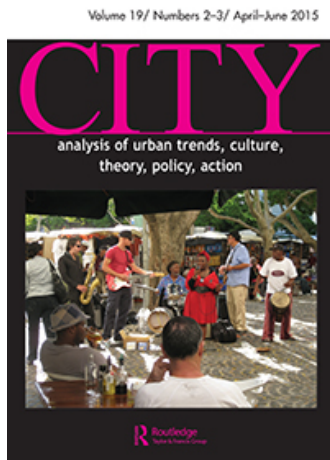


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Building a better theory of the urban

A response to 'Towards a new epistemology of the urban?'

Richard Walker

I should begin with the requisite praise of our authors, Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid, for their obvious level of sophistication, broad reading of the literature, and evident familiarity with cities and the thorny problems they present for social scientists. I know their intentions are good and I mean to engage them in a spirit of friendly combat. They are trying to offer us broad guidelines as to how to think about cities and urbanization, which is a noble if possibly errant cause. Nonetheless, I feel that they have failed to advance the cause of urban studies very far in their essay, 'Towards a new epistemology of the urban?' through a combination of over-attention to first principles in social theory, reiteration of familiar themes in urban research, and neglect of important historical and geographical knowledge about cities.

The general flaws of the piece are these:

- It is more of a manifesto than a theoretical statement about cities and urbanization, and it spends too much time with propositions at the level of metaphysics/philosophy. It functions more as ground clearing than a real debate about urbanism. Yes, we can agree that, 'Since its origins in the early twentieth 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.' Nonetheless, instead of

despairing over the 'fragmentation, disorientation and downright confusion permeating the field of urban studies', our time as urbanists might be better spent building upon the best theoretical and empirical contributions in play.

- The authors engage too much in setting up and knocking down straw men. Yes, of course, a lot of popular discourse about the 'new urban age' is naive in how it talks about cities and measures urbanization of the globe, but that is to be expected. But what urban theorist really thinks that we are 'witnessing the worldwide proliferation of a singular form of "the" city'?¹ Moreover, it muddies the waters to treat United Nations studies in the same breath as the urban triumphalism of Ed Glaeser (2011), who is anything but naive; the techno-fix approaches of internet ideologues, who speak with the forked-tongues of corporate billionaires and the Libertarian Right (Keen 2015); or the scientism of urban resilience theorists, with their mix of elitism and positivism (Ernstson *et al.* 2010).
- In positioning themselves in relation to recent developments in post-colonial urban theory (e.g., Robinson 2006, Roy 2009), the authors go in exactly the wrong direction. They accept the 'epistemological opening' created by the critique of existing urban theory as Eurocentric but proceed to reject urban theory from the Global South for 'its tendency to treat "the city" as a

privileged terrain for urban research'. I am not going to enter the minefield of debate over the positions taken by post-colonial urban theorists, but if there is one thing they have right it is to take seriously the questions raised by the mega-cities blossoming across the landscape outside Europe and North America.

- To the extent the authors are correct about the contemporary failings of urban studies, little of what they have to say about the new planetary urban condition is terribly new, except in degree. Their arguments could use a stiffer dose of urban historiography. As is often the case those who make fervent declarations that the present day marks a dramatic break with the past, Brenner and Schmid make some strange historical claims, such as the patently false statement that, 'new geographies of urban governance ... are no longer neatly subsumed within a singular, encompassing territorial framework of state power at any spatial scale, national or otherwise.' Since when have the city-systems of Europe, Asia or the Americas been neatly encompassed by nation states or colonial empires? (cf. DeVries 1984; St. John 2011).
- After reading the essay by Brenner and Schmid, I still don't know for sure what they mean by the urban other than it is not a trivial concept of a bounded, replicable city. Curiously, fewer than half their theses, #3, 5 and 6, pertain specifically to the urban, in that they are spatial/geographic propositions, and this points to a troubling elision between general social-philosophical propositions and urban-spatial ones. Yes, I know that relational thinking demands a good degree of openness and fluidity in defining concepts in a theoretical arena, but that doesn't mean that our theoretical foundations can be built entirely on the quicksand of meta-physical abstractions.
- Furthermore, even as our authors spend a disproportionate amount of time on philosophical tenets, they still manage to reiterate a number of common errors in their

approach to social science. I realize that the authors are not simple post-modernists and have previously criticized the anti-theoretical stand of 'assemblage theory' urbanists and others (Brenner, Madden, and Wachsmuth 2010), but they still need to be more materialist in their ontology, more dialectical in their conceptualizations, and more hard-boiled about social scientific method. Reflexivity is not enough.

- The authors could tone down the hyperdrive on their academic prose, so as not to burn the retinas of those less attuned to such supercharged prose. Admittedly, their paper is written for 'intellectual eyes only', but, even so, much of the argument could be said more plainly. I'm a bit old-fashioned in my approach to writing, however, as many students can attest, so I'm sure many post-modern readers will take umbrage at this recommendation.

So far I may appear to be replicating the broad-brush strokes of the work I am criticizing, so we need to get down to cases. I now turn to the seven theses that make up the bulk of Brenner and Schmid's essay:

Thesis 1: This thesis argues for the necessity of critical reflection upon the concepts of the urban and urbanization, and against the naive belief that objects organize themselves into self-evident forms without the need for prior conceptualization. This is unobjectionable as a first principle, although I wonder how many serious scholars still operate under purely empiricist assumptions. Where Brenner and Schmid go wrong is appearing to put all their bets on epistemological reflection rather than scientific analysis that relies fundamentally on an empirical as well as theoretical moment.

The problem is apparent in the title of their essay, 'Towards a new *epistemology* ...' and is repeated in the text. A key statement is this: '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.’ No, in fact, the urban and urbanization *are* empirical objects, even if they are not self-evident or easily delineated. The authors commit the fundamental philosophical error of confounding epistemology with ontology, and falling into the idealist trap of the post-moderns that because concepts are imperfect and non-correspondent with reality, there is no reality or, at least, no knowable reality (Bhaskar 1978; Sayers 1985).

Of course, my declaring cities to be objects in the world doesn’t make them so; but this is a separate argument about the ontological existence of certain things. I am conscious of the real, scientific problem of bridging the gap between theorization and empirical verification (Sayer 1992). My faith that urban areas are real things comes from long experience and study. I am more than happy to argue over how tricky they are to define, either in time or space, but simply declaring them unknowable beyond the prison of our minds (epistemology) won’t do, either. Our authors are not actually thus deluded, and do continue to treat cities as real things in the world, but they are incautious in the way they have set forth Thesis 1. In short, while we all may need to be driven towards a new urban theory(ies) or science of cities because our concepts are outmoded, this entails much more than moving ‘Towards a new epistemology of the urban’.

A further problem of this focus on epistemology and inattention to the ontological problem of cities is that we never get to even a rudimentary definition of what constitutes ‘the urban’ (cf. Harvey 1973; Scott and Storper 2015). This seems curiously non-materialist, which I don’t think Brenner and Schmid are. Yet while they are clear that the nature of the urban is contested and changing, we still need a minimal definition just to be sure we’re not going to confuse the urban with other phenomena like capitalism, mountains or gender. We have to insist on some basic notion of the ‘urban’ involving concentration, density and landscapes of people,

buildings and the like, along with a dialectical relation to the non-urban, i.e., rural, wild-lands, oceans, etc. And because the elemental problem of ontological first principles is not engaged in Thesis 1, it recurs again and again in subsequent theses. For example, it is simply not tenable to dismiss ‘the putative non-urban “outside”’, as they do under Thesis 4; if nothing is outside the urban, then the urban is everything; and if it is everything, it is nothing in particular and therefore not an interesting problem.

Thesis 2: Yes, the urban is a process, but it is also an object. Too many times recently I’ve seen heard scholars declare, in all seriousness, that something is a process and not a simple thing. This is not a great insight; in fact, it’s a half-truth. Again, I agree we cannot approach cities as naive empiricists for whom settlement types or boundaries are simple and self-evident, nor urban forms unchanging over time. But to declare everything as process and all form as forever shape-shifting is thoroughly one-sided. Where are the dialectics here? Where is the materialism? (Miller 2010)

Processes produce objects and objects always presuppose and even internalize the processes that make and break them. These objects (things, structures, systems) may be more or less long-lived, but even if they are always changing to some degree, all is not flux. There are intransigent materialities in the world that resist such conceptualizations. The sun is a process of gravity capturing matter into a dense enough space to ignite a process of fusion, but it is also a thing called a star with a time of formation, a period of life and a moment of death. I am process of living cells, but I am a bodily person, too. A river channel is always a process of deposition and erosion by the process of flowing water, but it is still an observable and measureable object. Even the river – a fluid object if there ever was one – has, at any time, boundaries and flows that can be modeled, even as they are swirling and shifting.

Cities are things of stone, concrete, breadth and depth and height. It is one thing to say

they are not changeless and another to forget the built-environment and the fixity of capital in time, as David Harvey has taught us (Harvey 1982). Brenner and Schmid's formulations, such as this one, just won't do: '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.' In this view, all stars are supernovae and all rivers are in flood all the time.

Not that any of these process/object dialectics are easy to capture and explain. Far from it! But that's what science is about. Why do social scientists have such difficulty accepting the interweaving of process and object? It is a problem that rarely impedes natural scientists – who deal with very dynamic and complex phenomena, too – even though they are often more naive than us about their metaphysical presuppositions.

Thesis 3: At last, we get to a thesis that is spatial and applies to cities rather than every phenomena in the universe. Yes, I agree that cities are concentrating, decentralizing and dividing all the time. Nothing terribly new here. I'm sure the authors are aware that this triad is not original, but at least it is about urban geography, which merits the longer discussion they give it. I will respond in kind.

First, Brenner and Schmid are right to say that urban studies has been too often focused on central cities – the densest agglomerations – to the exclusion of the larger urban diaspora. They recognize the force of agglomeration economies but are evidently trying to escape the shackles of a purely agglomeration theory of the urban, with its seeming requirement for concentration and compact cities.² Unfortunately for their thesis, the latest work on agglomeration economies defines cities at the largest possible scale of mega-urban regions like greater Los Angeles (Storper 2013; Scott and Storper 2015; Storper *et al.* 2015).

Second, our authors wish to emphasize the massive outward push of urban areas today. This is reasonable enough, but doesn't take us anywhere new without a better delineation of what constitutes the urban (built environment? density? flows of resources?) and how giant cities are sweeping across the landscape today. Oddly, they skip right over significant literatures on urban expansion, dismissing notions like 'edge cities' with a wave of the hand. One would have liked to see a more serious, even if brief, treatment of recent work on suburbanization that explodes earlier, simpler notions of how cities expand at their edges (Lewis 2004; Krause and Sugrue 2006); on exurban penumbrae around big cities (Morrill 2005); or massive belts of informal settlements around cities of the global south (Neuwirth 2005; Holston 2008).

Where our authors really want to go with the discussion of urban extension is to transcend the older tradition of cities exploiting rural hinterlands (e.g., Cronon 1991, Brechin 1999) by extending the concept of the urban as far as it will stretch. But what they end up doing is abolishing any clear idea of the countryside in contrast to the city (the undefined urban merging with an ill-conceived rural). I suggest that we need to pull back from the brink of totalizing urbanization to look more carefully at how cities penetrate, exploit and subsume rural areas. A beginning might be to build on three existing ideas that our authors overlook. One is to start with a more complete framework of city-systems that includes settlements at varying scales all the way down to the kinds of camps associated with resource extraction and towns/villages necessary for agriculture (Pred 1977; Walker 2015); Brenner and Schmid are just repeating the oversight of smaller cities and towns embedded within the rural by William Cronon, which I have criticized previously (Page and Walker 1991). A second consideration is that cities and city-systems continually expand into new territory by throwing up new, outlying settlements on rural land,

whether suburban flares, satellite cities, ski villages or timber camps; this, too, I have tried to theorize, along with Michael Storper, in terms of urban-industrial 'growth peripheries' (Storper and Walker 1989). A third way I have tried to think about the process of extensive urbanization is in terms of a dialectic of the urban and rural, in which the countryside is already transfigured by urban influences long before it becomes fully urban in the sense of being built upon and densely settled, and, furthermore, where the sprawling forms of modern cities ingest large swaths of the countryside in a way that 'ruralizes' the urban fabric (Walker 2007). All this bears further thought.

Finally, our authors add 'differentiated urbanism' to the mix, which is, again, a valuable idea but neither new nor controversial (Marcuse 1993). Curiously, however, their discussion immediately leaps to the process of 'creative destruction'. Creative destruction is a useful concept taken from Joseph Schumpeter's theory of capitalist technical change, one that urbanists, political economists and others have returned to again and again (Harvey 1982; Storper and Walker 1989). But there are two problems with what our authors do with it. On the one hand, they seem to conflate the division of urban space by whatever processes (social, economic, political) with the transformation of urban space; this is a rather basic confusion of the geographic and the historical, is it not? On the other hand, how can they envision creation and destruction of the urban if there is no urban object, no fixed material city, no built-environment, to be created and destroyed? Theses 1 and 2 come back to bite them here.

Thesis 4: Yes, 'the fabric of urbanization is multi-dimensional', but here we have a very general restatement of a problem facing all social science: how to slice and dice reality in a way that makes it easier to approach any complex social order. Back in the day, we used to follow Althusser in saying there were three dimensions of the social: economic, political and ideological (or cultural). Now we may prefer to slice things like our authors do:

spatial practices, territorial regulation and everyday life. I'm not arguing for or against either triad here, and I've used such formulae many times in my own work; the problem is that such simple formulations do not get us very far in theorizing cities or anything else. They are still in the realm of ground-clearing.

Worse, Brenner and Schmid combine these three dimensions with the previous three spatial moment of urbanization from Thesis 3 to construct a 9-part box of possibilities! This is the kind of classification scheme masquerading as real theory that drives me crazy. Please, fellow geographers, leave the boxes to the sociologists, who absolutely worship them. We urbanists really must do better. I know that this raises the specter of models and modeling, not to mention the faux-scientific demand for mathematical or statistical equations in all instances, but we do not have to follow the economists into their lair in order to be more rigorous in our approach. There are ways of rendering theoretical propositions in compact and coherent form that go beyond trifectas and boxes. I don't say it's easy or that I have not been frequently guilty of fuzzy formulations myself, but let us try to be more rigorous. Our theories need to highlight the strongest relations (dare I say 'structures?') among the relevant objects and processes; the logics by which they interact (dare I use the terms 'cause and effect', even if reciprocal to some degree?); the dynamics by which they change over time (evolutionary mechanisms?); and, of course, the imbrications of geographies in all this (Sayer 1992).

Thesis 5: Yes, in an important sense, urbanization has become 'planetary' (which apparently means more than 'global' to our authors). There are more and larger cities around the world and the process of urbanization is covering more territory and proceeding more rapidly than ever. One can hardly disagree with this formulation. But there are two problems with the formulation of Brenner and Schmid.

The first problem, which goes back to Theses 1, 2, and 3, is how to know whether

everything in the world is now urban/urbanized. While our authors are at pains to say that they are not claiming that the planet is totally urban, they effectively erase the rural: '[T]his 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.' While I have been tempted to say similar things since I wrote about the urbanization of rural America in the 1970s, it is a temptation that must be resisted. The rural 'Other' has not been fully internalized by the urban, even now. There are the obvious cases of non-urban polar regions, mountains and deserts, which may not be pure wilderness but are far from completely implicated in capitalism and urbanism yet. The same goes for large swaths of agrarian space: try telling the peasants of India or China or Chad that everything today is urbanized, and one would get very puzzled looks (even if they're using cell phones). This is not to say that the influence of the urban is not felt far and wide, economically, politically and culturally, but to leap from a relational process to the conclusion that this makes rural areas 'internal to the urban' remains sorely undialectical. I refer back again to what I said about extensive urbanization under Thesis 3: the urbanization of the countryside is always underway but always never complete. Indeed, there is a reverse ruralization of cities that is altering the urban fabric in important ways (Walker 2007).³

Second, any such declaration of planetary urbanization forces us to question whether the phenomenon is altogether new. Our authors recognize that there are historical precedents but say nothing of substance about them. After all, the British empire and London's financial system extended to cities around the globe in the 19th century (Reed 1981). Even earlier, global urban networks arose as part of European imperial and mercantile expansion after 1500. Then, what about the long-distance trading cities

from the Mediterranean to the Silk Road and India or down to Timbuktu in Africa during the Middle Ages? (Braudel 1984) And could one make a case that the cities of ancient China, the Roman Empire, pre-Columbian Peru and Mexico constituted at least continental urban systems in classical times? (Gates 2011)

I am not saying things have not changed, and profoundly, but if the authors are going to argue that we need entirely new urban concepts to do with planetary urbanization, they need to give us much more guidance about precisely how things have changed, both in the long term and in the defining years since the 1980s.⁴

Thesis 6: Cities evolve through a process of uneven development. True that! I, too, hold that landscapes of urbanism are not homogenous around the world, or even when they appear to be most bland and repetitive as in US suburban areas of the last generation. But, again, uneven development has been a basic tenet of urban studies at least since Neil Smith's (1984) intervention on the subject of capitalism and space. I am quite sympathetic with Brenner and Schmid's criticism of overly simplistic formulae for New Urban Forms shot from the cannons of empiricist and journalistic studies, and I agree that contemporary urbanization must be conceptualized as 'polymorphic', 'multiscalar' and ever mutating (cf. Walker and Schafran 2015). But they are, by turns, too hasty to dismiss as empiricist all efforts to specify important elements of the changing morphology of cities and too quick to revert to lofty pronouncements such as, '[T]he dawn of planetary urbanization appears to have markedly accentuated and reweven 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.' I'll say they are! And that's why we are still waiting for the 'new urban vocabulary' demanded by the authors to emerge in a more definite format, i.e., as clear theoretical formulations that we

can all apply in our research on cities around the world.

Thesis 7: The urban is a collective project (a social construct) whose potential can be appropriated by different contending actors, from capitalists to state leaders to social movements. This is certainly true, but not just of cities and the urban; it is true of everything human societies do. Here, once more, we have a general prescription for social theory rather than an urban theoretical proposition. There are, however, two specifically urban theses buried under this heading, both of which are worth discussion, but ought to be clearly separated.

The first proposition is that the urban is an independent process from capitalism, state formation or other key structures of social life. On this, I am in full agreement, and I am surprised it wasn't among the authors' opening theses, given that it is the foundational declaration of urban studies. Without such a thesis, we have no distinct object of study and should fold up our tents. Indeed, there is a good case to be made for urbanism being of much older provenance than either capitalism and even older than states (Kenoyer 1998).

The second proposition here is that people make their own cities and fight over the resources, meanings and the spaces thus created. I couldn't agree more. Cities offer particularly rich potentials that can be harnessed by popular movements (or else stolen away by ruling classes and states). Nor can I disagree that the struggle over 'the right to the city' is always shape-shifting, as is urbanism, and that we should look to unexpected places where radically new and exciting movements are emergent, along with new visions of the urban, as Jim Holston has done in Brazil (Holston 2008).

But it's hard to square this with the authors' subsequent statement under Thesis 7 that, 'The concept of planetary urbanization proposed here offers no more than an epistemological orientation...'. Just when we're getting somewhere, Brenner and Schmid back off, as in Theses 1 and 2, and

seem to deny the very object of social struggles and hopes, the existing city! I should hope that we urbanists can do better than this in our dialogue with urban social movements around the globe.

A Concluding Thought

As someone favorable to learning from political movements on the ground (e.g., Walker 2007), I can agree with our authors concluding statement that, '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.' Yes, political movements offer new ways of seeing that we academics can always profit from.

Nevertheless, I have to protest that we can do better than this. As a scholar with a certain faith in the (social) scientific project, I think we have the responsibility to try to reveal things that cannot easily be seen and understood in everyday life. The fact is that we have some powerful theoretical tools in our tool kit that have been developed by Marxists, Weberians, Lefebvrians, Braudeliens and other academic artisans. So, let us build with these rather than returning again and again to first principles – an indulgence far too often seen by social theorists as the highest form of intellectual labor.

Philosophy is, of course, an essential dimension of our collective project, and it behooves every one of us to dip our toes into metaphysics from time to time to test our mettle and bolster our self-critical faculties. But a major failing of contemporary social theory is that we all spend far too much time with our heads in the clouds and not enough with our feet on the ground, and almost none in the mid-altitudes where the theoretical view is often the clearest.

Best leave the philosophy of social science to those who do it best, like Andrew Sayer (e.g., Sayer 2011). After all, if I want to say something about Chilean cities, I turn to my colleagues who know Latin America, not to philosophers. We are not all Latin Americanists, nor are we all qualified to be philosophers, as much fun as either may be to dabble in. So, please, fellow urbanists: can we get on with our (hard) work?

Notes

- 1 For a more extensive discussion of 'the new urban age' literature, see Brenner and Schmid 2014.
- 2 As Neil Brenner has reiterated in a separate communication, February 19, 2015.
- 3 I cannot disagree with Brenner and Schmid when they say that, '[T]he 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.' But this seems to me a first principle of all investigation and sets up rural studies as an unreflective straw man.
- 4 And what to make of the strange claim that there was a 'long, violent and intensely contested transition from industrial and metropolitan to territorial formations of urbanization, roughly from the 1830s to the 1970s' – I can't make any sense of it.

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