Global cities research and urban theory making

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Global cities research has long been an integral and often a dominant aspect of urban theory making. Nowhere is this history more visible than in the recent anniversaries marking pioneering publications in this research tradition, including the centenary of Patrick Geddes' (1915) *Cities in Evolution*, golden anniversary of Peter Hall's (1966) *The World Cities* and silver anniversary of Saskia Sassen's (1991) *The Global City*. Each book became the antecedent to successive generations of world/global cities research and urban theory making, centred on examining cities as nodes in regional (Geddes), national (Hall) and global (Sassen) urban systems. Yet as we have passed these landmark anniversaries, world/global cities research is facing powerful challenges

– conceptually, empirically, ideologically, and methodologically – in ways arguably not seen before.

Most significant has been the strong postcolonial critique, which has taken to presenting world and global cities research as being fundamentally flawed. Arguing that world and global cities research suffers from intellectual parochialism – the result, it is suggested, of presenting universal claims to urban theory through the lens of cities in the global North – the postcolonial critique represents an intellectual call to arms to internationalise urban theory through more comparative modes of urban theory making (Roy and Ong, 2011; Robinson, 2016a; Schindler, 2017).

Aligned to this are calls for new methodological approaches to urban research. Arguing from a number of different theoretical vantage points, including actor-network theory and assemblage theory (Farías and Bender, 2010; McFarlane, 2011), these approaches seek to emphasise the particularity, variety and diversity of urban places vis-a-vis what they see as the a priori theorisation of knowledge about cities from the perspective of a limited number of world/global cities in the global North. Moreover, their aspiration for truly international urban studies 'conducted "on a world scale"' (Robinson, 2011: 2, citing Connell, 2007) places a premium on 'comparative methodologies' for undertaking 'comparative urbanism' (Robinson, 2014).

The problem currently is the perception that this necessitates the rejection of urban theories derived through global cities research and the development of alternative forms

of theorisation. In part we see this in the attempt to replace the privileged narrative of global/world cities with a counter-narrative of 'ordinary cities' (Robinson, 2006). We have also seen it to the fore in the writings of, most notably, Ananya Roy (2009) when arguing for 'new geographies of theory' and 'new conceptual vectors' in order to understand the 21st century metropolis (see also Ernstson et al., 2014). This is noteworthy because the focus is firmly on developing 'new' theories and conceptual adventures; there appears to be little or no place for refining, extending and advancing existing theories.

Recent interventions are moving this debate on apace. Peter Taylor, for example, suggests provocatively to conceptualise all cities as 'extraordinary' (Taylor, 2013), while Allen Scott and Michael Storper (2015: 3) talk of the need for a 'shared vocabulary' to underpin a 'general concept of the urban and the urbanization process' (see also Storper and Scott, 2016). Jamie Peck (2015) acknowledges that it is undeniable how our different vantage points impact how we perceive urban theory making, but has taken to arguing in the strongest possible terms that '[t]he test of urban theories ought to be their explanatory veracity across cases, not (just) where they come from' (Peck, 2015: 179). Meanwhile Richard Smith (2013), in this journal, rejects the global/world cities thesis for what he suggests is its neo-Marxist conceptualisations of command and control being a myth, and is equally dismissive of the 'ordinary cities' critique for failing to recognise this point.

There is no denying that at the start of the 21st century there has been a voracious appetite to engage with cities research. As a consequence, urban theory making has become more diversified, emerging from a greater variety of epistemological perspectives, geographical and disciplinary contexts and underpinned by a wider range of methodological approaches (Hubbard, 2018; Jayne and Ward, 2017; McNeill, 2017). Nevertheless, a tendency toward generalised critique, mischaracterisation, and silencing of other perspectives has at times polarised debate in unhelpful ways (van Meeteren et al., 2016a). Following Barnes and Sheppard's (2010) call for 'engaged pluralism' in economic geography, arguments for a more open and constructive dialogue in debates over urban theory making are currently in vogue (van Meeteren et al., 2016a, 2016b; Robinson, 2016b; Brenner, 2017).

This theme issue asks what does this mean for global cities research and urban theory making? We see this as an apt time to revisit and reimagine the theoretical and methodological foundations of studying the global urban. This necessarily involves some defence of world and global cities research but the aim here is not solely to defend a position, rather it is to engage with the current, often critical, debates in contemporary urban studies through a refined, extended and advanced world and global cities research agenda. In so doing, we seek to put forward a threefold argument.

Firstly, we argue that there is an urgent need to go beyond narrow calls for 'new' theory to more openly recognise the validity of re*new*ing existing approaches to urban theory making. Less fashionable but far more important is the task of 'stress-testing' both new

and existing concepts. As Peck (2017: 332) recently put it, this requires 'stretching and remaking received theoretical understandings, provisional conceptualisations, and working categories of analysis'. This is a critical task for urban scholars, for as Taylor and Lang's (2004) list of 100 concepts describing urban change at the turn of the century reveals in hindsight, new concepts and theories can quickly turn into a graveyard of conceptual corpses. That the world and global city concept remains firmly established 100 years on from its inception stands as testament to why we should not throw out the baby with the bathwater in the pursuit of new urban theories.

Secondly, and somewhat related to this, there needs to be a recognition that going forwards sometimes requires us to go back first. In the case of global cities research, one inherent problem is how the concept has been captured, glorified and reimagined by others (Leon, 2017), increasingly distancing it from the intellectual claims made by its key architects. An illustration of this is the way in which Friedmann's (1986; Friedmann and Wolff, 1982) original world city agenda called for research and action as a critique of the contradictions of industrial capitalism, but as with much global cities research, it has been captured and reappropriated by 'corporate social science' (Taylor, 2016) and urban policy gurus to fuel city boosterism. As a result, the original focus on actual global cities research and associated intellectual claims to urban theory making – work that continues today (e.g. Bassens and van Meeteren, 2015: Parnreiter, 2017) – has arguably become overshadowed and hidden by its (mis)use by others, both intellectually and practically. Instead, what we have seen over recent years are back-and-forth debates between advocates and critics that take as their starting point how the

global city concept has been mobilised. All the time this is distancing researchers from discussion and dialogue about the original research ideas and claims in ways detrimental to developing robust urban theory.

Thirdly, advancing urban theory making requires re-engagement with actual global cities research. It is one thing to have engaged pluralism in theory but another to have engaged pluralism in practice (Harrison and Hoyler, 2018). To this end, the papers in this theme issue demonstrate the value of stress-testing central assumptions and claims of urban theory from the doing of global cities research. Following on from this, the contributions reveal that engaging across difference is more nuanced than bridging dualisms (North/South, ordinary/extraordinary, universality/particularity, postcolonial/Euro-American). While often presented and imagined as a singular tradition, global cities research is a diverse intellectual endeavour and practice that engages and bridges different disciplines, theoretical frameworks, geographical contexts and methodological approaches.

Writing from the perspective of urban sociology and using network analytical methods, the first paper by Zachary Neal (this issue) revisits a fundamental argument pertaining to the rise of global cities, namely that the most globalised cities are the most (externally) connected (Taylor et al., 2010). For Neal, the questions we should be asking are not simply which cities are well connected or to what extent city x is connected to city y or city z. Introducing a new approach to comparative urban analysis, Neal is advocating a step change in global cities research, from focusing on accounts derived from what can

be observed to what can be observed *and expected*. By asking the question '*compared to what?*', for the first time we begin to see whether actual observations about the intensity of city connectivities are stronger or weaker than might be anticipated. Identifying with an emerging trend within geography for counterfactual thinking, one important consequence of this research is the potential to disturb and complicate established hierarchies of cities based on their connectivity, changing our perspective on what constitutes a 'successful' city and how we select cities for comparative urban analysis.

Applying Burawoy's extended case method to probe world city formation in Beirut, Lebanon, Marieke Krijnen, David Bassens and Michiel van Meeteren (this issue) demonstrate the disruptive potential of engaging with global cities research and urban theory making in, of and through cities located on the conceptual and geographical fringes (Kanai et al., 2017). Central to their agenda is to stress-test another key assumption of global city theory, namely that advanced producer service firms and the highly-skilled labour they employ are important indicators for world city formation. Finding that domestic and expat Beiruti professionals play a far more significant role than their Euro-American counterparts as intermediaries 'manning' circuits of value through Beirut, Krijnen et al. (this issue) reveal how global cities research is moving urban debates away from superimposed dualisms towards more pluralised conceptualisations of global cities and global city makers (Hoyler et al., 2018).

Connecting global cities research to broader debates about global production networks, Jana Kleibert (this issue) further develops this more nuanced approach to understanding the role of skilled labour in world city formation. Arguing that increased office linkages can put cities such as Manila, Philippines, 'on the map' and imply increased command and control functions, in-depth qualitative research reveals that all might not be what it seems. Constructively critiquing conceptualisations of command and control in global cities research and urban theory making (cf. Smith, 2014), Kleibert challenges the assumption that large offices equate to increased power and strategic role in global urban networks. By disclosing how Manila's service economy is sustained by the offshoring of back office functions from higher wage economies, Kleibert reveals the importance of widening the research frame to engage with cities beyond the conceptual and geographical heartland of global cities theory, as well as with other perspectives, to refine, extend and advance global cities research and its contribution to urban theory making.

In the final paper, Thomas Sigler and Kirsten Martinus (this issue) draw on social network analysis to decentre and extend global cities research by theorising urban positionality. Bringing in a national perspective, Australia is used as an example of a country experiencing transition towards a more global economic orientation, to make the case for widening the economic and geographic scope of global cities research. Their study of network relations between Australian cities and their international counterparts extends the analysis of the geographies of external relations beyond the finance/service sector to include energy, materials and industrials as vital sectors of the Australian

economy. Such a cross-sectoral comparative analysis stretches far beyond the usual

world and global cities to reveal hitherto ignored cities, which while not prominent in the

advanced service economy (or the economy per se) may nevertheless feature

prominently in a specific industry or sector of the economy (see also Derudder and

Taylor, 2017). In doing so, the paper argues for situating cities within multiple industry-

specific networks to reflect a diversity of globalisation processes shaped less by

command and control than by regional economic organisation and path dependence.

Taken together, the papers in this issue advance global cities research by stress-testing

four fundamental ingredients underpinning global city theory: connectivity, highly-skilled

labour, command and control, and advanced producer services. For urban theory

making, this points to a need to re-engage with global city theory itself, rather than

getting distracted or misled by how it is captured, characterised and channelled.

Common to the papers in the issue is their endeavour to develop novel conceptual and

methodological approaches that allow them to re-engage constructively with the key

aspects of global city theory. At one level, this approach to engaging with urban theory

through global cities research reveals the need to further advance existing theories

through continual stress-testing, as much as developing new theories to be stress-

tested (Roy, 2009; Brenner and Schmid, 2015). At another level, the diversity of

epistemological perspectives, geographical contexts and methodological approaches

showcased by the authors brings into sharp focus the plurality within global cities

research. To date, engaged pluralism has been taken to refer to conversing and

collaborating across dualisms (North/South, Euro-American/postcolony, academic/non-

academic, qualitative/quantitative) (Leitner and Sheppard, 2016). Equally important, we would argue, is applying the same principles within a specific research tradition such as global cities research: a case of practicing engaged pluralism by 'looking inside' as well as 'looking outside'.

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