

Doing global urban studies: On the need for engaged pluralism, frame switching, and methodological cross-fertilization

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Abstract:

By way of rejoinder to commentaries by members of the invisible college of postcolonial urbanism, we further develop issues of praxis regarding engaged pluralism and plead for its usefulness. Engaged pluralism when doing global urban studies depends on a research culture where both deconstructive and reconstructive moments are encouraged. Deconstruction benefits from the provincialization of all knowledge. Reconstruction can occur when we bracket ontological and epistemological incommensurability and focus on the cognitively enriching research praxis of frame switching, where research perspectives constitute non-exclusive, temporary, or alternating entries for research.

Keywords: global cities research, postcolonial urbanism, geographies of knowledge, philosophy of science, frame switching

As urban scholars, our 'ground, both empirical and epistemological, is being rapidly and often radically reshaped' (El Khoury, this issue). The world is urbanizing at an unprecedented pace, giving rise to pertinent questions. Are the class politics associated with planetary urbanization (Brenner and Schmid, 2014) becoming 'global', as in accounts of transnational elites (Robinson and Harris, 2000), or rather 'North-versus-South' (or Euro-America versus the postcolony) as in classic accounts of imperialism (Blaut, 1970)? How do 'colonially-induced' discursive frames impact planetary urbanization? To what extent can subaltern perspectives contribute to our (ways of) understanding and acting upon the world? An impetus for the 'straw man paper' was our conviction that there is underutilized potential for productive dialogue between political-economy and postcolonial perspectives on these questions, even if these perspectives are often cast as oppositional factions in academia (Sinha and Varma, 2015).

The main challenge is to not become paralyzed by notions of theoretical or empirical 'incommensurability' (Kuhn, 1970 [1962]), which are all too often invoked in human geography (van Meeteren, 2016: 7-19). Engaged pluralism (Barnes and Sheppard, 2010) 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 (see Bunnell, this issue). 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 (see also Blaut, 1979; Robinson, 2015).

Let us reignite the debate by emphasizing that the need to 'provincialize' urban knowledge (Sheppard et al., 2013; Leitner and Sheppard, 2015) pertains to both global cities research *and* the postcolonial critiques thereof. Rangan (this issue) reminds us how both intellectual projects emerged at particular historical moments and at particular places. The postcolonial agenda emerged from understanding historical imperial formations and their enduring importance for contemporary urban realities; the global city research agenda emerged via urban geographies of global (finance) capitalism, which can be understood as how a (different?) logic of 'empire' works under (financialized) globalization (Sassen, 2010; Bassens and van Meeteren, 2015; van Meeteren and Bassens, 2016), and how its geography is shifting over time (Derudder and Taylor 2016; Taylor and Derudder, 2016). Intellectual projects carry the idiosyncrasies of the time-space context surrounding their gestation. When theoretical projects travel, they tend to lose these locally-grounded referents and may become perceived as 'universal truths' (or having pretensions thereof) elsewhere. For instance, what is internationally known as 'poststructuralism' can only be understood genealogically through the particularities of the intellectual generation inhabiting the French academic field in the 1960s and 1970s (Angermüller, 2015). As suggested by El Khoury (this issue), much of the postcolonial controversy in urban studies can also be

related to sociological factors such as the intellectual generation of those involved. Particularly authors that came of academic age before the 1990s, i.e. before the cultural turn in the social sciences (e.g., Saskia Sassen, Allen Scott, Michael Storper), and those maturing afterwards (e.g., Colin McFarlane, Jennifer Robinson, Ananya Roy) are polemically engaged with one another. We, being part of what is again a younger intellectual generation, are profoundly shaped biographically and theoretically by the financial crisis of 2008 and following years. Resultantly, pre-cultural turn theory has regained acumen to make sense of our own predicament, necessitating us to bracket some of the concerns that were central in the 1990s, when political-economy was often argued to be 'old-hat' and uninteresting (Harvey, 2015). This feeling of witnessing a debate between 'parents' and 'grandparents' situates our ambivalence about its harsh tone.

Yet, 'poststructuralism' (when it left France), 'postcolonialism' (when it left India), and 'global city theory' (when it left its world-systems roots and its focus on London, New York, Tokyo and Los Angeles) all became perceived as 'universal truths' at one point, often to the dislike of the authors who created the original critical discourse. In a recent paper, Barnes and Abrahamson (forthcoming) invoke Gieryn's (2002) notion of 'truth spot' to capture the processes whereby particular knowledges are assembled in such a way that they become perceived as universal by the wider public (see also Leitner and Sheppard, 2015). Preventing this universalizing tendency requires the constant provincialization of everything we read. This implies a thorough analysis of the truth spot in question: which, how, and to what end are 'truths' 'assembled' is of fundamental importance and take part in a battle for representation (see also Massey, 2007). Yet, in our view such deconstructive gestures should also be followed by reconstructive moments as long as we remain sensitive to how we produce our particular truth-claim (Lake, 2013), and for what reason.

When unpacking the geographies of this particular dialogue, it can be noted that we are writing from Belgium, which is part of the political-economic core of the world-system, yet slightly off-center when it comes to being regarded an authoritative truth-spot about that core—a position many non-Anglophone, yet high-income contexts share (Aalbers, 2013). We are answered by authors from various places in the world, perhaps less associated with political-economic core of the world-system but not too far off, and predominantly biographically and situationally anchored in the British Commonwealth. To what extent can we regard this to be a debate between 'Euro-America and its postcolonial Other'? Or are we also just dragging partial perspectives in a truth spot trying to speak for others while still universalizing (see also Collins, this issue)? In any case, despite all postcolonial debates, the truth spots in human geography seem to be remarkably sticky. Although the conceptual programming and the conveyors have diversified in recent years, the global geographical community still seems to be hooked on radio California and radio Commonwealth; exactly the same stations that we all were tuned into thirty years ago. Therefore, we share the concerns about the geography of knowledge production voiced by Johnson (this issue), but we do note that this seems to pertain as much to the postcolonial replies to GCR as it does to GCR itself.

The question then becomes how to simultaneously achieve a practice where 'all' knowledge is equally provincialized critically, while retaining the intention to confront and combine these provincialized chunks of knowledge to generate new insights that might speak across

contexts. Ultimately, what we want is to produce knowledge that diminishes the amount of illusion and its harmful consequences in the world. Importantly, we believe that such an ambition is all but at odds with postcolonial and other subaltern subjectivities, highlighting the potential for engaged pluralism. First, our 'postcolonial interlocutors' seem to agree that a relational perspective on urban transformation is an important research avenue (Collins, El Khoury, Robinson this issue). As we indicated in the original contribution, the very world-systems-analysis heritage of the global cities agenda encodes relational thinking in the DNA of its research (Robinson, 2015). We agree with the potential of the methodological approaches suggested by our interlocutors: following objects or subjects, comparing them across multiple sites across core and periphery divides, and theorizing the processes under scrutiny from within these multiple contexts at the same time. The more methods to triangulate findings, the better. Second, key dimensions of political-economic approaches which are now commonly criticized (Roy, 2015) by postcolonial urban theory can still qualify as building blocks to build theory from both the center and the periphery. For instance, understanding the city as a place from which circuits of capital are orchestrated (i.e. command and control) (Bassens and van Meeteren, 2015), an urban land nexus (Scott and Storper, 2015), or as a store of value and projector of symbolic power (Walker, 2016) remain paramount, albeit partial, perspectives to understand the global urban predicament. What emerges here is a call for rigorous comparativism (as do Robinson and Roy, 2016), albeit sometimes with methods and nomenclature which may be not the preferred ones by post-prefixed inspired urban scholars. Deploying a 'comparative analytic' then hinges on both decontextualization and abstraction, and recontextualization that forces re-evaluation of the pre-contextual theoretical framing (Leitner and Sheppard, 2015: 5).

Engaged pluralism benefits from a clear view on what is exchanged and there appears to be lingering confusion reinforcing a situation where nomenclature rather than substance¹ dictates the debate. First, Robinson (this issue) argues that we can get rid of the notion of 'command and control' over the world economy because the work of Allen (2010), among others, has shown that 'power does not work that way'. However, we (see Bassens and van Meeteren 2015; Derudder and Taylor, 2016; van Meeteren and Bassens 2016) interpret Allen's criticism as a challenge to more thoroughly think through how subtler modalities of power work through the world city archipelago. Whether that resolves the issues is open for further debate, but the criticism on the 'command and control' notion in global cities research has surely been heard. Second, in our reading, the criticism of 'global city being a "random act" of synecdoche' (Robinson, this issue), also rests on misunderstanding and/or a difference in method. At this point, we need to re-emphasize that much global cities research (see Sassen, 2002; Taylor and Derudder 2016; van Meeteren and Bassens, 2016) perceives 'the global city' as a global urban process that is not reducible to specific cities. The point, therefore, is not to classify cities as 'global city' but to detect whether processes of global-city formation are taking place that may explain the urban from a particular vantage point. This seems compatible with Robinson's (2016; cf. Rangan this issue) call to look at 'genetic features' that shape cities. As critical realists we study these genetic features through attempting to isolate this process from other processes in a particular place by the method of abstraction (Wachsmuth et al., 2011). When abstracting, necessary properties of a theoretical proposition are discerned from the contingent. As a consequence, there is no randomness to the 'synecdoche': it is about understanding a specific aspect of the global urban as precisely as possible. Again, the choice for studying particular processes may be

debated, but as this is a methodological operation, which does not define 'immutable unchanging' properties of an ontological object, it does not perforce imply essentialism (Sayer, 2000).

Rejoining the global urban studies discussion, we acknowledge the translation challenges between viewpoints that complicate scientific communication within global urban research. Ultimately, this makes our ability to translate between concepts, methods, and concerns paramount (Parnell and Pieterse, 2015). What researchers produce is often not primarily abstract theoretical 'knowledge', but rather differing research practices that are only cast as ontologically or epistemologically 'incommensurable' post-factum. There is nothing that prevents a researcher from observing the same phenomenon through different paradigmatic lenses simultaneously or alternately, revealing new perspectives on the same phenomena. The barriers impeding such reflexivity are often cognitive rather than philosophical (Kuhn, 1970: 175). Therefore, our research subjects deserve better methodological dialogue than a continuous debate-stopping invocation of incommensurability. All phenomena are unique, and all perspectives are partial (Bunnell, this issue), yet we can always compare unique phenomena and juxtapose partial explanations. Resultantly, we need continuing debate about how to distinguish between methodologically better and worse comparisons.

Ultimately, the proof of engaged pluralism is in the praxis of (empirical) research. We therefore argue that a way forward may reside in the praxis of 'multicultural' global urban research. We do not put this forward as a trivial naïve proposition, but from the genuine belief that much good can be expected from researchers that have deep knowledge of the sensitivities emerging from multiple cultural and epistemological settings (i.e. constituting a cosmopolitan project), being immersed in multiple research frames, being reflexive about these frames, and being able to switch back and forth between them to ultimately cross-fertilize their own hybrid that proves productive in the world. Cross-cultural psychologists have assembled compelling evidence that *frame switching* between interpretative frames rooted in different cultures is perfectly possible (Hong et al., 2000), that it enhances 'the capacity and willingness to acknowledge the legitimacy of competing perspectives on the same issue and to forge conceptual links among these perspectives' (Tadmire and Tedlock, 2006: 174), and ultimately stimulates creativity by raising cognitive flexibility in terms of acknowledging (and generating) alternatives that are semantically novel (Crisp and Turner, 2011: 256-57). In this light, a particular research culture— name it global cities research, postcolonial urbanism, or something else—may only instill a temporal, non-exclusive state of mind with the researcher, but one that remains permanently open for simultaneous parallel engagement with numerous significant others.

¹ As we argue in our original contribution, critical realists contend that substance is never reducible to nomenclature, although nomenclature influences what we perceive as substance.

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