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# Beyond city limits

## A conceptual and political defense of ‘the city’ as an anchoring concept for critical urban theory

Mark Davidson and Kurt Iveson

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*With the publication of their piece ‘Towards a New Epistemology of the Urban?’ in City 19 (2–3), Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid hoped to ignite a debate about the adequacy of existing epistemologies for understanding urban life today. Brenner and Schmid’s desire to set urban research on a new course is premised on a wide-ranging critique of ‘city-centrism’ that they believe is holding back both mainstream and critical urban research. In this paper, we challenge Brenner and Schmid’s call for urban theory to shift from a concern with cities as ‘things’ to a concern with processes of concentrated, extended and differentiated urbanization. In their justified desire to critique ‘urban age’ ideologies that treat ‘the city’ as a fixed, bounded and replicable spatial unit, Brenner and Schmid risk robbing critical urban theory of a concept and an orientation that is crucial to both its conceptual clarity and its political efficacy. We offer in its place a conceptual and political defense of ‘the city’ as an anchor for a critical urban studies that can contribute to emancipatory politics. This is absolutely not a call for a return of bounded, universal concepts of ‘the city’ that have rightly been the target of critique. Rather, it is a call for an epistemology of the urban that is founded on an engagement with the political practices of subordinated peoples across a diverse range of cities. For many millions of people across the planet, the particularities of city life continue to be the context from which urbanization processes are experienced, understood, and potentially transformed.*

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**Key words:** urbanization, urban age, the city, planetary urbanization, critical urban theory, urban politics

‘This book opens with a city that was, symbolically, a world: it closes with a world that has become, in many practical aspects, a city.’ (Mumford 1966, xi; opening sentence to *The City in History*)

### A new urbanism?

Since the 1980s, a debate over the epistemological and political status of the city has been simmering (e.g. Brenner

2009; Massey 2007; Massey, Allen, and Pile 1999; McFarlane 2011; Robinson 2006). In the past couple of years, this simmer has reached boiling point. A number of urban theorists (Brenner 2014; Brenner and Schmid 2014, 2015a, 2015b; Harvey 2014; Merrifield 2014) have developed the concept of planetary urbanization to push urban theory onto a new trajectory. The foremost proponents of planetary urbanization have been Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid (2015a). In a recent issue of *City*, they published an extensive paper that provided the most forthright and developed iteration of the planetary urbanization thesis yet. While not necessary congruous with the previous iterations of others (e.g. Harvey 2014; Merrifield 2014), the paper does develop an extended argument about the implications of planetary urbanization for epistemologies of the urban.

For Brenner and Schmid (2015a), urban theory now requires fundamental rethinking. The foundational concepts of urban theory, most notably ‘the city’, must be revisited if urban theory is to respond to the ‘rapidly changing geographies of urbanization and urban struggle under early 21st-century capitalism’ (151). One can only agree with the sentiment. Whether viewed from the perspective of a global economic crisis instigated by localized property market financing or the formation of political movements across space via social media (Mason 2013), concepts such as ‘the city’ or ‘the urban’ appear to have more and more intellectual labor to perform.

Brenner and Schmid’s (2015a) recent intervention is therefore timely and necessarily provocative. In their paper, they state their desire for the work to ‘ignite and advance further debate on the epistemological foundations for critical urban theory and practice today’ (151). Based alone on the critical reflections of Richard Walker (2015) in the same issue, they clearly succeeded. This stated, in a response to Walker’s piece, Brenner and Schmid (2015b) argue that Walker’s polemic commentary caricatured,

misrepresented and misunderstood their work. In picking through Walker’s criticisms, they conclude that there are actually few areas of substantive disagreement between their respective positions.

In an effort to avoid missives or counting the angels dancing on the head of a pin, this paper seeks to examine some of the most fundamental and challenging aspects of Brenner and Schmid’s (2015a) planetary urbanization thesis.<sup>1</sup> Our engagement is motivated by our own ongoing attempt to grapple with the form and utility of critical urban theory (Davidson and Iveson 2014a, 2014b). In this work, we have attempted to approach urban theory by giving primacy to politics. This has involved an explicit attempt to formulate critical urban theory that avoids becoming another variant that produces a critical orientation without providing any ability to transcend critique (Davidson and Iveson 2014a, 4). We take the same approach in this engagement with planetary urbanization debates.

Our starting point—our epistemological foundation—is therefore different from Brenner and Schmid’s (2015a). It is worth noting the implications of such differences. When we set out to develop concrete conceptualizations of the urban, we necessarily abstract something from the vast indeterminable set of processes that make up our crude ‘urban’ reality. How we perform this abstraction, that is, what pieces of reality we chose to place in our intellectual gaze, creates the effect of constructing the very object we seek to understand. We must therefore be mindful of how we begin the process of epistemological abstraction—our foundations and starting points—since we will have to live with the implications of these later on; and particularly with respect to what political utility we find within our critical urban theory.

Our goal here is to argue that planetary urbanization needs to be recast and reapproached, and to argue for the ongoing importance of ‘the city’ as a key category for critical urban theory. As urban theorists are impelled to understand how ‘the erstwhile

boundaries of the city ... are being exploded and reconstituted' (Brenner and Schmid 2015a, 154), there is much to be gained from an engagement with the idea of planetary urbanization. Yet we must pump the brakes a little. While there is a great deal of the new to be explained, our eagerness to understand novelty must not blind us to that which persists. Further, we worry that in their justified desire to critique 'urban age' ideologies that treat 'the city' as a fixed, bounded and replicable spatial unit, Brenner and Schmid risk robbing critical urban theory of a concept and an orientation that is crucial to both its conceptual clarity and its political efficacy.

Our paper proceeds in three sections. First, we outline a key aspect of Brenner and Schmid's planetary urbanization thesis: their critique of 'cityism' in urban studies. In the following two sections, we offer two correctives to this critique of cityism. First, we suggest that there are *conceptual limitations* in Brenner and Schmid's critique of cityism, and argue that the category of 'the city' requires a more thorough dialectical re-examination. This conceptual discussion is necessarily pretty 'academic'—but this engagement is important precisely because of the relationship between the way we think and the way we act. In the third section, we spell out what we believe are the problematic political implications of Brenner and Schmid's epistemology. Here, we argue that *critical* urban theory *must* begin with the political if it is to accomplish its objectives, and set out how a theory of planetary urbanization can help us to develop a method of equality (Davidson and Iveson 2014b) that understands the democratic utility of the city to an emancipatory politics. In conclusion, we reflect on the nature of debate over planetary urbanization and the implications of its tenure.

### 'Cityism'

'So it goes, in a world that knows no real borders yet seems everywhere to build walls.

Planetary urbanization, as such, both unites and divides the world, unites and divides its planetary citizens.' (Merrifield 2014, xi)  
'... we aim to advance a hitherto largely subterranean stream of urban research that has, since the mid-twentieth century, cast doubt upon established understandings of the urban as a bounded, nodal and relatively self-enclosed socio-spatial condition'. (Brenner 2014, 15)

As the above quotations illustrate, the planetary urbanization thesis is concerned with an examination of the boundaries and implied divisions imposed by 'the city'. This concern with the persistent impositions of 'the city' is central to Brenner and Schmid's (2015a) sweeping critique of existing urban theory. They argue that 'the city' has enjoyed a bit of a revival in both scholarship and policy—the widely repeated mantra that more than half the world's population now lives in cities has given rise to a plethora of research seeking to understand the urbanized human condition, not to mention an 'urbanologizing' of mainstream science and economics (see also Gleeson 2012).

The effect of this type of research and associated theory, Brenner and Schmid (2015a, 165) argue, has often been to reduce the urban to a 'universal form', a 'settlement type' or a 'bounded spatial unit'. While the use of such statistics on urban populations is almost by definition misleading and open to manipulation (see Satterthwaite 2003), the widespread application of the heuristic has undoubtedly given rise to a proliferation of spatial imaginaries that construct the idea of peoples moving into city spaces (e.g. Glaeser 2011; Saunders 2010).

The problematization of urban theory that approaches the city as bounded has, of course, been with us for an extended period. In recent years a host of urban scholars have attempted to understand the city as a relational space (e.g. Amin and Thrift 2002; Massey, Allen, and Pile 1999; Shepard, Leitner, and Mariganti 2013). A wide range of research agendas have demonstrated the ways in which cities are shaped

through, for example, processes of economic and cultural globalization (e.g. Holston 1999; Isin 2001; Sassen 2001), migration (e.g. Sandercock 2002) and the metabolization of environmental resources (e.g. Heynen, Kaika, and Swyngedouw 2006). These investigations have been accompanied by a host of theoretical developments, many of which have drawn on postcolonial theories and/or actor-network and assemblage theories to propose new ways to study and explain urban life (e.g. Fariás and Bender 2012; McFarlane 2011; Robinson 2006; Roy and Ong 2011; Sheppard, Leitner, and Margianti 2013). In most cases, this has involved a rethinking of what makes, and what is, ‘the city’.

Although the import of innovative social theory into urban studies has stimulated a great deal of novel empirical work and related re-theorization, it is important to note that relational understandings of cities and urbanization have long influenced critical urban studies. Indeed, in the very first issue of *City*, in a piece recently included in an anthology on planetary urbanization compiled by Brenner and Schmid (2014), David Harvey (1996, 50) argued that ‘the “thing” we call a “city” is the outcome of a “process” we call “urbanization”’. In making ‘the city’ a product of urbanization, the former necessarily became hitched to geographically dispersed social and economic processes:

‘Urbanization must then be understood not in terms of some socio-organizational entity called “the city” (the theoretical object that so many geographers, demographers and sociologists erroneously presume) but as the production of specific and quite heterogeneous spatio-temporal forms embedded within different kinds of social action.’ (Harvey 1996, 52)

Harvey here repeats a spatial ontology articulated in his groundbreaking 1973 *Social Justice and the City* that placed an emphasis on the relationship between social process and spatial form (e.g. Harvey 1973, 13–14).

However, Brenner and Schmid (2015a) are asking us to take a conceptual leap beyond existing approaches to urban studies that practice relational thinking. They want us to dispense with ‘the city’ as an anchoring concept for urban theory. Early in their piece, they pose the following provocative questions:

‘If the urban is no longer coherently contained within or anchored to the city—or, for that matter, to any other bounded settlement type—then how can a scholarly field devoted to its investigation continue to exist? Or, to pose the same question as a challenge of intellectual reconstruction: is there—*could* there be—a new epistemology of the urban that might illuminate the emergent conditions, processes and transformations associated with a world of generalized urbanization?’ (Brenner and Schmid 2015a, 155)

In this passage and others like it, Brenner and Schmid call into question the place of ‘the city’ itself in urban theory. Drawing on Lefebvre’s characterization of urbanization as a process of implosion and explosion (Brenner 2014, 17), they suggest instead that we embrace an epistemology that seeks to understand the production of various kinds of ‘urban fabric’ that stretch beyond ‘the city’ and across the planet through moments of concentrated, extended and differentiated urbanization. Importantly, it is not just non-relational approaches to the city that are in the firing line. Brenner and Schmid are not only critical of contemporary ‘urbanology’ produced by the likes of Edward Glaeser (2011)—they are also critical of some of the strands of urban theory that have insisted on a relational approach to cities and cityness, on the grounds that they are still characterized by a ‘stubbornly persistent “methodological cityism”’ (Brenner and Schmid 2015a, 162). It is no longer enough, they argue, to contest problematic ideologies of the city as a bounded, universal spatial by offering an ‘alternative, substantially reinvigorated interpretive framework

through which to investigate its production, evolution and contestation’, as critical urbanists have done in the past. The fault with this approach is that it persists in ‘viewing the unit in question—the urban region or agglomeration—as the basic focal point for debates on the “urban question”’ (154).

‘Methodological cityism’ is a term borrowed from Angelo and Wachsmuth’s (2015) critique of how the ‘urban’ is conceptualized in the urban political ecology literature. Angelo and Wachsmuth claim urban political ecology has lacked a completed engagement with Lefebvre’s theorization of urbanization. Thus, too much urban research ‘takes as its methodological premise the city as a site as opposed to urbanization as a process’ (Angelo and Wachsmuth 2015, 21). This methodological problem has ‘naturalized the city as the sole analytical terrain of urban analysis’ (21). They argue for a

‘return to Lefebvre’s ([1970] 2003, 57) contention that “the city no longer corresponds to a real social object”, and that the proper object of analysis for urban studies would soon have to become a world-wide urban society exploding out of the historical space of the city’. (Angelo and Wachsmuth 2015, 23)

Building on Angelo and Wachsmuth’s critique of urban political ecology, Brenner and Schmid argue that the problem of methodological cityism can also be identified in much contemporary postcolonial urban research. Within this literature they argue that there is a ‘tendency to treat “the city” as the privileged terrain for urban research’ (Brenner and Schmid 2015a, 162). While much of this literature is ‘attuned to the multiple sociospatial configurations in which agglomerations are crystallizing under contemporary capitalism’ (162) it is ultimately problematic since ‘the bulk of postcolonial urban research and theory-building has, in practice, focused on cities, *tout court*’ (162). Even relational approaches to ‘the city’, then, are not enough—from this perspective, an adequately processual approach to the

urban would dispense with ‘city-centric epistemologies’ (169), thereby displacing ‘the city’ from its central role in urban theory, research and practice.

This further conceptual leap seems to us to be misconceived. In distinction to Brenner and Schmid (2015a, 2015b), we think that ‘the city’ remains a vital anchoring point for critical urban theory, so long as it is kept in productive tension with a concept of ‘the urban’ that is not contained within it. In the two sections to follow, we outline two related sets of concerns with the planetary urbanization thesis proposed by Brenner and Schmid—conceptual and political.

### Conceptual limitations: revisiting the city/urban dialectic

The critique of ‘the city’ and the persistence of ‘methodological cityism’ or ‘city-centrism’ in urban studies is a defining element of Brenner and Schmid’s proposed epistemology, and it has been one of the most contentious aspects of their work. (Indeed, we should not be surprised that it might generate critical responses from readers and authors of a journal called *City!*) Their treatment of ‘the city’ is therefore worth unpacking in some detail.

Certainly, Brenner and Schmid do maintain a concern with agglomeration. Their tripartite framework for enquiry into the ‘moments and dimensions of urbanization’ includes a focus on processes of ‘concentrated urbanization’ that involve agglomeration and spatial clustering of populations, activities and infrastructures. However, they do seek a ‘systematic analytical delinking of urbanization from trends related exclusively to city growth’ (Brenner and Schmid 2015a, 169).

There appear to us to be two variations on this ‘analytical delinking’ of urbanization and cities in Brenner and Schmid’s recent work—a provocative and a more modest version. When stated most strongly and provocatively, their epistemology of the urban seems to have no place at all for a concern

with ‘the city’ or ‘cities’. To take planetary urbanization seriously demands a substantial epistemological break with existing approaches (both mainstream and critical). In this strong version of their thesis, the analytical delinking of urbanization from cities is premised on two related epistemological claims:

- (a) claim about the non-existence of cities as bounded things, and in favor of a processual approach to urbanization, including processes of agglomeration, and;
- (b) the non-existence of a non-urban ‘outside’ to cities, and in favor of a concept of ‘planetary urbanization’ whose ‘urban fabric’ includes even those erstwhile rural and wilderness spaces that are now put to work in the service of ‘the relentless growth imperatives of an accelerating, increasingly planetary formation of capitalist urbanization’ (Brenner and Schmid 2015a, 153).

Therefore, there are *processes* of ‘concentrated urbanization’ alongside other urbanization processes, and ‘the “power of agglomeration” remains as fundamental as ever’ (Brenner and Schmid 2015a, 154). However, they insist that the moments of urbanization, including ‘concentrated urbanization’ and agglomeration, do not refer to ‘distinct morphological conditions, geographical sites or temporal stages, but to mutually constitutive, dialectically intertwined elements of a historically specific process of sociospatial transformation’ (169).

In this stronger version of their argument, Brenner and Schmid seek to displace any notion of cities as ‘things’ with a notion of agglomeration as *process*. In this respect, we think Brenner and Schmid’s provocative planetary urbanization thesis contains moments of over-reach. They problematically push beyond the justified (and widely accepted) notion that urbanization processes exceed any fixed things called ‘cities’ to a claim that it is no longer even meaningful or useful to

talk or think about ‘the city’ as a particular kind of ‘thing’ at all. The dialectic of ‘things’ (i.e. cities) and ‘social processes’ (i.e. urbanization) that Harvey recommends above is replaced with a dialectical relationship between processes (i.e. ‘moments’ of concentrated, extended and differentiated urbanization—see, especially, Brenner and Schmid 2015a, 166–169). Here, we concur with one of Walker’s (2015, 185) criticisms:

‘Yes, the urban is a process, but it is also an object. Too many times recently I’ve seen heard [*sic*] scholars declare, in all seriousness, that something is a process and not a simple thing. This is not a great insight; in fact, it’s a half truth. . . . I agree we cannot approach cities as naïve empiricists for whom settlement types or boundaries are simple and self-evident, nor urban forms unchanging over time. But to declare everything as process and all form as forever shape-shifting is thoroughly one-side. Where are the dialectics here? Where is the materialism?’

We think any outright rejection of ‘the city’ as a thing towards which urban theory might be oriented is conceptually flawed. Sure, as Walker notes, if ‘the city’ is conceived of as a bounded morphological form alone, then Brenner and Schmid’s (2015a) thesis seems plausible. However, as they readily admit, many who persist with some form of ‘methodological cityism’ would reject a notion of ‘the city’ as a ‘universal form’ or ‘bounded spatial unit’. Even in the Chicago School theorists, used by Brenner and Schmid (2015a) as an example of the type of urban theory that requires transcendence, we find multivariate definitions of the city that connect morphology to other features with extended geographies. Wirth (1938) argued that the city is defined by (i) permanence, (ii) large population size, (iii) high population density and (iv) social heterogeneity. Here then, ‘the city’ concept is doing more work than simply dealing with a fixed, bounded and/or universal urban morphology. (And as we will argue below, an urban theory that does not relegate ‘the

city' to junior partner status is important when dealing with the political components of social heterogeneity.)

Brenner and Schmid's (2015a) assertion that even a critical and relational orientation towards 'the city' should be replaced by a process-based understanding of the geography of urbanization (i.e. a dialectic between concentrated and extended urbanization) over-simplifies 'the city' concept. As Harvey (1973) argues, it is quite possible to incorporate multiple spatialities into urban theory. Indeed, for Harvey (1973), it is *necessary* to incorporate multiple spatialities into urban theory precisely because this multiplicity exists in our experience of the world:

'space is neither absolute, relative or relational *in itself*, but it can become one or all simultaneously depending on the circumstances. The problem of the proper conceptualization of space is resolved through human practice with respect to it. In other words, there are no philosophical answers to philosophical questions that arise over the nature of space—the answers lie in human practice.' (13)

The city should therefore be understood as a centrally important, multi-dimensional concept within urban theory. Furthermore, urban theory must be responsive to the fact that 'the city' remains a significant category of our ideology; it is used to bracket, in various ways, the planetary urbanization we all live with. 'The city' is multiple things, such as an object, a political boundary, a geography identity, a brand, a community, a unit of collective consumption, and more. A term such as 'London' therefore refers to an object with multiple socio-spatial configurations which, in ways not always directly tied to the said object, have various generative affects. The prospective replacement of 'the city' with a processional spectrum of extended/concentrated urbanization therefore strips urban theory of the necessity to investigate the implications of a social system based around, while not fully contained within or defined by, agglomeration.

The difficulties of doing without a notion of cities as 'things' that exist in relation to processes of urbanization is evidenced in some of the semantic acrobatics that Brenner and Schmid (2015a) end up performing in an attempt to discuss 'concentrated urbanization' without any use of the 'c' word. Terms such as 'large-scale metropolitan centers' (Brenner and Schmid 2015a, 166), 'spatial clusters' (166), 'large agglomerations' (167), 'dense population centers' (167) and 'large urban centers' (168) are used to refer to the 'places formerly known as cities'.<sup>2</sup> Here, in making their point about the diverse geographies of urbanization and the diverse forms of 'urban fabric' that are produced, they end up substituting terms and maintaining concepts.

This substitution of terms also characterizes the grid provided by Brenner and Schmid to illustrate the core elements of their epistemology of the urban. In their grid (Figure 1), Brenner and Schmid (2015a) divide the different geographies of urbanization in order to sketch out the various forms of urban fabric that have enveloped the planet. We find a great deal of their interpretative matrix to be very useful for understanding today's urbanisms. However, the idea of 'concentrated urbanization' that forms the top row of their grid is, we think, simply another way to talk about 'cities'. Indeed, the idea of '[T]he production of built environments and sociospatial configurations to harness the power of agglomeration' (Brenner and Schmid 2015a, 171) provides a quite concise definition of the things we call 'cities'. We also think that much of what they seek to capture in the bottom row as 'differential urbanization' refers to changes taking place in places we can describe as cities. For example, reference to '[R]ecurrent pressures to creatively destroy inherited geographies of agglomeration and associated operational landscapes' (171) is another way to articulate the processes of (re)investment within urban land markets. This substitution can only be justified if references to 'the city' are so reductive that they serve to obfuscate



		DIMENSIONS		
		SPATIAL PRACTICES	TERRITORIAL REGULATION	EVERYDAY LIFE
MOMENTS	CONCENTRATED URBANIZATION	The production of built environments and sociospatial configurations to harness the power of agglomeration	Rule-regimes and planning systems governing socioeconomic and environmental conditions associated with the power of agglomeration	The production of social routines, everyday practices and forms of life associated with the power of agglomeration
	EXTENDED URBANIZATION	The activation of places, territories and landscapes in relation to agglomerations; the subsequent creation, thickening and stretching of an 'urban fabric' connecting agglomerations to the diverse sites of sociometabolic and socioeconomic transformation upon which they depend	Governance systems oriented towards the sociometabolic processes that support major urban centers and facilitate the thickening and stretching of an urban fabric across territories	The social routines, everyday practices and forms of life that emerge (a) as diverse places, territories and landscapes are operationalized in relation to agglomerations, and (b) as a broader urban fabric is thickened and stretched across territories and scales
	DIFFERENTIAL URBANIZATION	Recurrent pressures to creatively destroy inherited geographies of agglomeration and associated operational landscapes	Mobilization of state institutions and other regulatory instruments to promote, manage, accelerate or otherwise influence the ongoing reorganization of urban agglomerations and the broader fabric of extended urbanization	The reorganization of social routines, everyday practices and forms of life in conjunction with the creative destruction of built environments and the urban fabric at any spatial scale

**Figure 1** Moments and dimensions of urbanization, from Brenner and Schmid (2015a, 171)

the differentiated forms of urbanization. Yet conceptualizations of ‘the city’ have always carried with them multiple components, just as the concept of urbanization continues to do in Brenner and Schmid’s (2015a) formulation.

In its more modest articulations, Brenner and Schmid’s epistemology seems not to demand an outright rejection of the idea that there are such things as ‘cities’. Rather, there seems to be an acknowledgement that ‘cities’ exist, but only as one among many kinds of ‘urban fabric’ associated with the planetary processes of urbanization. In ‘Thesis 3’ on the three mutually constitutive moments of urbanization, they note that

‘Obviously, large agglomerations remain central arenas and engines of massive urban transformations, and thus clearly merit sustained investigation, not least under early 21st-century capitalism’ (Brenner and Schmid 2015a, 167). They go on to argue that it is simply the orientation towards such agglomerations that must change:

‘However, we reject the widespread assumption within both mainstream and critical traditions of urban studies that agglomerations represent the privileged or even exclusive terrain of urban development (Scott and Storper 2014). In contrast, we propose that the historical and contemporary geographies of urban transformation

encompass much broader, if massively uneven, territories and landscapes, including many that may contain relatively small, dispersed or minimal populations, but where major socioeconomic, infrastructural and socio-metabolic metamorphoses have occurred precisely in support of, or as a consequence of, the everyday operations and growth imperatives of often-distant agglomerations. For this reason, the moment of concentrated urbanization is inextricably connected to that of extended urbanization.'

The city is not rejected per se, it is rejected as a 'privileged or even exclusive terrain of urban development'. Urban theory needs to be less 'city-centric', and pay more attention to those extended elements of urbanization that occur in relation to concentrated urbanization: 'the moment of concentrated urbanization is inextricably connected to that of extended urbanization'. Here 'the city' returns (sort of), in the form of concentrated urbanization where 'agglomeration' is thing as well as process.

The more modest critique of 'city-centrism' also characterizes parts of Brenner and Schmid's response to Walker. There, they appear to pull back a little from the more provocative, stronger variation of their epistemology with its determined avoidance of 'the city'. In place of outright rejection of the term, they mobilize it to describe a particular kind of morphology that exists alongside others in the process of planetary urbanization:

'While we do not deny the connection between urbanization and city-building (agglomeration), we view the latter as only one among many morphological patterns that are associated with the urbanization process.' (Brenner and Schmid 2015b, 10)

Here, then, rather than jettisoning the city concept altogether, they draw the city/urban distinction, and further argue that we should place most of the intellectual emphasis on urbanization: 'because we emphasize process rather than morphology, the

parameters for a definitional specification of the urban (as well as of urbanization) are reframed' (Brenner and Schmid 2015b, 10). This intellectual emphasis, they argue, gives greater purchase on the diverse geographies of urbanization:

'Our work to date gives us reason to believe that significantly expanded notions of the urban and urbanization do indeed open up some useful, productive new horizons for engaging with contemporary sociospatial transformations.' (10)

What is 'new' here is more a matter of emphasis than a matter of breaking with existing relational epistemologies. An orientation towards 'the city' or 'cities' is thought to inhibit our ability to further develop an epistemology of the urban that insists on processes and relationships that extend beyond the city limits.

Therefore, there is an ambiguity in Brenner and Schmid's treatment of 'the city' and 'cities' that has important implications for their epistemological claims. We believe it is quite possible to strongly *agree* with the notion that urbanization processes extend beyond 'the city' (perhaps even to a planetary scale), while strongly *disagreeing* with the notion that 'the city' either does not exist or that its theoretical mobilization is so limiting that it should be jettisoned and replaced by a notion of concentrated/extended urbanization. Brenner and Schmid (2015b) are critical of Walker for insisting that 'the "city" and the "urban" are essentially identical concepts'. While we are not sure he actually does this, we certainly agree with them that it is important to maintain a distinction between 'the city' and urbanization. However, for us this distinction should not over-ride their fundamental relation as *things* and *processes*. As Harvey (1996, 50) put it, while it is important not to fall into the 'persistent habit of privileging things and spatial forms over social processes', that does not mean dropping the entire notion of 'things' like cities:

'The antidote is not to abandon all talk of the city as a whole, as is the penchant of postmodernist critique, but to return to the level of social processes as being fundamental to the construction of the things that contain them.' (51)

Without some reference to 'cities', we find it difficult to understand what is distinctly 'urban' about some of the socio-spatial processes and forms that Brenner and Schmid seek to highlight. Let us be clear, this is absolutely not to suggest that the urban is *the same as* 'the city', and/or that the urban is *contained within* the city. Nor do we think that is the only geographical expression of urbanization. However, we would argue that the geographies of 'extended urbanization' highlighted by Brenner and Schmid can only be meaningfully understood to be *urban* (or to produce a kind of 'urban fabric') *in relation to cities*. That is to say, the geographies of urbanization that extend beyond cities are *urban* because of their relation to unfolding processes of city-making. If the extended geographies of urbanization have no necessary or privileged or significant relation to cities, then what makes them *urban*? We would insist on a reading of the 'city/urban distinction' that maintains a focus on *both*, keeping some relational notion of 'cities' and 'cityness' as an anchor for an 'epistemology of the urban'. Without that anchoring notion, why consider any of the processes listed through the lens of the urban at all? It is possible to organize our enquiries into cities in a manner that extends far beyond the city limits (see Brenner and Schmid 2015b, 10) while nonetheless maintaining some sense of cityness that is distinct from, while related to, other spatial formations.

Like Walker, we prefer to approach the relationship of 'the city' and 'the urban' within urban theory as a dialectic of 'thing' and 'process' (see also Lefebvre 1991; Merrifield 2002). We agree with Brenner and Schmid (2015a) that in recent decades, the concept of 'the city' seems to have diminished in utility, while 'the urban' has become a

critical concept for understanding life across the planet (see Lefebvre 1991, [1970] 2003). However, we cannot agree that this central dialectic of urban theory has disappeared, or that we can replace it with a dialectic between processes of concentrated and extended urbanization without losing crucial analytical and political purchase. Nor can we agree even with the more modest version of Brenner and Schmid's thesis that 'the city' should now, at best, play a bit part in urban theory development. Their suggested conceptual realignment away from 'the city' as a 'thing' runs the risk of removing the necessary city/urban dialectic of urban theory.

We might translate the extended planetary urbanization thesis of Brenner and Schmid (2015a) as claim that urban theory has reached a transcendent moment that has made 'the city' into a largely redundant concept:

'In contrast to the geographies of territorial inequality associated with previous cycles of industrialization, this new mosaic of spatial unevenness cannot be captured adequately through areal models, with their typological differences of space between urban/rural, metropole/colony, First/Second/Third World, North/South, East/West and so forth.' (Brenner and Schmid 2015a, 152)

Whereas 'the city' may once have defined where and how the urban occurs, now it is no longer necessary:

'Indeed, rather than witnessing the worldwide proliferation of a singular urban form, "the city", we are instead confronted with new processes of urbanization that are bringing forth diverse socio-economic conditions, territorial formations and socio-metabolic transformations across the planet.' (Brenner and Schmid 2015a, 152)

The urban therefore no longer requires the city; urbanization no longer maps onto the city form. It is more productive to view our (urbanized) society producing its own

particular spatiality, within which ‘cities’—as critical and identifiable objects of agglomeration and from which people derive meaning—exist and exert a power influence over the entire social process. Yes, ‘cities’ is plural, and thus we could choose to define various ‘urban fabrics’ as opposed to various ‘cities’. However, this would entail us losing an ability to define those spaces that can generate urbanism itself. It is the production of spatial logics within particular spaces (especially, for urban theorists, *cities*), that gives rise to the evolution of the production(s) of space through planetary urbanization. As Brenner and Schmid (2015a) argue, we may now live in a moment whereby a particular mode of spatial appropriation is dominant on a global level. Yet, if we follow our dialectical thinking through, even this would not mean that ‘the city’ itself disappears. Rather, we might only be able to understand the planetary urban process through a *re-engagement* with the idea of ‘the city’. Purging our vocabulary of ‘the city’ would seem to be counter-productive to our dialectical thinking in this regard.<sup>3</sup>

The politics of this reasoning is—potentially—fascinating. As well as focusing on the planetary urbanization process—here we are thinking of the images of shipping lanes, tar sands and ocean cables that are mobilized in planetary urbanization publications (Brenner and Schmid 2014)—we might actually have to place our gaze back on ‘the city’ to understand and politicize the current capitalist spatial configuration. Think, for example, about how the *New York Times* (Story and Saul 2015) in its recent series on who owns what Manhattan apartments (i.e. the working of a very local property market) illustrated the operation of corrupted global capitalism. It is only through understanding a problematic city object (i.e. the New York City real estate market) that one can begin to see how, for example, sovereign wealth can be (ab)used by corrupt elites. Without understanding what Manhattan is, as a social and real estate locale, it is

impossible to fully understand part of the current global capitalist process. In just this single example, it is possible to see how we still need to prioritize a particular part of the concentrated/extended urbanization spectrum (i.e. the city) to understand how inherently localized agglomeration processes connect into, and constitute, broader urbanization processes.

We might consider Doreen Massey’s (2007) *World City* as an exemplar of critical urban theory that is concerned with London *as a city*, without treating London as a ‘fixed, bounded or universally generalizable’ thing. Indeed, Massey’s book seeks precisely to understand London in relation to broader spatial processes that reach ‘beyond city limits’, noting how it is shaped by (and indeed shapes) such processes. Even while insisting that one cannot draw a line around London, in passages such as the following London is still referred to as a ‘place’, an ‘it’, a ‘here’ and even potentially a ‘we’:

‘A high proportion of Londoners were born outside the administrative boundaries. But it is far more than this. There is a vast geography of dependencies, relations and effects that spreads out from here around the globe. This is not to slide into some easy declaration that “everyone is a Londoner”, but it *is* to argue that, in considering the politics and the practices, and the very character, of this place, it is necessary to follow also the lines of its engagement with elsewhere. Such lines of engagement are both part of what makes it what it is, and part of its effects.’ (Massey 2007, 13)

Of course, Massey (2007, 14) also realizes that such a view of London is not universally shared, and that others continue to associate the idea of the city with ‘closure, competition, and the evocation of external enemies’. However, to engage in a politics that contests such fixed, bounded constructions of London is not to reject the very idea of London *per se*—just as we argue that developing critical understandings of urbanization and its various geographies

ought not proceed by rejecting the very idea of the city as a thing. Massey conceives of her project as ‘an argument *against* localism but *for* a politics of place’—a politics that is not contained within London, but rather takes the form of a ‘politics of place *beyond* place’ (15). Here, we think it would be a mistake to treat Massey’s work (along with the work of postcolonial urbanists and urban political ecologists) as a form of ‘cityism’ that needs to be transcended. Crucially, Massey’s work also shows what is at stake *politically* in our defense of a (particular form of) cityism. As ever, Massey’s London work is designed to help us conceptualize and support emancipatory political praxis. This point is of particular significance for critically oriented urban theory, of course. Therefore, let us now consider it in further depth.

### Political limitations: on the particular and the universal in emancipatory urban politics

Many of the powerful movements that have rocked the world in recent years have been ignited by efforts to intervene in the ways that cities are regulated and lived—be it in relation to the policing of informal urban traders in Tunisia, the price of buses in Rio, the building of a shopping mall in central Istanbul, the price of a living wage in London and Los Angeles, and so on. This should surely tell us something. Of course, Brenner and Schmid (2015a, 153) are not ignorant of such struggles. However, the epistemology they offer does not seem to us to live up to their stated desire to understand how such struggles seek ‘not only to influence the production of places, but to reshape the broader institutional and territorial frameworks through which urbanization processes are being managed’ (153). The crucial point for us is that collective efforts to ‘influence the production of places’ are often explicitly oriented towards ‘the city’ (by which we mean they are emplaced

efforts to remake Sydney or São Paulo or Sheffield), and this orientation towards the city remains a crucial way in which a politics of urbanization *that potentially extends beyond ‘the city’* takes shape. That is to say, the very politics of urbanization which theorists such as Brenner and Schmid (2015a) and Merrifield (2014) seem to want has not emerged through a refusal of ‘the city’ in favor of an orientation towards ‘planetary urbanization’—rather, it has emerged through struggles over life in cities that frequently mobilize ‘the city’ as their stage, their object and even their subject (see Davidson and Iveson 2014a). Here, we agree with Harvey (1996, 58–59; emphasis added) on the need to view:

‘the production of different spatio-temporal orderings and structures as active moments within the social process, the appreciation of which will better reveal how what we conventionally understand by urbanization and urban forms might be redefined and factored in as moments of transformation and consequently possible points of intervention within that social process’.

While cities, then, are not the only (or even always the primary) point of intervention in the processes of urbanization, they remain crucial and require very particular analytical treatment to understand their significance (i.e. an urban theory).

This political point about the shifting but enduring significance of ‘the city’ for an emancipatory urban politics emerges from our conceptual discussion of the city/urban dialectic above. Politically, the problem with the notion that we should dispense with or demote ‘the city’ within urban theory is this: by dismissing a concern with the particularities of city life in favor of a focus on the universality of planetary urbanization, Brenner and Schmid also shift our focus away from the particular places where political challenges to the abstract universality of planetary urbanization might emerge. As critical urban theorists, if we were to follow Brenner and Schmid’s (2015a) lead

we could become focused on the abstract universality of planetary urbanization. However, we cannot simply read off the political from such analyses. This would be to disconnect the central dialectical of critical urban studies: the relationship between the city (as lived) and the urban process (as structure). At a moment where the relationship between these two things is clearly in flux, such an intellectual choice would seem to take critical urban studies in the wrong direction.

At this point it is important to clarify our use of the term politics. We are not arguing here that an (abstract) critique of urbanized capitalism is without some form of politics. The identification of exploitation, of any kind, within the Marxian-derived planetary urbanization thesis demonstrates all kinds of societal tension and relations. Yet this does *not* provide a foundation for *understanding how politics actually takes place*. Here, in our recent work on urban politics (Davidson and Iveson 2014a, 2014b; Iveson 2014), we have turned to Jacques Rancière to help us better understand how politics works, as an enacted practice of dissensus and disagreement. As we now seek to explain, we find Rancière's approach to the relationship between the universal and the particular especially helpful in thinking through the importance of 'the city' for a politics that might confront the inequalities and injustices of planetary urbanization. Such a navigation is required for us to understand how a planetary urban process shapes, and is shaped by, the city. Without this, it is very difficult to achieve the political objectives of critical urban theory.

Rancière's political theory has become increasingly influential within critical urban studies in recent years (e.g. Dikeç 2007, 2013; Swyngedouw 2009, 2010). It is a little difficult to pigeonhole Rancière's approach precisely, his work being a mixture of historiography, philosophy and political theory. However, the origins of Rancière's work on political theory is instructive. Rancière had been one of Louis Althusser's students,

working on the former's *Reading Capital* (Althusser et al. 1965). In the midst of the May 1968 Paris uprisings, Rancière broke with his former teacher. Rancière (2003) described the distance between Althusser's structural accounts of capitalist society to the scenes on the streets as 'almost laughable'. What Althusser's accounts of capitalism missed—totally—was the ways in which people became political subjects. That is, the ways in which politics gets formulated and enacted. This turning point inspired Rancière to develop social and political theory in a way that navigates a path between the particularities of subjectification and the universal logics of politics and economics.

Rancière (1999) reserves the term 'politics' for a very particular application. Most applications of the term 'politics' refer to any contestation that takes place within or between societies. This conflict can be about resources or rights, but it necessarily involves a contestation about what is held in common:

'Justice as the basis of community has not yet come into play wherever the sole concern is with preventing individuals who live together from doing each other reciprocal wrongs and with reestablishing the balance of profits and losses whenever they do so. It only begins when what is at issue is what citizens have *in common* and when the main concern is with the way the forms of exercising and of controlling the exercising of this common capacity are divided up.' (Rancière 1999, 5)

When we start to be concerned with common lots, we need a criterion with which to assess our allocations: 'The political begins precisely when one stops balancing profits and losses and worries instead about distributing *common* lots and evening out communal shares and entitlements to these shares' (Rancière 1999, 5). Rancière notes that there exist many different criteria upon which we might assess our allocations. Democracy, he insists, provides a very distinct criterion, based on the *absence* of any natural titles to govern. Where other criteria for allocation are premised on the notion that some people (be

they the wealthy, the learned, the male, the white, the elders, etc.) have a natural right to exercise authority over others, democracy is scandalous because it presumes the equality of all. Politics, for Rancière (1999, 16), takes place when that radical equality is enacted by those whose equality is denied in an existing social order:

‘Politics occurs because, or when, the natural order of the shepherd kings, the warlords, or property owners is interrupted by a freedom that crops up and makes real the ultimate equality on which any social order rests.’

Or, as he puts it elsewhere: ‘politics exists wherever the count of parts and parties of society is disturbed by the inscription of a part of those who have no part’ (Rancière 1999, 123). There are many ramifications of this political theory, so it is necessary to pick out just two points that are closely related to this discussion. The first point concerns the universal operation of politics within various social and temporal contexts, and the second point looks at the consequent relationship between the universal and particular dimensions of the lifeworld.

Rancière’s writing on how politics relates to the city can be a little disorientating. At one moment, you are reading about disputes in the Greek polis, the next you are in the streets of Paris in 1968. In his use of various examples, Rancière is demonstrating a simple point: that politics is universal, but necessarily emerges out of the particular. It is not that any one type of issue (or indeed place) is any more political than any other, nor that equality has a pre-given meaning outside of specific contexts (and contests):

‘Nothing is political in itself for the political only happens by means of a principle that does not belong to it: equality. The status of this “principle” needs to be specified. Equality is not a given that politics then presses into service, an essence embodied in the law or a goal politics sets itself the task of attaining. It is a mere assumption that needs to be discerned within the practices implementing it.’ (Rancière 1999, 33)

Politics, then, is founded in the manifestation of an inequality and the enactment of equality through a process of political subjectification. The potential for politics is therefore timeless and placeless, but the emergence of politics is always contextual and situated. The relationship between particular/unequal treatment and universal politics is critical for Rancière. It means that politics does not occur within the abstract. It is that the concrete—what he often refers to as the allocation of spaces within the police order—must be held in dialogue with the abstract (i.e. equality/democracy). One can only identify these (universal) things within the operation of particular practices. The necessity of dialectical thought is here, again, demonstrated. No surprise then that Rancière uses examples of politics that range from the Plebeians to Rosa Parks. In the absence of any concrete universality, we must therefore understand the universal through the particular.

Again, this dialectical navigation can guide us in understanding the planetary urbanization condition. If planetary urbanization represents the extension of urbanization logics (i.e. a particular capitalist accumulation process) across a host of ‘urban fabrics’, which for us include ‘cities’, then we are left with a task of understanding how the particularities of the urban fabric are shaped and/or dictated by the abstract/universal logics.

A cursory look across a host of political moments that have occurred since 2007 reveal that ‘the city’ is often central in how people understand their engagement with structural processes, and how they articulate their complaints against it. The counter-movement against zombie neoliberalism (Peck 2010) has, we would argue, been comprised of a host of predominantly city-based struggles that have, at times, been able to unite through an acknowledgement of their common causes and concerns (Davidson and Iveson 2014b). If we omit these elements of the political process from our critical urban research, we are left only with the abstract universal. The categories within which people form and order their lives are,

in large part, dispensed with. An ability to connect our contingent and ever-changing social categories—what Louis Wirth (1938) might have called social heterogeneity—to the universal structuring of global capitalism is greatly reduced, if not lost completely.

Furthermore, our ability to think about the city as a formulator and stage for politics is removed. We are left with a politics that is pre-ordained; politics is reduced to being an outcome of the structural divisions created by planetary urbanization. The subjectification process is pre-defined, and all that remains is for people to realize their structural interests at the planetary scale. Such an approach therefore forecloses an active and ongoing engagement with the particular forms of democratic politics taking place in cities, in which people are finding ways to enact their equality against the inequalities of the social order in which they find themselves. In contrast to this, we argue that maintaining the concept of the city, in dialogue with the urban, is necessary for politics itself. The city is a key domain in which subjectification (i.e. fighting against inequality through the enactment and inscription of equality into the existing police order) becomes contestation. It also serves as the space whereby this contestation can be staged, where claims are articulated and the legitimacy of criteria for allocation is tested (Davidson and Iveson 2014a).

Note that within this formulation of politics, while we think that right now we cannot do without the idea of the city, we do not seek to reintroduce a timeless, placeless or bounded concept of ‘the city’ as a privileged space of the political. Indeed, Rancière (1999, 10) warns us against any such idea that politics has a proper place:

‘What makes an action political is not its object or the place where it is carried out, but solely its form, the form in which confirmation of equality is inscribed in the setting up of a dispute, of a community existing solely through being divided.’

Rather, our point is to suggest that a critical urban theory concerned with emancipation

ought to have the tools to help us understand when, where and how ‘the city’ does emerge as a site of the political, as it has done in recent years. Cities are once again emerging as spaces where inequality is founded/recognized and where democratic equality is enacted. If urbanization is indeed becoming planetary, a renewed and relational politics of the city is a potential resource in the struggles to come, not an impediment to such struggles. As the universal dimension of planetary urbanization therefore becomes increasingly dominant over peoples’ lives, perhaps paradoxically it becomes more important that we prioritize our analysis of the particular: ‘The key moment of any theoretical (and ethical, and political, and—as Badiou demonstrated—even aesthetic) struggle is the rise of universality out of the particular life-world’ (Žižek 2007, n.p.). None of this forecloses a global anti-capitalist politics. Indeed, it should empower such a politics, given the fact it enables particular/emplaced struggles to contest those universal structures that define much of our lives. For an emancipatory politics of planetary urbanization to emerge, we argue, relies greatly on ‘the city’ within a dialectic with ‘the urban’. To understand and intervene in this dialectic is, in our view, the way for critical *urban* theory to proceed.

We would also add that this approach to cities and the urban leaves space for ‘the rural’ to continue to matter for spatial theory and emancipatory politics in a similar manner to—and indeed, in *relation* to—‘the city’ (see also Catterall 2015). Even if we reject a concept of ‘the city’ that is fixed and bounded, we are not required to also reject any concept of a non-urban ‘outside’. For example, while we are no experts here, we can see no reason to jettison a relational concept of ‘the rural’. We might even ask whether or not contemporary developments such as the growth of global agri-business that Brenner and Schmid see as moments of ‘extended urbanization’ might not also constitute moments of ‘extended ruralization’ at the same time. Such a relational approach to the



rural would also allow for struggles for equality emerging from emplaced struggles over the future of rural communities. For instance, the contemporary ‘Lock the Gate’ movement in Australia has involved an exciting alliance of rural property-owners, rural communities and urban activists in refusing to allow exploration for coal seam gas on agricultural land (Hutton 2012). Certainly, this movement has highlighted the ‘urban’ drivers of coal seam gas exploration, with fossil fuel companies seeking to profit by supplying growing Australian cities with cheap sources of energy. However, the contestation of this process has involved an encounter between those who are explicitly oriented towards the possible futures of ‘the city’ and ‘the country’. As urban environmental activists travel to camp out at farm gates, and as farmers and their communities reach out to urban-based political groups and media, they have expressed and transformed—rather than transcended—their place-based identities and aspirations.

## Conclusion

For Brenner and Schmid (2015a, 159), the changing constitution of the contemporary urban condition demands that ‘vigilant analysis and revision of the very conceptual and methodological frameworks being used to investigate the urban process’. The emergent debate on planetary urbanization will be central to the development of critical urban theory and, hopefully, the contribution of critical urban theory to political change. In this regard, the recent manifesto set out by Brenner and Schmid (2015a) is a highly valuable contribution. It has formalized and assertively extended a set of debates that have been circulating with critical urban studies for some time. Put simply, it is now difficult to ignore a debate about planetary urbanization. Indeed, in our own work, we are finding it to be a productive heuristic in many different applications.

Nevertheless, in this contribution we have drawn upon our recent work on the

prospective direction of critical urban theory to suggest some limitations to the planetary urbanization thesis. A central concern motivating our intervention has been our belief that ‘the city’ remains an important analytical and political category. As such, we resist calls for the analytic to be dispensed with and/or sidelined. We think that ‘the city’ both exists and requires consistent interrogation with regards to its relationship to the urbanization process and the political. The relationship between ‘the city’ and ‘the urban’ has, we would argue, long been thought of—both implicitly and explicitly—as a dialectical one. At its most extreme lengths, we think the planetary urbanization thesis can suggest that such a dialectical relation no longer exists. This interpretation is both theoretically and politically problematic. The task at hand is therefore to understand just how the city operates within an urbanization process that has become required within a systemically dysfunctional form of capitalism.

Maintaining a concern for the city/urban dialectic is also crucial in terms of formulating a truly *critical* urban theory. For too long, much critical urban theory has only served to reconfirm its own critique. Elsewhere we have argued that critical urban theory must be more concerned with the formulation and presentation of political claims; what we refer to as a ‘method of equality’ (Davidson and Iveson 2014a). Within this project, influenced by the work of Jacques Rancière (1999), we have found that ‘the city’ is often formative for many of today’s political struggles. ‘The city’ remains a site/component of political subjectification and a stage within which political claims are articulated. As we hope to have made clear, our conceptual and political defense of ‘the city’ as an anchor for critical urban studies is absolutely not a call for a return of bounded, universal concepts of ‘the city’ that have rightly been the target of critique. Rather, it is a call for us to put our concerns about the injustices of capitalist urbanization processes into dialogue with the political

practices that are emerging from (while certainly not contained within) subordinated peoples in a diverse range of cities (see also Sheppard, Leitner, and Mariganti 2013, 897–899). Put simply, for many millions of people across the planet, the particularities of city life form the context from which planetary urbanization is experienced, understood and potentially transformed.

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### Notes

- 1 We should also note as we begin that for the most part, we are engaging here with the piece Brenner and Schmid have recently published in *City*, rather than engaging with the wider corpus of the work that they have produced both together and separately. If this has resulted in any particular omissions or misunderstandings of their position, then we can only apologize, and offer the hope that the ongoing dialogue and debate with ourselves and others will result in clarifications.
- 2 For a few years, as a consequence of a dispute with his former record label, musical artist Prince dropped his name, and insisted on using a symbol in its place. He became 'the artist formerly known as Prince' in official communications. But we all kinda knew he was still Prince . . .
- 3 The dialectical relationship between the city and urbanization also seems to us to emerge from Lefebvre's ([1970] 2003) conceptualization of the particular (i.e. city) and universal (i.e. urbanization). His seminal work on an urbanized planet sought to

explain how a certain logic of capitalist development had become imbued across earthly life-making processes. Urbanization, for Lefebvre, was becoming a predominant feature of social life; something distinct from prior processes of industrialization. He certainly claimed that urbanization and its associated fabrics exceeded the city per se. But note the way in which this is articulated:

'The urban fabric grows, extends its borders, corrodes the residue of agrarian life. This expression, "urban fabric", does not narrowly define the built world of cities but all manifestations of the dominance of the city over the country. In this sense, a vacation home, a highway, a supermarket in the countryside are all part of the urban fabric.' (Lefebvre [1970] 2003, 4)

Here it seems to us that Lefebvre's conception of an extended 'urban fabric' that takes a diversity of forms still delineates between the city—as something that extends influence amongst hinterlands—and urbanization as a process. In this passage, the supermarket remains in the country, but the supermarket brings with it something of the city. If we entirely abandon the distinction between city and country (or of any similar spatial designations), then our ability to develop Lefebvre's theoretical and political project becomes significantly limited. To put this another way, Lefebvre certainly distinguishes between the city and this planetary urbanization process, but does not argue that urbanization has therefore transcended the city. Instead, there is a new relation to be explained and critiqued. A focus on 'the city' as a bounded, stable object will not do—his concept of an 'urban fabric' is:

'preferable to the word "city", which appears to designate a clearly defined, definitive object, a scientific object and the immediate goal of action, whereas the theoretical approach requires a critique of this "object" and a more complex notion of the virtual or possible object'. (Lefebvre [1970] 2003, 4)

Here then, notions of 'the city' as a 'clearly defined, definitive object' are to be critiqued, but to us this implies a critical orientation towards 'the city' rather than dispensing with it.

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