

– OUT IN SPACE: Difference and Abstraction in Planetary Urbanization

HILLARY ANGELO AND KIAN GOH

Abstract

A common thread has emerged in recent critiques of planetary urbanization. Whether on empirical, epistemological or theoretical grounds, critics tend to posit ‘difference against abstraction’, arguing that planetary urbanization—as an abstract theory of large-scale phenomena—occludes ‘everyday’ embodied, small-scale and place-based forms of social difference in its production and/or application. Here we engage with this critique as two queer, feminist scholars sympathetic both to critics’ arguments about the politics of knowledge production and to the planetary urbanization framework. While we agree that the theory’s most visible adherents have not systematically engaged with questions of difference, especially at smaller scales of social analysis, we reject the suggestion that planetary urbanization is inherently incompatible with such concerns. Rather, we argue that the opposite is true. Using examples from our own research, we show how the planetary urbanization framework—by enforcing a multiscalar and non-city-centric view of apparently local phenomena—can be central to theorizing and understanding social difference at the level of everyday life in empirical research.

Introduction

The room is full of feminist geographers. We lock eyes across the rows of seats and bodies sprawled in the aisle, more than a hint of recognition. A soft smile, a knowing nod. Under different circumstances, this might have been the start of spatial theory lesbian drama. Here, it conveyed a quiet exasperation. Once again we find ourselves caught between a presumed hard and softer place, our theoretical pedigree rubbing uncomfortably with our politics and our identities. We had met the day before, two queer, feminist women scholars taking part in a series of planetary urbanization panels later described as being ‘all white men’. Now we cross paths again at panels organized in response, entitled ‘Voices from another planet’. We had each gone seeking inspiration, but our eye contact confirmed only another feeling of alienation.

As queer, feminist women scholars personally and intellectually close to the center of planetary urbanization, we have felt the pressures and contradictions of being and working in the admittedly masculine spaces of urban theory-making. We both studied under Neil Brenner, whose work, frequently in co-authorship with Christian Schmid, has sparked the present debate about gender-theoretical dynamics in urban studies. We have felt the familiar twinge of being among a small number of women in a crowded theory seminar, or in a room of close interlocutors engaged in formative discussions of high-level concepts. We love these spaces—for their invigorating acuity and, yes, for the sense of belonging to something bigger and grander than ourselves—and yet, we are painfully aware of what’s not there, what’s going on outside.

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The recent public debates on planetary urbanization—from the panels at the 2017 meeting of the American Association of Geographers (AAG) described above, to subsequent published papers, to social media exchanges—have incited and troubled us. Our academic lineage and chosen theoretical frameworks have brought us close to the center of planetary urbanization. And yet our identities and research objects are exactly those that critics argue are marginalized by this framework—leading us to ask hard questions. Have we possibly marginalized ourselves in our own professional spaces? To what extent do the intellectual frameworks we participate in actually help us investigate the questions we find so pressing? Our research dwells on people in places, everyday social relationships and cultural histories—all concerns critics charge have been rendered mute or invisible in grand urban theory. So, how's that working out for us?

Since that meeting at the 2017 AAG, we have spent quite a lot of time engaged with these questions. Here we explain why and how we remain proponents and practitioners of a set of concepts and methods derived from the theoretical framework of planetary urbanization. We do so by engaging with critiques of this framework as scholars whose identities might be expected to place us at odds with it. In the following sections we articulate and respond to what we see as a main critique of planetary urbanization: its treatment of 'difference', whether on theoretical, epistemological or empirical grounds. We contend that some of these critiques have conflated ideas of abstraction and concrete scalar distinctions in their notions of difference and attempt to disentangle them. While we reject the suggestion of some critics that planetary urbanization, as a theoretical project, is inherently incompatible with concerns for difference, we agree that its most visible advocates have not systematically engaged with the way that embodied forms of social difference, other systems of oppression, and perceptions and activities at the level of 'everyday life' relate to, intersect with and/or might transform these theories. We then engage with this critique by showing how we use planetary urbanization frameworks to theorize social difference and smaller-scaled phenomena in our own research, to indicate paths along which adherents of planetary urbanization might incorporate such research objects and concerns.

Critiques: social difference against planetary urbanization

Planetary urbanization refers to recent calls for urban theory to examine the new scales and scopes of urban expansion, changing state regulatory structures and urban social movements (Brenner, 2013a; 2013b; Merrifield, 2013; Kanai, 2014; Angelo and Wachsmuth, 2015; Arboleda, 2016; Castriota and Tonucci, 2018). Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid, most prominently, have developed Henri Lefebvre's ([1970] 2003) ideas about an incipient 'planetary' urban society to critique formulations of the urban as a bounded unit of territory or a particular place-defined object, and to explore how processes of urbanization under capitalism have become globalized and generalized, thereby transforming not only urban agglomerations but also spaces far outside cities proper, including agricultural regions, forests, oceans and deserts, in ways that are planetary in scale (Brenner and Schmid, 2014; 2017). Such propositions build on longstanding debates on the nature of the urban, including Brenner's (2000) prior examination of the urban as a historically specific process and not a particular morphology, the scale of which is socially contested and constituted.

Primary texts formulating theories of planetary urbanization have provoked a lively and contentious set of responses. Those currently in print are primarily a 2018 special issue of *Society and Space* (see Peake *et al.*, 2018), a 2018 debates section of *Urban Geography* (see Wilson and Jonas, 2018), as well as articles published before and after (see Table 1).

Based on our survey of these pieces, we find that the critiques fall into three registers. The first, which we describe as *empirical*, contests what authors describe as

TABLE 1 Three registers of critiques in response to planetary urbanization theorizing

Type of Critique	Representative Statement/Position	Associated Scholarship
1. Empirical	Concerned with 'the urban as a ground for difference; the omission of subjects and occlusion of subjectivity; and the occlusion of a constitutive outside' (Ruddick <i>et al.</i> , 2018: 394).	Davidson and Iveson, 2015; Schindler, 2017; Khatam and Haas, 2018; O'Callaghan, 2018; Reddy, 2018
2. Epistemological	'It is jarring indeed to encounter a "new epistemology of the urban" that absorbs concepts of relationality and hybridity while jettisoning the political-epistemological corollary that there is no 'innocent' or objective place from which to know' (Derickson, 2018: 557).	Peake, 2016a; 2016b; Derickson, 2016; 2018; Katz, 2017; Grange and Gunder, 2018; McLean, 2018
3. Theoretical	'Lefebvre's articulation of the urban problematic needs to be contextualized within his broader body of work, in which "difference" and "everyday life" are integral to his urban and spatial writings' (Buckley and Strauss, 2016: 625).	Buckley and Strauss, 2016; Jazeel, 2018; Keil, 2018; Kipfer, 2018; Oswin, 2018; Ziederman, 2018

the presumed universality of a theory of planetary urbanization by offering concrete, place-specific illustrations of urban variability—often through a postcolonial lens—as evidence of the theory's explanatory limitations. The second is *epistemological*. These pieces invoke positional, political critiques of planetary urbanization's knowledge claims, using feminist theory and other critical perspectives to object to the global explanatory ambition of planetary urbanization and its precepts of knowledge production. The third set, which we call *theoretical*, invoke specific conceptual interventions in their critiques, often related to alternative readings of the foundational texts influencing planetary urbanization. These categories are analytical distinctions; many papers contain more than one of these elements.

As we see it, all three types share a core objection, which is to posit 'difference against abstraction'. Whether on empirical, epistemological or theoretical grounds, each suggests that planetary urbanization—as an abstract theory of large-scale phenomena—is inadequate or incomplete to the extent that it fails to accommodate embodied and place-based forms of social difference, either in its production (as a result of situated knowledge), or its application (in a three-dimensional and contradictory world). Some suggest that it *cannot* and some only that it *has not*, but regardless, each offers some form of 'difference'—as theoretical category, methodological standpoint or concrete case study—as a corrective.

– Type 1: Empirical (concrete difference against universalizing abstractions)

In the first register of critique, authors draw on feminist, postcolonial and 'relational' approaches to urban studies to argue that planetary urbanization obscures 'difference', and they offer an illustrative case study of a specific place as proof of the theory's explanatory limitations. Take the contributions to the 2018 *Society and Space* special issue (Peake *et al.*, 2018), which Ruddick *et al.* (2018: 394) describe as being concerned with 'the urban as a ground for difference; the omission of subjects and occlusion of subjectivity; and the occlusion of a constitutive outside and its capacity to remake the urban'.

Many of the contributions use an illustrative case as the basis of their critique. Khatam and Haas (2018), for example, offer an investigation of two 'different contexts'—Tehran (Iran) and Rawabi (Palestine/Israel)—to argue for what they call 'the differential city', saying that 'detracting attention from spatialized differentiations such as "city" obscures the specific ways in which planetary urbanization encounters everyday life at the local' (*ibid.*: 4) and that 'particular spatialities vanish from its analytical vocabulary and are diminished' (*ibid.*: 14). O'Callaghan (2018: 3) describes a fault line between planetary urbanization and what he calls 'situated urban theorizing'. He agrees with

‘critics [who] have highlighted the problematic ways in which the epistemology may close off difference’ (*ibid.*: 1) and offers a case study of Dublin in which he ‘reads for difference’ (*ibid.*: 4; see also Gibson-Graham, 2008), arguing that by ‘framing its level of analysis at broader spatial scales’, planetary urbanization risks ‘ignor[ing] the ways in which the messy context of localized history, politics, culture, and encounter’ matter for urban politics (O’Callaghan, 2018: 15). Reddy (2018: 1–2; emphasis in original) describes planetary urbanization’s ‘*will to map*’ as putting local difference ‘under erasure’ and offers a ‘supplementary reading’ of Bangalore as a corrective.

Such critiques present substantive disagreement with the core tenets of planetary urbanization by searching for, and finding, ‘difference’ across particular situations and locations. This approach for the most part necessitates a focus on the concrete and the local and these scholars do not generally extend their analyses either to higher levels of abstraction or to larger geographic scales. Although the narratives proffered appear to fit comfortably within a framework that suggests that broader political economic forces (such as globalized capitalism and neoliberalism) touch down in different ways in different sites, the authors declare the planetary urbanization thesis to be inadequate for explaining the particular things they observe. But this register of critique does not actually assess the primary object of its analysis: the global patterning of urban geographies.

We find least affinity with this set of critiques. Theories of planetary urbanization have never postulated that a view of globalized, generalized processes means that urbanization is the same everywhere, and in fact assert precisely the opposite. As Goonewardena has argued, the conceit of a planetary approach is to bring a ‘totality’ into view—not in order to homogenize or ‘fetishize the oppressive ways of the world, but to negate them’ (Goonewardena, 2018: 463). Critiques in the empirical register have neither engaged with this core argument nor unearthed through their research other foundational processes that refute or seriously complicate the significance of planetary-scale urban political-economic ones.

– Type 2: Epistemological (positional and political against supposed objectivity)

The second set of claims regarding planetary urbanization’s occlusion of difference is positional and concerns the production of knowledge, contesting the ‘god trick’ (Haraway, 1988) of planetary explanation. Critics charge that Brenner and Schmid, by nature of their own (male) identities and (privileged) positions in academia, reproduce longstanding hierarchies and exclusions in urban research. Moreover, they assert that the planetary urbanization framework, because of its claims about a ‘generalized urbanization’, attempts to universalize the viewpoint of a small set of largely white, largely male, Euro-Americans.

In effect, the critics suggest: *You shouldn’t be doing this (especially like this)*. Purveyors of the framework attempt to be, in Derickson’s words, ‘masters of the universe’ (2018: 557). Derickson calls it a ‘conceit in which only some can luxuriate’, suggesting that the tenets of planetary urbanization can only be subscribed to by those with a high level of privilege; it is white male researchers occupying a central position in theory-making who can make such knowledge claims and have them accepted. She cautions that the political is at stake, and urges us to look instead to feminist and critical race approaches that center everyday lived experience. McLean (2018) echoes this critique, leveling the question of ‘what counts and who decides?’ in urban scholarship and calling for a different toolkit based on praxis-oriented, alternative-pedagogy approaches. And Katz (2017), in a conference paper on ‘splanetary urbanism’, links the planetary urbanization framework (and its advocates) to current critiques of privileged ‘splaining’—a memorable but ultimately unhelpful coinage. After all, what is theory supposed to do but explain? A key part of this assertion is not only that Brenner and Schmid render people on the ground and others in their field invisible, but that by

undertaking theorizing as they have, they exacerbate the damage wrought by histories of Euro-American-centric urban theory and hegemonic systems of knowledge production.¹

This is a political argument. It is broached by scholars and activists who by and large speak from the margins—as women, as people of color, as postcolonial subjects, as scholars in subfields and areas of research not always given precedence—about uneven geographies of knowledge production in which we, too, have felt frustration. Political arguments are political strategies. In this case, they help claim space for feminist, positional scholarship in a disciplinary field (Peake, 2016b). We are in alignment with this political position. Feminist geographers have long made similar arguments, such as Deutsche's (1991) and Massey's (1991) prominent critiques of Harvey (recounted in Oswin, 2018; see also Brenner, 2018). Indeed, more than a quarter century after Massey rued the continual neglect of feminist analytical contributions to studies of space and place, we too decry the need, still, to remind dominant intellectual bodies and institutions that positional, embodied critiques exist. We support the push to center feminist, people of color and queer embodied scholarship, and to ask, continually, what is our knowledge for? (*cf.* Derickson, 2018).

And yet, in retreating from 'planetary' approaches on principle, critiques of positionality and embodiment do not engage directly with the theory's central arguments and—while sometimes explicitly acknowledging the necessity of abstraction in theory-making (e.g. Derickson, 2018: 557)—can be read as arguing against the project of theorizing large-scale processes in general. Certainly we do not see feminist and/or queer identities as inherently placing one at odds with theories of large-scale processes. Indeed, one goal which theorists of planetary urbanization and queer and feminist geographers share is an interest in 'link[ing] international geographies to everyday life' (Dowler and Sharp, 2001: 71) in order to understand the intersecting nature of events and processes playing out at multiple scales and their effects (an ambition which both standpoints also often trace back to Lefebvre). However, in rejecting a planetary urbanization framework on the grounds of its presumed erasure of grounded, embodied difference, its European history, and the whiteness and maleness of its primary adherents, feminist critics have not challenged the core theoretical provocations laid out in planetary urbanization theory. We will return to this point.

- Type 3: Theoretical (alternate readings of the same traditions and of the relationship to other theories and processes)

A third set of critiques attempts to reframe, extend or divert arguments in the planetary urbanization framework, more or less sympathetically. Most don't take issue with the broad articulations of the theory, but rather its conceptual boundaries—the idea spaces where, critics assert, it has failed to go. In this register critics re-read and extend Lefebvrian analysis, or bring in other theorists, or posit other forms of local and global domination to counter some of the key assertions of planetary urbanization theory.

In the words of Buckley and Strauss, for example:

To Brenner (2013[a]) ... mobilizations of everyday lived experience—particularly of idiographic 'categories of practice'—to understand the urban phenomenon and to dismantle rural-urban binaries might be considered deeply inadequate ... Yet, for Lefebvre, we argue, paying attention to such categories of practice offers a crucial pathway to new understandings of the urban phenomenon ... Lefebvre's articulation of the urban problematic needs to be contextualized within his broader body of work, in which 'difference' and 'everyday life' are integral to his urban and spatial writings (Buckley and Strauss, 2016: 625).

¹ Similar arguments and themes continue to animate recent debates, including one on 'urban assemblages' in the journal *City* (Brenner et al., 2011), for example. An earlier round of critiques of planetary urbanization also voiced parallel concerns (Derickson, 2016; Peake, 2016a; 2016b).

Though not wholly dissimilar from other critiques in their emphasis on everyday lived experience, Buckley and Strauss see the possibility of the framework to engage with such themes and scales. They point out that Lefebvre's ideas of 'difference' and 'everyday life' need to be fleshed out in planetary urbanization (see also Goonewardena *et al.*, 2008). That processes of urbanization do not *only* play out at large scales; that they hit the ground (and are contested) at the level of everyday life; and that they can and do spiral up to affect (in Lefebvre's language) the 'urban'/mediating scale.

In this same category we place critics who point to other large-scale processes not adequately considered in relationship to urbanization. Jazeel argues that 'if "the city" is just one result of urbanization processes ... then it does not necessarily follow that urbanization is *the only* socio-spatial process that gives "cities in a world of cities" their heterogeneous characteristics (*cf.* Robinson, 2011)' (Jazeel, 2018: 2; emphasis in original). Or as Oswin (2018: 543) puts it: 'other unjust and violent forces like patriarchy, colonialism, racism, nationalism, and heteronormativity are still kicking too'. Zeiderman (2018), exploring the ways in which designations of space affect historical constructions of racism, reminds us not to forget about the political and social lives of our concepts—that is, *people* are impacted on the ground. And Kipfer has raised questions about theoretical reflexivity and pluralism and how such work can be integrated with 'counter-colonial and Indigenous concerns' (Kipfer, 2018: 476).

Although they are outside our schema of critiques, here we also acknowledge scholars thinking through different notions of planetariness from different theoretical traditions and animating other kinds of discussions—some of which a few critics engage with. Brenner and Schmid's position is rooted in a Marxist/Lefebvrian tradition—one premised on understanding conceptual relationships of concreteness and abstraction and the potential 'knowability' of a generalized totality (Goonewardena, 2018; see also Sayer, 1981; 1992; Stanek, 2008). Spivak (2003; 2012; see also Majumder, 2017) offers an idea of planetarity as an alterity, 'an other to the global', a kind of unknowability. If Brenner and Schmid pose the planetary as an analytical approach to know the ongoing consequences of globalized capitalist urbanization, Spivak poses planetarity as a way to affirm the meaning of being human (to 'think the other'), to contest the presumed unboundedness of global economic processes. And Mbembe sees colonialism and, necessarily, decolonization, as planetary processes and speculates about the future of the planet from the vantage point of the African continent (Mbembe and Balakrishnan, 2016; Bangstad and Nilsen, 2019; Mbembe, 2019). Such views, coming from different positionalities and modes of knowledge production, nevertheless coalesce as ways to bring into view and challenge the dominance of capitalism and other global systems of domination.

– Difference against abstraction

For all their distinctness, many critics—especially across the first two registers—offer a parallel type of response, which is to posit a manner of *difference* against a mode of *abstraction*. In so doing they conflate two sets of questions: an ontological question of *scale* (how do we understand the relationship between small-scale, often local, and large-scale, often global, processes and phenomena?); and an epistemological question of theory-making (how and when do we move between the abstract and concrete in our analyses?). For Type 1, this takes the form of empirics against grand theory; for Type 2, situated, embodied or positional knowledge against supposed objectivity. Such arguments proceed along these lines: *We don't understand urbanization [here] if we don't understand the distinct production of social difference [here]. And scholarship that has roots in a hegemonic Euro-American geography or conducted by Euro-American white men (especially dwelling at higher levels of abstraction or broader geographic scales) cannot possibly understand such social production.*

Critics pointing to empirical difference, by nature of their conceptual framing, do not tangle with the concerns motivating the theorization of planetary-scale urban

processes, while positional critiques do not engage with the fact that some researchers are actually carrying out abstract, generalized, multiscale theorizing from positions of marginality. Both the Type 1 and Type 2 critiques dismiss the overall theoretical project of planetary urbanization without substantively taking on its core provocations: that is, the inability of inherited forms and concepts of the city to deal with new scopes and scales of urban processes. While we are in political alignment with epistemological critiques, analytical concerns around these new scopes and scales remain. And indeed, it is at least in part our political positioning that drives us to dwell on them.

For Type 3 critiques, a different shade of difference, so to speak, is invoked. Here, critics point out how conceptualizations of difference, involving multiple scales and levels of analysis, have long been constitutive of urban theories. They assert that there is no conceptual basis for large-scale urban frameworks to deny or overlook such forms of difference. We largely agree with this point and see potential for expanding and re-orienting points of view and objects of inquiry in ways that actually address the political concerns of Type 2 positional critiques and build on the provocations of Type 3 theoretical critiques. Does engagement with positional, situated knowledge production change the view of planetary-scale urbanization? Conversely, have positional, embodied theoretical approaches taken on the conditions of generalized, globalized urban change as objects of analysis? These two related questions animate, for us, the need to reassert and reconceptualize multiscale, multilevel explanations of urbanization.

Difference and abstraction: multiscale explanations for apparently local phenomena

Both of us, in our research, engage with positional, situated knowledge production, and we do so using planetary urbanization frameworks—taking this theory to places critics argue it has not yet gone, or cannot go. Take, for example, Buckley and Strauss's mandate to 'follow' urbanization across scales in empirical research, especially to the study of smaller, everyday phenomena. What does it look like to use multiscale urban processes to study phenomena at the level of everyday life? The 'original' planetary urbanization research most targeted by critics invokes core Marxist/Lefebvrian abstractions, in particular processes of urbanization as the spatialization of capital, and traces their concrete manifestations back and forth across levels of abstraction. Planetary urbanization theorizing has done this particularly with reference to the large scale: physical transformations of the deserts, the oceans, the planet. What, then, about other scales of this possible space?

Some of the critiques of planetary urbanization's treatment of social difference, described above, suggest that planetary urbanization cannot provide such multiscale accounts. That an abstract theory of large-scale processes is inherently at odds with, and antithetical to, such concerns. But in our view, a planetary urbanization framework does not simply allow for local difference and particularity; it is especially well-suited to doing so and to helping reveal connections across scales. Here, we address this core concern of the critiques by *looking to planetary urbanization to help illuminate difference*, using examples from our own research to show how apparently local difference can be, and is, incorporated into multiscale planetary urbanization frameworks.

While quite different in terms of site, social relationships and historical periods, our research shares concerns around processes of urbanization and environmental change. Here we foreground aspects that address the questions most directly opened up by critiques of planetary urbanization in the theoretical register: the relationship between larger-scale processes and abstract levels of theory and concrete social relationships in particular locations, as well as the relationship between urbanization and other large-scale processes and forms of domination. In our view, the framework makes it possible to 'see' a set of conditions that are central to our research by (1) insisting that the urban is a multiscale process rather than a distinct spatial morphology (Brenner, 2013a); and

(2) enforcing a non-city-centric view in response to the ‘methodological cityism’ that continues to dominate urban studies (Angelo and Wachsmuth, 2015; Angelo, 2017).

– Why common practices persist across disparate spaces and times

One thing a planetary view of everyday practices can help reveal is how particular small-scale ideas and behaviors are outcomes of global urban processes rather than local quirks, reactions against cities as places, or timeless, natural associations.

Take perceptions and practices of ‘nature’ in cities. ‘Nature’ is a category with a great diversity of meanings across social difference of various kinds, and radically different conventions for its use, behavior and design (Rademacher, 2011; Stoetzer, 2017). Yet in spite of this diversity, cities are ‘greened’ across the globe in remarkably similar ways. Not only in Europe and North America but across the global South, urban entrepreneurs, policymakers, activists and civic groups are all prone to argue that ‘greener cities’ are ‘better cities’. How might we explain greening’s consistent aesthetic forms and widespread popularity today?

Traditional explanations for greening are both Euro- and city-centric, in describing it as a reaction against the density and public health problems of the nineteenth-century industrial metropolis (Nash, 2014). Today, critical scholars document greening’s unequal outcomes in affluent Northern cities (Gould and Lewis, 2016) and the global diffusion of urban ‘best practices’ (Montero, 2017), while positivist, policy-oriented approaches take ‘nature’s’ widespread legibility as a good for granted (Angelo, 2019b) and tend to localize and essentialize social difference as ‘ethnic preferences’ (see Byrne and Wolch, 2009) to be accommodated through design.

An analysis from the standpoint of planetary urbanization, however, offers an entirely different kind of explanation for the ‘origin and spread’ of greening, one that has far more in common with the social, historical study of concepts such as nationalism (Anderson, 2006). It places explanatory emphasis on accounting for the material and imaginative conditions of possibility for such similar practices to be taken up in very different places with diverse histories. Nationalism, as Goswami (2002) and others have argued, is a ‘formal’ rather than ‘substantive’ concept: once it became possible to think the world in terms of nations, the concept could travel, producing nationalist movements of very different kinds.

Similarly, a study of greening in Germany’s Ruhr region—an area lacking traditional cities and thus traditional reasons for greening them—suggests that urban *process*, rather than urban form, makes it possible to use signifiers of nature as a fix for urban problems (Angelo, 2019a). There, not cities but a set of broader urban transformations in political economy and the phenomenology of everyday life made it possible to view nature as socially beneficial in the first place; meanwhile, protagonists came to view themselves as participants in an international urban field in which the idea of green as a good for cities was already established. This made it possible to ‘green’ the Ruhr at the beginning of the twentieth century. Today, greening is ubiquitous in part because, over the past 150 years, this distinctly urban and historically Euro-American understanding of nature has traveled and become hegemonic.

This is partly a historical argument about the *large and concrete*: real political and economic interconnections helped people in different places to think in similar ways. But it is also an example of the *small and abstract*: of abstraction at the level of everyday life, in that it seeks to identify formal similarities in ideas and practices across the concrete differences of specific greening projects in particular places.

As such, we might expect this explanation for greening to fall prey to the same critiques of planetary urbanization: that it erases social difference and takes the Euro-American city as universal. In fact, the opposite is true. In re-situating local ‘differences’ as expressions of a formally similar global practice, such a perspective makes it possible to see how substantively different greening projects operate within

a formally similar set of historical understandings, social practices, aesthetics and associations that are now planetary in scale, and have traveled on and been constituted through global processes such as capitalism and imperialism. It also provides a broader view of conflicts over urban nature, suggesting that these do not only reflect social and economic inequalities and forms of local and embodied ‘difference’, but are refracted through a shared understanding of nature *that makes these conflicts possible in the first place*. By identifying and historicizing a shared, formal conception of nature and a path along which it travels, this more abstract, processual account actually produces an explanation that is far less Eurocentric and essentializing of social difference than many existing ones.

- How urban spatial struggles of ‘everyday life’ respond to larger territorial and global-urban processes

A planetary view of urban socio-spatial struggles also shows that radical shifts in small-scale practices may not necessarily change larger processes and, conversely, that these supposedly ‘small’ practices may not be that small.

Many researchers have pointed out the ways in which marginalized urban residents, such as residents of informal settlements, have distinct and cohesive practices of their own (see e.g. Perlman, 1976; Holston, 1999). These practices center community social relationships, autonomy and locality and present alternatives to the broader capitalist political economy. These alternative practices and imaginaries (Leitner *et al.*, 2007) are often framed as resisting the dominant forces of the state and of capital. Indeed, this is one oft-rehearsed example of an abstraction of small-scale processes. However, it is not always clear if and how these practices affect change at larger geographic scales or have a meaningful impact on a more generalized level. What should we learn from them? What *can* we learn from them?

In recent studies of urban politics and flooding in Jakarta, Indonesia, for example, various commentaries have noted the promising rise of grassroots movements among residents in informal settlements (see Padawangi *et al.*, 2016; Leitner and Sheppard, 2018). Coalitions of residents, activists and researchers have organized against urban development and infrastructural projects that threaten to displace these settlements, creating alternative plans and negotiating claims. As in examples elsewhere, researchers and commentators point to the agency and organization among locally based, grassroots movements.

Here, researchers oriented towards explaining the *small and concrete* might describe the relevant social, spatial and environmental marginalizations in term of specific historical factors and chart the ways in which local groups organize against these oppressions. Those invested in *small* but more *abstract* levels of theory would understand and assert that such practices are in tune with broader phenomena of alternative movement building, explained by concepts such as radical planning (see for example Miraftab, 2009; Friedmann, 2011).

- A framework tuned to multiscalar urban processes and a non-city-centric view—in line with planetary urbanization theories—illuminates the ways in which these movements, although developed in response to historically specific, place-based, social and spatial marginalization, are also responding to biophysical, environmental threats that are linked to both very localized geospatial and political conditions as well as *larger* spatial-scale environmental planning modes and to more generalized *abstract* development patterns.

In Jakarta, colonial-era racist controls enforced social and spatial marginalizations that were then exacerbated in the post-independence years, when nation-building and rapid urban growth further relegated poor urban residents to settlements on increasingly risky terrain along waterways and the coastline. This much is well understood by those studying informality and local social movements. However,

a full understanding of the current dynamics must take into consideration a broader, more abstract set of processes. First, flood risks are produced by development patterns across the watershed, tied to political and biophysical processes often far outside the ‘city’ proper (Goh, 2019b). Second, new pressures do not only come from city leaders and elites’ urge for flood protection, modernization and the banishment of ‘illegal’ informal settlement dwellers; they are compounded by emerging modes of globally constituted plan-making motivated by reconfiguring governance arrangements, capital flows and environmental changes across scales, such as the generalized conditions and variable impacts of climate change (Goh, 2019a). These broader conditions can only be explained by looking at shifts in global urban development trajectories and global environmental management and then tracing them back to local processes.

Such a view doesn’t merely subsume such on-the-ground practices to local (ir)relevance in the face of globalized developmental and environmental conditions. Instead, it broaches the possibility of acts of resistance that can be conceived of and organized in more general terms, across larger geographic scales.

– Multiscalar, multilevel theorizing

The outcome of doing research as outlined here is not to occlude differences between places or to argue that all ‘local’ conflicts are the same, but to make apparently local conflicts look different. In our empirically grounded research of urban practice, explaining social ‘difference’ of various kinds is a central analytical goal. We have found that the framework of planetary urbanization has helped enforce an analytical view of apparently local understandings as bound up in larger-scale changes with their own histories, and this has prompted us to provide explanations for why and how ideas and practices travel across time and space.

To expand further (see Figure 1): the *small and concrete* is the scale and level at which our work intersects with the core concerns of the critics. This is where much of our fieldwork resides—in our case, studies of urban greening projects in the Ruhr and social movements in Jakarta. But the research we conduct is empirically grounded at more than one moment. It traces these concrete phenomena and human relationships across spatial scales. First, it bridges small-scale social observations to the *large and concrete*. These include both large-scale processes such as climate change, the globalization of communications and financial networks, and the rapid increase of

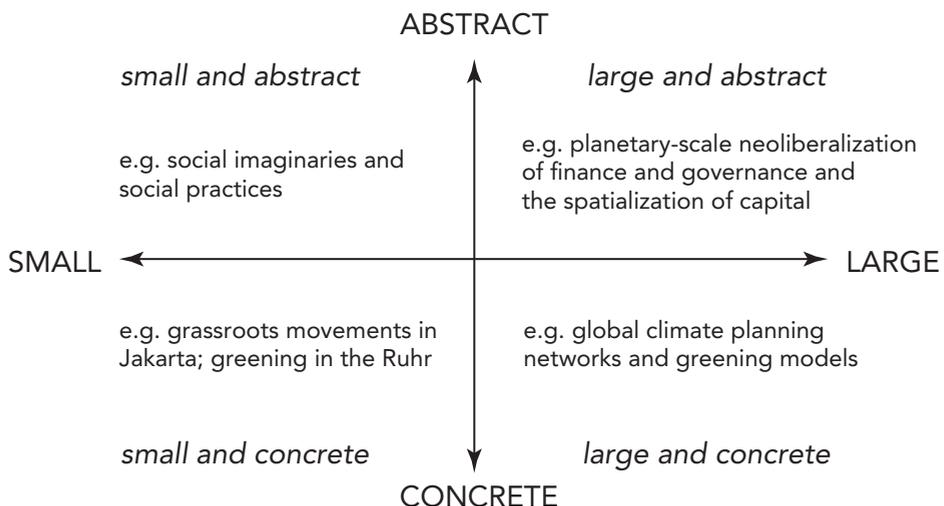


FIGURE 1 Diagram showing scales of phenomena and levels of abstraction

population and build-up of ‘city-like’ settlements around the world, as well as large-scale phenomena such as global climate planning networks or international greening models. In our respective research, we have each only been able to find adequate explanations for apparently local phenomena by linking them empirically to these larger-scale processes. In addition, our research is engaged with the *small and abstract*. It moves across levels of analysis to produce abstract concepts of ‘everyday’ phenomena such as social imaginaries and social practices that are related, by way of the multiscale empirical connections established, to the *large and abstract*: large-scale, globalized and generalized conditions such as the neoliberalization of finance and governance or the spatialization of capital.

We do not think of this as either a *fait accompli* or a completely novel idea. We stress that this effort is congruent with a long lineage of thinking, much of it by feminist scholars. For example, Massey (1996; ([1991] 1994)) argued for the importance of exposing unequal spatialized social power at large and small scales, and for a view of places as specific intersections within a broader constellation of social relations. In these terms we also see our use of the planetary urbanization framework as largely in line with the political objectives of recent critiques. It is part of a response, albeit a still incomplete one, to the call from Roy (2017)—invoking Gilroy (1993)—to reconceptualize the epistemological problem of thinking about the world: as connected yet faceted, fractal and non-uniform geographies and temporalities.

Conclusion

That day, we each attended the panels organized in response to planetary urbanization ready to be convinced—perhaps even hoping to feel more at home in a different intellectual space. But even if our bodies might have fit in better our concerns were left unaddressed, and in some ways made more acute. We left. The next day, processing our frustration, we expressed mutual dissatisfaction. And so we began this paper.

We are two people who, by some accounts, should not be sympathetic to planetary urbanization. In terms of our bodies and what we study we have much in common with the critics; we have felt professional marginalization and are part of queer, feminist political and intellectual struggles (Goh, 2018). Yet we still find it a powerful framework. Why? Because it enforces a multiscale perspective on urban processes and conditions and provides a view of interconnections among apparently disparate spaces and events. Rather than bringing a charge of ‘difference against abstraction’, we argue that research informed by planetary urbanization can and should continue to traverse spatial scales and analytical levels—not only between the concrete and abstract at the large scale, but also at the small scale and everyday level.

Planetary urbanization theorists’ (now infamous) claim to urban theory ‘without an outside’ is not a claim that no difference exists or that all things in the world can or should be explained through this framework. Not all urban struggles are products of global processes; not all phenomena produced by globalized processes look the same in specific places; not all social relationships are created by them. Rather, it is a claim that the broader political economic forces of urbanization now permeate most/all of the spaces we can discern, even those we generally do not see as embedded in these structural conditions. It reminds urban researchers to look beyond cities for explanations, and suggests that analyses of urban phenomena relegated only to the particularities of specific places risk missing a (literally) big part of the story.

On one level, what is at stake here are competing frameworks for how to understand and explain phenomena in the world. On another level, there is the notion of a shared political project. In this light, we see the ‘planetary’ aspects of planetary

urbanization not as foreclosing the possibility of alternative social practices or occluding everyday life, but as inviting scholars to expose and center everyday struggles as an inevitable part of plural, multiscalar processes. Broad-based, liberatory possibilities only exist if we are able to see and explain the ways in which local politics is in alignment and complicity across spaces and scales, or extends to larger structural/systemic conditions. So, rather than having gone too far in universalizing and eradicating difference, if anything we might argue the opposite—that planetary urbanization has possibly not gone far enough to bring into relief these various levels of social relationships and the connections between them. Doing so serves to illuminate intersections between the large and small scale that are important analytically—and politically—as points of leverage for contesting unjust futures.

Hillary Angelo, Department of Sociology, University of California Santa Cruz, 1156 High Street, Santa Cruz, CA 95064, USA, hangel@ucsc.edu

Kian Goh, Department of Urban Planning, University of California Los Angeles, 3250 Public Affairs Building, 337 Charles E. Young Drive East, Los Angeles, CA 90095, USA, kiangoh@ucla.edu

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