

Theorising the Global Urban with “GCR”: Beyond Cities and Synechdoche

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Abstract:

50 words: The new generation of Global and World City research (GCR) has expanded the range of cities and the kinds of firms and economic circuits explored, with interesting insights for global urban studies. I raise a few issues for debate: why synechdoche continues to be invoked; why power hierarchies are still proposed, in the face of a more network-oriented form of power; and where alternatives to the powerful (and usually negative) real-world political effects of the “global city” term might come from?

This paper welcomes the new generation of Global and World City research (GCR), which has sought to generalise some of the insights by, for example, recasting the World City hypothesis in relation to financialisation and the wider role of producer and financial services in globalisation. Together with expansion of the range of cities and the kinds of firms and economic circuits explored, there are interesting contributions being generated for analyses of global urban studies more generally. I raise a few issues for debate: why synechdoche continues to be invoked (categorising cities on the basis of only a segment of the economic activities which take place there); why power hierarchies amongst cities are considered relevant when most authors have embraced a more network-oriented form of power; and, relatedly, how the powerful (and usually negative) real-world political effects of the “global city” term might be contested, and where the new ideas and practices to do that might be imagined to come from?

Key words: Global city, Ordinary city, financialisation, globalisation, urban theory

It is 15 years since I wrote my “off the map” paper (Robinson, 2002) and advocated the ground-clearing exercise of treating all cities as “ordinary” in order to rebuild an urban theory more attuned to understanding the “world of cities” (Robinson, 2006; 2011). “GCR” scholars responded quickly to the growing call for a more global urban studies, emanating from a number of different sources, exploring a range of different networks of firms and other international actors (such as NGOs and international agencies) across a very wide array of cities. In one of the most recent GAWC (Global and World Cities) research group papers 525 cities and 175 firms were considered as part of an exercise in updating the data on world city networks (De Rudder *et al.*, 2010), or the “world city archipelago” (Bassens and van Meeteren, 2015). From the current *Dialogues* paper by Bassens, DeRudder and van Meeteren (?), I have been intrigued to learn about more recent work which explores, for example, alternative Islamic systems of global finance (Bassens *et al.*, 2010) or “stress tests” GAWC ideas in different contexts (Beirut, for example – see Krijnen *et al.*, 2016).

I was also delighted to be directed to read the excellent paper by Bassens and van Meeteren (2015) which recasts the World City hypothesis in relation to financialisation and the post-2008 crisis period. It

grounds what had been a fairly broad brush analysis of the internal architecture of APS firms in a detailed consideration of the wider role of producer and financial services. They bring a robust theoretical perspective to this school of research. The growing body of services firms extract a rent for knowledge of reliable opportunities and procedures for surplus value realisation. They also facilitate switching of capital across different areas of capital investment - as in Harvey's (1978) classic analysis of a shift from productive capital to the built environment at times of mounting crises of overproduction (for the global version of this argument, see Harvey, 2015). And these firms are becoming increasingly directly involved in investments on their own account, benefitting from their own close analysis of opportunities. Bassens *et al* (2015) suggest that with the growth of financialisation and shareholder capitalism these practices are being "introduced more deeply into wider economies by APS operating from a much broader set of world cities." (Bassens and van Meeteren, 2015: 758), and also depending more on the transnationalisation of their own activities - firms benefit from being able to draw on expertise in and across different regions.

This is a long way from the rudimentary empirical approach of earlier GCR - counting (Western) APS firms' headquarters and branches in different locations, assuming the nature of their intra-firm relationships and mapping these on to a putative hierarchy of world cities (Taylor, 2004; de Rudder *et al*, 2010). It also updates the corporate-oriented analysis of Sassen (where innovation in APS supports the operations of TNCs), and suggests that APS and financial services are a driving force in the circulation of capital today. This paper will, I hope, become a classic of urban and economic geography. The *Dialogues* paper here is right to express frustration that as urban studies heads off in a globalising direction, this and other extremely valuable contributions are in danger of being ignored by postcolonial scholars. If anything, their research assures readers that these activities are more central to the production of urban economies and space in many cities around the world than they were when the terms "world" and "global" city were coined.

Nonetheless, I am going to make a friendly suggestion to these authors that their own approach takes them rather far from "global and world cities" analysis as such. Although they frame their contributions as being about "world cities" and "global cities", they barely mention these terms in their own recent substantive papers. I feel the full potential of GCR to contribute to the rich vein of theoretical experimentation underway in urban studies is hampered by a continuing allegiance to terms and concepts which reach back to much earlier phases of theorisation (1960s thinking of "systems" of "cities", for example). Encouraging the authors to take further some of their own observations, I suggest that two of the key concepts of GCR could usefully be abandoned: "*world city*" (because it is a misleading synecdoche); and "*control and command*" of the global economy (because power does not work like that). And then, as I discuss towards the end of these comments, the potential for "GCR" to contribute to wider efforts to rethink the spatiality of the global urban beyond "the city" will be more fully able to be realised.

Firstly, then, in a spirit of engaged pluralism, I find myself really perplexed about the lingering desire by GCR scholars to engage in random acts of **synecdoche**, from time to time using the analysis of APS and financial services activities to label and hierarchise the wider urban concentrations in which they take

place (Amin and Graham, 1998). Thus “London” (wherever that is) is presented as a “Global City”, for example, based on analysis of only a segment of the economic activities which take place there. More to the point for urban scholars more generally, the wider world of cities is hierarchized based on one (often relatively insignificant) element in the multiple circuits of the global economy. While the authors of the *Dialogues* paper are eager to distance themselves from the traditions of hierarchically-ordered tables of cities, these remain central to the concepts they continue to use to describe their analyses, such as the “world city archipelago” (or WCA) (De Rudder *et al.*, 2010). In these studies, the networking capacities of a selected set of Advanced Producer Services firms are transmuted into rankings of cities, as more or less globally connected, and thus powerful.

This terminology might be a helpful code for economic geographers, but it is both inaccurate and analytically meaningless for the study of wider processes of urbanisation - and it remains politically dangerous. London’s most eminent scholars, for example, quickly refuted the analytical relevance of the epithet, “global city” (Buck *et al.*, 2001), but instead found the term most useful as a descriptor of the growth coalition and rapaciously exclusionary governance regime which has gathered under its sign (Massey, 2007; Gordon and Travers, 2011). It is an analytical fallacy to align APS activities with the overall ascription of a certain label or characteristic to a whole “city”; what we are discussing is the emergence of economic districts or clusters associated with the production of the capacity for transnational economic organisation. Bassens and van Meeteren (2015: 757) acknowledge this and offer the label (from Sassen, 1998), “Advanced Producer Services Complex” - as I pointed out in 2002, this is rather less snappy than Global City, but a lot more accurate and much less harmful in terms of the performativity of the term.

My second point concerns **power**, and starts from the justification offered for using APS “firms” (as opposed to any other element of the global economy) as the foundation for defining a hierarchy of “cities”: that it is these activities which “command and control” the global economy. However, as they also acknowledge, the analytics of power in the global economy (such as in global production networks) has moved on, and with it any basis for privileging APS in understanding the role of cities in globalisation (Coe *et al.*, 2008). Indeed, as these authors indicate, GAWC studies and GCR have embraced a more network-oriented form of power; here John Allen’s topological analyses (2008; 2016) and Richard Smith’s (2014) critiques are apposite. Richard Smith’s argument, following John Allen, is that even the “cluster” metaphor fails to capture the complex networked and relational spatiality of these activities. Bassens and van Meeteren (2015) clarify that the power relations of APS’ role in global capitalism are rather more subtle than “command and control” (facilitating, switching, advising, circulating knowledge).

The other side of the issue of “power” concerns the power of the GCR terminology itself. To what extent does the analytic of “global city” perform power¹? And where might alternatives come from? My own

¹ I should add very quickly that as a good Foucauldian, my critique of the performativity of these terms is not in any way predicated on impugning the integrity of world/global city scholars (not any more so than all of us who are bullied into ambitiously circulating ourselves and our work to earn the favour of institutional regulators and

excursions into the history of strategic planning in London suggest that the academic and policy uses of the term “global city” emerged around the same time (more research into the history of this term is needed), marking a major break in policy agendas in that context from redistribution and quality of life to economic growth and global competitiveness. They signalled a turning point for London from a deindustrialising, declining and shrinking metropolis to a dynamic, nationally and globally dominating spatial concentration (Gordon, 1995). However, the more that I experience the impact of the concept, “global city” in action in London, articulating and shaping the agenda to support London’s physical and economic growth at the expense of poor and middle class populations, the more I am eager to throw whatever intellectual and political energies I have behind alternative formulations which would support a very different performativity. I would love it if GCR researchers could think of ways to subvert this configuration of power-knowledge, to detonate the outrageous destruction of urbanity which is being undertaken with the resources of our collective intellectual labour. And here I must disagree with the authors that it is acceptable to suggest we can simply divide up the world of scholarship into those who just analyse “capitalism”, and others of us who can busy ourselves looking for alternatives (p. 15). This does a great disservice to the activist scholarship of Gibson-Graham, for whom (a) the interrogation of alternatives is the basis of an analytics of power and (b) without being alert to the “outside”, the analysis of power can itself simply perform and entrench power, so capitalism becomes much more all-powerful in our theoretical imaginations than it is in practice.

There are already-existing resources available for thinking cities differently – but in the spirit of Gibson-Graham these can be hard to come by. My feeling is that they will be the result of patient community-based organising, collaborations and political activism; and that they will grow out of the spaces in the city which are fundamentally overlooked by GCR. Ordinary residents of “global cities” are making an effort – can we scholars join them?

Finally, moving beyond the metaphor of the “city” and the hierarchies of “command and control”, we find in GCR a rich discussion of the **spatialities** of interconnectedness and localisation of APS which can provide fuel for some new ways of (re)thinking the urban. Bassen and van Meeteren again: “The system of interconnected localization economies reveals itself as the particular geography of the WCA” (p. 759) – the “World Cities Archipelago” (coined by Taylor, 2004) - which they suggest could be interpreted as “an abstract networked unity that performs a certain, yet to be defined, part in contemporary capitalism” (p. 753). This in no way supports the continued production of tabulations and hierarchisations of CITIES based on FIRM interconnectivity. Here, then, GCR scholars can find common cause with postcolonial and planetary urbanisation scholars in acknowledging the need to reinvent the spatialities with which the urban can be thought - through networks, interconnections, topological and relational spatialities of social and economic life, as well as in a disparate set of discrete localisations dependent on the diverse platforms of metropolitan areas, city-regions, globalising and regionally integrated economies.

adjudicators). The shocking elision of rigorous scholarship and popular boosterist practices which this article cites by writers in the *Guardian* deserves a strong rejoinder.

But one more move is required - to make space for other interpretations of the global urban it is necessary to go beyond the relatively reductionist approach GCR adopts in relation to the diversity of urban economies. The authors grapple admirably with the critique of “economic reductionism” which has been levied at GCR – and their points are well made, with authors in this tradition exploring the political, cultural and personal dynamics all relevant to understanding the transnational world of APS. But I would still say, 15 years later, that if you want to understand the urban, maybe you don’t want to (only) start there: it is the diverse economies of cities, in concert with a wide array of networks and localisation economies, as exemplified in the APS sector, which give us the characteristic dynamism of the urban and which can help us to understand the great diversity of urbanisation processes and outcomes (Duranton and Puga, 2001; Kraetke, 2010; Taylor, 2014). How can the analysis of APS sit alongside the multiplicity of economic processes, localisations, networks and territorialisations which make the global urban now? This is to insist on the value of beginning analyses of the global urban anywhere – in the dense clusters in Guanzhou co-ordinating the trade of the cheap consumer goods supplying the needs of the majority world (Simone, 2011); in the astonishing reframing of central Johannesburg as a concentration of informal retail trade and investment across the African continent (Le Roux, 2014); in the (ir)real-speculations in property and projects producing alternative visions of peripheral urban developments across some of the poorest cities in the world (de Boeck, 2011; Watson, 2014; Caldeira, 2016); in the multiplicity of worldings of Asian urban development now remaking cities everywhere (Roy and Ong, 2011; Harrison et al., 2014). APS is no more important than any of these dynamics in shaping the global urban.

In conclusion, I think the seam of research which has come to us under the sign of “global city research” provides some fascinating evidence of the need for new vocabularies of the urban as the dynamics of both urbanisation and capitalism change, and as scholars become more attuned to the global nature of urbanisation processes – GCR has played an important part in fostering this latter sensibility. However, for this contribution to effectively join the conversation about the global urban, my most significant advice remains to divert energies away from the synechdochal categorisation of “cities” on the basis of firms, and to rethink the ideas of hierarchy or control which ground the definition of the “global” or “world city”. The challenge is to think with and beyond the APS clusters/world cities archipelago to examine what alternative spatial imaginaries and concepts might be helpful. If the global urban is emerging as a patchwork of many different territories, articulating a vast range of productive, speculative, rent-seeking and survivalist economic and political projects, with planetary-wide operational landscapes and implications (Simone, 2011; Brenner and Schmid, 2015), it is clear that the rich seam of work Bassens et al outline here in this issue of *Dialogues* makes a useful contribution to understanding this. But we must also insist that it is equally important to start thinking the urban with the many different dynamics grounding, co-ordinating and shaping the global urban now, and to keep an open mind as to the spatial forms and territorial outcomes which are relevant to understanding contemporary urbanisation.

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