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Debating planetary urbanization: for an engaged pluralism

1.

Christian Schmid and I are grateful to Linda Peake and her colleagues at the City Institute at York University in Toronto for inviting us to participate in a workshop focused on our recent work on planetary urbanization in Spring 2016. The event was generative, intense and collegial, while also opening up some important debates regarding contemporary urban theory. Many of the papers presented at that workshop, along with several others, now appear in published form in this issue of *Society & Space*.

While some reflect the close reading and thoughtful dialogue that occurred in the Toronto workshop, others adopt a more sharply critical, even dismissive tone, and repeat certain simplistic caricatures of our work that appear to be gaining currency in certain circles of radical geography. Indeed, based on a reading of recent critiques of our work by a number of scholars working in feminist, poststructuralist and queer-theoretical traditions, including several included in this special issue, it would be easy to reach any or all of the following conclusions: (a) our work is completely unreflexive about questions of positionality in sociospatial theory; (b) we are working in a white, masculinist, Eurocentric and heteropatriarchal tradition that is indifferent to questions of gender, sexuality, race and difference; (c) our work is directly antagonistic to such concerns—that is, the frameworks we are developing actively impede productive engagement with them; and (d) we embrace a totalizing, homogenizing, universalizing and intellectually imperialistic conception of urbanization.

There is currently a tendency, at least in some publications, to articulate such criticisms through general assertions about our position (or, in some cases, on the basis of second-hand references to the work of others who have made such general assertions), rather than through an engagement with our key texts, and through the consequent, grounded elaboration of specific arguments in support of such conclusive dismissals. For example, the claim that our work on planetary urbanization is “totalizing” is now repeated regularly in critical discussions of our work among some of our feminist and poststructuralist colleagues, as if it were an established truism that does not require any justification or explication. But what exactly is meant by this claim, and can it really be grounded with reference to specific arguments we make in our writings (for further discussion, see

Goonewardena 2017; Schmid 2017, 2016, 2015)? And how can such readings be reconciled with our arguments, in all of our writings on this topic, (a) that planetary urbanization is variegated, uneven, volatile and emergent; (b) that this process assumes specific forms across divergent spatiotemporal contexts; (c) that we need a plurality of conceptualizations, methodological approaches, analytical perspectives and cartographic strategies through which to decipher its manifold manifestations; and (d) that our understanding of emergent urban transformations currently remains severely underdeveloped? Such readings also tend to ignore the explicitly nominalist, anti-totalizing orientation of our critique of contemporary triumphalist “urban age” ideologies, of inherited conceptions of “the” city as a singular, universal settlement type, and of entrenched modernist understandings of urbanization as a unilinear rural-to-urban “transition.”

Aside from the misleading, simplistic polemics on the question of “totalizing” theory, several other manifestly indefensible assertions about our position have been repeated by many critics. Here is a short list of some of most prevalent caricatures that are now in circulation, often in combination with one another, but which cannot be grounded with reference to our actual texts and the arguments they advance:

- We have never claimed to be studying something called “planetary urbanism”; nor have we ever used this label to describe the epistemology of the urban we have been developing. In fact, Christian Schmid and I have never used the term “planetary urbanism” in any of our writings. The term “urbanism” is one we have used only with considerable precision, generally to describe contemporary mainstream urban ideologies; the specific discourses, practices and ideologies of urban design; and with reference to Louis Wirth’s (1938) famous sociological theorization.¹ Our work is focused on the *problematique* of urbanization, capitalist urbanization in particular. We view planetary urbanization as the contemporary formation of the latter, and we argue that its consolidation generates new conceptual, analytical and political challenges for those trying to decipher, represent and influence its spatiotemporal dynamics. The tendency, especially but not exclusively among some critics, to label us and our collaborators as “planetary urbanists” amounts to affirmatively identifying our research agenda with the very processes we are concerned to decipher, criticize and supersede. It is formally equivalent to describing critics of capitalist urbanization as “capitalist urbanists,” critics of neoliberal urbanization as

¹ For a useful discussion of the various historical and contemporary meanings that have been associated with the term urbanism in the field of urban social science, see Sheppard, Leitner and Maringanti 2013.

“neoliberal urbanists,” critics of heteropatriarchal forms of urbanization as “heteropatriarchal” urbanists, and so forth.

- We have never asserted that cities no longer exist or are no longer important. In fact, we have consistently emphasized that concentrated urbanization (the process of agglomeration and its wide-ranging consequences) remains a constitutive dimension of urbanization; it is, accordingly, a central analytical, representational and political focus in our work. We have, however, questioned the long-entrenched obsession among many urban scholars with demarcating a neat boundary between city and non-city spaces in a world of increasingly generalized urbanization and rapidly imploding/exploding urban transformations. We have also called into question the naturalized, singular, diffusionist and transhistorical conception of “the” city that has long underpinned the major traditions of urban theory. We thus critique the epistemological framework of city-centric and city-dominant (McGee 1971) urban theory, which Hillary Angelo and David Wachsmuth (2014) have more recently critically deconstructed under the rubric of “methodological cityism.”
- We have never argued that planetary urbanization flattens, evens out or supersedes differences among places (or territories, landscapes, scales or ecologies). In fact, we have constantly emphasized the constitutively uneven, variegated nature of capitalist urbanization, including in its planetary configuration. As Christian Schmid forcefully explains in his contribution to this special issue (2017; see also Schmid et. al. 2017), our proposed conceptualization of urbanization as planetary is intended to decenter inherited approaches to the urban question that begin with the idea of “the” city as a bounded spatial unit and then look “inwards” towards its neighborhoods, built environments and social fabric (as, for example, in classic Chicago School models), or “outwards” towards the metropolis, the region, the territory and the world (as, for example, in more recent theories of global city formation). We invert that intellectual starting point and the analytical frameworks, methodological tactics and cartographic visions that flow from it, using a planetary (re)orientation as the impetus for a foundational reframing of the urban question as such. This radical reframing immediately alters the lens through which uneven spatial development is understood—for instance, by relativizing inherited geographical dualisms such as urban/suburban/rural/wilderness—but it in no way entails the absurd claim that sociospatial, institutional and ecological differentiation no longer exist or no longer matter. The question, for us, is not whether urbanization generates

uneven spatial development, but how most effectively to conceptualize, represent and influence its contemporary manifestations.

- We have never claimed that planetary urbanization has the same causes or assumes the same forms in the cities, regions and territories of the Global North and those in the Global South.² Rather, we have emphasized repeatedly that planetary urbanization is a constitutively uneven, variegated process. It is thus simply false to suggest we are attempting to impose northern or Euro-American theory upon spaces to which it does not apply. Despite some differences of epistemology, conceptual apparatus and method with some of our colleagues working in postcolonial streams of urban studies, we strongly support their injunction to develop specific theoretical conceptual tools and analytical insights from diverse experiences of urban transformation, worldwide. The planetary epistemological orientation we have been developing is intended to inform and animate that endeavor, among others.
- We have never presented our approach to planetary urbanization as a “theory of everything.” Nor have we ever proposed that studies of planetary urbanization require the subsumption or colonization of other fields of research (for instance, political ecology, agrarian studies or rural sociology). And we have certainly never advanced the intellectually imperialistic view that the reinvented approach to urban theory we are proposing could somehow supplant other forms of knowledge, within or beyond the field of urban studies, academic or otherwise. Our texts repeatedly emphasize the meta-theoretical nature of our intervention; the challenges of reconstructing the field of urban studies as a collective, multifaceted, open and ongoing research endeavor; the need for plural epistemologies; and the specificity of urbanization as one among a multitude of structural processes and transformations shaping planetary life today.³

² This is the controversial argument that Storper and Scott (2016) have recently advanced regarding the urban land nexus, which they attempt to theorize based a universalizing theoretical perspective. Although we share with Storper and Scott an interest in capitalist structures of the urban, we reject their monist, agglomeration-centric framing of the urban question. In epistemological terms, our position is much more closely aligned with that of the postcolonial urban researchers whose work Storper and Scott subject to polemical critique and caricature (for robust replies, see Robinson and Roy 2016; Roy 2016; Robinson 2016).

³ Considerable confusion on these issues has been generated by attempts to interpret my use of the formulation “urban theory without an outside” (Brenner 2014a, b, 2013) as a call for a universalizing epistemology of the urban that would encompass, subsume or supersede other

- We have never claimed that the study of planetary urbanization requires us to privilege structural analysis and to ignore the fabric of everyday life, the mobilizations of social movements and ongoing struggles to shape and reshape the urban fabric of the world. Our work is intended to help illuminate the changing contexts in which such mobilizations and struggles are occurring, and their shifting and intensifying stakes in a world of generalized urbanization, geopolitical volatility and cascading economic and environmental crises. More generally, our critique of planetary urbanization is focused on the potentialities for emancipatory politics, the “possible urban worlds” (Harvey 1996) and “alter-urbanizations” (Brenner 2016) that inhere within, but are systemically suppressed by, current power relations, institutional arrangements and forms of territorial organization.

In short, Christian Schmid and I have always framed our work in accordance with the critical realist principle of “open systems,” according to which the concrete articulations of social relations result from a “concentration of manifold determinations” rather than from singular, all-encompassing causal mechanisms or covering laws (Marx 1973 [1857]; Sayer 1992; Jessop 1990). Our goal has never been to “lock down” a singular, monistic approach to the urban question. Rather, we strongly concur with Helga Leitner and Eric Sheppard’s recent (2016: 230) injunction “to take seriously the possibility that no single theory suffices to account for the variegated nature of urbanization and cities across the world.” In our work on planetary urbanization, we have sought to contribute to the broader, collective and constantly evolving project of developing new approaches—concepts, methods, cartographies, modes of interpretation, analytical tactics, and much more—that might help us investigate and understand emergent transformations of urban life and their wide-ranging implications for material

perspectives. It is difficult to grasp how such arguments can be reasonably attributed to me, or associated with any aspect of my work with Christian Schmid—this is a “non-existing hyperbolic monster,” a hyperreal caricature (Van Meeteren, Derudder and Bassens 2016: 258) of the theoretical agendas and methodological orientations presented in our writings. The notion of “urban theory without an outside” and corresponding references to the “constitutive outside” of urban studies simply underscore our long-standing critique of inherited urban epistemologies that strive to impose clear spatial boundaries around the urban—for example, by treating the city a discrete, distinctive settlement type or territorial unit. In contrast, our proposed approach to planetary urbanization strives to supersede the rigidly entrenched interior/exterior dualism upon which urban theory has long been premised, in favor of relational, processual, multiscalar and multidimensional conceptualizations of urbanization.

conditions, territorial organization, politics, ecology, everyday life and struggle. Thus, as we argued in our essay, “Towards a new epistemology of the urban?” (Brenner and Schmid 2015a: 13):

[...] Our proposals are meant to demarcate some relatively broad epistemological parameters within which a multiplicity of reflexive approaches to critical urban theory might be pursued [...] This discussion is thus intended as a *meta*-theoretical exercise: instead of attempting to nail down a fixed definition of the essential properties of the urban phenomenon ‘once and for all’, it involves developing a reflexive epistemological framework that may help bring into focus and render intelligible the ongoing reconstitution of that phenomenon in relation to the simultaneous evolution of the very concepts and methods being used to study it.

In reflecting on the recent reception of our work, in this special issue of *Society & Space* and elsewhere, Christian Schmid and I considered offering a detailed refutation of such superficial (mis)readings and polemical modes of (non)engagement, with reference to specific examples of the above caricatures, and others—as we attempted to do, for example, in an online response to Richard Walker’s (2015) scattershot polemic in an earlier round of academic “combat and caricature” (Brenner and Schmid 2015b). However, we concluded that doing so would make for pretty tedious reading, and would likely serve only to stoke the flames of a debate that presently seems to be moving in unproductively polarizing directions. More importantly, such a response would probably not speak very effectively to what is, from our point of view, the key question at stake in these debates: How can we most effectively decipher and influence emergent patterns and pathways of urban transformation?

2.

In a fruitful reflection on the evolution of debates within economic geography since the 1980s, Eric Sheppard and Trevor Barnes (2010: 194) build upon the work of pragmatist philosopher Richard Bernstein (1988) to distinguish various forms of pluralism, only one of which—“engaged pluralism”—promotes “open conversation and a tolerant community.” The others—which Bernstein termed fragmenting pluralism; flabby pluralism; polemical pluralism and defensive pluralism—tend to splinter intellectual communities into hermetically sealed language-games; to promote superficial rather than substantive forms of intellectual borrowing; to

privilege polemical, antagonistic modes of engagement with alternative viewpoints; or to engage alternative perspectives only as a means to reaffirm the correctness of one's own paradigm. The problem with such polemical or defensive epistemological postures is that they create a fragmented intellectual landscape composed of apparently incommensurable, internally focused and self-affirming research communities that interact only superficially or antagonistically, rather than reciprocally informing or animating one other in productive, mutually transformative ways. By contrast, Barnes and Sheppard (2010: 194) argue, building upon Bernstein's (1988: 15) reading of pragmatist philosopher William James, an engaged pluralism involves "resolving that however much we are committed to our styles of thinking, we are willing to listen to others without denying or suppressing the otherness of the other."

In a recent exchange on global city theory and postcolonial urban studies, Michiel van Meeteren, Ben Derudder and David Bassens (2016) apply a conception of engaged pluralism derived from Barnes and Sheppard's work to contemporary urban studies debates (see also van Meeteren, Bassens and Derudder 2016). Although approaches to postcolonial theory have often been framed through antagonistic, polemical and sometimes superficial contrasts to the positions of global city theory, van Meeteren and his co-authors argue that there are actually ample possibilities for more productive dialogue, mutual engagement and cross-pollination that have yet to be tapped, and that have wide-ranging implications for how each of these approaches to urban research might be pursued. Van Meeteren, Bassens and Derudder's reflections on the global city theory/postcolonial urban theory debates have considerable relevance to the increasingly heated controversies about planetary urbanization that are currently under way. The cautionary reflections of Van Meeteren et. al. on such matters are worth quoting at length:

The main challenge is not to become paralyzed by notions of theoretical or empirical incommensurability (Kuhn 1970 [1962] [...]) Engaged pluralism above all means stubbornly pursuing potential common ground rather than accentuating alleged incommensurability and thus avoiding placing cities beyond compare (Peck 2015). Whatever the source of intellectual disagreement, our key point is that we, as participants in the debates on global urban research, in fact quite often agree (Bunnell 2016). Yet we tend to focus on disagreements. However, contention should not preclude a collective choice to engage in an overarching global urban studies project that, in its most general sense, wishes to analyze, understand, explain and influence the urban drivers of social change. Nevertheless, it remains an

open question exactly how to practice and facilitate engaged pluralism in the face of enduring epistemological and ontological differences, especially when navigating contemporary publication structures that seem to reward controversy over understanding. This makes engaged pluralism a difficult task, as potential agreement does not ensure establishing a veritable research culture in which engaged pluralism can take root (Van Meeteren, Bassens and Derudder 2016: 297).

Certainly, the various knowledge-formations within the field of critical urban studies could evolve through a self-imposed enclosure within their own putatively separate discursive worlds, without seriously engaging with apparently “non-aligned” frameworks of analysis, methodologies and research agendas. They may also evolve antagonistically, referencing one another mainly as negative examples of intellectual “dead-ends,” or as familiar rhetorical foils around which to present their own chosen pathway of theory-building and research in the most favorable light possible. Several of the contributions presented in this special issue, along with a few other recent publications that are now regularly cited as authoritative feminist or poststructuralist deconstructions of our work on planetary urbanization, appear to chart a course towards the latter scenario—Bernstein’s (1988) “polemical” formation of pluralism. In principle, critics of such arguments could respond in kind, with a similarly antagonistic emphasis on points of disagreement, resort to caricature, superficial reading, analytical simplification, ungenerous rhetoric, points-scoring maneuvers, and so forth.

In effect, the various participants in these discussions today appear poised to embark upon a contemporary “rehash” of the rancorous debates on capitalism, culture, locality, gender and difference of the late 1980s and early 1990s, which pitted Marxian geographers such as David Harvey against feminist scholars such as Doreen Massey, Donna Haraway, Rosalyn Deutsche and others. From my particular point of view, an unreflexive return to the “scorched earth” of these earlier rounds of academic combat would represent a missed opportunity, in a radically transformed intellectual, politico-cultural and geoeconomic configuration, for further dialogue across apparent epistemological, theoretical and political divides. Such a dialogue is arguably needed more urgently than ever in these “post-truth” times of “fake news” and “alternative facts,” when clear lines of communication among political allies, including (perhaps especially) about points of disagreement, are a matter of foundational, even existential, importance.

Indeed, faced with the prospect of a contemporary “reenactment” of the bitter Marxism/poststructuralism battles of the 1990s in the field of critical urban studies, it may also be salient to consider their stakes not only in abstract, epistemological terms, but in relation to the contested, always mutating historical-geographical contexts in which they are embedded and which they are also presumably concerned to illuminate. To what degree, one might ask, did the polarized debates of the 1990s—which, for example, opposed global/local, economy/culture, structure/agency, totality/fragment, system/difference and whole/residue—effectively illuminate that particular moment of worldwide sociospatial restructuring, uneven spatial development and politico-cultural struggle? To what degree would a contemporary reenactment of those arguments, the defensive or polemical modes of critique they tended to deploy, and the dualisms they tended to ossify rather than supersede, productively illuminate our present planetary predicament, its contradictions and crisis-tendencies, and the struggles (both reactionary/neoauthoritarian and progressive/radical) it is unleashing?

While I would certainly not discount the continued philosophical, methodological and political importance of the foundational issues that were explored in such debates, I have serious doubts that such battle reenactments will prove to be particularly productive for advancing the work of critical urban studies today. Within a neoliberalized university environment that tends “to reward controversy over understanding” and to promote a culture of competitive individualism among scholars (Van Meeteren, Bassens and Derudder 2016: 297), the reenactors may well receive professional recognition for their efforts. But that should offer cold comfort to those who view the field of critical urban studies as a collective intellectual and political endeavor: one whose contributors embrace diverse conceptual orientations, methodologies and research agendas, while also striving to confront some broadly shared questions and concerns, both scholarly and practical.

Surely, more fruitful modes of engagement are also possible—ones that, despite possibly fundamental epistemological, methodological and/or political differences, could (a) productively advance and reciprocally transform the heterodox research cultures involved in critical explorations of the urban question today, while also (b) harnessing them as part of the shared project(s) of critical urban studies to confront the major intellectual and political challenges associated with our contemporary moment of worldwide urban transformation. This was evidently the intention behind the Toronto workshop, and it is one that, from my point of view, deserves to be

taken very seriously, not only in relation to debates on planetary urbanization, but across the wide-ranging terrain of contemporary critical urban studies.⁴

3.

In their manifesto on engaged pluralism, Barnes and Sheppard (2010: 208) argue that “the challenge [...] to all geographers of whatever stripe [...] is to initiate exchange, to trade their various local epistemologies and theories with those of others, and in the process to create new knowledge.” This, they suggest, can produce “a more vibrant, interesting discipline, capable of generating complex, shifting understandings that reflect and shape equally complex and dynamic materialities” (Barnes and Sheppard 2010: 208). But they also underscore a number of major hurdles to the creation of genuinely flexible, open “trading zones” in which research questions and methodological tactics may be coordinated coherently in order to advance knowledge, despite the persistence of distinct cultures of inquiry, discursive conventions and intellectual objectives among the various participants (Barnes and Sheppard 2010: 196-7; Galison 1997). These hurdles include, among others, hegemonic institutional practices and professional norms that may inhibit cultures of dialogue; entrenched power relations within universities, professional associations and disciplines that privilege some actors, voices and forms of “evidence” while excluding others; the persistent role of hidden,

⁴ It is worth noting that polemical modes of engagement have been adopted, in some cases, by scholars working outside the specific traditions of critical urban theory referenced in our discussion here. For example, Storper and Scott (2016) reduce research on planetary urbanization to the rather facile claim that “cities are dead”—a position that, as noted above, Christian Schmid and I explicitly reject, and which would be logically impossible to reconcile with our core concept of concentrated urbanization. As we have repeatedly emphasized, the critique of city-centric modes of urban theory does not require us to abandon the analysis of agglomeration processes, but to rethink the epistemological, conceptual and cartographic framework in which the latter are explored. Storper and Scott confidently proclaim that our distinction between concentrated and extended urbanization is “clumsy,” but they barely discuss even its most rudimentary elements. They reference the latter concept, in particular, mainly by ridiculing it and then quickly dismissing it; they do not meaningfully engage with our actual arguments regarding the industrial transformation of erstwhile hinterland, rural and wilderness spaces under contemporary capitalism, and the connection of those transformations to ongoing processes of concentrated urbanization. While our approach to urbanization clearly does diverge from that embraced by agglomeration theorists such as Storper and Scott, the specific nature of the disagreement is impossible to assess coherently if our critics resort to pejorative declarations and dismissive rhetoric while declining to engage with the core concepts, distinctions and arguments developed in our work. In effect, Storper and Scott’s article appears to exemplify the “polemical” form of pluralism “where the approach [under scrutiny] becomes ... [an] ideological weapon to advance one’s own orientation” (Bernstein 1988: 15; quoted in Barnes and Sheppard 2010: 194).

hierarchical networks of influence that determine which conceptual frameworks, methodological tactics and research questions receive attention and thus legitimation within specific scholarly milieux; as well as pervasive issues of translation that seriously complicate communication across linguistic, cultural and political divides (Barnes and Sheppard 2010: 208-9). Obviously, then, engaged pluralism is not simply an abstract epistemological stance, a purely normative vision or a generic commitment to détente or dialogue among apparently opposed scholarly perspectives. It is a long-term, incremental project, at once intellectual, interpersonal and institutional; and it is one that requires considerable dedication, patience and persistence among its proponents and participants.

Barnes and Sheppard's injunction, and their cautionary warnings, seem especially salient for the field of critical urban studies today (Van Meeteren, Derudder and Bassens 2016; Van Meeteren, Bassens and Derudder 2016). In our current moment of paradigmatic uncertainty and intense, often fragmenting, debates regarding the intellectual foundations, methodological tools, spatial referents and overarching mission(s) of our research field, there are arguably many interesting, emergent possibilities for the construction of new scholarly "trading zones" (Barnes and Sheppard 2010: 195-7) that would not only permit more productive, meaningful modes of communication among critical urban researchers, but would also enhance the field's collective capacities to decipher the core processes, transformations and contestations with which it is concerned.

The controversy around planetary urbanization is, obviously, only one among many terrains of debate in which such trading zones could potentially be established, should critical urban scholars choose to prioritize that goal. Too often, though, such explorations are blocked through the entrenched habits of mind associated with polemical and defensive pluralism, in which alternative perspectives are introduced primarily as "hyperreal" counterpoints intended to bolster the reader's confidence in an author's own preferred framework of analysis (Van Meeteren, Derudder and Bassens 2016: 258). While such polemical procedures and defensive rhetorical maneuvers may enhance feelings of community, cohesiveness, identity and perhaps even righteousness within specific research milieux, they also entail significant disadvantages and may, in aggregate, be intellectually counterproductive. As Van Meeteren, Derudder and Bassens (2016: 259) explain, the uncritical adoption of polemical pluralist framings might (a) "lead scholars to draw wrong conclusions about the value of the work of colleagues"; (b) engender a "toxic culture of dialogue"; and, most importantly, (c) prevent scholars from learning from one another's conceptual frameworks, methodological tactics and concrete insights in order to wrestle with shared or intersecting research questions, to rethink the

parameters of established research agendas or to invent new pathways of investigation.

It is in this spirit, then, that I revisit a few of the core issues that were discussed and debated in the Toronto workshop, and that are also articulated in various forms—polemical, defensive and dialogic—across the papers included in this special issue. Given the workshop’s specific focus on planetary urbanization, these meta-theoretical observations focus perforce on that specific *problematique*, and on the project Christian Schmid and I have been pursuing to explore its major elements. Obviously, this focus should not be misconstrued as a self-serving assertion that this *problematique*, or our own formulation of it, should be privileged reference points for exploring the possibilities for engaged pluralist dialogue in critical urban studies. As we have emphasized, this project represents but one thread within an ongoing, multifaceted and increasingly variegated debate regarding the contemporary urban question.

Indeed, an essential starting point for an engaged pluralist dialogue on the issues at stake in this exchange is the recognition that emergent studies of planetary urbanization are not enclosed within a neatly bounded “school” of thought to which scholars “subscribe,” like members of a political party or a country club. The same surely applies to most other major strands of contemporary critical urban theory, including all of those represented in this debate, from feminism and queer theory to postcolonial urban studies, critical race theory, indigenous studies and the multiple variants of poststructuralist urban theorizing. In fact, each of these streams of critical urban theory is quite internally differentiated and intersects considerably with many of the others on a range of essential issues—including normative foundations, epistemological commitments, methodological orientations, research agendas and interpretive claims. Consequently, despite the tendency in some debates to emphasize the distinctiveness of putatively “competing” approaches to the urban question, as if they formed discretely separated discursive “bubbles” or opposing “teams” of researchers, such characterizations exaggerate (a) the degree of coherence, unity and consensus *within* the major streams of critical urban research and also, in many cases, (b) the extent of intellectual antagonism, differentiation and divergence *among* the latter. It is thus probably more productive, in reflecting on the major debates that animate the field of work in critical urban theory today, to eschew simplistic labels (whether for paradigms, epistemologies or methods) and to focus more attention on specific intellectual challenges and political concerns, the research questions that flow from them, and the various strategies of engagement that have been mobilized to confront the latter.

Against this background, I would like to demarcate several central issues in the study of planetary urbanization that, from my particular perspective, could be productively explored (a) through a more sustained engagement and critical dialogue with the insights of key strands of feminist urban studies, queer theory, critical race theory and indigenous studies—many of which were productively developed by the participants in the Toronto workshop; as well as (b) through a still deeper exploration of several research agendas that Christian Schmid and I have long shared with key strands of postcolonial urban theory (see, for instance, Barnett and Parnell 2016; Parnell 2016; Robinson 2016, 2014; Roy 2016, 2015, 2014). In thus proceeding, I certainly do not intend to subsume these intricately differentiated, entangled and dynamically evolving research fields under any kind of generic, homogenizing intellectual rubric—epistemological, methodological, political or otherwise. Nor do I claim any special competence or expertise in addressing their hugely variegated research agendas, which I have to date engaged primarily as an interested reader, teacher, reviewer and editor, rather than as an active participant or contributor. My more circumscribed purpose here is to outline what I take to be some of the most productive, if also controversial, questions that have thus far emerged from the dialogues that were initiated at the Toronto workshop, and that build variously on contributions to these diverse streams of critical urban studies and social theory.

For purposes of this discussion, I do not attempt further to defend, clarify or elaborate the specific arguments that Christian Schmid and I have been developing in our writings on planetary urbanization; that is a task for other venues. My concern is simply to propose just a few among many possible focal points for future dialogue among the various streams of critical urban theory in which the *problematique* of planetary urbanization has been provoking discussion, debate, controversy and research. In each of the nine questions presented below, the possessive adjective “our” refers specifically to my collaborative writings on planetary urbanization with Christian Schmid, which were the focus of debate at the Toronto workshop and which are, consequently, a central theoretical reference point for this exchange in *Society & Space*. Of course, the same questions may also be quite productively posed about the recent work of our immediate collaborators, about that of broadly allied scholars (Andy Merrifield, Stefan Kipfer and Kanishka Goonewardena, for example), and about many other contemporary engagements with this *problematique*. I suspect that even among those who are concerned to explore and develop some version of this research agenda, these questions would be answered in a variety of different ways, pointing in turn towards a fairly broad spectrum of possible pathways for its future elaboration.

1. In what ways might the investigation of planetary urbanization be productively extended and transformed through a more sustained engagement with the knowledge-claims of those in nondominant, subordinate, marginalized or subaltern positions, in and outside the academy (Lukács 1971 [1923]; Gramsci 1971 [1948]; Katz 1996; Mignolo 2000; Peake 2016; Quijano 2000; Sousa Santos 2014)?⁵

⁵ It seems appropriate here to address directly an essential question that was posed by several participants in the Toronto workshop: why were so few female contributors included in the volume I edited on planetary urbanization, *Implosions/Explosions* (Brenner 2014b)? One might pose similar questions, of course, about other aspects of the volume's authorial composition (with reference, for instance, to considerations of race, sexuality or language). I assume full editorial responsibility for the volume's authorial composition, and I recognize that it is problematic. As I explained in the book's Introduction (Brenner 2014a: 22-4), in assembling the volume, my main priorities were: (1) to present writings that directly engaged Henri Lefebvre's thesis of generalized urbanization, while also challenging city-centric or city-dominant approaches to urban studies and urban ideologies; (2) to present writings that explicitly engaged with or developed the core concept of "extended urbanization"; and (3) to gather some of my own recent writings with Christian Schmid, several of our individually authored contributions on related issues, and various texts by our closest collaborators and (former and current) doctoral students that advanced the preceding agendas as part of a shared research agenda on contemporary urbanization. Especially under priority (1) above, it is clear that my own lens on the debate ignored important contributions by urban scholars working in feminist and queer-theoretical traditions—as Michelle Buckley and Kendra Strauss (2016) have productively demonstrated. Meanwhile, even just a few years after the book's publication, pursuit of the same set of priorities would already yield a far more diverse set of contributors and types of contributions. Obviously, the three priorities listed above could have been productively combined with at least two additional priorities, namely (4) to explore those agendas, or aspects of them, via diverse epistemic, social and political positionalities; and (5) to promote authorial diversity as a "standard practice" for all forms of critical scholarship in an academic environment that is largely dominated by white men and governed through entrenched Eurocentric/heteropatriarchal ideologies, discourses and practices. I could also, of course, have framed the book's theoretical *problématique* more broadly, or differently—but, for better or for worse, I quite deliberately made the decision to focus its agenda rather tightly around the nexus of theoretical work connecting the ideas of generalized urbanization and extended urbanization, such as I and my collaborators conceived them in 2010-2013. If I had even remotely anticipated that *Implosions/Explosions* would become a central reference point for scholarly debate within the field of critical urban studies, priorities (4) and (5) would have figured more centrally in my vision of the book. Should, as a result of the relatively narrow range of positionalities represented in *Implosions/Explosions*, the entire research agenda on planetary urbanization be dismissed as irredeemably masculinist—or white, or heteropatriarchal, or Eurocentric? This is very much under debate at the moment, with reference to the various conceptualizations and practices of epistemic positionality that have thus far been elaborated in work on this topic. While I would never deny the epistemological and political importance of such considerations in scholarly discourse, it also seems salient to exercise some caution regarding the dangers of deriving essentialist conclusions on this basis. For my part, I hope that future rounds of debate on planetary urbanization can be

2. In what ways are contemporary urban ideologies infused with and animated by sexist, racialized, heteronormative, heteropatriarchal, biopolitical and neocolonial projects of sociospatial transformation? In what ways might our historical genealogy and critique of contemporary “urban age” discourses and practices be productively extended and transformed through the deployment of feminist, queer-theoretical, postcolonial, decolonial and critical race-theoretical modes of analysis?
3. In what ways might our critique of city-centric and “city-dominant” (McGee 1971) approaches to the urban question be extended or transformed through a more sustained engagement with earlier feminist and queer-theoretical deconstructions of “metronormativity” and associated geographical dualisms, including the classic triad of urban/suburban/rural (Buckley and Strauss 2016)? How might such critiques be extended and transformed through their articulation to postcolonial and decolonial critiques of Eurocentric, metrocentric knowledge-formations and associated spatial dualisms, such as Occident/Orient, modern/traditional and culture/nature (Mignolo 2000; Quijano 2000; Sousa Santos 2014)?
4. To what degree does a theoretical focus on capitalist structurations of the urban inhibit, warp or block engagement with questions of “difference”—whether of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, citizenship status or otherwise? In what ways might an analysis of capital’s uneven, chronically crisis-prone historical geographies productively inform and animate investigations of the shifting territorial landscapes in which social differences are expressed, materialized, contested and fought out—and vice versa (Quijano 2000; Tsing 2009; Schmid 2016)?
5. We have anchored our call for new conceptualizations of the urban question with reference to various emergent sociospatial transformations, within and beyond major metropolitan regions, that destabilize inherited urban epistemologies (Brenner and Schmid 2015a: 151-3; Brenner and Schmid 2014, 2011). A closely parallel line of argumentation has been articulated by several prominent postcolonial urban theorists, who likewise connect many of their

focused not only on the initial framing presented in *Implosions/Explosions*, but on the content and potential of the increasingly heterodox constellation of epistemologies, concepts, methods and research agendas that are now being elaborated through this quite variegated stream of critical urban theory.

specific epistemological proposals to the challenges of deciphering emergent urban transformations (see, for example, Robinson and Roy 2016; Roy 2009; Robinson 2015). To what degree do feminist, queer-theoretical and critical race-theoretical approaches to urban questions likewise ground their proposed concepts and methods in relation to the specific tasks associated with analyzing contemporary or emergent forms of urban restructuring? To what degree do such approaches direct attention to essential dimensions of contemporary urban emergence that our work has neglected? If so, what are the implications of (re)considering the latter for our own epistemological proposals, methodological orientations and research agendas?⁶

6. In what ways are the geographies of extended urbanization we have begun to demarcate in our work—related, for instance, to the tendential enclosure, industrialization and infrastructuralization of erstwhile agricultural and extractive hinterlands, emergent landscapes of tourism, logistics and waste management, and new regimes of techno-environmental management—forged through gendered, sexualized, racialized, biopolitical and neocolonial power relations, and associated projects of normalization (Arboleda 2015a, b; Wilson and Bayón 2015)? How might more explicitly feminist, queer, critical race-theoretical, decolonial and postcolonial approaches to such dynamics inform, extend and transform conceptualizations and investigations of extended urbanization (Cowen 2014; Kipfer 2017, 2014; Kipfer and Goonewardena 2013)?

7. In our work to date, we have theorized the planetary scale of contemporary urbanization primarily with reference to Lefebvre’s notions of generalized urbanization and the “planetaryization” of the urban, which focus primarily on the spatiotemporal dynamics, contradictions and contestations unleashed by capital (see also Brenner 2018). In what ways could that conceptualization be complemented, extended or transformed through a more sustained engagement with alternative understandings of the planetary derived from other traditions of literary, political, cultural, spatial and ecological theory that speak, for instance, to questions of citizenship, politics, sovereignty, coloniality, world ecology,

⁶ This line of reflection also raises the thorny question of periodizing urban restructuring processes, which Christian Schmid and I have only just begun to explore in our work on planetary urbanization. To what degree might the periodizations of urban restructuring generated through research on planetary urbanization and those associated with postcolonial, feminist, queer-theoretical and/or critical race-theoretical approaches to urban studies reciprocally inform and animate one another?

environmentality, the anthropocene, the capitalocene, the posthuman, the nonhuman, technonature, geoculture and *altermondialité* (see, for example, Bratton 2016; Spivak 2003; Connolly 2017; Luke 2015; Mignolo 2000; Moore 2016; Ruddick 2015; Elias and Moraru 2015; Roy 2015)?

8. In what sense is planetary urbanization a (bio)political project, one that entails not only new strategies of capital accumulation and new formations of capitalist territorial organization, but new frameworks of territorial regulation, state spatial strategies, modes of racial and/or sexual normalization, formations of governmentality, biopower and regimes of subjectivity? To what degree might the analysis of such issues help inform the broader project of repoliticizing debates on the urban question, in and outside the academy, in this putatively “post-political” age (Swyngedouw and Wilson 2014; Exo Adams 2014; Roy 2015)?
9. In what ways might approaches to planetary urbanization contribute to ongoing struggles to imagine and to construct “alter-urbanizations” (Brenner 2016)—alternative pathways for the production, appropriation and transformation of space, at once in the spheres of politics, law, social reproduction, ecology, infrastructure and everyday life? How might the post-capitalist visions of “possible urban worlds” (Harvey 1996) and differential space (Schmid 2008) that pervade neo-Marxian and neo-Lefebvrian scholarship be extended and transformed by those oriented towards transcending sexist, heteropatriarchal, racially exclusionary, neoimperial and neocolonial forms of urbanization?

Obviously, this list of questions is hardly exhaustive, and it is necessarily articulated from my own particular perspective as an urban theorist and researcher. Other workshop participants and readers of the essays included this special issue will no doubt generate many other questions, whose exploration might also potentially advance the kind of engaged pluralist dialogue among critical urban theorists I am proposing. In this sense, whatever conclusions might be drawn from the questions posed above, the point of this exercise transcends the particular contents of my own enumeration: it is to promote a research culture within critical urban studies in which scholars strive “to initiate exchange, to trade their various local epistemologies and theories with those of others, and in the process to create new knowledge” (Barnes and Sheppard 2010: 208).

It should be emphasized, finally, that a multiplicity of starting points for engaged pluralist approaches to critical urban studies are possible, each opening up

distinctive pathways of theorization, methodological experimentation and concrete research (see, for example, the interesting proposals presented by Van Meeteren, Derudder and Bassens 2016, and the subsequent exchange in the same volume of *Dialogues in Human Geography*). Planetary urbanization is under discussion here because it has recently provoked some discussion, debate and controversy, but it is but one among many vibrant critical perspectives on the contemporary urban question that could be productively brought into closer dialogue with one another, in the interest of advancing, among other agendas, the following three central tasks of critical urban theory (Brenner 2016): (1) the critique of urban ideologies that naturalize or legitimize the inscriptions of power, domination, dispossession, social suffering and ecological devastation upon spatial landscapes; (2) the development of a spatial analytics of power through which to decipher patterns and pathways of urbanization, their contestation, their crisis-tendencies and their consequences; and (3) the excavation of alter-urbanizations: possible urban worlds that are immanent within, yet suppressed by, extant spatial practices, and that point towards more emancipatory—just, democratic, inclusive, diverse, nonviolent, culturally vibrant and environmentally sane—modes of urban life.

For my part, I would hope not only that engaged pluralist dialogues will proliferate among critical urban researchers, building upon a broad range of starting points, but also that the various pathways of exploration thereby forged might eventually intersect to inform and animate these, and no doubt many other, shared agendas in the field of critical urban studies. But such agendas can only be the (provisional) *outcome* of dialogue, debate and research. While they cannot and should not entail a convergence of epistemologies, concepts or methods, they do imply “a willingness to listen and to take seriously other people’s ideas” (Barnes and Sheppard 2010: 209).

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