

# From the city lens toward urbanisation as a way of seeing: Country/city binaries on an urbanising planet

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## Abstract

In recent years, three superficially distinct urban subfields have made parallel efforts to incorporate the city's traditional 'outsides' into urban research. Urban political ecology, American urban sociology and postcolonial urban studies have made, respectively, 'nature', the 'rural' and the 'not-yet' city the objects of self-consciously urban analyses. I argue that these interventions are analogous efforts to hybridise city/nature, city/country or society/nature binaries, and that they have a common cause. Each is a response to a persistent 'city lens' that remains pervasive in urban practice, and whose assumptions are an increasingly poor fit for contemporary urban environments. This lens, ground in the context of the 19th century metropolis, interprets the world through a series of binary associations hung on the basic assumption that the city can be defined against a non-urban outside. I develop John Berger's (2008 [1972]) idea of 'ways of seeing' as a heuristic for understanding this situation and, using the case of nature, show how the city lens encourages practitioners and some scholars to *romanticise*, *anachronise* or *generalise* when confronting signs of the not-city in the urban. I conclude by evaluating the limitations of hybridity as a solution to the problems of the city lens, and by outlining an alternative approach. I advocate for turning this way of seeing into a research object, and argue for the importance of an historical and process-oriented examination of the ongoing use of these categories even as critical urban scholars attempt to move beyond them.

## Keywords

city lens, country/city binaries, planetary urbanisation, urban epistemology, ways of seeing

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## Introduction: New urban geographies as a problem for urban social analysis

This paper is motivated by a series of recent debates in urban studies about the interpretation of changing urban geographies and

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their implications for urban social research. Scholars agree that urban geographies appear to have transformed dramatically over the past few decades, even if there is not yet a consensus about what the precise nature of these changes is. In the first decade of the 21st century, the United Nations declared that more than half of the world's population lived in cities (UN-HABITAT, 2006; UNFPA, 2007). By the middle of the second, the idea that we live in an 'urban age' has become a foundational ideology of our time (Burdett and Rode, 2006). And though the claim that the world is now more than 50% urban suggests a simple quantitative increase in the size and number of cities across the planet, increasingly – and contentiously – urbanists argue that these are *qualitative* changes, and ones that are unsettling many of the foundational assumptions of urban studies (Brenner and Schmid, 2015; Sheppard et al., 2013; see also Scott and Storper, 2015 and Walker, 2015).

I argue that the main axis along which urban studies' foundational assumptions have been challenged in recent years has been that of the relationship of the city to its perceived opposites, as traditionally 'non-urban' research sites and subjects increasingly intrude on urban environments. The explosive growth of 'mega-cities' in the global South has challenged the assumption that cities are necessarily products of economic modernisation and are characterised by forms of citizenship, bureaucratic management, infrastructure and services, and cosmopolitanism familiar to Anglo-Europeans (Roy, 2009). China's seasonal rural–urban commuting patterns, massive urban relocation programmes and labour practices fed by consumption in the North Atlantic show lives affected by urban processes lived at ever-greater distances from cities, suggesting that lines drawn between city and country serve, at best, administrative rather than descriptive functions

(Duhigg and Barboza, 2012; Johnson, 2013). And climate catastrophe, green design and urban agriculture have all troubled the commonsense notion that nature and cities are opposites (Cockrall-King, 2012; Newman et al., 2009; Owen, 2009).

As these sites and topics have become the subjects of self-consciously urban analyses, urbanists' responses to these empirical challenges to city/nature, city/country or society/nature binaries have been in one way strikingly congruous. Across the field, scholars have aimed to stretch, combine or migrate the old binary categories in order to unite the city with its traditional opposites – a mode of intervention I refer to throughout this paper as 'hybridity'.<sup>1</sup> Consider three recent examples from three disparate urban subfields. American urban sociologists, urban political ecologists and postcolonial urban theorists study, respectively, the rural, nature and the global South in relationship to urbanisation – each a self-evidently 'non-urban' (and ideological) research object on the basis of traditional urban/rural classifications. And each has resolved this problem in the same way: by stretching, contracting or relocating the old binary categories to accommodate new research sites and objects. As Herbert Gans (2009) has argued, American urban sociology has responded to increasingly 'illogical' systems of spatial classification based upon notions of urban–suburban–town–rural areas by 'inventing adjectives to deal with at least some of the variations' in blurry 'rurban' spaces (2009: 214). Among researchers working in urban political ecology, the untenability of city/nature and society/nature dualisms for understanding the production or composition of urban environments has led scholars to rework binary concepts as hybrids: 'socio-nature', 'urban nature' etc. (e.g. Gandy, 2002; Heynen et al., 2006). Postcolonial geographers have argued that the developmentalist assumptions embedded in North/

South and city/'not-yet' city binaries have turned Western industrial cities into the 'privileged sites' of universal experience and of 'universal' urban theory (Robinson, 2011: 3). They have responded by producing theory in the South and migrating concepts northward, 'provincialising' urban theory by bringing 'off the map' cities and their characteristic forms of urbanism into focus (Hentschel, 2015; Robinson, 2006; Roy, 2009; Sheppard et al., 2013).

The remainder of this paper is a reflection on this situation, and a contribution to the growing set of efforts devoted to denaturalising 'the city' as the privileged site of urban research and examining the consequences of this city-orientation in urban analyses (e.g. Angelo and Wachsmuth, 2015; Brenner, 2014; Brenner and Schmid, 2014, 2015; Wachsmuth, 2014). Here, I take the field's analogous attacks on binarism as an invitation to examine what urban studies is reacting *to* – which, I argue, is a set of underlying folk understandings of the city that have been challenged by new urban geographies and subsequent new research interests, the assumptions of which are an increasingly poor fit for contemporary urban environments. The central argument is that there is a hegemonic way of seeing urban environments (what I call the 'city lens') that was developed in the context of the 19th century industrial metropolis, and which continues to strongly influence how we interpret urban life. Using John Berger's idea of 'ways of seeing' as a tool for understanding this situation, I review the historical origins of the lens and the assumptions it enables; examine its uses and effects in contemporary urban environments; and evaluate the limits of 'hybridity' as a solution to this problem. I conclude by arguing that we must contend with the practical uses of these categories even as we strive to move beyond them analytically, and by outlining an alternative historical and process-oriented approach to

these categories instead. This is not an argument about how to understand the ontological nature of the contemporary city, but an effort to bring a naturalised epistemological 'lens' into focus as an object of analysis for urban studies, and to examine the effects of 'seeing city' on the interpretation of an urbanising world.

## Ways of seeing

What does it mean to speak of the city as a 'lens'? The phrase 'ways of seeing' comes from a short book of the same name by art critic and writer John Berger (2008 [1972]), which demystifies the 'masterpiece' of high art and the canonical way of seeing it, offering a more critical and democratic philosophy of art production and reception. The book's message is that ways of seeing change as the world does, and that particular representations are *artefacts*: interpretations of the world in a given place and time. In Berger's words, 'the relationship between what we see and what we know is never settled' (p. 7); a sociologist might say that ways of seeing are historical. How we see is a product of how we have been taught to see and the qualities of the environment – the properties of the things we are looking at and the modes through which we experience them. Berger's argument is about technology: the invention of the camera changed the way people saw by complicating notions of perspective and of time. These new perceptions were reflected in new forms of art; Impressionism and Cubism reflect new visual experiences and, as representations, outlast the worlds they represent. Berger's visual metaphor also helps illustrate how particular experiences ossify as *lenses* – they become generalised epistemological frameworks through which we view and interpret the world.

Berger's argument is given another layer – in a very different context – by Rogers

Brubaker and Frederick Cooper (2000), who distinguish between ‘categories of practice’ and ‘categories of analysis’, or ‘folk’ and ‘analytical’ understandings of a phenomenon. In Brubaker and Cooper’s language, the ‘city lens’ is the name I have given to the folk categories commonly used to make sense of the city, most if not all of which define the city in relationship to an ‘outside’ (countryside, rural, etc.), as I will explain below. Brubaker and Cooper distinguish between practical and analytical categories in order to argue that the former should not influence the latter. I bring it up here to underscore how fragile these distinctions are. As folk understandings become familiar, naturalised lenses for looking at the world, they threaten to influence categories of analysis in subtle ways. The project of this paper is to identify the folk understandings of the city that have become problematic for contemporary urban researchers, and to explain why this is the case by examining their relationship to current categories of practice and analysis.

In response to the changes in global urban geographies introduced above, some urbanists have suggested that urban studies requires fundamentally new categories of analysis. One set of arguments for this kind of fundamental rethinking has come under the banner of ‘planetary urbanisation’ (see Brenner, 2014). Much of this work has been focused on changing physical and economic geographies and the ontological nature of the urban, which is not the intention here. Instead, I am taking up the suggestion in this literature that contemporary forms of urbanism are also changing urban experience such that new categories for urban social analysis are required as well. Andy Merrifield, for example (also citing John Berger), has described the relationship between new objective environments and new corresponding understandings of them as a paradigm shift akin to Cubism in painting: the new

urban condition is one that ‘behooves a different *way of seeing*’, and argued that in order to grasp it we academics must literally ‘reposition our vision and re-describe what we see’ (Merrifield, 2013: 911, 912, emphasis in original). Christian Schmid (2013) has argued that new *representations* of urbanisation can, or should, correspond to new *experiences* of urbanisation, and specifically, that, in an environment of complete, or ‘planetary’ urbanisation, the urban can no longer be represented as the familiar ‘grey’ of the city in contrast to a presumably ‘green’ outside.

Merrifield and Schmid’s arguments are in keeping with a long history of interventions in urban studies on the relationship between the city as a ‘space of representation’ and as a ‘representation of space’ (Lefebvre, 1991), as I will explain further below. But it has not always been clear in the contemporary debates about urbanism what the implications of changing urban *geographies* are for urban social analysis. Are new urban geographies provoking new experiences of urbanisation, or are people still interpreting them in the old ways? If people are interpreting them anew, how would we know? And how might we characterise those changes? If the old ways of seeing are not sufficient for urban researchers, what are those old ways and how might we begin to develop new ones?

I use the idea of ‘ways of seeing’ as a heuristic to explore this situation in the world, to evaluate responses in the discipline, and to elaborate Merrifield and Schmid’s suggestion that a new way of seeing is necessary. I argue that hybridity is a response to a contradiction, and read the parallel interventions across urban subfields as demonstrations in support of Merrifield and Schmid’s point. Scholars are incorporating traditionally non-urban sites and subjects because in spite of changing urban geographies, the ‘city lens’ remains the

dominant interpretive mode in everyday urban experience and in urban practice. The goal of this essay is to make this naturalised, hegemonic way of seeing urban environments visible, to contextualise it in broader historical transformations, and to understand the problems it is causing today. In the following sections of this paper, I explore the origins of the city lens, describe its characteristic ways of seeing, and show how this interpretive framework influences urban practice and urban analysis.

### **A brief history of the city lens in urban practice and analysis**

Let us begin working towards a new lens as Berger did, by demystifying the old, with some historical perspective on the origins of the city lens and on the history of these debates in the discipline. The central contention of this paper is that is that there is a folk understanding of the city – the ‘city lens’ – whose assumptions continue to underpin contemporary urban practice, which were part of the founding assumptions of urban studies as a discipline, and which cause analytical problems for urbanists studying increasingly diversified urban research objects and geographies today. This lens carves up spatial and social difference in binary terms. It delineates the geographic space of the city against a non-urban outside, and assigns a variety of polarised social signifiers to each location. The first thing to realise is that this lens is, in Berger’s sense, a way of seeing. It is a *historical phenomenon* – a response to the texture of experience in a particular place and time. Concretely, the city lens is an inheritance of a particular sociospatial form: the industrial metropolis at the turn of the last century.

London, Paris, Berlin and New York around 1900 were the contexts in which this lens was ground and in which practical and eventually analytical categories for studying

urban environments were developed. As we well know by now, many features of these environments taken to be characteristics of the city were actually effects of industrial capitalism, such as the fact that after half a century of explosive growth, these cities had accumulated incredible wealth, cosmopolitanism and culture on the one hand, and poverty, pollution and immiseration on the other. But whether glorifying the factory or condemning the slum, people most easily and most often comprehended these new experiences in spatial terms. Social reformers described the city as a container for social problems, to which the fresh air of the countryside was an antidote. Artists painted the city as shock, density, energy, social difference, anonymity and alienation in contrast to the quiet, familial ties of rural life (e.g. Kirchner’s *Potsdamer Platz* (1914) or Mondrian’s *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1943)). As these folk understandings of the city crystallised in popular culture and public life, social scientists, encouraged by the contrasts offered up by the physical qualities of Berlin, New York, London and Chicago in the first half of the 20th century, anchored analytical categories around these polarities as well.

The industrial city appeared to either cause or correlate with the new kinds of behaviour and social organisation that were the first research objects of the first urbanists. Nineteenth-century social scientists fascinated by industrial cities’ human density, diversity, vibrancy, isolation, poverty and anomie described them in city/not-city terms. In Europe early in the century, binaries such as *Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft*, agrarian/industrial and traditional/modern became the frames through which the city’s new social forms were understood, and in which the space of the city became synonymous with each of these latter characteristics (e.g. Simmel, 1964 [1902]; Tönnies, 1963 [1887]). In the USA several decades later,

though Louis Wirth (1938) famously asked after '*urbanism as a way of life*' (italics mine) in practice, Chicago School sociologists reproduced this pairing of geographic location with social types by taking urban experience to be synonymous with the experience of the industrial metropolis, a way of life indigenous to a particular location, 'ecology' and morphology. From Berlin to Chicago, scholars treated these contrasts as transhistorical attributes of cities as particular kinds of places (large, dense, heterogeneous), rather than one of many possible historical products of urbanisation processes.

The industrial metropolis was not, of course, where these binary contrasts originated. Ideas about cities (or 'society' or 'culture') in contrast to country life, to wild nature, to the rural past, and so on, long precede and far exceed the boundaries of urban studies. These oppositions have taken different forms in different contexts, in the name of modernity, the Enlightenment or industrial capitalism (e.g. Fitzsimmons, 1989; Sayer, 1984; Smith, 2008; Williams, 1973). But in the 20th century, in the context of these cities, they were given a strongly spatial dimension, and canonised as sets of analytical categories for a nascent urban studies, they also had particularly far-reaching effects. The impressionistic oppositions exhibited by the 20th century metropolis helped define the first research object of urban studies as a unique place – the city – that could be distinguished, spatially and socially, from its non-urban outside.

Urban studies has long since rejected its founding dualisms in guises as crude as Tönnies' *Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft* or Simmel and the Chicago School's ahistoricity. In fact, just the opposite: the history of the field can be told as a story of changing answers to what Castells (1972) first termed 'the urban question'. Urbanists are always asking what a city is. A place? A collection of people? A phenomenological outcome of

other processes? And the field's constant redefinition of its research object has always reflected changes in the urban morphology, cultural and political movements, and economic processes of each moment (see Brenner, 2000). It was the rise of capitalism and the eclipse of the mercantile by the industrial city that provoked Marx, Weber, and Durkheim's first urban observations in the 19th century. Growing suburbs and metropolitan areas caused urbanists to remark on the incoherence of the city as a spatial or economic unit in the 1960s (Friedmann and Miller, 1965; Gottmann, 1961). Changing geographies of production and consumption, as well as new cultural forms such as postmodernism, were the focus of theoretical debates in the 1970s and 1980s (Harvey, 1989; Lefebvre, 2003 [1970]; Saunders, 2003 [1981]; Soja, 1989). Today, the set of recent interventions I mentioned at the beginning are at least in part a response to economic globalisation, environmental inequality and urbanisation in the global South. And in each of these instances, scholars have proposed new images of the city to more accurately reflect changing urban forms including – to name just a few – the megalopolis (Gottmann, 1961), the ecumenopolis (Doxiadis, 1968), the postmetropolis (Soja, 2000), the global city (Sassen, 2001), the urbanised planet (Brenner, 2014).

But to historicise today's epistemological interventions further, urban political ecology, postcolonial urban theory and American urban sociology are each centrally preoccupied with some version of *hybridity*. Each is similar in that their goal is to incorporate traditionally non-urban research sites and subjects into self-consciously urban analyses, and that they accomplish this by uniting the city with one of its outsides – nature, the rural, the not-yet city. They are also far from the first to notice that city/not-city binaries are a problematic representation of actually existing urban geographies.

As early as 1961, Jean Gottmann remarked of the Northeastern Seaboard that ‘in some aspects we may find this urban region much “wilder,” and in others much more “civilized” than would be expected ... urban people and activities have taken on more rural aspects and traditionally rural pursuits have acquired urban characteristics’ (1961: 217), and called for an analysis starting with a ‘new symbiosis integrating what used to be “urban” and “rural”’ (1961: 216; see also Friedmann and Miller, 1965; Saunders, 1986). Rather, today’s interventions are interesting because they are evidence of the fact that *in spite of this history* binary ways of seeing urban environments remain hegemonic in urban practice and are still the folk understanding of the city against which contemporary urban scholars fight.

In other words, even if critically minded urban scholars agree that the large, dense, heterogeneous, nucleated city distinguishable from its rural hinterland is at best an ideal type of urban environment, and even if the discipline has come very far from relying on city/not-city binaries as explicit analytical categories, in the world and in urban practice these binaries remain the dominant ‘folk’ way of understanding of what cities are and what urbanism is. The practical associations that became the hegemonic means through which to understand city life in the 20th century are reproduced to the extent that the city remains, more subtly but quite powerfully, the site of shocks and exposure, collective politics, public space and culture – against the country, or nature, as the site of community, familiarity or tradition. The problem today is that this set of assumptions is causing problems for urban studies not just *directly* – regarding disciplinary debates about ‘the urban question’, or how we understand ‘the city’ or ‘the urban’ as an object of analysis upon which most recent publications have focused – but

*indirectly*, regarding how people, places and things that could be intuitively mapped onto those binaries are interpreted in the popular imagination.

### **How the city lens sees: Romanticism, anachronism, universalism**

The city lens is a reification of a historical experience of the city turned into an interpretive frame, which people use to make sense of a variety of situations in the world today. Here, I outline this lens’ basic operational logics relatively abstractly – describing what happens when the city lens gets turned on the world – before turning to concrete examples of the city lens in action in the following sections.

Ironically, the city lens’ binary framework is not too *rigid*, but too flexible. The variety of relational opposites (rural/urban, society/nature, *Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft*, etc.) that are commonly hung on the city/not-city as a spatial distinction are unstable along two dimensions. First, as mentioned above, there is slippage between ‘categories of practice’ and ‘categories of analysis’ in their use (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000). Second and more problematic is their transposability. Because, in Andrew Sayer’s (1984: 283) words, as ‘everyday’ concepts country and city carry such a ‘heavy affective load’, they allow a great degree of movement between associated meanings and signifiers.

I will return to John Berger for an illustration. Berger’s (2011 [1980]) ‘Why look at animals’ offers the following contrast:

A peasant becomes fond of his pig and is glad to salt away its pork. What is significant, and is so difficult for the urban stranger to understand, is that the two statements in that sentence are connected by an *and* and not by a *but*. (p. 7)

Much like Raymond Williams' (1973) *The Country and the City*, this sentence is part of a larger argument about the transformations of modern capitalism and changing relationships to, and perceptions of, nature and animals that have been a product of them. Also much like Williams' exploration of the powerful ideas and feelings, positive and negative, which have 'gathered' on the concepts *country* and *city*, purpose of the contrast between the 'peasant' and the 'urban stranger' is to shorthand this historical transformation through two subject types. This pair of figures, just like this pair of space-times, is so affectively 'loaded' that they are both very evocative and have a special utility. By drawing on these everyday associations, Berger can describe a historical transformation that is multi-dimensional, and in one phrase can conjure a whole set of changing social, spatial, economic, political forms: spatio-temporal location (country to city), form of economic organisation (agrarian to industrial), form of social organisation (community to anonymity) and normative values (good community and bad anomie). This net of associations makes these useful as literary devices; Berger can use the peasant or the urban stranger as characters in a fable, highly symbolic, recognisable tropes that he can assume will be consistently interpreted.

But the density of associated everyday meanings also makes them vulnerable to easy misreading. Sayer (1984: 283–284), drawing on Mary Douglas, notes that these associations are 'leaky', and that there is 'spillage' in their use: 'people appeal to equivalences and metaphors' in their interpretations based on these categories, such that rural life could signify simplicity or community or leisure or tradition. We can also add (1) that people are willing to take the presence of one-half of one of these pairs as an indicator of others, such that a peasant looks like agrarian production, which looks

like the countryside, which suggests strong community ties, which implies an unalienated relation to nature, and so on, and (2) that we associate not just spaces and times, but particular *materials and subjects* with these binaries, assuming that from the presence of any one indicator we can infer others.

The connotative power of these sets of relational opposites also makes it very hard to resist the representational significance that signifiers of urban and rural take on. Through the city lens, particular sets of material referents (the superficially natural, 'green' elements of the built environment: trees, grass, plants, animals – or the superficially social 'grey' of buildings, roads, industry and infrastructure) come to be associated with corresponding social characteristics (green means community; grey means anomie). These associations are assumed to travel in families, such that we can move between the second-order assumptions about social types and sensibilities that have 'gathered' on each term to make sense of these material signifiers as well as places themselves (green means not just community, but also direct social relationships). It is with this in the background that we can 'read' urban greening projects as a social improvement projects, and while when we see a (green) community garden in a city we may not think explicitly about 'nature', or 'the country', or see gardeners as peasants, analytical questions of social organisation – community, of tight social ties, of dense networks – are likely to come to mind, and we are likely to associate normative goods with the space itself and its presence in the city.

Put more schematically, the city lens has three characteristic moves. First, it forgets that these binaries are shorthands for sets of complex and variable transformations and treats them as *transhistorical* categories instead. This is in part enabled by a second assumption, which is that these relational

opposites are *transposable* and that families of social characteristics correspond to particular materials and locations such that from the presence of one signifier (whether subject type, materials, social form, etc.) any number of the signifieds can be inferred. Finally, third, it tends to overlay a set of uninterrogated *normative* assumptions onto them.

Applied in social life, these logics produce some familiar patterns. With the above explanation of the work that these categories do in the background, let us take as an example what happens when people wearing a city lens confront intruding signifiers of the traditional not-city in one material form: practical, everyday signs of 'nature' (green space, gardens and animals) in cities. It should be noted that these relational opposites, as well as being leaky, have changing normative valences – the not-city can be threatening wild nature or a pastoral idyll – so many possible conclusions that could be drawn from different configurations of assumptions. But to maintain our interrogation of the Anglo-European city lens' favourite biases, and drawing on the critiques made by the three interventions that interest us here, the city lens' most familiar effects include:

*Romanticism.* Perhaps the most common logical move that can be made by associating the not-city's normative goods with particular materials, romanticism is all-too familiar to urban scholars of 'nature' (as a material research object) and 'community' (as a social form) in contemporary American urban culture as well as American urban sociology. While nature of course can be imagined to lie outside the social entirely (one of the main ideologies urban political ecology seeks to critique), in an urban context (usually meaning *in the city*) nature is very often then paired with social associations – the normative ideal of community (as the small-scale, homogeneous, small town) and the interactive norm of face-to-face relationships. Because the *material presence of green space*

becomes an indicator of a particular social form, it can also be seen as the bearer of particular values. We see this in policy, in planning, in community development and in the community garden, as urban food movements recover values through food culture, as the green city is imagined to promise alternative social worlds, or as urban 'greening' and agriculture is used to fix urban social problems, as I will describe in detail in the following section.

*Anachronism.* With the opposite normative valence, material signs of nature in the urban overlain read through Chicago School developmentalism become signals of the 'not yet' rather than the bygone (Robinson, 2002: 532). This move is all-too familiar to scholars of the global South or those working in a comparative urban framework and, as they have ably demonstrated, is a long shadow of Chicago School urbanism's 'parochialist' origins, characterised by Jennifer Robinson as a dual uptake of ideas about Western modernity and European developmentalism which turned into an understanding of urban experience as 'modern' counterposed against folk/culture/tribal 'tradition' (Robinson, 2011: 4; Escobar, 1995). Thus goat herders in Dhaka look like pastoral subjects in urbanising spaces, rural anachronisms in a field of city – things that would/should/will disappear on the march to city rather than taking on the rustic charm that urban chicken- and bee-keepers do among urbanites in the USA. The seeming inevitability of Romania's recent ban of horse-drawn carts on main streets (Chamberlain, 2008) is analogous to the (more subtle) way that, these scholars have argued, certain urban conditions and behaviours – particularly informality and kinds of 'making do' – are assumed to be ones that will disappear with increasing urbanisation rather than being modes of urban living characteristic of particular places (Roy, 2009; Roy and AlSayyad, 2003).

*Universalism.* Assumptions about the ahistoricity and transposability of country/city binaries allow movement between various spaces and materials; they also allow movement across time. Historical analyses may project these binaries *back* in time, reading spaces, times and materials as indicators of the same (contemporary) forms of knowledge or subjectivity or social consciousness, seeing them as evidence of familiar urban categories rather than querying how and where such understandings emerged. I have observed this, for example, in research on industrial workers' housing in Germany's Ruhr region (Angelo, 2013). Through the city lens and its family associations, social historians were able to describe a new industrial bourgeoisie as 'feudal' (like Berger's 'peasant', defined by a shorthand that locates them in space and time and social relationships) based on a series of behaviours and decisions about the material environment, namely factory dwellings that appeared to reproduce rural ideals – small scale, culturally homogeneous, with private green spaces. Historians have interpreted mine and factory owners' decisions to manage their employees through these forms of housing as anti-modern, rather than contemporary responses to a modern social formation, and the presence of green space was presented as evidence in support of the point. The mistake here is universalism – the assumption that these categories exist statically in time rather than emerge historically, and that the burden of proof is evidentiary rather than explanatory.

### **The city lens in practice: Romanticising 'nature'**

To elaborate one example, let us now examine one of the most familiar and contemporary examples of the city lens in action more closely: the romanticisation of signs of 'nature' in the urban. Among practitioners

and the public, a pervasive discourse of 'improvement' accompanies efforts to 'green' cities, including urban agriculture, community gardens, and the creation of recreational parks and waterfronts. This interpretation of the addition of everyday forms of nature to cities is a normative judgement based upon and made possible by a city/nature binary. If cities are without nature, green space can be added. If cities are imagined to be crowded, grey, dense, dirty places (in implicit contrast to the countryside outside), the addition of green space can be, and usually is, evaluated as good. Detroit, for example, is one of the USA's most troubled urban areas, and one in which its tens of thousands of abandoned and dilapidated buildings have become the primary symbol of the city's decline. The solution that has emerged to cope with this situation is to demolish the crumbling buildings and replace the empty parcels with green space – in spite of the great expense and public health risks of exposure to lead and other toxins (Thompson, 2015). What is so striking about the plan, and what accounts for its popularity, is that the new, 'green' landscape allows Detroit's economic devastation to be recast and reimagined as pastoralisation and renewal. A recent *New York Times* photographic essay on Detroit featured aerial photographs depicting vacant lots dotted with trees, seeded as lawns or used for community gardens or agriculture (MacLean, 2014). The photographer's accompanying description is as clear an example as any of the city lens in action when he explains how he interprets Detroit's greening as a symbol of hope for the future:

From the air today, the decline appears to be slowing. The spaces once covered in rubble are cleared and mowed. Open green spaces, along with new community gardens and orchards, look almost bucolic against the downtown skyline. From my plane, I sense the potential for resurgence in these areas. I can see how

neighborhoods could become more walkable and support mixed-use development, with new shops, public transit and nearby parks and schools.

While there are real physical, social and ecological reasons to want more parks and green spaces in cities, the use of nature to 'improve' cities is an example of how these folk associations (1) drive particular interventions in the built environment and (2) shape justifications for and interpretations of them in urban practice. The associations of the city lens enable this photographer to interpret Detroit's post-demolition geography as bucolic and full of potential in spite of greening's risks and the city's continued economic devastation. I would go so far as to argue that the popularity of greening as an urban development strategy is *itself* a product of this implicit contrast to the city. But at the very least, 'greening's' almost universally broad appeal also shows the ubiquitousness of this interpretive lens: making a 'farm' out of an industrial city is an urban development narrative that, across ideological differences, corporations, communities, foundations and government can all get behind (Morgan, 2015: 1386). The same lens also made parks and green spaces a powerful element of former Mayor Michael Bloomberg's 'luxury city' agenda in New York City (Loughran, 2014), as the promise to improve access to nature effectively stifled opposition that might have been inflamed by more transparently 'social' interventions – such as the construction of luxury housing or the controversial (and eventually failed) West Side Stadium proposal. Detroit's 'ruin porn' is an example of a romantic interpretation of nature in the city with the opposite normative valence (Millington, 2013): the pathos of industrial landscapes repopulated with animals, plants, and 'feral' people and buildings is an instance of nature 'reclaiming' the social.

Moving from urban practice into urban analysis, we see the same romantic view of nature in the interpretation of everyday forms of green space, parks and gardens in cities. Very often, these are treated not just as *materially* opposed to conventional understandings of the quotidian textures of the city, but also as socially and politically outside of it. Such blatantly unreflexive romanticism is rare among critical urbanists (especially those with nature as their research object), but one recent example in social science is James Gibson's (2009) *A Reenchanted World: the Quest for a New Kinship with Nature*, which argues that we can repair the social by adding nature (Angelo and Jerolmack, 2012). The sentiment is also alive and well in work by scholar-practitioners. To return to the example of urban agriculture, Adams and Hardman (2014, quoting Hou, 2010: 15) have noted in this journal that guerrilla gardening is very often celebrated as a 'resistant' activity that can 'effect change in hegemonic landscapes', and that the gardens themselves are more generally assumed to be 'free spaces' in cities, that remain outside of social relationships and politics. Morgan (2015: 1385, quoting McClintock, 2010: 202) has also observed that urban agriculture is often imagined to help 'redress social and ecological alienation in capitalist societies by helping to "re-establish a conscious metabolic relationship between humans and our biophysical environment by reintegrating intellectual and manual labour"'. And Draus et al. (2014) note that organisations advocating for urban agriculture often do so based on the premise that 'it will promote social cohesion, individual responsibility, social justice' and other intangible social outcomes (2014: 2524). Such views of urban gardening – which each of these scholars critique – are examples of just the problematic inferences that the city lens makes it possible to make: that inserting nature into cities can be understood to create

spaces free of traditionally 'urban' – rationalised, profit-maximising, anonymous – social relationships (romanticism); that gardening and urban agriculture can reproduce unalienated forms of work characteristic of rural or pre-industrial societies, by providing a phenomenal experience of reintegrated intellectual and manual labour (anachronism); and that nature spaces can be celebrated because they build community – in spite of, or especially, across social and economic differences – because the benefits gained through interaction with nature are the same for everyone everywhere (universalism). These assumptions are not just general instances of a naïve view of nature, but a specific conception of nature's role *in the city*, in contrast to the city, and in relationship to the politics and social relationships of a city.

Each of these examples illustrates how the city lens' folk categories underpin urban practice and social analysis not specifically concerned with disciplinary questions about what counts as urban and how it should be studied. And though there is nothing necessarily wrong with such ad hoc use of these distinctions, the examples do show how romanticising nature in cities affects the distribution of resources and political outcomes. Among practitioners, the assumption that the materials commonly called 'nature' (grass, trees, flowers) bring or encourage traditionally non-urban values and social attributes (health, hope, community renewal) means that efforts to 'green' Detroit have been able to secure large amounts of public and private funding without consideration of other solutions, and have contributed to the sense that 'decline is slowing' even in the absence of substantive economic investment. In New York and elsewhere, it has meant that the differential social benefits and outcomes of efforts to create 'green' and sustainable cities have been less readily apparent and less quickly interrogated.

## Hybridity and its limits

Moving from categories of practice to categories of analysis – or from those working from behind the city lens to those self-consciously trying to move beyond it – what we see more often in critical geography and urban studies is a healthy and robust critique of these impulses, repeatedly resolved with an epistemological intervention that I have characterised as 'hybridity'. As I began this paper by arguing, urban political ecology, American urban sociology and postcolonial urban studies have each made analogous critiques of binarism – objecting to urban/rural, society/nature, city/not-yet city binaries that designate 'urban' and 'non-urban' research sites and subjects. Returning to these three interventions now, we can see that it is just this family of associations to which the three interventions are objecting. They are resisting a universalising assumption that tight social ties or patterns of conspicuous consumption belong to country or city, respectively; anachronistic readings of Southern cities' informal economies or inadequate public services as not-yet city; and romantic notions such as the idea that 'returning' nature to the city will help save the city.

Beyond these three subfields, a strikingly large amount of contemporary urban research is similarly organised around the question of how people and places meet or violate binary expectations for cities or not-city spaces. The critics of romantic views of urban agriculture cited in the previous section, for example, also explain that city/nature is false dichotomy, and advocate for some kind of union. Morgan (2015) argues that food has been a 'stranger' to urban planning because it is understood to lie 'outside' the city, and sees urban agriculture undoing these binaries by falsifying this assumption. Like urban political ecology's 'socio-nature', a recent special issue of *Urban*

*Studies* calling for a ‘social-ecological resilience framing’ in urban governance notes that ‘tropes’ of the urban ‘apply all across the landscape’ (Beilin and Wilkinson, 2015: 1214). The field of ‘peasant studies’ has begun to self-consciously deploy phrases such as ‘peasants in the city’ and the ‘urban peasant’; making ironic use of these distinctions the entry point to discussing how the migration and labour patterns of their traditionally non-urban research objects become part of urbanisation and change it (e.g. Overton, 2001).

But if there is broad agreement among urbanists that these binaries are problematic, the most common way of addressing them is by continuing to play off these recognisable associations. In this way scholarship continues to use these binaries as foundational contrasts even as it explicitly rejects them. Let us take one article in Beilin and Wilkinson’s special issue as an example, which concerns ‘amenity migrants’ (also known as ‘rural gentrifiers’), and examines what happens after urbanites, seduced by the romance of rural life, migrate to the countryside (Beilin et al., 2015). The case study shows inhabitants of these spaces making sense of the new migrants in city/not-city terms. One long-time resident is quoted as saying that ‘it’s funny though as they come out here and don’t want to be involved ... [they want] all these urban things [like street lighting, guttering, etc.] as well as seclusion’ (2015: 1313). Or in other words, urban–rural migrants continue to have ‘urban’ expectations for comfort and amenities, while not living up to the spirit of community that ‘should’ accompany the countryside. The researchers draw on the same folk understandings of the city as their subjects when they evaluate migrants’ behaviour in terms of whether or to what extent they conform to activities and social behaviours expected in each kind of space. Though the authors note that the peri-urban

‘is neither clearly “rural” nor definitively “urban”’ (2015: 1306), they also remark that amenity migrants are strangers in the countryside because they consume the landscape rather than contributing to its production (2015: 1314).

The effect of continually playing off these binaries is that contemporary urban geographies are not described (or, we can thus imagine, *perceived*) as qualitatively different kinds of urban environments – requiring an analytical paradigm shift – but as signifiers of country or city in the wrong places, or as apparently paradoxical mashups of these binary pairs: ‘green city’, the ‘urban peasant’, the ‘rural gentrifier’. And because such terms rely on the city lens for their interpretive efficacy, its binary folk categories still govern the patterns of expected social difference laid out. As a result, hybridity has two major limitations.

(1) It is too targeted given the ubiquity of the city lens and the scope of its effects. Though each of these interventions corrects one specific misinterpretation that is a product of the city lens (e.g. urban political ecology’s argument that cities are not without nature, but constitutively ‘socio-natural’ environments), these categorical divisions remain deeply embedded in urban studies’ epistemology more generally. This is indicated by a number of biases and blind spots characteristic of the field. For example, urban studies’ latent developmentalism, anthropocentrism and arbitrary geographical circumspection that the critiques introduced in the first section of this essay target are not only products of naïve Euro-centrism – each also correlates with, and draws upon, one city/not-city binary pair. Developmentalism: the city/not-yet city. Anthropocentrism: city/nature. Arbitrary geographical circumspection: urban/rural binaries. Another tell is urbanists’ preoccupation *with* the city. David Wachsmuth (2014) has written about the ‘tenacity’ of the

idea of the city as a bounded form; together we have described 'methodological cityism': the fetish for studying the city as the privileged site of urban processes that may extend far beyond it (Angelo and Wachsmuth, 2014). An underlying city/not-city epistemology contributes to reproducing urban studies' default research object as 'the city' as a site in contrast to a putatively non-urban outside (Brenner, 2013: 97) – and may also help explain the field's fierce resistance to the suggestion that 'urbanisation' might be a more appropriate one. But urbanists' methodological preference for a particular spatial location is not surprising; it corresponds with, and reinforces, an epistemological frame that carves up the social world in binary terms. This binary epistemology is also reproduced outside of urban studies, manifesting as disciplinary gaps between 'urban' and 'rural' studies (Smith, 2011), urban studies and 'development' studies (Robinson, 2002), and sociology and ecology (Dunlap and Catton, 1994).

(2) Hybridity is a solution poorly equipped to handle the ongoing physical transformations of urban space. Today's interventions are motivated by urbanists' shared interest in the dramatic expansion of urban environments and a real desire to study these extended geographies *as urban*, even as debates rage about what the nature and implications of these changes are. But through the city lens, the breakdown of the expected correspondence between spatial location and each of these binary pairs is experienced as 'matter out of place' (Douglas, 2002 [1966]): the most readily available interpretation of traditionally non-urban sites and subjects is still as signs of the not-city in the wrong places, such as the 'urban peasant'. It seems fair to assume that more and more cities will look less and less like the traditional Euro-American metropolis in the coming decades – and, therefore, that the city lens will provide a less and less

adequate representation of these spaces and people. In North American and European cities, new geographies will continue to be experienced as the increasing intrusion of the city's perceived opposites on 'urban' analyses; outside of them, the normative overlay of these second-order assumptions will still make it very hard for researchers not to read spaces and subjects as more or less urban, political, communitarian or cosmopolitan, and so on, based on the presence or absence of various city or non-city signifiers.

Evidence of these limitations is already visible today. For example, Monika Krause (2013) has argued, to good effect, for the study of the 'ruralisation' rather than the 'urbanisation' of the world, both to counter the 'imperialism' of the urban and to analyse contemporary sociospatial transformations 'from the perspective of that which is supposedly acted upon or being transformed' (2013: 233). It is true that non-urban often fades problematically from view in the debates about urbanisation. But does encouraging a view of subsistence agriculture among squatters in Maputo, Africa, as 'the rural in the urban', just as we already characterise suburbanites in the countryside as the urban in the rural, get us to the 'broader understanding of variation in socio-spatial arrangements' for which Krause rightly calls (2013: 235)? Instead of moving us away from the problematic urban/rural framing, it seems more likely to have the opposite effect: putting scholars of the non-urban in the position of contesting the problematic associations that so often accompany a 'rural' understanding of their research objects. This is exactly the form of anachronism I described above – the idea that by being characterised as 'rural', Maputo's squatters are not only somehow less urban, but also less modern, less developed and less rational. Postcolonial urban studies' need to demonstrate that informality

is a mode of urbanism characteristic of the global South rather than an earlier developmental 'stage' is an example of just this kind of perpetual battle. Having established the basic grounds for research on Southern cities outside of a developmentalist or exceptionalist framework, they must still fight the assumption that poor people's infrastructure, education, sanitation and food provisioning in Mumbai or Johannesburg are products of contemporary inequalities rather than leftovers from rural life or consequences of migration from countryside. Flipping from one side of the binary to the other is important to bring the 'non-urban' into focus, but little to break us out of the binary way of seeing that was the impetus for these interventions in the first place.

### **From the city lens toward urbanisation as a way of seeing**

So what does an alternative look like? As Colin McFarlane (2010: 728) has put it, 'despite the fact that many urbanists do not themselves subscribe to these categories, and despite efforts to blur notions of First/Third, Developed/Developing, or North/South, these categories have an ongoing performative effect – they are stubborn, and are not easily written away'. The bulk of this paper has been devoted to illustrating this fact in urban practice and in urban research. The stubbornness of city/not-city binaries suggests that while striving to move beyond them analytically, we must also contend with their ongoing use. I conclude by proposing another response to these frustrations than hybridity, which is to turn these binaries into a research object, and study their social utility, legibility and consequences.

Detroit, for example, is a clear demonstration of the 'performative effect' of city/nature binaries. A romantic view of nature makes it possible to fix Detroit through 'greening', as much or more than economic

reinvestment, and puts greening and agriculture projects front and centre in narratives about the city's renaissance. The challenge is to account for the power of this idea as something other than a product of 'modernity' or Detroit policymakers' naïveté and to understand the consequences of its deployment on Detroit's post-industry redevelopment programme.

From the perspective developed in this essay (and as I have elaborated at more length elsewhere (Angelo, 2015)), the explanation looks something like this. The bundle of transformations we describe as 'urbanisation' – the shift from an agrarian to industrial economy, increasingly socially heterogeneous milieus, a norm of market-based, rather than subsistence-based livelihoods – have produced a variety of environments with new and different experiential selectivities. In the 19th century, one of these was the industrial city, characterised by the size, density and heterogeneity so well documented by the Chicago School, and the social consequences of which were so carefully teased out by Simmel, Durkheim and others. This city was a place where people suffered increased exposure to environmental 'bads', decreased access to environmental 'goods', and experienced nature as a place for leisure rather than labour. As urbanised environments and market economies expanded throughout the 20th century, more and more people had these types of experiences of nature – not only in large metropolises. These experiences had epistemological consequences. First, they contributed to the production of a hegemonic understanding of urban environments as opposed to nature, as outside nature. They also contributed to the emergence of an idea of nature as an 'indirect' good – something beneficial not for subsistence purposes, but for the social, moral and psychological benefits it delivered. Once available in the public imagination, this way of seeing nature travelled. It became 'modular' (Anderson,

2006): widely replicated, legible far beyond the boundaries of industrial cities, and frequently called upon when making decisions about the built environment. This way of seeing constitutes a shared social imaginary that I have called 'urbanised nature' (Angelo, 2015).<sup>2</sup> Most importantly in this context, this imaginary has enabled a set of practices: it makes it possible to 'improve' cities by 'greening' them. Urbanised nature allows people to act with the naturalised belief that everyone benefits from the addition of nature, and conditions audiences to receive greening interventions as such.

The methodological point to take beyond the case of nature is that ways of seeing are outcomes of processes, rather than reactions to places. In arguing that urban studies still lacks an 'urban epistemology', proponents of planetary urbanisation have advocated for a shift from the city as a site to *urban processes* as the proper research object of urban studies (Brenner, 2014; Brenner and Schmid, 2015). This reorientation has been modelled concretely cartographically (Brenner and Katsikis, 2013; Diener et al., 2005), though increasingly, scholars are describing urbanisation in terms of extra-city economic and geopolitical transformations (Gustafson et al., 2014; Whitehead, 2013). The type of explanation I have outlined in brief above extends this type of argument into the realm of social knowledge and social experience, and is a way of elaborating Merrifield and Schmid's assertions that contemporary urban geographies have changed such that fundamentally new ways of seeing are necessary. Rather beginning with the city-as-social-experience, I am arguing that we can actually trace the forms of social knowledge that changing environments produce, and map their movement and use over time.

Pursuing this type of analysis involves departing from current approaches in two main ways.

First, it requires studying *urban imaginaries* in addition to *imaginaries of the urban*. Examining the urban as a lens, as a way of seeing lots of things, means looking not just at how city is perceived, but how things *other than the city* are understood through it. Just as debates in the field remain inordinately focused on the question of the 'city' or 'urbanisation' rather than on the spaces that it is affecting or acting upon, such phenomenological or perception-oriented approaches have focused primarily on conceptions of the city itself (Goonewardena, 2005; Lynch, 1960; Wachsmuth, 2014). But looking at the city to see the effect of urbanisation on social categories is a bit like looking at the sun. We might also look *away* from the city and towards other categories that are also constructed by urban processes. This means abandoning the city not just as a container or naturalised research object, but even conceptions of it as the primary thing we urbanists want to know about.

The researchers who most often confront the forms of social knowledge created by urbanisation are those whose research objects are traditionally constructed in opposition to the city – exactly those scholars of nature, the rural and the global South whose efforts have provoked this examination. Among scholars of nature, urban imaginaries – imaginaries shaped in and through urban processes – have received some direct attention. Huber and Currie (2007) have attempted to construct a specifically 'urban' imaginary of nature; Brewster and Bell's (2010) discussion of a dominant public 'out in nature' frame, though they do not explicitly query its origins, is clearly a product of these oppositions. In both cases, the 'nature' in question is not understood to be 'urban' because of its location in a city, or because it has been physically transformed by capital. Rather, as in the case of the photographer's account of Detroit, each is taken as an

instance of nature as interpreted by subjects whose entire epistemological orientation has been shaped by urbanisation.

Second, it requires adopting a historical perspective on the emergence and transformation of categories of understanding. Rather than taking the city lens as a 'categorical commonality' belonging to those who inhabit particular spaces or subject positions, we can approach it as something more like 'historically variable relational embeddedness', much as has been suggested for the study of categorical markers of identity, such as class, nation, ethnicity or sexuality (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000: 11). Just as we study the production of objective forms of nature through capitalist urbanisation (Smith, 2008), we can study the production of subjective ways of seeing nature – e.g. as outside the city, and something that can be used to 'improve' the city. Understood in these terms, the questions become: What produced this way of seeing? What have been its effects?

The city lens is a historical condition. Being able to decipher the world in terms of city/not-city binaries, is, like class-consciousness, 'something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened)' (Thompson, 1966: 8). It is a form of social knowledge and social consciousness that is an outcome of a process, rather than a state entered on the day territory X reached population Y. Much as Thompson (1966) did with class, as Brubaker and Cooper (2000) have recommended with nationalism and as Scott (1991) has shown with identity, we can look for the emergence of these self-understandings and understandings of the world in different places and times. Just as reflecting on the experience of Berlin in 1900 or Chicago in 1960 helps us understand fairly well where the city/not city epistemology came from, a study of Johannesburg or Mumbai reveals that what is produced through global uneven development is not just different kinds of cities, but entirely different logics and modes of subjectivity.

Beyond cataloguing the diversity of ways of seeing the city, we could study how different ways of seeing emerge from different places, among people with different power, resources and knowledge.

## Conclusion

Today's disciplinary debates about how to understand the nature of contemporary urban transformations are motivated by a basic common problem: the boundaries of the discipline are moving ever-farther from the 19th century European city as urban geographies, research interests and political commitments continue to expand and diversify. This paper has offered a historical perspective on this situation, arguing that though that metropolis is no longer the characteristic form of urbanism, an understanding of the city and its associated oppositions derived from it remain a dominant interpretive frame – and that it is against these folk understandings of the city that urbanists' interventions are directed. Its goal has been to highlight the limitations of the city as a 'way of seeing' in contemporary urban environments, and to explicate the social and representational dimensions of what sometimes appears to be simply a debate about interpreting geography.

I concluded by arguing that in addition to attempting to move beyond these binaries through hybridity, we might also study how urbanisation produces environments and experiences that create categories of understanding that are durable across subsequent changes. As the set of critiques from urban political ecology, postcolonial urban studies and American urban sociology suggest, and as the case of Detroit reaffirms, the city lens still has considerable affective power and utility. This paper has not been a study of the *effects* of changing urban geographies on ideas about nature, or the global South, or the rural in relationship to the city – I have

not attempted to gauge their future durability. But my conjecture, as a scholar of nature, is that they have so far remained undisturbed. An urbanising planet has not produced a situation in which people can no longer use nature to fix the social. If anything, the opposite appears to be true. The ubiquitousness of green urban solutions to global environmental problems suggests that these tacit beliefs have intensified rather than dissolved. Which is why, I argue, it is important to study these ways of seeing even as we strive to move beyond them.

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### Notes

1. I use the term ‘hybridity’ quite literally in this paper: to describe parallel efforts to combine two traditionally opposed terms. I do not mean to suggest that urban political ecology, postcolonial urban studies or American urban sociology share specific ontological claims or methodological approaches beyond this analytical manoeuvre. While efforts to hybridise city/not-city binaries bear some similarities to other recent efforts to rethink the city as relational, hybrid and networked rather

than a static, bounded, human-dominated place – Actor-Network-Theory and ‘assemblage’ urbanism in particular (Farias and Bender, 2012; McFarlane, 2011; see also Brenner et al., 2011) – an exploration of these similarities is beyond the scope of this paper and is not its primary intention.

2. I use this phrase to distinguish this imaginary from ‘urban nature’, commonly understood to mean ‘nature in cities’ (Angelo and Wachsmuth, 2015).

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