

## Provincializing Global Urbanism: A Manifesto<sup>1</sup>

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“To thematize requires a project to select its objects, deploy them in a bounded field, and submit them to disciplined inquiry” (Guha, 1997, [xv](#))

1. The term **urbanism** has become much in vogue since 2000 in interdisciplinary Anglophone urban studies scholarship. Its usage can be traced back to the late nineteenth century in English and French language dictionaries, where it refers to: the study of the physical needs of urban societies, the management of urban spaces (urban planning), the characteristic way of life of city dwellers, and urbanization. The Oxford English Dictionary includes the following formative uses:

“The local colour or detail, the sentiment or the social life, the provincialism or urbanism of the story”

“Many primitive virtues are obviously incompatible with urbanism and industrialism” (Aldous Huxley)

“The dynamic of urbanism as we know it makes inevitable the syndrome of violence, alienation, high crime rates and delinquency that we associate with our cities”

Urbanism thus has come to refer to a distinct kind of site (the city), separable from other (rural) places, and taken to be a hallmark of modernism, progress, development and the metropole—the opposite of provincialism. At the same time, urbanism is associated with a set of social ills, the dark side of development contrasted with an idyllic rural past. This dissonance implies the need for

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intervention – urban planning to achieve development while minimizing social disfunctionality.

2. **Urbanization**, relatedly, has come to be seen as the destination of societal development tout court: Friedmann and Wolff termed this the urban transition; Lefebvre dubbed it the urban revolution, recently reformulated by Brenner and Schmid as planetary urbanization (Friedmann and Wolff, 1982; Lefebvre, 2003 (1970); Brenner and Schmid, 2012). Indeed, urbanization has become a prominent aspect of societal change, at historically unprecedented rates across the post-colonial societies of Latin America, Asia, and more recently Africa and non-white Oceania.<sup>2</sup> In the long history of cities, the shift of urbanization from Asia and the Middle East to Europe and North America after 1500, accompanying the latter's rise to prosperity as centers of globalizing capitalism, is now being reversed. Beyond this sheer pace of change, the scope of certain characteristics of urbanization emerging in post-colonial societies seems distinct: social polarization, informality, congestion and complex rural-urban inter-relations. From the perspective of Europe and North America, such characteristics are seen as failures of development. 'Mega-cities' such as Jakarta, Lagos, Calcutta or São Paulo are represented as an extreme form of such failures, in urgent need of intervention to set them on the proper path.
3. **Mainstream global urbanism** is not a coherent body of theory or practice, but loose bundles of ideas and practices that travel across the world—increasingly through transnational networks. In its mainstream form, it is a way of thinking about urbanism that explicitly or implicitly relies on cities in North America and Western Europe as the norm. It bears the imprint of previous rounds of domination and capital accumulation, when European colonial authorities sought to remake Asian, African and Latin American cities along the lines of emergent principles of European urban planning. After colonialism, the goal has been to remake them into prosperous centers of global capitalism—most recently according to the neoliberal precept that capitalist market mechanisms, combined with private property and now good governance, are the key to prosperity. Mega-cities, in particular, are advised and incentivized to become shiny modern *global* cities, like New York, London, Tokyo or, most recently, Singapore, Hong Kong or Shanghai (presented as Asian exemplars of the global city norm). Self-conscious practitioners of global urbanism are aware that their best practices and policy principles are always localized, subverted and transmogrified to suit sectarian interests in local contexts, [and advocate](#) such localization as desirable. Yet, localization of the global norm is only a representational strategy to maintain the hegemony of the master narrative.

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<sup>2</sup> Europe's nineteenth century explosion of urbanization, coinciding with its emergence as the core of global capitalist industrialization, entailed a threefold increase in the number of urban residents. Across Asia, Africa, Oceania and Latin America, urban populations have increased twelvefold in the last sixty years.

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This mainstream approach to global urbanism takes for granted that capitalism and liberal democracy are natural, ubiquitous norms, capable of overcoming the poverty, inequality and injustice seen as so pervasive across the global South. It is disseminated through seductive media images, research and pedagogic practices of corporate, policy, and academic communities, and is saturated with inequalities of power. It is elitist in character, seeking to assimilate all that comes in its way into itself. Ameri-Eurocentric historicism is thus a hallmark of mainstream global urbanism.

Notwithstanding its influence, and the considerable resources mobilized in its name, **mainstream global urbanism** persistently fails to deliver on its promise of prosperity for all. Whereas the World Bank (2009) is confident that globalizing capitalism and Western development models will enable today's informal settlements in Mumbai to go the way of London's Victorian slums, we are skeptical. This failure is not simply one of implementation, but of theory. The presumption that such theories are applicable in all spaces and times, albeit attentive to local context, must be challenged. Even theories critical of globalizing, urbanizing capitalism themselves too often are rooted in northern perspectives and experiences, with their capacity to travel elsewhere subject to question—the post-colonial conundrum. Numerous scholars have noted this in the last decade, calling for alternative approaches (e.g., Robinson, 2006; Pieterse, 2008; Bunnell and Maringanti, 2010; Simone, 2010; McFarlane, 2011; Ong and Roy, 2011; Roy, 2011b).

4. **Provincializing global urbanism** means identifying and empowering new loci of enunciation (Werner, 2012) from which to speak back against, thereby contesting, mainstream global urbanism. Mainstream global urbanism cannot but encounter Others that cannot be fully reduced to its own image and assimilated to itself. Contemporary African and continental Asian cities are both like and unlike their European, North American and Japanese counterparts. Cities in the global South are at once full of hope and aspiration, risk and danger, replete with sharp contrasts and contradictions. They are places for which it is difficult to plan and yet where planning (as an attempt to direct, contain and stoke growth) cannot be abandoned. Crisis and failure are also windows of opportunity, when broad patterns of the malaise become visible and open up possibilities for large-scale mobilizations—as the Arab Spring demonstrated.

5. **Provincialization** has **multiple potential meanings** that share the goal of deconstructing what we think we know, disrupting norms about what is familiar and what is strange. This pays homage to a genre of post-colonial theory that seeks to demonstrate the parochial character of universal knowledge claims (Spivak, 1999). Chakrabarty (2000) undertakes the task of provincializing Europe by drawing a distinction between History 1 and History 2. The former presents the developmental histories of Western Europe and North America as the global norm, against which all are to be judged (and many found wanting). In

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this view, failure to conform to History 1 is a sign of undesirable deviance. The taken-for-grantedness of History 1, he asserts, elides the presence of, thereby trivializing, History 2 - alternatives that draw strength from a capacity to resist becoming 'forms of [globalizing capitalism's] own life-processes' (Chakrabarty, 2000: 63). In order for such alternative histories to become familiar and worthy of examination, the European trajectory of History 1 must be made strange—provincialized as just one history among many local co-equals, each worthy of attention. To provincialize Europe, is to reveal Eurocentrism as a specific articulation placing Europe at the end of history – with everything outside of Europe as an imagined space condemned to what he calls history's waiting room. Provincialization thus is a critical strategy whereby the 'universal' is revealed to be no more than a place-holder, necessary and inevitable at all times but entangled in concrete power struggles as rival claimants struggle over what should occupy this place. In this context, provincialization implies decolonizing mainstream knowledge claims.

Provincialization—as the word implies—is a *spatiotemporal* process: **geohistory**. Geohistory 1 imagines places as bounded territorial units progressing at different speeds along the same linear development trajectory, following the advice of those ahead of them. Interactions between these places are imagined as mutually beneficial and reinforcing—the antithesis of uneven geographical development—accelerating the convergence of backward toward advanced territories, and culminating in a flattened geography of equal opportunity. By contrast to this 'non-spatialized globalization' (Massey, 1999: 33), geohistories 2 entail differentiated places inter-penetrated by uneven, emergent connectivities. These relational, contingent geographies tendentially reinforce pre-existing inequalities, interrupted on occasion by qualitative shifts in power relations (repetition and difference). Rather than imagining well-defined territories, such as global regions of North and South, differentiation emerges at every scale, shaped by how residents of any place, living prosperously or precariously, are differently positioned within and through trans-local processes.

6. It follows that provincializing global urbanism means **deconstructing imaginaries of cities**. Rather than the ongoing convention, in urban studies, of conceptualizing cities as distinct, bounded territorial units of analysis, cities should be conceptualized as open, intertwined with circulations and flows crossing whatever administrative boundaries define their edges (Amin and Thrift, 2002). The processes, events and phenomena observed within what we conventionally call cities are never peculiar to, nor are they bounded by, the place within which they may be observed (Massey, 1991). Particularly in post-colonial societies (where rural areas have not depopulated and, relatedly, urban areas fail to provide the means of livelihood for many in-migrants), intimate, geographically complex connectivities link those places designated as urban with those designated as rural (Ortega, 2012). Each thereby influences the other, in uneven and frequently far from mutually beneficial ways. The same can be

asserted for the socionatural processes coevolving with cities: The complex, uneven and geographically fractal ways in which cities emerge as more-than-human entities. Cities also are unevenly interconnected, through flows of human bodies, commodities, money, ideas and norms. Again, these inter-connections profoundly shape the goings on within cities, in uneven ways that tendentially privilege certain places, and norms, at the expense of others—(re)producing unequal socio-spatial positionalities. Thirdly, are the connectivities across scale: From household to neighborhood, city, nation and beyond. These engender contested politics of scale; those with the capacity to operate globally seeking to assert their influence over cities, neighborhoods and households, and those operating locally contesting such efforts with alternative, bottom-up but also horizontally networked, political strategies. Like connectivities, and cities themselves as places, such scalar relations are continually reshaped by socionatural processes, producing spatio-temporalities with unequal conditions of possibility.

7. Against global urbanism, in the spirit of subaltern studies some have asserted **subaltern urbanism** as its other. By subaltern urbanism, we mean some of the approaches to the study of cities that privilege everyday lived urban life over research strategies that view cities from a distance, explicitly or implicitly working to disrupt mainstream global urbanism by attending to the tactics of survival and subversion resorted to by subaltern or subordinated populations. Beyond closely attending to everyday life, subaltern urbanism self-consciously avoids engagement with questions of state, capital, strategies of organized collective action—all of which are taken to be contaminated already by elitism and grand theory. Instead, they focus resolutely on tactics, encroachments and subversions and accommodations. Like global urbanism, subaltern urbanism is not a coherent theory. The proliferation of scholars using adjectives such as insurgent and occupancy urbanism seek to open up new windows onto those ways of inhabiting the city that run counter to or disrupt global urbanism.

Sympathetic with this spirit, we nevertheless question approaches that follow early subaltern studies in conceptualizing the subaltern in terms of a 'demographic difference' (Guha, 1982) between the elite and the rest. Reducing subalternity to habitus, an attribute of subordinated people who inhabit an autonomous realm (distinct and bounded from the elites), forces the subaltern urbanist to presume to represent the subaltern, paradoxically rendering the latter incapable of speech. This presumption is problematic: Contemporary subaltern/subordinated populations do assert and speak for themselves, developing very complex trajectories connecting with one another, the state and capital (Chari, 2012). It also encourages the erroneous reading that attributes resistance, subversion, illegality, informality etc. exclusively to subalterns, underplaying how pervasively and effectively the rich and powerful also engage in such practices (Roy, 2009a).

While recognizing the importance of subordinated populations' everyday activities in and beyond cities, therefore, provincializing global urbanism also necessitates '**worlding' subaltern urbanism**, instead of romanticizing its localized otherness. Worlding was adopted by Spivak (1985), from Heidegger, to describe the ways that the post-colony/'third world' is brought into the world—albeit a world essentially constructed through geohistory 1. Simone's (2004) use of worlding describes how subordinated African urban residents, presumed to operate parochially, develop rich, complex connectivities spanning the globe. Ong and Roy (2011) invoke it as a verb meaning the 'art of being global', and as an alternative ontology for studying cities. As objects of analysis they stress diverse sets of practices, both those oriented toward 'harnessing global regimes of value' and producing 'regimes of truth', but also 'the anticipatory politics of residents and transients, citizens and migrants' (Roy, 2011a: 312, 314, 313). We endorse such goals, noting that they leave open the question of how to identify and theorize practices of urban worlding.

8. Worldings that emerge from subordinated experiences, cutting across distinct precarious loci of enunciation, can be productive of **alternative theoretical perspectives** with the potential to speak back against those theories underwriting global urbanism, thereby decentering current geographies of knowledge and theory production. Knowledge is conventionally located with exponents of the theoretical paradigms emanating from, or premised on the geohistory of Europe and North America. Through geohistory 1 these exponents, living prosperously, are represented as the experts, pioneering developmental success and transmitting it to the post-colony and other subordinated populations (notwithstanding periodic shifts, even reversals, in global urbanists' diagnoses and prescriptions, and their persistent failure to deliver on promises of prosperity and sustainability). Alternative perspectives never emerge fully formed from spaces that lie outside those of mainstream global urbanism. Although not simply a question of northern vs. southern theory (pace Connell, 2007), alternative theorizations are "ways of knowing-and-being that have the capacity to transform and inform theory in the north [sic], to subvert its universalisms in order to rewrite them in a different, less provincial register" (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2011: 49). Indeed, they may emerge from precarious experiences in, or moving through, European and North American cities. Further, their potential for rethinking European and North American cities may be as insightful as for cities elsewhere. In some ways (e.g., cultural diversity, informality, underemployment), current urban experiences in Asia and Africa may even foreshadow North American and European urban life (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2011).
9. Alternative theorizations open up ways of narrating urbanization worldwide that do not presume the North American and European urban experience to be foundational, but also anticipate an agenda that seeks to respond with responsibility. Spivak (2003) introduces the notion of **planetarity** as an alternative to the global. She argues against global regimes of truth and value,

which she sees as both propagating the myth that the world is subject to human control and carrying the burden of Eurocentrism. In contrast 'planetary' captures our planet as 'a species of alterity, belonging to another system; ...we inhabit it, on loan' (p. 72):

If we imagine ourselves as planetary subjects rather than global agents, planetary creatures rather than global entities, alterity remains underived from us; it is not our dialectical negation, it contains us as much as it flings us away. (73)

Approaching urbanism and urbanization through the lens of planetary keeps alterity open. It asserts the possibility of a plurality of worlded, if not global urbanisms, as well as the possibility that the world is not simply dominated by the urban. Processes playing out through cities, anywhere, have the potential to shape urbanization everywhere. While the world may seem increasingly urban, urban life remains subject to more-than-urban and more-than-human processes and events. We see this conception as somewhat distinct from the concept of planetary urbanization (cf. Brenner, 2013), where the planetary comes to stand in for the global, which is conceptualized as producing locally contextualized variegations on global capitalism, neoliberalization, etc.

10. Methodologically, alternative theorizations will require that urban scholars take seriously the distinct situated knowledges that emerge in and through Southern livelihood practices.<sup>3</sup> Knowledge produced in the global South is often treated as primarily raw empirical data and information, to be made sense of by utilizing theories advanced by Western scholars. Scholars increasingly question this division, however, seeking to disrupt the epistemic hierarchy it entails. Engaging with such knowledges would require urban scholars to take more seriously what they have traditionally regarded as research subjects, and their roles in knowledge production. This may be accomplished in different ways, but requires that urban scholars open up our imaginations of research, and learning/pedagogy. For example, in participatory action research the research subject becomes a research partner, with all partners learning from one another. Taking other knowledges seriously does not mean adopting them uncritically, however. Rather, scholars and practitioners must act in critical solidarity with one another (both between and within what are diverse communities of scholars and practitioners). This requires engaging in constructive ways across multiple, overlapping differences, with the goal of articulating knowledge commonalities—the basis for theorizing but also for ethico-political commitments. As a domain of theorizing, these knowledge commonalities will have the potential to speak back to pre-existing urban theories produced within the academy.

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<sup>3</sup> By 'southern', we mean those, everywhere, whose livelihoods have been made precarious by geohistorical processes of colonialism and globalizing capitalism.

## MY VERSION

Given the pervasive power and taken-for-grantedness of the mainstream global urbanism propagated through influential academic and governance institutions, and its inimical impact on the livelihood possibilities of the urban majority, it is essential that urban scholars find a basis to challenge this colonizer's model of the urban world (cf. Blaut, 1993). Building on *Urban Geography's* spirit of "radical openness as method" (Wolch, 2003), this requires not only provincializing mainstream urbanism, but also maintaining an openness to provincializing progressive/radical theorizations that have been constructed over the past generation. It will be necessary to engage with alternative theoretical perspectives, and to acknowledge the situated planetarity of contemporary urbanism, if we are to "blast open theoretical geographies" and "transform the theoretical canon to ensure 21st-century relevance" (Roy 2009b, p. 820; Parnell & Robinson, 2012, p. 593).

## ELVIN

Given the power and pervasive market appeal of mainstream global urbanism promoted by powerful academic disciplines and institutions of economics and political power, it is essential that urban geographers mobilize to provincialize these dominant narratives. Delivering on *Urban Geography's* spirit of "radical openness as method" (Wolch, 2003) requires transforming the "theoretical canon" of urban theory (Parnell & Robinson, 2012, p. 593) as the realignment of spaces of world urbanization shifts "the theoretical epicenter of urban scholars and policymakers." (p. 593). In turn, this requires an openness not only to provincializing mainstream urbanism -- but also provincializing some of the progressive/radical oppositional others that have been constructed over the past generation. Reconstructing urban knowledge production practices, engaging with alternative theoretical perspectives, and acknowledging the situated planetarity of contemporary urbanism might finally allow us to destroy the colonizer's model of the urban world (Blaut, 1993), and "to transform the theoretical canon to ensure 21st-century relevance," (Parnell & Robinson, 2012, p. 593).

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