcations of its research object and terrain? It is this question that underpins my initial theoretical elaborations with Christian Schmid on concentrated, extended, and differential urbanization (Brenner and Schmid, 2015a).

Clearly, there are other important semantic and political valences associated with the notions of the “outside” and the “constitutive outside” in diverse fields of post-Marxist, poststructuralist, socialist-feminist, feminist, and queer theory (see, among many examples, Butler, 1993; Christopherson, 1989; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). These are, as Buckley and Strauss (2016) have cogently demonstrated, actually quite closely articulated to many of the epistemological perspectives that emerge from a neo-Lefebvrian reframing of urban question. The latter obviously deserve continued exploration among critical urban scholars wrestling with the politics of knowledge, whether in relation to the study of planetary urbanization or otherwise.

(continued)

Despite the torrent of criticism assembled in this volume and elsewhere, I still believe my earlier questions remain hugely salient for contemporary urban theory: What are the appropriate sites for “urban” research today? How, if at all, might such sites be demarcated—analytically, spatially, and politically? However, I would now emphasize far more explicitly that such questions are inseparable from the contested politics of urban knowledge. I also readily concede that my framing of this politics in *Implosions/Explosions* was far too narrow and should be expanded. Below, I suggest several possible avenues for such an endeavor, all of which build upon the critique of dualistic “boundary-thinking” in urban studies that is under development in our work on planetary urbanization, while also engaging with several allied agendas of feminist, queer-theoretical, and postcolonial urban research.

As for the formulation, “urban theory without an outside”: in the interest of greater conceptual precision, and in hopes of redirecting the debate in more productive directions, I am quite happy to abandon it. It might be replaced with any among the following options, or perhaps others—“urban theory without an inside”; “urban theory without an inside/outside dualism”; “urban theory without city-centrism”; or, perhaps, “urban theory without methodological territorialism.” May the debate continue: the spatialities of urbanization continue to mutate.

constitutively multiscalar configuration of urbanization processes; and the specificity of urbanization as one among a multitude of sociospatial processes and transformations shaping planetary life today (see Box 1).

- We have never claimed that the study of planetary urbanization requires us to privilege structural analysis and to ignore the fabric of everyday life, the mobilizations of social movements and ongoing struggles to shape and reshape the urban fabric of the world. Our work is intended to help illuminate the changing contexts in which such mobilizations and struggles are occurring, and their shifting and intensifying stakes in a world of generalized urbanization, intense geopolitical volatility, and cascading economic and environmental crises. More generally, our critique of planetary urbanization is focused on the potentialities for emancipatory politics, the “possible urban worlds” (Harvey, 1996) and “alter-urbanizations” (Brenner, 2016) that inhere within, but are systemically suppressed by, current power relations, institutional arrangements, and forms of territorial organization.

In short, Christian Schmid and I have always framed our work in accordance with the critical realist principle of “open systems,” according to which the concrete articulations of social relations result from a “concentration of manifold determinations” rather than from singular, all-encompassing causal mechanisms or covering laws (Jessop, 1990; Marx, 1973 [1857]; Sayer, 1992). Our goal has never been to “lock down” a singular, monistic approach to the urban question. Rather, we concur with Leitner and Sheppard’s (2016: 230) recent injunction “to take seriously the possibility that no single theory suffices to account for the variegated nature of urbanization and cities across the world.” In our work on planetary urbanization, we have sought to contribute to the broader, collective, and constantly evolving project of developing new approaches—concepts, methods, cartographies, modes of interpretation, analytical tactics, and much more—that might help us investigate and understand emergent transformations of urban life and their wide-ranging implications for material conditions, territorial organization, politics, ecology, everyday life, and struggle. Thus, as we argued in our essay, “Towards a new epistemology of the urban?” (Brenner and Schmid, 2015a: 13):

[...] Our proposals are meant to demarcate some relatively broad epistemological parameters within which a multiplicity of reflexive approaches to critical urban theory might be pursued [...]

This discussion is thus intended as a *meta*-theoretical exercise: instead of attempting to nail down a fixed definition of the essential properties of the urban phenomenon “once and for all,” it involves developing a reflexive epistemological framework that may help bring into focus and render intelligible the ongoing reconstitution of that phenomenon in relation to the simultaneous evolution of the very concepts and methods being used to study it.

3

In a fruitful reflection on the evolution of debates within economic geography since the 1980s, Barnes and Sheppard (2010: 194) build upon the work of pragmatist philosopher Richard Bernstein (1988) to distinguish various forms of pluralism, only one of which—“engaged pluralism”—promotes “open conversation and a tolerant community.” The others—which Bernstein termed fragmenting pluralism; flabby pluralism; polemical pluralism and defensive pluralism—tend to splinter intellectual communities into hermetically sealed language-games; to promote superficial rather than substantive forms of intellectual borrowing; to privilege polemical, antagonistic modes of engagement with alternative viewpoints; or to engage alternative perspectives only as a means to reaffirm the correctness of one’s own paradigm. The problem with such polemical or defensive epistemological postures is that they create a fragmented intellectual landscape composed of apparently incommensurable, internally focused and self-affirming research communities that interact only superficially or antagonistically, rather than reciprocally informing or animating one other in productive, mutually transformative ways. By contrast, Barnes and Sheppard (2010: 194) argue, building upon Bernstein’s (1988: 15) reading of pragmatist philosopher William James, an engaged pluralism involves “resolving that however much we are committed to our styles of thinking, we are willing to listen to others without denying or suppressing the otherness of the other.”

In a recent exchange on global city theory and postcolonial urban studies, van Meeteren et al. (2016b) apply a conception of engaged pluralism derived from Barnes and Sheppard’s work to contemporary urban studies debates (see also van Meeteren et al., 2016a). Although approaches to postcolonial theory have often been framed through antagonistic, polemical, and sometimes superficial contrasts to the positions of global city theory, van Meeteren and his co-authors argue that there are actually ample possibilities for more productive dialogue, mutual engagement, and cross-pollination that have yet to be tapped, and that have wide-ranging implications for how each of these approaches to urban research might be pursued. Van Meeteren, Bassens, and Derudder’s reflections on the global city theory/postcolonial urban theory debates have considerable relevance to the increasingly heated controversies about planetary urbanization that are currently under way. The cautionary reflections of van Meeteren et al. on such matters are worth quoting at length:

The main challenge is not to become paralyzed by notions of theoretical or empirical incommensurability (Kuhn, 1970 [1962]) [...] Engaged pluralism above all means stubbornly pursuing potential common ground rather than accentuating alleged incommensurability and thus avoiding placing cities beyond compare (Peck, 2015). Whatever the source of intellectual disagreement, our key point is that we, as participants in the debates on global urban research, in fact quite often agree (Bunnell, 2016). Yet we tend to focus on disagreements. However, contention should not preclude a collective choice to engage in an overarching global urban studies project that, in its most general sense, wishes to analyze, understand, explain and influence the urban drivers of social change. Nevertheless, it remains an open question exactly how to practice and

facilitate engaged pluralism in the face of enduring epistemological and ontological differences, especially when navigating contemporary publication structures that seem to reward controversy over understanding. This makes engaged pluralism a difficult task, as potential agreement does not ensure establishing a veritable research culture in which engaged pluralism can take root (van Meeteren et al., 2016a: 297).

Certainly, the various knowledge-formations within the field of critical urban studies could evolve through a self-imposed enclosure within their own putatively separate discursive worlds, without seriously engaging with apparently “non-aligned” frameworks of analysis, methodologies, and research agendas. They may also evolve antagonistically, referencing one another mainly as negative examples of intellectual “dead-ends,” or as familiar rhetorical foils around which to present their own chosen pathway of theory-building and research in the most favorable light possible. Several of the contributions presented in this special issue, along with a few other recent publications that are now regularly cited as authoritative feminist or poststructuralist deconstructions of our work on planetary urbanization, appear to chart a course towards the latter scenario—Bernstein’s (1988) “polemical” formation of pluralism. In principle, critics of such arguments could respond in kind, with a similarly antagonistic emphasis on points of disagreement, resort to caricature, superficial reading, analytical simplification, ungenerous rhetoric, points-scoring maneuvers, and so forth.

In effect, the various participants in these discussions today appear poised to embark upon a contemporary “rehash” of the rancorous debates on capitalism, culture, locality, gender, and difference of the late 1980s and early 1990s, which pitted Marxian geographers such as David Harvey against feminist scholars such as Doreen Massey, Donna Haraway, Rosalyn Deutsche, and others. Nonetheless, from my particular point of view, an unreflexive return to the “scorched earth” of these earlier rounds of academic combat would represent a missed opportunity, in a radically transformed intellectual, politico-cultural, and geoeconomic configuration, for further dialogue across apparent epistemological, theoretical, and political divides. Such a dialogue is arguably needed more urgently than ever in these “post-truth” times of “fake news” and “alternative facts,” when clear lines of communication among political allies, including (perhaps especially) about points of disagreement, are a matter of foundational, even existential, importance.

Indeed, faced with the prospect of a contemporary “reenactment” of the bitter Marxism/poststructuralism battles of the 1990s in the field of critical urban studies, it may also be salient to consider their stakes not only in abstract, epistemological terms, but in relation to the contested, always mutating historical-geographical contexts in which they are embedded and which they are also presumably concerned to illuminate. To what degree, one might ask, did the polarized debates of the 1990s—which, for example, opposed global/local, economy/culture, structure/agency, totality/fragment, system/difference, major/minor, and whole/residue—effectively illuminate that particular moment of worldwide sociospatial restructuring, uneven spatial development and politico-cultural struggle? To what degree would a contemporary reenactment of those arguments, the defensive or polemical modes of critique they tended to deploy, and the dualisms they tended to ossify rather than supersede, productively illuminate our present planetary predicament, its contradictions and crisis-tendencies, and the struggles (both reactionary/neoauthoritarian and progressive/radical) it is unleashing?

While I would certainly not discount the continued philosophical, methodological, and political importance of the foundational issues that were explored in such debates, I have serious doubts that such battle reenactments will prove to be particularly productive for advancing the work of critical urban studies today. Within a neoliberalized university

environment that tends “to reward controversy over understanding” and to promote a culture of competitive individualism among scholars (van Meeteren et al., 2016a: 297), the reenactors may well receive professional recognition for their efforts. But that should offer cold comfort to those who view the field of critical urban studies as a collective intellectual and political endeavor: one whose contributors embrace diverse conceptual orientations, methodologies, and research agendas, while also striving to confront some broadly shared questions and concerns, both scholarly and practical.

Surely, more fruitful modes of engagement are also possible—ones that, despite possibly fundamental epistemological, methodological, and/or political differences, could (a) productively advance and reciprocally transform the heterodox research cultures involved in critical explorations of the urban question today, while also (b) harnessing them as part of the shared project(s) of critical urban studies to confront the major intellectual and political challenges associated with our contemporary moment of worldwide urban transformation. This is, from my point of view, an agenda that deserves to be taken very seriously, not only in relation to debates on planetary urbanization, but across the wide-ranging terrain of contemporary critical urban studies.⁴

4

In their manifesto on engaged pluralism, Barnes and Sheppard (2010: 208) argue that “the challenge [...] to all geographers of whatever stripe [...] is to initiate exchange, to trade their various local epistemologies and theories with those of others, and in the process to create new knowledge.” This, they suggest, can produce “a more vibrant, interesting discipline, capable of generating complex, shifting understandings that reflect and shape equally complex and dynamic materialities” (Barnes and Sheppard, 2010: 208). But they also underscore a number of major hurdles to the creation of genuinely flexible, open “trading zones” in which research questions and methodological tactics may be coordinated coherently in order to advance knowledge, despite the persistence of distinct cultures of inquiry, discursive conventions and intellectual objectives among the various participants (Barnes and Sheppard, 2010: 196–197; Galison, 1997). These hurdles include, among others, hegemonic institutional practices and professional norms that may inhibit cultures of dialogue; entrenched power relations within universities, professional associations and disciplines that privilege some actors, voices and forms of “evidence” while excluding others; the persistent role of hidden, hierarchical networks of influence that determine which conceptual frameworks, methodological tactics, and research questions receive attention and thus legitimation within specific scholarly milieux; as well as pervasive issues of translation that seriously complicate communication across linguistic, cultural, and political divides (Barnes and Sheppard, 2010: 208–209). Clearly, then, engaged pluralism is not simply an abstract epistemological stance, a purely normative vision or a generic commitment to détente or dialogue among apparently opposed scholarly perspectives. It is a long-term, incremental project, at once intellectual, interpersonal, and institutional; and it is one that requires considerable dedication, patience, and persistence among its proponents and participants.

Barnes and Sheppard’s injunction, and their cautionary warnings, seem especially salient for the field of critical urban studies today (van Meeteren et al., 2016a, 2016b). In our current moment of paradigmatic uncertainty and intense, often fragmenting, debates regarding the intellectual foundations, methodological tools, spatial referents, and overarching mission(s) of our research field, there are arguably many interesting, emergent possibilities for the construction of new scholarly “trading zones” (Barnes and Sheppard, 2010: 195–197) that would

not only permit more productive, meaningful modes of communication among critical urban researchers, but would also enhance the field's collective capacities to decipher the core processes, transformations, and contestations with which it is concerned.

The controversy around planetary urbanization is, obviously, only one among many terrains of debate in which such trading zones could potentially be established, should critical urban scholars choose to prioritize that goal. Too often, though, such explorations are blocked through the entrenched habits of mind associated with polemical and defensive pluralism, in which alternative perspectives are introduced primarily as “hyperreal” counterpoints intended to bolster the reader's confidence in an author's own preferred framework of analysis (van Meeteren et al., 2016b: 258). While such polemical procedures and defensive rhetorical maneuvers may enhance feelings of community, cohesiveness, identity, and perhaps even righteousness within specific research milieux, they also entail significant disadvantages and may, in aggregate, be intellectually counterproductive. As van Meeteren et al. (2016b: 259) explain, the uncritical adoption of polemical pluralist framings might (a) “lead scholars to draw wrong conclusions about the value of the work of colleagues”; (b) engender a “toxic culture of dialogue”; and, most importantly, (c) prevent scholars from learning from one another's conceptual frameworks, methodological tactics and concrete insights in order to wrestle with shared or intersecting research questions, to rethink the parameters of established research agendas or to invent new pathways of investigation.

It is in this spirit, then, that I revisit a few of the core issues that were debated in the Toronto workshop from which much of this special issue arose, and that are also articulated in various forms—polemical, defensive, and dialogic—across the articles published here. Given the special issue's specific focus on planetary urbanization, these metatheoretical observations focus perforce on that specific *problematique*, and on the project Christian Schmid and I have been pursuing to explore its major elements. Obviously, this focus should not be misconstrued as a self-serving assertion that this *problematique*, or our own formulation of it, should be privileged reference points for exploring the possibilities for engaged pluralist dialogue in critical urban studies. As we have emphasized, this project represents but one thread within an ongoing, multifaceted, and increasingly variegated debate regarding the contemporary urban question.

Indeed, an essential starting point for an engaged pluralist dialogue on the issues at stake in this exchange is the recognition that emergent studies of planetary urbanization are not enclosed within a neatly bounded “school” of thought to which scholars “subscribe,” like members of a political party or a country club. The same surely applies to most other major strands of contemporary critical urban theory, including all of those represented in this debate, from feminism and queer theory to postcolonial urban studies, critical race theory, indigenous studies, and the multiple variants of poststructuralist urban theorizing. In fact, each of these streams of critical urban theory is quite internally differentiated and intersects considerably with many of the others on a range of essential issues—including normative foundations, epistemological commitments, methodological orientations, research agendas, and interpretive claims. Consequently, despite the tendency in some debates to emphasize the distinctiveness of putatively “competing” approaches to the urban question, as if they formed discretely separated discursive “bubbles” or opposing “teams” of researchers, such characterizations exaggerate (a) the degree of coherence, unity, and consensus *within* the major streams of critical urban research and also, in many cases, (b) the extent of intellectual antagonism, differentiation, and divergence *among* the latter. It is thus probably more productive, in reflecting on the major debates that animate the field of work in critical urban theory today, to eschew simplistic labels (whether for paradigms, epistemologies, or methods) and to focus more attention on specific

intellectual challenges and political concerns, the research questions that flow from them, and the various strategies of engagement that have been mobilized to confront the latter.

Against this background, I would like to demarcate several central issues in the study of planetary urbanization that, from my perspective, could be productively explored (a) through a more sustained engagement and critical dialogue with the insights of key strands of feminist urban studies, queer theory, critical race theory, and indigenous studies; as well as (b) through a still deeper exploration of several research agendas that Christian Schmid and I have long shared with key strands of postcolonial urban theory (see, for instance, Barnett and Parnell, 2016; Parnell, 2016; Robinson, 2014, 2016; Roy, 2014, 2015, 2016). In thus proceeding, I certainly do not intend to subsume these intricately differentiated, entangled, and dynamically evolving research fields under any kind of generic, homogenizing intellectual rubric—epistemological, methodological, political, or otherwise. Nor do I claim any special competence or expertise in addressing their hugely variegated research agendas, which I have to date engaged primarily as an interested reader, teacher, reviewer, and editor, rather than as an active participant or contributor. My more circumscribed purpose here is to outline what I take to be some of the most productive, if also controversial, questions that have thus far emerged from the dialogues that were initiated at the Toronto workshop, and that build variously on contributions to these diverse streams of critical urban studies and social theory.

For purposes of this discussion, I do not attempt further to defend, clarify, or elaborate the specific arguments that Christian Schmid and I have been developing in our writings on planetary urbanization; that is a task for other venues. My concern is simply to propose just a few among many possible focal points for future dialogue among the various streams of critical urban theory in which the *problematique* of planetary urbanization has been provoking discussion, debate, controversy, and research. In each of the nine questions presented below, the possessive adjective “our” refers specifically to my collaborative writings on planetary urbanization with Christian Schmid. Of course, the same questions may also be quite productively posed about the recent work of our immediate collaborators, about that of broadly allied scholars (Andy Merrifield, Stefan Kipfer, Kanishka Goonewardena, and Roberto-Luis Monte-Mór, for example), and about many other contemporary engagements with this *problematique*. I suspect that even among those who are concerned to explore and develop some version of this research agenda, these questions would be answered in a variety of different ways, pointing in turn towards a fairly broad spectrum of possible pathways for its future elaboration.

1. In what ways might the investigation of planetary urbanization be productively extended and transformed through a more sustained engagement with the knowledge-claims of those in nondominant, subordinate, marginalized, or subaltern positions, in and outside the academy (de Sousa Santos, 2014; Gramsci, 1971 [1948]; Katz, 1996; Lukács, 1971 [1923]; Mignolo, 2000; Peake, 2016; Quijano, 2000)?⁵
2. In what ways are contemporary urban ideologies infused with and animated by sexist, racialized, heteronormative, heteropatriarchal, biopolitical, and neocolonial projects of sociospatial transformation? In what ways might our historical genealogy and critique of contemporary “urban age” discourses and practices be productively extended and transformed through the deployment of feminist, queer-theoretical, postcolonial, decolonial, and critical race-theoretical modes of analysis?
3. In what ways might our critique of city-centric and city-dominant approaches to the urban question be extended or transformed through a more sustained engagement with

earlier feminist and queer-theoretical deconstructions of “metronormativity” and associated geographical dualisms, including the classic triad of urban/suburban/rural (Buckley and Strauss, 2016)? How might such critiques be extended and transformed through their articulation to postcolonial and decolonial critiques of Eurocentric, metrocentric knowledge-formations, and associated spatial dualisms, such as Occident/Orient, modern/traditional, and culture/nature (de Sousa Santos, 2014; Mignolo, 2000; Quijano, 2000)?

4. To what degree does a theoretical focus on capitalist structururations of the urban inhibit, warp, or block engagement with questions of “difference”—whether of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, citizenship status, or otherwise? In what ways might an analysis of capital’s uneven, chronically crisis-prone historical geographies productively inform and animate investigations of the shifting territorial landscapes in which social differences are expressed, materialized, contested, and fought out—and vice versa (Quijano, 2000; Schmid, 2016; Tsing, 2009)?
5. We have anchored our call for new conceptualizations of the urban question with reference to various emergent sociospatial transformations, within and beyond major metropolitan regions, that destabilize inherited urban epistemologies (Brenner and Schmid, 2011, 2014, 2015a: 151–153). A closely parallel line of argumentation has been articulated by several prominent postcolonial urban theorists, who likewise connect many of their specific epistemological proposals to the challenges of deciphering contemporary urban transformations (see, for example, Robinson, 2014; Robinson and Roy, 2016; Roy, 2009). To what degree do feminist, queer-theoretical, and critical race-theoretical approaches to urban questions likewise ground their proposed concepts and methods in relation to the specific tasks associated with analyzing contemporary or emergent forms of urban restructuring? To what degree do such approaches direct attention to essential dimensions of contemporary urban emergence that our work has neglected? If so, what are the implications of (re)considering the latter for our own epistemological proposals, methodological orientations, and research agendas?⁶
6. In what ways are the geographies of extended urbanization we have begun to demarcate in our work—related, for instance, to the tendential enclosure, industrialization and infrastructuralization of erstwhile agricultural and extractive hinterlands, emergent landscapes of tourism, logistics and waste management, and new regimes of techno-environmental management—forged through gendered, sexualized, racialized, biopolitical, and neocolonial power relations, and associated projects of normalization (Arboleda, 2015a, 2015b; Wilson and Bayón, 2015)? How might more explicitly feminist, queer, critical race-theoretical, decolonial, and postcolonial approaches to such dynamics inform, extend, and transform conceptualizations and investigations of extended urbanization (Cowen, 2014; Kipfer, 2014, 2017; Kipfer and Goonewardena, 2013)?
7. In our work to date, we have theorized the planetary scale of contemporary urbanization primarily with reference to Lefebvre’s notions of generalized urbanization and the “planetaryization” of the urban, which focus primarily on the spatiotemporal dynamics, contradictions, and contestations unleashed by capital (see also Brenner, 2018). In what ways could that conceptualization be complemented, extended, or transformed through a more sustained engagement with alternative understandings of the planetary derived from other traditions of literary, political, cultural, spatial, and ecological theory that speak, for instance, to questions of citizenship, politics, sovereignty, coloniality, world ecology, environmentality, the anthropocene, the capitalocene, the posthuman, the

- nonhuman, technonature, geoculture, and *altermondialité* (see, for example, Bratton, 2016; Connolly, 2017; Elias and Moraru, 2015; Luke, 2015; Mignolo, 2000; Moore, 2016; Roy, 2015; Ruddick, 2015; Spivak, 2003)?
8. In what sense is planetary urbanization a (bio)political project, one that entails not only new strategies of capital accumulation and new formations of capitalist territorial organization, but new frameworks of territorial regulation, state spatial strategies, modes of racial, and/or sexual normalization, formations of governmentality, biopower, and regimes of subjectivity? To what degree might the analysis of such issues help inform the broader project of repoliticizing debates on the urban question, in and outside the academy, in this putatively “post-political” age (Exo Adams, 2014; Roy, 2015; Swyngedouw and Wilson, 2014)?
 9. In what ways might approaches to planetary urbanization contribute to ongoing struggles to imagine and to construct “alter-urbanizations” (Brenner, 2016)—alternative pathways for the production, appropriation, and transformation of space, at once in the spheres of politics, law, social reproduction, ecology, infrastructure, and everyday life? How might the post-capitalist visions of “possible urban worlds” (Harvey, 1996) and differential space (Schmid, 2008) that pervade neo-Marxian and neo-Lefebvrian scholarship be extended and transformed by those oriented towards transcending sexist, hetero-patriarchal, racially exclusionary, neoimperial, and neocolonial forms of urbanization?

Obviously, this list of questions is hardly exhaustive, and it is necessarily articulated from my own particular perspective as an urban theorist and researcher. Readers of this special issue will no doubt generate many other questions, whose exploration might also potentially advance the kind of engaged pluralist dialogue among critical urban theorists I am proposing. In this sense, whatever conclusions might be drawn from the questions posed above, the point of this exercise transcends the particular contents of my own enumeration: it is to promote a research culture within critical urban studies in which scholars strive “to initiate exchange, to trade their various local epistemologies and theories with those of others, and in the process to create new knowledge” (Barnes and Sheppard, 2010: 208).

It should be emphasized, finally, that a multiplicity of starting points for engaged pluralist approaches to critical urban studies are possible, each opening up distinctive pathways of theorization, methodological experimentation, and concrete research (see, for example, the interesting proposals presented by van Meeteren et al. (2016b) and the subsequent exchange in the same volume of *Dialogues in Human Geography*). The *problematique* of planetary urbanization is under scrutiny here because it has recently provoked some discussion, debate, and controversy, but it is but one among many vibrant critical perspectives on the contemporary urban question that could be productively brought into closer dialogue with one another, in the interest of advancing, among other agendas, the following three central tasks of critical urban theory (Brenner, 2016): (1) the critique of urban ideologies that naturalize or legitimize the inscriptions of power, domination, dispossession, social suffering, and ecological devastation upon spatial landscapes; (2) the development of a spatial analytics of power through which to decipher patterns and pathways of urbanization, their contestation, their crisis-tendencies, and their consequences; and (3) the excavation of alter-urbanizations: possible urban worlds that are immanent within, yet suppressed by, extant spatial practices, and that point towards more emancipatory—just, democratic, inclusive, diverse, nonviolent, culturally vibrant, and environmentally sane—modes of urban life.

For my part, I would hope not only that engaged pluralist dialogues will proliferate among critical urban researchers, building upon a broad range of starting points, but also that the various pathways of exploration thereby forged might eventually intersect to inform and animate these, and no doubt many other, shared agendas in the field of critical urban studies. But such agendas can only be the (provisional) *outcome* of dialogue, debate, and research. While they cannot and should not entail a convergence of epistemologies, concepts, or methods, they do imply “a willingness to listen and to take seriously other people’s ideas” (Barnes and Sheppard, 2010: 209).

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Notes

1. As Goonewardena points out (2018), the concept of “totality” is a key tool for Marxian, anti-colonial and socialist-feminist approaches to critical theory. It is not only compatible with the concern to investigate sociospatial contradiction, mediation, articulation and difference, but provides an essential conceptual and methodological foundation on which to explore such issues in epistemologically reflexive, historically specific and contextually nuanced ways. In this sense, as Goonewardena cogently argues, the discursive construction of “totalizing” theory as a target for critique and even derision in this special issue and elsewhere is extremely debilitating, in both intellectual and political terms, for radical geographical scholarship. Moreover, the epithet of “totalizing theory” is often a misnomer for what may be more precisely characterized as *universalizing* knowledge-claims. As Go (2016: 182) explains, “Universalism [...] insinuates the Cartesian positivist assumption of the disembodied knowing subject and the complete knowability of the world.” Such positions are completely distinct from the holistically structural yet epistemically reflexive, historically specific perspectives opened up by critical theories of totality, whether in relation to capital, patriarchy, racism or colonialism. Positivist universalisms also bear little resemblance to critical realist or perspectival realist approaches to sociological generalization that, rather than being extended mechanistically to all instances of a given phenomenon or imposed upon all dimensions of social life, are reflexively “applied to delimited analytic objects” across variegated contexts, sites and scales (Go, 2016: 182). Julian Go’s brilliant recent book, *Postcolonial Thought and Social Theory* (2016), offers a lucid discussion of these and related methodological distinctions in the context of a post-positivist reading and reconstruction of postcolonial social theory.
2. For a useful discussion of the various historical and contemporary meanings that have been associated with the term urbanism in the field of urban social science, see Sheppard et al. (2013).
3. This is the controversial argument that Storper and Scott (2016) have recently advanced regarding the urban land nexus, which they attempt to theorize based on a universalizing theoretical perspective. Although we share with Storper and Scott an interest in capitalist structurations of the urban,

we reject their monist, universalist and agglomeration-centric framing of the urban question. In epistemological terms, our position is more closely aligned with that of the postcolonial urban researchers whose work Storper and Scott likewise subject to polemical critique and caricature (for robust replies, see Robinson, 2016; Robinson and Roy, 2016; Roy, 2016; Parnell and Pieterse, 2016).

4. It is worth noting that polemical modes of engagement have been adopted, in some cases, by scholars working outside the specific traditions of critical urban theory referenced in our discussion here. For example, Storper and Scott (2016) reduce research on planetary urbanization to the rather facile claim that “cities are dead”—a position that, as noted above, Christian Schmid and I explicitly reject, and which would be logically impossible to reconcile with our concept of concentrated urbanization. As we have repeatedly emphasized, the critique of city-centric modes of urban theory does not require us to abandon the analysis of agglomeration processes, but to rethink the epistemological, conceptual and cartographic framework in which the latter are explored. Storper and Scott confidently proclaim that our distinction between concentrated and extended urbanization is “clumsy,” but they barely discuss even its most rudimentary elements. They reference the latter concept, in particular, mainly by ridiculing it and then quickly dismissing it; they do not meaningfully engage with our actual arguments regarding the industrial transformation of erstwhile hinterland, rural and wilderness spaces under contemporary capitalism, and the connection of those transformations to ongoing processes of concentrated urbanization. While our approach to urbanization clearly does diverge from that embraced by agglomeration theorists such as Storper and Scott, the specific nature of the disagreement is impossible to assess coherently if critics resort to pejorative declarations and dismissive rhetoric while declining to engage with the core concepts, distinctions and arguments developed in the work being referenced. In effect, Storper and Scott’s article appears to exemplify the “polemical” form of pluralism “where the approach [under scrutiny] becomes . . . [an] ideological weapon to advance one’s own orientation” (Bernstein, 1988: 15; quoted in Barnes and Sheppard, 2010: 194).
5. It seems appropriate here to address an essential question that was posed by several participants in the Toronto workshop: why were so few female contributors included in *Implosions/Explosions* (Brenner, 2014b)? In assembling the volume, my main priorities were: (1) to present writings that directly engaged Henri Lefebvre’s thesis of generalized urbanization, while also challenging city-centric or city-dominant approaches to urban studies and urban ideologies; (2) to present writings that explicitly engaged with or developed the core concept of “extended urbanization”; and (3) to gather some of my own recent writings with Christian Schmid, several of our individually authored contributions on related issues, and various texts by our closest collaborators and (former and current) doctoral students that advanced the preceding agendas as part of a shared research agenda on contemporary urbanization (see Brenner, 2014a: 22–24). Especially under priority (1), as Buckley and Strauss (2016) have productively demonstrated, my own lens on the debate ignored important contributions by urban scholars working in feminist and queer scholarly traditions. Meanwhile, even just a few years after the book’s publication, pursuit of the same goal would already yield a far more diverse set of contributors and contributions. The priorities listed above could have been productively combined with at least two additional priorities, namely (4) to explore those agendas via a plurality of epistemic positionalities; and (5) to promote authorial diversity as a “standard practice” for all forms of critical scholarship. If I had anticipated that *Implosions/Explosions* would become a central reference point for scholarly debate within the field of critical urban studies, priorities (4) and (5) would have certainly figured more centrally in my vision of the book. For better or for worse, I opted to focus the book’s agenda rather tightly around the nexus of theoretical work connecting the ideas of generalized urbanization and extended urbanization, such as I and my collaborators conceived them in 2010–2013. Should, as a result of the relatively narrow range of authorial positionalities represented in *Implosions/Explosions*, research on planetary urbanization be dismissed as irredeemably masculinist—or white, or heteropatriarchial, or Eurocentric? While I would never deny the philosophical or political importance of epistemic positionality in scholarly discourse, it also seems appropriate to exercise some caution regarding the dangers of deriving essentialist conclusions on this basis. For my part, I hope that future rounds

of debate on planetary urbanization can be focused not only on the initial framing of the research agenda presented in *Implosions/Explosions*, but on the content and potential of the increasingly heterodox constellation of epistemologies, concepts, methods and research questions that are now being elaborated through this variegated stream of critical urban theory.

6. This line of reflection also raises the thorny question of periodizing urban restructuring processes, which Christian Schmid and I have only just begun to explore in our work on planetary urbanization. To what degree might the periodizations of urban restructuring generated through research on planetary urbanization and those associated with postcolonial, feminist, queer-theoretical and/or critical race-theoretical approaches to urban studies reciprocally inform and animate one another?

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