

# Constitutive outsides or hidden abodes? Totality and ideology in critical urban theory

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## Abstract

In the context of hotly contested debates within critical urban theory, many scholars have recently attempted (both implicitly and explicitly) to move beyond the relational-dialectical concept of ‘totality’, taking up the notion of ‘the constitutive outside’ in its place. With this in view, this article seeks to (1) develop a critique of the ways in which the concept of the constitutive outside is deployed in these debates; and (2) to sketch another path forward – one that understands capitalist urbanisation as a distinctive moment in the evolution of a world-encompassing and internally related socio-spatial totality, while also attending to well-founded concerns among theorists of the constitutive outside regarding the question of difference and ascriptive hierarchisation. More precisely, this article will pursue a close reading of work on the constitutive outside in critical urban theory, suggesting that it effectively re-articulates longstanding and entrenched tenets of capitalist ideology, positing the image of a ‘space-time of the other’. And it will conclude with a revised conceptualisation of totality for critical urban theory, building on Nancy Fraser’s recent work on capitalism’s racialised, gendered, and ecological ‘hidden abodes’.

## Keywords

critical urban theory, dialectics, feminism, planetary urbanisation, postcolonial theory, totality

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## 摘要

面对批判城市理论内部激烈的争论，许多研究者最近尝试（有含蓄地，也有明确地）超越“整体性”的关系辩证概念，在其研究中采用“构成性外部”的概念。有鉴于此，本文旨在（1）对这些争论运用构成性外部概念的方式提出批评；（2）为未来的研究勾勒出另一条道路——将资本主义城市化理解为包罗万象且内部相关的社会空间整体性发展过程中的一个独特时刻，同时也关注构成性外部理论家们在差异和归属等级方面所关心的、有充分根据的问题。更准确地说，本文将仔细解读批判城市理论中有关构成性外部的著作，表明它有效地重新阐明了资本主义意识形态长期存在的根深蒂固的信条，提出了“他者时空”的意象。本文的最后以南希·弗雷泽 (Nancy Fraser) 关于资本主义的种族化、性别化和生态的隐秘之处的近期研究为基础，对批判城市理论整体性的概念化进行修订。

## 关键词

批判城市理论、辩证法、女权主义、星球城市化、后殖民理论、整体性

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## Introduction

Outside of the walls of the academy, the concept of ‘totality’, if it is considered at all, surely fails to inspire more than a shrug. One often hears that a given issue must be understood ‘in its totality’, but this is hardly a phrase that connotes any political or ideological orientation. Within critical urban studies, however, the concept of totality has found itself at the centre of some of the disciplines most contested debates – not least in recent discussions on extended and planetary urbanisation, and the scope, scale, and vantage of critical urban theory (see, for context, Goonewardena, 2018). Indeed, as Addie (2020: 579) plainly states: ‘[t]he appeal to a broader totality . . . marks a central epistemic and methodological incommensurability’ within contemporary urban studies. Of course, for some, this controversy over totality and its relation to critical urban theory in the present is nothing more than a ‘unreflexive return’ to the ‘scorched-earth’ debates of the late 1980s and early 1990s, which (to put it much too reductively) pitted feminists and post-structuralists against Marxist political economists (see, for context, Brenner, 2018:

579). For others, however, it is not so simple. According to Goonewardena (2018), the concept of totality – and the relational-dialectical methodology that it typically presupposes – is at the core of any anti-racist and socialist-feminist theorisation worth its salt. And urban theory today – rather than being too ‘totalising’ – must take up the dialectical language of totality in much the same way. If we want an urban theory capable of grasping problems of racialised and gendered hierarchisation – and the place of urbanisation within the context of profoundly interrelated planetary crises – we require ‘not less totality, but more – a decidedly *more* holistic account’ of the production of space and the current global socio-spatial conjuncture (Goonewardena, 2018: 467, emphasis in original).

Others disagree, suggesting that the language of totality, and ‘totalising’ urban theory, obscures the ever-present instances of ‘radical alterity’, ‘singularity’, and ‘excess’ that define any conjuncture (see the special issue introduced by Oswin and Pratt (2021) for these terms). And indeed, while the concept of totality itself has not been its primary

point of reference nor object of critique, a particularly productive strand of theorisation has emerged in this context, with specific reference to the concept of ‘the constitutive outside’. What is at stake for theorists of the constitutive outside is not merely the claim that there is an outside to urban theory and the urban process, but more fundamentally that there are social forms and practices that are *necessarily in excess of* the urban process and the internally related socio-spatial totality of which capitalist urbanisation is a part. Derickson (2018), in an emblematic intervention in this strand of ‘non-totalising theory’, makes a claim to urban theory’s constitutive outside from a Rancièrian perspective. She posits Rancièr’s conception of ‘the political’ – understood as ‘constituted by ephemeral moments in which “the part of those that have no part” produce a rupture in the order of the police’ – in order to suggest that *any* social totality is, by necessity, incomplete. The very existence and possibility of ‘the political’ demonstrates, as she puts it, the ‘always incomplete conception of the social totality and the way in which it necessarily produces an outside’ (see Derickson, 2018: 558). But Derickson, as I will demonstrate below, is far from alone in mobilising the language of the constitutive outside in this ‘non-totalising’ way. Against the claim that there is ‘no longer any *outside* to the urban world’ (Brenner and Schmid, 2014, quoted in Roy, 2016: 815, emphasis in original), Roy suggests that ‘the “them” is not the constitutive opposite of a concrete “us” but the symbol of what makes any “us” impossible’ (Mouffe, 2000, quoted in Roy, 2016: 821). Put otherwise, she adopts political theorist Chantal Mouffe’s argument that all identities are predicated on the ‘affirmation of a difference’ and are necessarily unstable (Mouffe, 2005, quoted in Dikeç, 2012: 672), and puts it to work in an urban-theoretical context to underscore that there is always

‘something that exceeds the urban’ (Roy, 2016: 820).

It is in reference to these thorny debates within critical urban theory that this article seeks to make its intervention, which proceeds in several parts. I will begin by engaging the concept of totality itself – and by sketching out, in some theoretical depth, how the concept informs the spatial dialectics of both Neil Brenner and David Harvey, two key guideposts in Marxist critical urban theory and contemporary debates around these themes. Then, I will address the aforementioned literature on the constitutive outside in critical urban theory – an admittedly heterodox literature that has recently taken up the concept of ‘the constitutive outside’ and deployed it in ways that profoundly challenge (both implicitly *and* explicitly) the relational-dialectical language of totality itself. More specifically, I will here home my attention on two of the core claims articulated within that literature, which offer a direct challenge to the image of the world as an internally related whole. These claims are: (1) that critical urban theory would do well to attend to and acknowledge those forms of difference (particularly those forms of difference that pertain to race, gender, and sexuality) that are not only not reducible to, but putatively *exceed*, the relations of capitalist urbanisation and the dynamics of global capital accumulation; and (2) the tightly linked assertion that we must not occlude those forms of political agency that are constituted *in excess of* capitalist urbanisation and the relations of capitalist society (or, the complexly overdetermined capitalist socio-spatial totality of which urbanisation is a part). Following this broad backdrop of debate, I will then make two closely linked arguments. First, I will suggest that – despite its many productive advances – the ‘non-totalising’ literature on the constitutive outside ultimately undercuts the objectives of its own critique. Indeed, despite its specific

interest in the problematic of difference, much of the literature on the constitutive outside in urban theory inadvertently reproduces the image of a *racialised and gendered* space-time that is outside, beyond, or in excess of, the constitutive relations of the capitalist socio-spatial totality; and in so doing, reproduces the image of what might be called, following Fabian (2014), the ‘space-time of the other’.

Following an explication of how this image of the ‘space-time of the other’ re-articulates longstanding and entrenched tenets of capitalist ideology, I will then conclude by developing a revised conceptualisation of totality for critical urban theory, building on Nancy Fraser’s recent work on capitalism’s racialised, gendered, and ecological ‘hidden abodes’. Put otherwise, I will here suggest that for urban studies to take seriously the concern for difference articulated in the literature on the constitutive outside, and to do so in a way that maintains the relational-dialectical language of totality articulated by the likes of Brenner and Harvey, we would do well to turn from the constitutive outsides to *the hidden abodes of urbanisation* (for comparable efforts, see Addie, 2020; Angelo and Goh, 2021; Goonewardena, 2018).

## Marxism and totality

For some Marxists, totality is the definitive and central concept of historical materialism, distinguishing it from other schools of thought and modes of social, political, and economic investigation. The Hungarian philosopher Georg Lukács said as much directly: ‘[i]t is not the primacy of economic motives in history that constitutes the decisive difference between Marxism and bourgeois thought, but the point of view of totality’ (Lukács, 1971, quoted in Goonewardena, 2018: 461). Such a claim stems from the work of Marx himself, who attempted to grasp capitalist

society as a ‘complexly structured differentiated totality’ (Hall, 2003: 127) – and to reject the bourgeois ideology of linear causality, suggesting (in its place) the image of reciprocal co-evolution of part and whole in the context of an economic system that tended toward ‘planetary extension’ (cf. Brenner, 2017: 282). And yet, despite the superficial clarity that attends to such a description of Marx’s method, the significance of totality in Marxist thought – and in contemporary critical urban theory, more specifically – remains a matter of confusion and heated debate (see, for context, Jay, 1984). Indeed, drawing on Louis Althusser from another context, we might say that much writing on the notion of totality, not least in critical urban theory, is seemingly united only by ‘(1) a word; (2) a certain vague conception of the unity of things; [and] (3) some theoretical enemies’ (Althusser, 2005: 203). In what follows, I will therefore attempt to establish the notion of totality that informs the spatial dialectics of both Neil Brenner and David Harvey, two key guideposts in Marxist critical urban theory and contemporary debates on this theme (see, for context, Goonewardena, 2018; Hart, 2018).

To begin, we can turn to Brenner’s agenda setting 2009 article ‘What is critical urban theory?’ In it, he attempts to answer that question in broad strokes, and to sketch out the epistemological and methodological presuppositions needed for the critical study of urbanisation; for a mode of inquiry ‘grounded [in] an antagonistic relationship not only to inherited urban knowledges, but more generally, to existing urban formations’ (Brenner, 2009: 198). In doing so, Brenner identifies four tenets that define (Frankfurt School) critical theory in general, and which (should) form the basis for critical urban theory more specifically.

- First, critical theory is ‘unapologetically abstract’, developing ‘formal concepts’

and generalisations from the ‘actual organisation’ and historical movement of society. It speaks to a moment ‘analytically prior to’, though not at odds with, ‘the famous Leninist question of “What is to be done?”’ (Brenner, 2009: 1–202).

- Second, critical theory is methodologically reflexive, shedding all pretence of ‘positivistic, transcendental, [and/or] metaphysical’ methodology so as to acknowledge and account for its own historical–geographical conditions of possibility. Indeed, critical theory recognises that all knowledge – not least ‘oppositional, antagonistic forms of knowledge, subjectivity and consciousness’ – is ‘embedded within the dialectics of social and historical change’ (Brenner, 2009: 202).
- Third, critical theory resists the instrumentalisation of knowledge and those attempts to use knowledge to ‘render existing institutional arrangements more efficient and effective’ (Brenner, 2009: 202). And in the place of instrumental and technocratic reason, critical theory pursues an ‘explicit’ (and ‘unavoidable’) ‘engagement with normative questions’, positing normativity as unavoidable precisely because it rejects the atomistic distinction between subject and object, or, the ‘separation’ of the researcher ‘from their object of investigation’ (Brenner, 2009: 202).
- Finally, critical theory seeks to identify those immanent moments and potentialities for ‘the possible’ within the present conjuncture; ‘to excavate the emancipatory possibilities that are embedded within, yet simultaneously suppressed by, this very system’ (Brenner, 2009: 203).

These tenets are certainly clarifying in relation to the general problematic of critical urban theory (see, for further explication, Brenner, 2009: 205). And yet, for our

purposes, they are especially useful in that they also suggest a specific relation to the concept of totality as well. We can use these tenets, that is, as an entrée into Brenner’s position on that subject, which is further elaborated elsewhere in his corpus (see Brenner, 2017, 2019). And this is precisely because at the core of Brenner’s calls to reject metaphysical and transhistorical knowledge, to recognise the embeddedness of all knowledge *within* the dialectics of social and historical change, and to embrace normativity, is a particular conceptualisation of subject/object relations. Put otherwise, in positing these tenets Brenner effectively reestablishes and underscores the longstanding Marxist position that objectivity and subjectivity are the outcome of a process of reciprocal co-determination; and suggests that subject and object are made and remade in the context of a broader ‘whole’ that is undergoing perpetual historical change. These methodological imperatives have at their core, in other words, the understanding that ‘reality’ is not ‘constituted of isolated, self-sufficient particulars’, but is rather a ‘system comprised of parts that are constituted by the whole system to which they belong and which interrelate with that system’ (Best, 1989, quoted in Goonewardena, 2005: 59). After all, it is precisely this onto-epistemological first principle that enables us to say that no ‘knower’ is positioned outside of the ever-evolving relations and processes that constitute them; such a principle grounds the assertion that we must reject transhistoricism and embrace normativity. And of course, as Brenner and Ghosh (2022: 884) have more recently elaborated, it is also with these principles of reciprocal co-determination in view that we can ‘escape’ the pitfalls of Cartesian reductionism, which treats ‘physical, biological, or social processes as outcomes of relations among pregiven, fundamentally undecomposable units’.

In fact, central to the broad tenets for critical urban theory established above is not only a distinctive conceptualisation of subject/object co-determination – and thus a commitment to the grammar of totality – but a theorisation of the relationship between totality and oppositional forms of subjectivity as well; and of the ways in which oppositional subjectivities might develop in a world (or totality) determined in the last instance by the imperatives of accumulation. Insofar as Brenner’s framework embraces the notion of subject/object co-constitution, and affirms the potentiality for oppositional and antagonistic forms of subjectivity and consciousness, it suggests that capitalist society is an internally related whole – but a whole that is, nonetheless, ‘contradictory’ and ‘fragmented’ (Brenner, 2009: 202). The subject is, by definition, ‘structuring and being structured by the object’ in this framework (Harvey, 2009: 298), but critique is still able to emerge, not least because ‘society is in conflict with itself, that is, because its mode of development is self-contradictory’ (Brenner, 2009: 202). As Brenner puts it (2009: 202), ‘[i]f the totality were closed, non-contradictory or complete, there would be no critical consciousness of it; there would be no need for critique; and indeed, critique would be structurally impossible’. More simply put: subjectivity is here invariably constrained by its relations, but it is *not totally subsumed by them*. Within the capitalist socio-spatial totality in particular, oppositional forms of subjectivity and consciousness not only persist – they are, in some way or another, productive of the broader ‘context of context’ and rendered possible by the contradictory nature of capitalist society itself. In that sense, the ‘famous Leninist question of “What is to be done?”’ is predictably never far from view (Brenner, 2009: 202). A different kind of world – and a different kind of totality – is an always-present potentiality.

As readers will surely note, this conceptualisation is quite far removed from the image of totality often associated with Marxist thought. For one, in Brenner’s schematic accounting of the tenets of critical urban theory – and in the supporting texts gestured to above – we generally find little trace of a ‘longitudinal’ totality, wherein history is understood to move in unison ‘progressively forward’ and towards a pre-defined destination or conclusion; nor do we encounter an ‘expressive’ totality, in which history is understood as the ‘unified expression of a single principle’ (Ciccariello-Maher, 2017: 9; see also Jay, 1984). Indeed, this approach to critical urban theory – and totality – seemingly rejects teleology, the image of history as unitary ascent, and crude epiphenomenalism altogether. There is little evidence of economic determinism, and a clear understanding of the socio-spatial totality as a dialectic of relatively autonomous, ‘internally related moments’ – each of which ‘codetermines the others’ while transforming and remaking the totality itself (see also, for context, Loftus, 2015: 370). After all, and as Brenner has demonstrated elsewhere, each reciprocally constituted instance ‘changes constantly in the course of [its] ceaseless dialectical interactions’ with the rest of the whole (Lukács, 1971: 13); no part is ‘ontologically prior to the whole’, just as the whole is not ontologically prior to its parts (cf. Levins and Lewontin, 1987: 2; see also Brenner, 2017, 2019; Brenner and Ghosh, 2022). And further still, it seems quite clear that within Brenner’s theorisation there is no epistemically privileged subject that will come to see the ‘isolated facts of social life as aspects of the historical process and integrate[] them in a *totality*’ (see, for context, Lukács, 1971, quoted in Jay, 1984: 104, emphasis in original).

In fact, across Brenner’s corpus the socio-spatial totality presupposed seems better understood as an available (if

ultimately ungraspable) object of immanent critique. Much as it is in the work of Henri Lefebvre (see Buckley and Strauss, 2016), the role of the critical (urban) theorist is thus not to ‘provide finality’, nor to posit an Archimedean viewpoint from which every aspect of the whole can be seen; it is, rather, to ‘remind us of the demands of totality, that is, the impossibility of accepting fragmentation and confirming separation’ (Lefebvre, 2003: 68; see also Deutsche, 1998) – a demand that is particularly strong in the context of planetary capitalist society. Put otherwise, while Brenner and Ghosh (2022) have recently posited the relevance of totality in considering biogeophysical processes themselves, Brenner’s corpus forcefully suggests (including in the work with Ghosh) that the lexicon of totality is ‘essential’ precisely because ‘we live in a political-economic system . . . oriented towards totalisation’ (cf. Brenner, 2017: 282). Capital itself seeks to produce a global, geohistorical totality in its own image. It ‘displays the features of the objectifying, world-making practice of the *Geist*’; and, as such, capitalist history has been more about spatial reorganisation than extension since roughly the 1880s, given capital’s effective colonisation of planetary space (see Arboleda, 2020: 18; Postone, 1993; Smith, 2008). Of course, this does not mean that all global ‘relations’ are nothing more than capitalist relations. But insofar as they are part and parcel of a shared geohistorical totality – however ‘complexly overdetermined or mediated’ – they are necessarily formed in relation to those imperatives and dynamics (see Goonewardena, 2018: 460–461). While there are many ways of describing the internally related, world-encompassing socio-spatial totality (Goonewardena, 2018: 460), Brenner effectively insists that we cannot obscure that the totality is, and long has been, a capitalist one as well.

At this stage, Brenner’s engagement with the notion of totality should be relatively

clear. And yet, what remains largely out of view is how the concept of totality might be deployed in the critical study of urbanisation itself. To gain a fuller sense of that procedure – and a fuller sense of the perspective on totality offered by another key guidepost in the ongoing debate on this problematic (see Hart, 2018) – we would do well to turn to (arguably) the most important theorist of urbanisation in contemporary Anglophone scholarship: David Harvey. Of course, in doing so, we should first recall that Harvey’s conceptualisation of the urban process under capitalism is rooted in the claim that at the core of capitalist economies is a contradiction of fixity and motion (see, for context, Brenner, 2019; Conroy, 2023a; Harvey, 1985). Capital relies upon a set of socio-spatial infrastructures – a relatively ‘fixed’ urban fabric – for accumulation to take place. And yet, inter-capitalist competition, the pressure to extract evermore surplus from labour, and the demand to increase the speed at which capital circulates, necessarily leads towards crises of overaccumulation – to instances in which surpluses of capital and surpluses of unemployed or underemployed labour sit side by side without opportunity for profitable reinvestment within capital’s established geography. To ‘resolve’ such crises, capital is driven to re-territorialise and restructure: to produce new geographies for surplus investment, capital circulation, and labour exploitation. And this, of course, entails new rounds of urbanisation, or the production of a new ‘rational landscape’ for accumulation (Harvey, 1985). The existing urban fabric – or the ‘crowning glory of past capitalist development’ – comes, in such contexts, to ‘imprison[] and inhibit[] the accumulation process within a set of specific physical constraints’ (Harvey, 1978: 124). And these constraints, according to Harvey, must be systematically destroyed and reconfigured in order to allow for the reproduction of capital.

This theorisation may not appear as hugely relevant to our discussion regarding totality in critical urban theory. However, as Harvey himself has made clear, his theorisation of urbanisation is rooted in a strong commitment to a distinctive onto-epistemology – and to a Marxist conception of totality in particular. Some of Harvey’s clearest articulations of this position are in his earliest work (see, however, Harvey, 1996), in texts like ‘Population, resources, and the ideology of science’ (Harvey, 1974) and *Social Justice and the City* (2009 [1973]). Take, for example, the final pages of the latter text. Therein, Harvey suggests that his thinking on urbanisation is rooted in the understanding that ‘reality’ is best conceived as an historically evolving ‘totality of internally related parts’, and that ‘these parts’ are best conceived as ‘expandable relations such that each one in its fullness can represent the totality’ (Ollman, 1972, quoted in Harvey, 2009: 288). In other words, Harvey rejects any logic of so-called ‘atomistic association’, endorsing a perspective that views the ‘permanences’ (as Alfred North Whitehead put it) that surround us as ‘matter in motion’, made, remade, and unmade through a process of co-constitution and mutual transformation (Harvey, 1996: 50). Further, and as Harvey also notes in *Social Justice and the City*, the socio-spatial totality of which capitalist urbanisation is a part is one which is best understood through an approach that we might call, following Piaget, ‘operational structuralist’ – or, through an approach that seeks to identify the ‘logical procedures or natural processes by which the whole is formed’, rather than identifying ‘causes’ between individual elements (Piaget, 1970, quoted in Harvey, 2009: 288). After all, to speak of unidirectional causality would be to invoke what Hegel referred to as chemism – ‘the idea that discrete, preconstituted ingredients can only affect each other from the outside’ (McNally, 2017: 100).

More plainly, these philosophical and methodological first principles help to

underscore, throughout Harvey’s corpus, that urbanisation is a constitutive moment in the making and remaking of a broader socio-spatial totality, one that has long been structured by the ‘transformation rules’ of capital itself (Harvey, 2009). The urban fabric is made through capital’s ongoing (socio-spatial) becoming – it is the crystallisation of politically mediated and highly contradictory socio-spatial processes (see, for context, Brenner, 2019: 234); processes that have long since come to structure life on a planetary scale, and which always aim towards space-time compression. And yet, quite clearly for Harvey this does not mean that urbanisation is the transparent expression of any single logic or tendency, even if he does, at times, lapse into a form of ‘ex-post facto functionalism’ (see, for context, Brenner, 2019, ch. 2; Hart, 2018). In fact, in *Social Justice and the City* in particular, Harvey approvingly cites Althusser shortly after developing an understanding of social relations that quite closely tracks an Althusserian conception of overdetermination (see also Resnick and Wolff, 2004). He writes:

each element (rather like Leibniz’s monads) reflects within itself all the characteristics of the totality because it is the locus of a set of relationships within that totality. Concepts such as labour power and surplus have to be treated, for example, as reflections of all social relationships occurring within a given mode of production. (Harvey, 2009: 289)<sup>1</sup>

And Harvey also approvingly cites Mao thereafter, in order to establish the point that the socio-spatial totality is not structured from top to bottom by a ‘single line of determination’ (see Hall, 2021: 302), but by many contradictions, both ‘within and between’ the relatively autonomous structures of the totality (see, for context, Harvey, 2009: 293). Urbanisation is thus, it would seem, a complex and conflictual moment that plays a role in mediating crises of overaccumulation

– but it is also overdetermined by its relations with the other moments in the internally related whole (see Harvey, 2009: 292).

In sum, for Brenner and Harvey the lexicon of totality – which is both directly deployed and strongly implied throughout nearly all of their work – is much more than a tool to make sense of the dynamics of capitalist (re)production. It is a fundamental concept in (non-teleological) dialectical analysis, which allows us to insist on the mutual conditioning of subject and object, part and whole. Thus, while there is little doubt that these scholars focus largely on the structuring force of capital within the socio-spatial totality – and, in the case of Brenner, on state-capital articulations and mediations (see Brenner, 2019) – it is largely incorrect to suggest that either presupposes, at the level of theoretical first principles, a socio-spatial totality that ‘imposes uniformity on heterogeneity’, or a whole that unidirectionally determines its parts (cf. Hart, 2018: 372; see also, for additional context, Sheppard, 2006, 2008). The totality at the core of their shared relational-dialectical method is best understood as ‘discovered through analysis of the mutual conditioning of the parts’ (and thus, we might add, as closer to Gillian Hart’s recent work on relational comparison than is often proposed) (cf. McMichael, 1990, quoted in Hart, 2018: 389). As Brenner puts it, following McMichael (1990), the imperative is to reject theorisations that posit ‘an encompassing structure, objectified system, or expressive totality’ and to ‘explore the relationally coevolving, mutually constitutive interconnections – and the intercontextual mediations – that form and transform’ distinctive subjectivities and spaces. And, in so doing, to discover how those subjectivities and spaces ‘simultaneously produce and relentlessly restructure the macrospatial configurations in which they are embedded’ (Brenner, 2019: 374).

## Urban theory and its outsides

As established in the opening pages of this article, recent years have seen this broad lexicon of totality, found in the work of both Brenner and Harvey – and in the work of many others as well – come under sustained scrutiny within critical urban theory, with much debate on that question spurred by recent scholarship on extended and planetary urbanisation. In the pages to come, however, I will focus specifically on a highly influential strand of theorisation that has emerged in this context, and which has engaged the concept of totality – if at times only tangentially or indirectly – in and through the notion of ‘the constitutive outside’. And yet, before proceeding down this path an immediate question must be addressed: what exactly *is* ‘the constitutive outside’? The term, as is relatively well known, traces its roots to the work of literary theorist Henry Staten, who first deployed it in his 1984 text *Wittgenstein and Derrida* to ‘refer to a number of themes developed by Jacques Derrida around notions such as “supplement”, “trace” and “différance”’ (Mouffe, 2005: 15, emphasis in original). In the years since, however, it has surely become most closely associated with the work of political theorist Chantal Mouffe, who draws on Staten’s coinage in the context of her neo-Schmittian writing on ‘the political’ and agonistic democracy (see Fisker et al., 2019; Mouffe, 2005: 14–15). For Mouffe, the notion of the constitutive outside is useful precisely because it allows her to think both ‘with’ and ‘against’ Carl Schmitt, and to propose a new conception of liberal democratic politics in the process. It allows Mouffe to underscore, in other words, that ‘the creation of an identity implies the establishment of a difference, difference which is often constructed on the basis of a hierarchy’ (Mouffe, 2005: 15).

And, going further still, to argue that this demarcation – this presupposition of a constitutive outside – suggests the ‘ever present possibility of antagonism’, and the ‘dimension of undecidability which pervades every order’ (Mouffe, 2005: 17).

But if the concept of the constitutive outside has a fairly straightforward genealogy – traceable from Staten to Mouffe – my suggestion in what follows is that this relatively circumscribed history does not exhaust every usage nor invocation of the term. Indeed, in the present context I will suggest that a broad and heterogenous group of scholars has deployed certain aspects of the above theorisation – and the phrase ‘the constitutive outside’ itself – but done so to develop a kind of ‘non-totalising’ critical urban theory, against the recent claim that there is no longer an outside to the urban world (see Roy, 2016). In other words, I will attempt to trace the lineaments of a distinctive literature within critical urban theory below, which draws relatively freely on a range of (at times divergent) theoretical traditions – from Mouffian, to Rancièrian, to postcolonial and queer theoretical traditions of urban studies, and beyond – but which are united by an acceptance that there is not only an outside to the urban world and the urban process, but a constitutive outside that demonstrates the ‘radical undecidability’ and partiality of the urban process itself; or, put differently, which demonstrates ‘the symbol of something exceeding’ the urban, and the ‘possibility/impossibility’ of its ‘positivity as such’ (Mouffe, 2000, quoted in Roy, 2016: 821). And, I will do so, with a specific focus on how the literature on the constitutive outside – which again quite often does not take the concept of totality as its primary target nor point of departure – challenges that relational-dialectical language given its emphasis on socio-spatial processes that are putatively ‘beyond and before the city, the urban and urbanisation’ – and thus

outside of the relations that constitute those processes as well (Jazeel, 2018: 411; see also, for context, Derickson, 2018; Grange and Gunder, 2019; Katz, 2021: 599; Oswin, 2018; Peake, 2016; Pratt, 2018; Reddy, 2018).

With this requisite ground clearing in view, the remainder of this section will thus turn more closely and specifically to this disciplinarily specific literature on the constitutive outside, and home my attention on two of the core claims articulated within it. These claims are: (1) that critical urban theory would do well to attend to and acknowledge those forms of difference (particularly those forms of difference that pertain to race, gender, and sexuality) that are not only not reducible to, but putatively *exceed*, the relations of capitalist urbanisation and the dynamics of global capital accumulation; and (2) the tightly linked assertion that we must not occlude those forms of political agency that are constituted *in excess of* capitalist urbanisation and the relations of capitalist society (or, the complexly overdetermined capitalist socio-spatial totality of which urbanisation is a part) (see, e.g. Katz, 2021). Again, in engaging these two claims my concern is not to further excavate their theoretical lineage, nor is it to provide a detailed account of the philosophical principles at work within this broad domain. It is, rather, to provide a close reading of these core claims within the literature on the constitutive outside in urban theory, their relation to the concept of totality as it is explicated above, and – ultimately – to suggest that they effectively lead scholars of the constitutive outside to undermine and undercut the objectives of their own critique. Put otherwise, and as will become clear, my argument is that in positing certain forms of difference and political agency as outside of the relations of capitalist urbanisation – and the capitalist socio-spatial totality itself – these theorists

effectively re-articulate entrenched tenets of capitalist ideology.

The first claim identified above – regarding the problem of difference and the outsides of capitalist urbanisation and capitalist society – is by now quite common within the literature in critical urban theory. It emerges straightforwardly from the contention that certain strands of urban theory – and, above all, the literature on extended and planetary urbanisation – have the proclivity to deny ‘an ontological space for [the] other’, occluding persistent forms of difference that complicate and confound narratives centred around, for example, capitalist urbanisation and the dynamics of global capital accumulation (see, for context, Ruddick et al., 2018: 398). And of course, in a certain sense, these arguments are well taken. We would certainly do well to avoid theorisations that posit a totality defined by the ‘unified expression of a single [economic] principle’ (Ciccariello-Maher, 2017: 9). Any conception of the socio-spatial whole that denies the relative autonomy of its parts is right to be questioned. And yet, in gesturing towards this problem of socio-spatial difference, many authors writing in and through the concept of the constitutive outside go further still. Building on that received language and theoretical lexicon, they highlight racialised, gendered, and sexualised subjects whose lives are presented not only as complicating capitalo-centric narratives, but as exceeding the dynamics of capital and capitalist urbanisation altogether, demonstrating the partiality or incompleteness of those processes (see Pratt, 2018: 565; Reddy, 2018). These are lives and forms of difference, we are told in this literature, that are not only obscured by ‘totalising theory’ – or by the claim that the urban world no longer has an outside – but that are untranslatable by the language of critical urban theory itself, and outside of the internally related totality of which capital and capitalist urbanisation are a part. Importantly, this is a claim

that is found in work that is otherwise strongly committed to relational–dialectical theorisation (see, for context, Reddy, 2018; Ruddick et al., 2018). And yet, *even in such work* we encounter the assertion that urban studies must attend to the ‘glimpses of quite otherness’ and to the forms of ‘irreconcilable difference’ that persist vis-à-vis the urban (Jazeel quoted in Pratt, 2018: 565); or, as Jazeel has put it, that it must attend to the ‘supplements’ that persist not only to urban knowledge, but to urban life itself (Jazeel, 2018).

Again, these comments surely reflect a critically important set of concerns for difference in the face of recent trends in critical urban theory. They also productively resist the tendency to privilege urbanisation ‘in the last instance’ in that discursive milieu, and come from scholars whose commitment to relational-dialectical theorisation is (quite nearly) beyond reproach (see, for context, Jazeel, 2018; Katz, 2021). And yet, insofar as specific forms of difference are positioned as *in excess of* – or as *supplemental to* – those relations that constitute the urban process itself, such scholars seem to undercut the objectives of their own critique. This reading of difference not only situates these thinkers at odds with the fully relational-dialectical lexicon of totality outlined above, but it leads them to effectively – if inadvertently – re-articulate a long-standing tradition within anthropology and geography of rendering ‘the other’ as distant; or, in other words, as disconnected from coexisting (and relationally produced) spaces, and as outside of a shared contemporaneity. These scholars – through their insistence on difference – seem to deny a shared condition of coevalness to certain subjects, which is ‘the condition for truly dialectical confrontation’ (Fabian, 1983, quoted in Massey, 2005: 69). And they do so in rather exclusive reference to those with marginal social identities (see, for context, Peck, 2015). Indeed, while this work

notes that ‘[y]es, capitalism is everywhere’ (Oswin, 2018: 544), it also quite clearly and consistently posits an ‘unassimilated and inassimilable exterior’ to the urban process and the broader totality that constitutes it (Moore, 2011, quoted in Reddy, 2018: 532), conflating – rather consistently – that exterior with ascriptive difference. These scholars present a sphere that is ultimately its own discrete space-time – a space-time of the (racialised, gendered, and sexualised) other – that remains, to use a common turn of phrase in this literature, ‘before and beyond’ the forms of relational constitution that seemingly prevail in other parts of the world and/or other social contexts (cf. Fabian, 2014).

Crucially, while it might be suggested that the above is a misreading of claims which are strictly concerned with the outsides of urban theory – or with the necessary partiality and instability of urban discourse – this is almost certainly not the case. To be sure, certain scholars, such as Oswin (2018), deploy the language of the constitutive outside quite strictly in relation to the domain of urban theory. But it is also quite clear that there are other scholars within the literature on the constitutive outside that refer to both the outsides of theory and the outsides of spatial processes, calling into question the relational-dialectical approach to totality outlined above.<sup>2</sup> In this context we might, for example, recall the recent work of Reddy, and her insistence that we not occlude ‘*capitalism’s and capitalist urbanisation’s*“undigested and indigestible, unassimilated and inassimilable exterior that falls outside its monstrously capacious system”’ (Moore, 2011, quoted in Reddy, 2018: 532, emphasis added). At stake in such a claim is, of course, the relational constitution of people and places vis-à-vis capitalist urbanisation and a broader, world-encompassing, and complexly overdetermined totality (see, for additional context, Pratt, 2018: 564;

Ruddick et al., 2018: 393). And again, it is in precisely this context that the notion of ‘the outside’ ends up propping up those epistemologies and ontologies it surely seeks to reject (see, e.g. Reddy, 2018: 531 on the imperative of relational thought). While it would be inaccurate to suggest that this literature reproduces a straightforward form of Cartesian reductionism or atomistic thought, it does, if only selectively and momentarily, quite plainly situate certain subjectivities and forms of difference as outside of the relationally constituted whole (Levins and Lewontin, 1987: 2). In the place of a fully ‘relational gestalt’, some ‘others’ are rendered not only as distant, but as almost ‘self-encapsulated’ – Jazeel’s usage of the phrase ‘manifold singularities’ is evocative here (Jazeel, 2018: 412) – given that their ‘meaning and properties’ sit before and beyond their relations to a broader whole, which is surely capitalist if also much more (cf. Taussig, 2010: 35).

This takes us to the second, tightly linked claim of scholars of the constitutive outside within critical urban theory: namely, that we must not occlude those forms of political agency that are constituted *in excess of* capitalist urbanisation and the relations of capitalist society (or, the complexly overdetermined capitalist socio-spatial totality of which urbanisation is a part). Of course, in response to such a claim, I should again underscore that there is a key kernel of insight at the core of this assertion. Even if we insist that the relations of capital now prevail on a planetary scale, we would do well to avoid forms of theorisation which suggest that a ‘capitalist whole’ – or, worse, capitalist urbanisation alone – unidirectionally governs its parts, obscuring the emergence of the whole in and through variegated (and at times oppositional) forms of subjectivity and political practice (see Hart, 2018; McMichael, 1990). And, more simply put, we would do well to reject those theoretical approaches that posit ‘local’ people

and places as merely the ‘victims of the global’, rather than as integral to the ways in which the global is ‘constituted, invented, coordinated, produced’ (Massey, 2004: 11). Indeed, as already noted above, this is precisely what relational-dialectical thought aims to do in and through the concept of totality, even if it at times fails to live up to that standard. Within this tradition, totality ‘is always there’: it is a ‘logical construct that refers to the way the whole is present through internal relations in each of its parts’, even if everything is decidedly not *equally* related to everything else within a totality (Ollman, 2003: 72; see also Harvey, 1996: 53). And when it is at its best a relational–dialectical approach allows us to maintain this commitment while insisting that it is through subjectivities and variegated forms of political action that the totality itself is produced and remade. Insofar as this literature fails to meet that demand, it should be subject to rigorous critique.

And yet, with that said, the literature on the constitutive outside in critical urban theory pushes such a critique further still. These thinkers generally suggest that we require not only more attention to subjectivity and political agency, but attention to the fact that certain forms of political practice are made *in excess of* capitalist urbanisation and the broader socio-spatial totality of which it is a part (see, for context, Katz, 2021; Kern and McLean, 2017: 408; Ruddick et al., 2018: 399). In developing this argument these thinkers do not abandon the language of relationality altogether (see, e.g. Jazeel, 2018; Katz, 2021; Reddy, 2018). But insofar as they develop this argument in and through the concept of the constitutive outside, they posit an excess at the heart of any process; ‘[t]his undecidability . . . is always a function of the symbol of something exceeding the subject’ (Peake, 2016: 222, emphasis added). And these thinkers deploy that insight to argue that (certain forms of) political practice are formed *beyond* the urban

process and its manifold determinations, precisely because those processes are ‘always incomplete’ (see, for context, Katz, 2021: 599; Roy, 2016: 813). While capitalist urbanisation and/or capitalist society may ‘seek to totalise’ themselves, these theorists suggest that there remain forms of political practice and agency that ‘compromise, redirect, mutate, [and] refuse’ those dynamics from the outside (see Reddy, 2018: 532–533). And, perhaps most importantly for our purposes, they also quite clearly associate this agential outside with racialised, gendered, and sexualised subjects. In that sense, we thus reencounter the aforementioned ‘space-time of the other’ in this context, albeit in reference to the problem of (subaltern) agency specifically. Despite the insistence of many scholars of the constitutive outside that historical difference is a ‘fundamental constituent of global urban transformation’ (Roy, 2016: 821), we continue to find the claim that certain subjects are beyond urban dynamics – and, indeed, the totality that forms and overdetermines them – such that their politics are primarily concerned with ‘protecting and producing’ their own outsides (Ruddick et al., 2018: 398).

Again, I should emphasise that this claim sits uneasily in relation to the generally quite dialectical language that informs the work of scholars of the constitutive outside; and which is present in, *inter alia*, their clearly established efforts to attend to political agency while also noting that political practice is typically forged in relation to an ‘assemblage of sites experiencing similar effects’ as a result of their place within a shared process (see, for context, Katz, 2021: 609). And, going further still, this claim also sits quite awkwardly in relation to the empirical work that informs much of this literature, from Reddy’s work on waste pickers in contemporary Bangalore, which demonstrates – in her words – ‘that Bangalore’s knowledge economy’ depends for its

reproduction ‘upon the IT city forging unequal relations with diverse actors such as waste-workers and messy connections to near/distant sites of waste disposal’ (Reddy, 2018: 535); to Jazeel’s work on Sri Lanka’s post-independence ethnic politics, and the ways in which a ‘litany of references to non-metropolitan times and spaces’ informs the production of space, and postcolonial architectural formations, in that context (Jazeel, 2018: 414); and beyond (see, e.g. Roy, 2016). What all of this work helps to underscore is that political practice is made relationally, and – as Asa Roast helps to demonstrate in his work on commoning ‘outside/within’ the urban in Chongqing – that it is ‘entangled within’ the ‘uneven production’ of the global urban fabric (Roast, 2022: 402). Put differently, what this empirical work seems to suggest is that political practice is always overdetermined – and that it is a moment, much like urbanisation itself, in a discontinuously evolving totality, a ‘site of different effectivities emanating from all the other social processes’ within the whole (Resnick and Wolff, 2004: 63).

Still, insofar as these scholars of the constitutive outside also seek to make sense of political agency as independent of urbanisation or as supplemental to it – even in the most ‘cityest of cities’ (see, for context, Katz, 2021: 599) – they necessarily reproduce a limited conceptualisation of the relationship between political practice and the socio-spatial totality. In the last instance, politics is situated on one side of an inside/outside binary, and beyond the ‘determinate constraints’ of the whole (see Brenner, 2017: 253). And, of course, because the political practices and agencies of racialised, gendered, and sexualised subjects are particularly associated with this ‘outside’, these scholars ultimately reproduce the image of the ‘space-time of the other’ once again, locating the political activities of these subjects as uniquely untouched by an urban

process (and totality) that is ‘always incomplete’.

## **The ideology of capital and the hidden abodes of urbanisation**

At this stage it should be clear that my intention is not simply to reject the literature on the constitutive outside within critical urban theory on its face. This literature raises critical questions regarding ascriptive difference, while also insisting that we not obscure the problem of subjectivity and political agency. Scholars that deploy the language of the constitutive outside within critical urban theory are also surely correct insofar as they suggest that not all social processes and dynamics are reducible to the imperatives of urbanisation nor global capital accumulation (even if they are, we would certainly counter, *related* to those dynamics in the context of a world-encompassing, overdetermined socio-spatial totality). Even a relational-dialectical approach can concede that while the capitalist ‘laws of motion’ structure the workings of the global socio-spatial whole in profound ways – and long have – a host of other relations persist, which might even constitute the ‘structure in dominance’ within a particular conjuncture (see, for context, Conroy, 2023b). Nevertheless, as I have argued above, the literature on the constitutive outside also maintains quite profound limitations, which radically circumscribe its relevance in contemporary critical urban theory, and which we would do well to address. In deploying the language of the constitutive outside as both an epistemological and ontological frame of reference – and doing so, rather consistently and specifically, with reference to racialised, gendered, and sexualised difference – this literature ends up inadvertently reproducing the image of the ‘space-time of the other’ (cf. Fabian, 2014). In other words, this literature demonstrates a

curious, if only partial, lapse into non-relational thought, and one that allows difference to be ‘neatly packed into [] bounded spaces’, situated outside of the constitutive relations of the capitalist world-system, and for coevalness to ultimately, if opaquely, be denied (Massey, 2005: 69–70). This literature poses a challenge to the received approach to totality in critical urban theory, albeit while ceding critical epistemological and ontological ground to non-relational thought.

Of course, as readers of the history of capitalism are surely aware, this precise denial of coevalness – on the basis of ascriptive difference – has long been highly functional to capital and capitalist reproduction. The ideological relegation of racialised and gendered subjects, in particular, outside of the constitutive relations of the modern world-system has long been central to the reproduction of capitalism on an expanded scale. According to the geographer Jason W Moore, when capital faces its periodic crises – in which it can no longer secure its requisite ‘cheap’ inputs, causing the value composition of capital to rise – it tends to posit, map, devalue, and expropriate new ‘external natures’, so as to replenish its spiralling vortex of accumulation and reestablish the disequilibrium in the relation between capitalisation and appropriation in the web of life (Moore, 2015). And, as Moore notes, across the history of capitalism ‘external nature’ has referred not only to non-humans but rather to a constellation of human and non-human actors. Racialised and gendered subjects, in other words, have often been conflated with non-human nature, ideologically placed outside of the constitutive relations of the modern world-system, and rendered devalued and expropriable, so as to ensure the expanded reproduction of capital and the disequilibrium between the value form and capital’s necessarily more expansive set of non-commodified socio-ecological value relations

(Conroy, 2023c). And of course, Moore is not the only source available to help us make these claims. Similar, if nonidentical, arguments have been developed by Maria Mies, Claudia von Werlhof, and Silvia Federici – all of whom Moore draws on in developing these observations – among many others.

In fact, in this context we might simply, and more broadly, point out that it was a refusal of any form of non-relational thought – and the tendency to render particular spaces and subjectivities as outside of the internal relations of the capitalist socio-spatial totality, specifically – that animated many of the pathbreaking contributions of feminists to geographical debates at the end of last century and the beginning of this one. The basic premise of many of the critiques waged against masculinist political economy in that context was that processes of racialisation and gendered hierarchisation, rather than operating as external ‘supplements’ – which, from a position of exteriority, demonstrated the ‘radical undecidability’ or incompleteness of capitalist society – were in fact internal to and co-constitutive of capitalist restructuring and macro-geographical processes like neoliberalisation. Doreen Massey (however else she may have felt about the language of totality) argued in precisely that context that non-relational representations of place and space typically followed discussions of ‘femininity’, and that representations of that sort ‘both reflect and [are] part of the constitution of, among other things, the masculinity and femininity of the sexist society in which we live’ (Massey, 1994: 259). And a parallel impulse animated Carla Freeman’s critically important work on globalisation, which sought to correct ‘formulations in which the “third-world woman” is defined either outside globalisation or as the presumed back upon which its production depends’ (Freeman, 2001: 1012). Thus, the common invocation by contemporary theorists of the constitutive outside that

certain (particularly racialised, gendered, and sexualised) people, spaces, and/or processes exist ‘before and beyond’ the internal relations of the capitalist socio-spatial totality not only re-articulates key tenets of capitalist ideology, which serve the periodic needs of capital as it seeks to map out new ‘commodity frontiers’ (see Moore, 2015). But it is also situates these scholars at odds with much foundational work within feminist geopolitical economy (to say nothing of anti-colonial and anti-racist theorisation as well) (see, for additional context, Addie, 2020: 586; Goonewardena, 2018).

And yet, to lodge this critique of the literature on the constitutive outside in urban theory, and to underscore its relation to entrenched forms of capitalist ideology, is not to recommend a simple return to the approaches to totality outlined above. Contemporary theorists of the constitutive outside have raised critically important concerns, particularly regarding the problem of ascriptive hierarchy and difference, and its occlusion in much work that deploys the language of totality in critical urban theory. And as such, it now appears as imperative to *engage those concerns*, while remaining steadfast in our rejection of any lapse into non-relational thought, and the language of ‘singularity’, ‘radical alterity’, ‘irreconcilable difference’, ‘exteriority’, and ‘excess’. We must now consider the co-determination of various patterns of ascriptive difference, capital accumulation, and capitalist urbanisation, within the context of a complex whole (see also Goonewardena, 2018). But what would such a model of dialectical thinking entail? What would it look like to think ascriptive difference, capitalist urbanisation, and the dynamics of capital accumulation in that way?

There is limited space to engage these questions here. However, several brief notes are particularly important to underscore. First, and most critically, I want to suggest

that in pursuing these questions we would do well to integrate the insights embedded in the recent work of Nancy Fraser on the ‘hidden abodes’ of capitalism (see Fraser, 2022). After all, Fraser’s primary agenda, in this recent work, is to push back against the ‘widely held view that capitalism propels the ever-increasing commodification of life as such’ (Fraser, 2014: 59). And to suggest, by contrast, the dialectical co-constitution of the value form and its often highly racialised, gendered, and ecological value relations (see Moore, 2015 for that turn of phrase); or, the notion that Marx’s so-called ‘hidden abode of production’ has historically relied upon – both presupposed and reproduced – all manner of unwaged and undercapitalised forms of racialised, gendered, and ecological work (Fraser, 2022). Indeed, Fraser describes her project – and her theorisation of capitalism as an institutionalised social order – as moving from the ‘front-story’ of exploitation to the ‘back-story’ of socio-ecological expropriation, dispossession, and theft. And she maintains that while the line between the ‘foreground’ and the ‘background’ of capitalism has shifted throughout its history – as a result of both inherent crisis tendencies and social struggle – capitalism cannot do without these background conditions (or hidden abodes), which have long been tightly linked to patterns of ascriptive difference and hierarchisation. As such, Fraser’s approach allows us to begin to see that racialised and gendered difference, in particular, are not supplemental to or excessive of the capitalist socio-spatial totality, but made through ‘different effectivities emanating from all the other social processes’ within the whole (cf. Resnick and Wolff, 2004: 63).

Of course, Fraser’s claim that certain work is located ‘behind’ the hidden abode of production might, at first glance, appear to reproduce the problematic presuppositions of the literature on the constitutive outside

within urban theory. But such a reading would miss the mark. Indeed, in staking these claims Fraser does not shy away from the dialectical lexicon of totality at all; nor does she posit an outside which renders any totality by necessity incomplete. Rather, she simply suggests a totality that is distinct from that proposed by the likes of Lukács (among others). Fraser insists that capital depends upon and reproduces spheres of expropriable work. And she underscores that insofar as these spheres are outside of the wage nexus, and (in the case of the ecological and social reproductive hidden abodes) the *direct* control of capital, they ‘do not simply mirror the commodity logic, but embody distinctive normative and ontological grammars of their own’ (Fraser, 2014: 66). Put differently, capitalism’s hidden abodes *behind the hidden abode of production* contribute to a social totality that is ‘normatively differentiated, encompassing a determinate plurality of distinct but inter-related social ontologies’ (Fraser, 2014: 67). To suggest that these spheres are ‘outside’ of capitalist society and/or ‘inherently opposed to it’ is to simply overlook the fact that the practices they contain ‘are not only sources of critique but also integral parts of the capitalist order’ (Fraser, 2014: 70). Such readings, as Postone (1993: 80) put it in another context, confuse and ‘conflate what is and what should be’. And more plainly, they obscure the profound imbrication of expropriated racialised, gendered, and ecological work in the historical–geographical evolution of capitalism.

It should be clear, by now, that Fraser’s methodological first principles are thus consistent with both Brenner’s and Harvey’s. All appear to maintain the language of reciprocal co-constitution, and the image of a totality that is neither longitudinal nor expressive. Where Fraser differs, however, is in her approach to the *process of abstraction*. As Ollman notes, the process of abstraction is the process through which scholars draw

boundaries and establish units in the relationally constituted whole, so as to ‘arrive at parts that are better suited – chiefly through the inclusion of significant elements of change and interaction – to the particular investigation’ at hand (Ollman, 2003: 5). Fraser effectively recasts the necessary relations that constitute our capitalist socio-spatial totality, bringing into relief – through a distinctive process of abstraction – capital’s reliance upon extra-economic expropriation and theft (and the historical function of ascriptive difference and hierarchisation in that context). And yet, with Fraser’s rough sketch of the capitalist socio-spatial totality in view, the obvious question that remains is: how does urbanisation and the urban process fit into this picture? Here, it seems useful, once again, to recall the scholarship of Jason Moore (2015), which has deployed many of the same conceptual manoeuvres as Fraser, but with a more acute geographical sensibility (see also Conroy, 2023c). Indeed, in this context, Moore’s core argument can be stated quite simply: capital relies not only on the ongoing expropriation of (often highly racialised and gendered) cheap inputs in order to support the foreground of exploitation, but it also tends to exhaust these background conditions of possibility leading to crises of overaccumulation. And further still, in such moments of crisis – in which capital can no longer secure cheap work from its hidden abodes – capital often attempts to re-territorialise the geography of expropriation and exploitation, *tout court*. It attempts to redraw the lines between exploitable and expropriable work and to seek out new ‘frontiers’ for both the procurement of cheap inputs and surplus investment (see, for additional context, Conroy, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c, 2023d).

This formulation is critical for our purposes because it links together the dynamic of crisis formation and re-territorialisation – which is, again, central to the making and

remaking of the urban fabric (following Harvey) – and the hidden abodes of capitalism, broadly conceived. We can now quite clearly see that the geographies of capitalist urbanisation (which stretch, we must emphasise, far beyond the city) are not only linked to capital's endemic tendency to render landscapes and geographies of accumulation obsolete – the manifestation of capital's need to perpetually produce new socio-spatial arrangements due to its internal dynamism within the sphere of production. But that capitalist urbanisation is, more fully, part and parcel of the recalibration of the relationship between exploitation and (often highly racialised and gendered) expropriation in the web of life (Moore, 2015). The urban process – conceived here as 'a medium, site, and expression of diverse, multiscalar political-economic processes' (Brenner, 2019: 253) – is a necessary moment in the remaking of the vast, multiscalar spatial matrix that guarantees the ongoing reproduction of capital, and the disequilibrium between the value form and its socio-ecological value relations (Moore, 2015).<sup>3</sup> Of course, given the planetary dominance of capital, the remaking of the extended urban fabric today hardly involves the absolute expansion of capitalist relations into untouched 'hinterlands', or the disarticulation of pre-capitalist 'lifeworlds' (Sevilla-Buitrago, 2014: 237; Smith, 2008). Rather, it simply entails a process of socio-spatial reorganisation. In other words, urbanisation in this context names the politically mediated *implosion* of infrastructural networks and socio-spatial 'configurations that have been reflexively designed to accelerate and intensify the accumulation of capital on the world market' within and beyond the city (Brenner, 2017: 220); and the internally related *explosion* of new (often highly racialised and gendered) hidden abodes of expropriated work to support these capitalised investments, within a landscape already

made in accordance with the imperatives of accumulation (see, for a more complete account, Conroy, 2023a, 2023c). The urban fabric is produced in response to crises, but our understanding of what propels those crises – and the role of ascriptive difference in relation to them – is fundamentally transformed.

At this stage, there are only two additional points to underscore in our attempt to extend the relational-dialectical lexicon of totality (as developed by the likes of Brenner and Harvey) in order to attend to the concerns for ascriptive difference and hierarchisation articulated by theorists of the constitutive outside. First, we must recall that while processes like racialisation and gender hierarchisation are *often* functional to capital – and tightly articulated to its expropriative needs, as sketched above – these processes are not reducible to the imperatives of accumulation, nor even *logically* necessary for their reproduction at the highest level of conceptual abstraction (Conroy, 2023b, 2023d). Racialisation and gendered hierarchisation are, rather, reciprocally constituted and overdetermined instances within a shared whole, and can even enter into direct contradiction with the demands of accumulation (see Resnick and Wolff, 2004). In other words, 'there is not merely a *single* invariant racism' nor sexism that must operate according to the imperatives of accumulation within all capitalist conjunctures (Balibar, 1988: 40, emphasis in original). There are, rather, historically specific and structurally constrained *racisms* and *sexisms* within distinctive contexts, which are both shaped by and constitutive of the reproduction of capitalism on an expanded scale (see Conroy, 2023b; Hall, 2021: 234). This is a point that is enabled by Fraser's most recent writing on these themes, even if some of her earlier work arguably veered towards a reductionist reading (see, for context, Conroy, 2023c). While racialisation and gendered hierarchisation have long supported capitalist expropriation, dispossession, and theft – such

that we can sensibly refer to capitalism's racialised, gendered, and ecological background conditions of possibility – Fraser has recently underscored that the precise articulation of that relation is a matter of historical specificity and conjunctural analysis (see Fraser, 2022).

Second, it is crucial to underscore that particular representations of urban space, and categories of urban analysis, function precisely to obscure urbanisation's embeddedness within a broader socio-spatial totality – and to occlude the profound interconnections of ascriptive difference and urbanisation that concern us here. Of course, the general thrust of this idea has long roots in Marxist thought. In *Capital*, Marx famously described the mystifications that emerge under capitalism not as the result of the 'manipulation of the ruling class', but rather as the result of the 'structure of bourgeois society' itself, 'and the activity that constantly reproduces this structure' (Heinrich, 2012: 181). Critical urban theory would do well to think through the mystifications of mainstream and critical urban discourse in comparable terms. Wachsmuth (2014) makes an important move in this respect insofar as he presents 'the city' as ideological. In his view, 'the city' speaks to a category of practice: it is a representation of 'the urbanisation processes that exceed it' (Wachsmuth, 2014: 75). A closely linked argument has been made by Goonewardena (2005) as well. While he does not argue that 'the city' is ideological – nor that it relates to an historically specific 'way of seeing' (Angelo, 2017) – he does suggest that 'urban sensorium' mediates ideology; it functions to bring about ideology and produce capitalist hegemony (Goonewardena, 2005: 51). For him, 'the contemporary urban sensory environment (the "sensorium") systematically obscures *not only* the structure of urban space, but also the basic workings of capitalism' (Wachsmuth, 2014: 79, emphasis in original). Despite their divergences, however, what is clear from both accounts is that we must

seek to reveal those relations that are involved in the production and experience of urban environments; and the ways in which the constitutive relations of urbanisation, and urbanisation's position within a broader totality, are obscured in mainstream and even critical traditions of urban thought.

## Conclusion

This article has proceeded in several parts. First, it sketched out the significance of the concept of totality within the scholarship of Neil Brenner and David Harvey, two key guideposts in the Marxist literature in critical urban theory and ongoing debates on these themes. Then, it addressed two of the core claims of scholars of the constitutive outside within contemporary critical urban theory, arguing that in developing their (implicit and explicit) critique of totality, such theorists effectively re-articulate key ideological tenets of capitalist society, which have (incidentally) long been subject to feminist critique. Finally, this article concluded by suggesting a revised map of the socio-spatial totality for critical urban theory. In doing so, I have insisted that Nancy Fraser's recent work on the hidden abodes of capitalism is fundamental if we are to consider the co-determination of various patterns of ascriptive difference, capital accumulation, and capitalist urbanisation; and to situate those relations within the context of a complex, and internally related, whole – a whole in which each element is understood as 'interiorising' its 'interdependence' (see Ollman, 2003: 139). The broader implications of this work for urban studies should be clear: with the above theorisation in view, I have attempted to establish the basis for a heterodox research agenda within critical urban theory, which thinks together the tightly interrelated concerns of researchers from feminist, anti-racist, ecological, and anti-capitalist traditions; and, going further still, I have sought to establish the lineaments

(if only that) of a theorisation of capitalist urbanisation itself, attuned to the ways in which the extended urban fabric mediates both capitalist exploitation and socio-ecological expropriation, dispossession, and theft. I have attempted, that is, to bring into view what might be referred to as the hidden abodes of capitalist urbanisation, and their relation to the reweaving of the urban fabric.<sup>4</sup>

And yet, in closing, we would do well to recall that this insistence on dialectical thinking in critical urban theory – and this call for a renewed approach to the question of totality in that disciplinary milieu – is not simply a matter of academic dispute and theorisation. The political stakes of these arguments are never far from view. As Fraser has rightly pointed out,

political projects that appeal to what they imagine to be capitalism's 'outside' usually end up recycling capitalist stereotypes . . . To premise one's struggles on these oppositions is not to challenge, but unwittingly to reflect, the institutionalized social order of capitalist society. (Fraser, 2014: 70)


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### Notes

1. This invocation of Leibniz should not lead us to presume that Harvey's totality is an expressive

one, defined by an 'inner essence' (see, for context, Althusser and Balibar, 1979: 187).

2. As Pratt (2018: 565) helps to point out, in the recent debate on the constitutive outside in urban theory the phrase 'the outside' has come to denote several 'perhaps interrelated concerns', including both the 'outsides' of putatively dominant strands in critical urban theory, as well as those processes 'beyond urbanisation'.
3. This argument is indebted to collaborative work with Salma Abouelhossein, Neil Brenner, and Swarnabh Ghosh.
4. These issues are pursued in much more depth in my ongoing PhD dissertation project, currently titled *The Hidden Abodes of Urbanization: The Production of Space and the Reproduction of Capitalist Society*.

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