Society and Space

Journeys through planetary urbanization: Decentering perspectives on the urban

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Christian Schmid
ETH Zurich, Switzerland

Abstract

In recent years, the concept of planetary urbanization has provoked a widespread debate. It is grounded upon a basic hypothesis: that the contemporary urbanizing world cannot be adequately understood without systematically revising inherited concepts and representations of the urban. It is therefore first and foremost an invitation to adopt a different perspective, one that decenters the focus of analysis and looks from an ex-centric position on the urban world. This article attempts to clarify some of the most pressing questions that have arisen thus far in the debate on planetary urbanization. It approaches the question of the power of the urban under conditions of planetary urbanization, and explores the nature and role of theory, in relation to urban practice as well as in relation to urban research. Through some reflections on the relationship between the abstract and the concrete in social theory, this paper discusses the much-debated question of "universalizing" and "totalizing" theoretical engagements, addresses the role of difference and specificity in urban research, and finally evaluates some first results of the various ongoing investigations of planetary urbanization.

Keywords

Planetary urbanization, postcolonial urbanism, extended urbanization, concrete abstraction, critical urban theory, Henri Lefebvre

Introduction

"Today, it can be argued that every square inch of the world is urbanized to some degree" (Soja, 2014: 285). With this simple formulation, Edward Soja clearly expressed one of the basic concerns, which the concept of planetary urbanization is meant to elaborate. The main goal of my collaborative interventions with Neil Brenner on this topic is to offer a different

Corresponding author:
Christian Schmid, ETH Zurich, Stefano-Franscini-Platz 5, Zurich 8093, Switzerland.
Email: schmid@arch.ethz.ch

analytical perspective on the urban phenomenon, one that fundamentally questions what can still be seen as the most widespread understanding of the urban: the city as a densely populated and bounded urban form.

This "traditional" conception of the city already has been seriously challenged by many scholars, with reference to a multitude of observations: the creation of new scales of urbanization; the blurring and rearticulation of the urban fabric; the de- and reterritorialization of the hinterland; the massive operationalization of landscapes; the emergence of urban corridors; the urbanization of the wilderness (see Brenner and Schmid, 2012). These and many other emergent phenomena indicate various ways in which the seemingly familiar form of the urban is being fundamentally transformed across the planet. However, despite the increasing evidence and urgency of such observations, city-centric conceptions of the urban are still asserted in many scholarly contributions (see also Angelo and Wachsmuth, 2015; Cairns, 2018).

In the work Neil Brenner and I have elaborated so far, rather than trying to reassert the concept of the "city" amidst these ongoing implosions and explosions of urban areas, we propose to explore contemporary urban phenomena from a radical different angle, one that decenters the long-entrenched analytical gaze of urban studies, which demarcate their object of analysis with reference to "the center": the observer is usually positioned in the very core of an agglomeration, looking outwards toward the (urban) peripheries and trying to define an outer boundary. Depending on the definitions applied, a smaller or larger area is then delineated as a "city," an "urban region," a "mega-region," and so forth. In contrast, adopting a planetary orientation means first of all decentering the focus of analysis, looking from an ex-centric position, one that looks from the periphery and asks where to find "the urban." Such an orientation enables a researcher to detect a wide variety of expressions of the urban that have traditionally been excluded from analytical consideration because they are located outside large agglomerations and metropolitan regions and their immediate hinterlands. It also offers a different way of analyzing traditional sites of urban research, because it focuses simultaneously on processes of concentrated, extended and differential urbanization (Brenner and Schmid, 2015). It thus illuminates the wider context of an urban territory and traces the effects of the various relationships and mutual interactions between centralities and peripheries.

Neil Brenner and I linked these reflections to a short text written by Henri Lefebvre (2014 [1989]) at the end of his life, from which we borrowed the term "planetary urbanization" both as a provocation based on our own observations, and as the contemporary materialization of Lefebvre's famous thesis of the complete urbanization of society. In a parallel move, Merrifield (2012, 2013, 2014) published his own interpretation of the same term and the same text. There are, of course, many other possible understandings of this term, and there are also different concepts of the planetary (see e.g., Sidaway et al., 2014; Spivak, 2003). In contrast to many of our critics, Neil Brenner and I understand planetary urbanization not as a single encompassing urban process, but rather as a complex interplay of related but contradictory processes marked by the uneven development of capitalism as well as by manifold, specific social and political determinations (see also Schmid 2015). Planetary urbanization is a historical and not a universal phenomenon that developed in the last decades and produces very different urban outcomes. To understand planetary urbanization requires, therefore, not only new theoretical efforts but also detailed and careful empirical studies that help to illuminate, understand, and theorize the great variety of urban differences emerging around the planet.

Starting from these initial ideas, Neil Brenner and I wrote several texts to develop this agenda for urban theory and research. After publishing a short outline of our basic hypotheses (Brenner and Schmid, 2012), we presented a detailed critique of the widely prevalent

concept of the "urban age" (Brenner and Schmid, 2014). Brenner (2014) then edited the volume *Implosions–Explosions,* which brings together a range of already published and newly commissioned contributions that have strongly informed and inspired our reflections on planetary urbanization. We finally jointly published a third article, which tries to systematize some of the core lessons that have emerged from our first reflections, while also outlining some of our general proposals for a planetary perspective on urbanization (Brenner and Schmid, 2015). In this text, we focused basically on epistemological questions, and put forward a series of theses outlining a broad framework for conceptualizing contemporary urbanization processes. It has to be emphasized that the elaboration of these theses was directly influenced by ongoing research Neil Brenner and I were involved in (see e.g., Schmid et al., 2018; Urban Theory Lab, 2015).[1]

These writings on planetary urbanization have provoked an astonishingly widespread debate, which has oscillated between very positive, affirming commentaries, detailed and engaged critiques, as well as proposals for further research and theoretical developments. Especially encouraging are a range of empirical studies that either take the concept of planetary urbanization as a starting point and inspiration, or pursue related work in a similar direction, thereby opening up dialogues with other research fields, such as geopolitics, urban political ecology, the anthropocene, studies of circular migration, and many others. Because of the constraints of length, I regrettably cannot attempt here to engage with those important contributions.

Beyond these engaged and productive debates, there have also been dismissive critiques and blunt rejections. Some of those readings are highly selective or partial, and neglect entire strands of our work. Others reproach us for positions we have never embraced, and which are, in some cases, ones we explicitly criticize. In a few cases, critics attack our work for putatively neglecting certain issues, only to then propose our own concepts, sometimes our own words, as their putatively more sophisticated alternative. The most problematic of those maneuvers is the allegation that our conceptualization is "abstract," "universalizing," and "totalizing," often claiming to represent more "radical" or "activist" strands of urban research. Such allegations have been repeated so frequently that it appears to have acquired the status of a self-evident "truism" circulating widely through the various channels of the academic industry, including published texts, conference proposals, paper abstracts, and editorial reviews. For a more detailed engagement with such critiques, see Neil Brenner's article in this issue of *Society and Space*.

The more fundamental problem underlying many such simplifying criticisms is that they do not really engage with the core agenda, concepts and definitions of planetary urbanization, but substitute their own understandings and "stories" instead. There are of course many different understandings of the status and the character of theoretical and epistemological reflections. In my own intellectual tradition, to try to understand the meaning of concepts and terminology that are derived from a different theoretical position and therefore also use a different language would require, first of all, an immanent reading that reveals the inner logic of a concept, following the definitions and sources indicated in these texts and then discussing possible shortcomings and weaknesses. Only on such a basis, a fruitful debate that goes beyond the exchange of allegations and stereotypes would become possible.

Therefore, instead of further discussing the reception of our work thus far, I decided to reference my own personal trajectory as a starting point and guideline into some broader reflections on specific topics highlighted in the current debate on planetary urbanization. Following the imperative for theoretical and epistemological reflexivity in critical theory (see e.g., Bourdieu, 1990), this paper situates my engagements with critical urban theory in the

context of my own political and intellectual pathway, and in relation to my changing positions outside and inside the academic industry. As a result, this paper is not just about planetary urbanization, but much more about discussing the urban question more generally, and about how to (re)establish openness and respect toward a plurality of voices in this debate.

The power of the urban

I start with the core of the debate, a question that haunts urban researchers of all kinds, but that also arises in the midst of the smoke and the noise in the current intellectual battle: what *is* the urban? What are we arguing over? What are we fighting for? I have to admit that I have been intrigued by this question for more than three decades, and my various travels through urban theories, urban histories, and urban worlds, in urban centers as well as in remote outskirts, have brought surprising new aspects and insights, but of course never a clear answer.

It is interesting and encouraging that many critics of planetary urbanization refer to Lefebvre's theoretical reflections for answers to this question about the nature of the urban, and that they demand greater sensitivity to everyday life and urban struggle. My own starting point in relation to this question, and my entry point to urban studies more generally, was indeed an urban struggle: Zurich in the early 1980s. We had just lived through one of the fiercest urban revolts in Western Europe of that time, which had erupted precisely in one of the most quiet, self-satisfied, and boring cities you could imagine. The Zurich "movement," as we called it, was one out of many other urban struggles that arose throughout Western Europe in the late 1970s and early 1980s.[2] The urban revolt in Zurich lasted almost for two years. It was as surprising as it was fierce, and images of heavy police forces, street fighting, and smashed windows of banks and luxury shops circulated around the world; demonstrations and actions happened almost in a weekly rhythm, hundreds of people were seriously hurt due to police violence, and thousands had to face court cases. But, at the same time, the movement also provoked an explosion of fantasy, fun, and lust for life. The urban revolt aimed directly into the heart of everyday life: at stake was the urban, the right to the city, the right to live different forms and alternative styles of life, the role of women in urban space, communal living, alternative culture, the use of public spaces, the rights of migrants and refugees, and many more urgent questions (see Nigg, 2001; Schmid, 1998, 2012).

The personal experience of such a revolt propels you almost immediately and irreversibly on a different path in life. I was involved in the Zurich movement in many ways. I was living in a collective house together with people coming from very different social contexts outside of academia. At the same time, I participated as a student in a project on community media and action research with video in cultural anthropology, in which we accompanied and documented the beginning of the movement—a project that almost immediately propelled us right into the center of the struggle (for further details, see Schmid, 2017). After the revolt had run out of steam and finally collapsed two years after the first riot, it became clear that it had fundamentally changed Zurich's everyday life, its public spaces, and its cultural sphere. Zurich became much more open minded and cosmopolitan, further propelled by a strategy of integration adopted by the City of Zurich, which promoted and supported alternative culture, beneath other things also by constantly increasing public subsidies. In a Lefebvrian sense, it can be said that the movement and its repercussions in wider social milieus indeed had produced a different urban space.

Why this revolt? How was it related to the city and to urban development? At the Institute of Geography at the University of Zurich, still during the years of the Zurich riots, we formed a group of students and started our own urban studies.[3] We wanted to find out what had really happened in our city. Our goal was to analyze our own history and to understand our own situation. However, urban studies did not exist in Zurich at that time. Thus, we started from scratch, reading Lefebvre, Castells and Harvey, and also the Chicago School of sociology and some economic theories (Hartmann et al., 1986). Lefebvre proved to be by far the most compelling of all our readings. We were particularly inspired by his thesis of the complete urbanization of society, his concept of the urban revolution, and his understanding of the urban as a process, which provided us with some important guidelines for further research. Since that time, urban studies became my topic and my passion.

Despite the fact that most of the theories we were drawn to proved to be difficult to apply, they were precious for us. "Theory" was not only a means to analyze and understand our own situation, but it was also a very practical, powerful, and joyful instrument that we applied in our activisms, for instance in the alternative cultural center Rote Fabrik—one of the concrete results that the Zurich movement had achieved and in which we worked for many years (see e.g., Wolff, 1998). This center offered us the great opportunity to confront our theoretical insights with the practical world, by organizing public events, discussions, happenings, and "urban safaris" (public city tours). We thus developed a transductive approach to urban research in which our conceptualizations informed and inspired our more practical endeavors; concomitantly, the experiences we could gain through our activisms constantly challenged our theoretical reflections, thus stimulating us to revise our concepts.

After almost a decade of engaging in urban theory and practice in Zurich, we initiated, together with some friends the International Network of Urban Research and Action (INURA), an organization that brought together activists, practitioners, and researchers from various disciplines, and that still exists now, after almost three decades. In the context of INURA, we could not only widen the scope of our urban experiences, but also deepen our understanding of all sorts of urban practices and struggles (see INURA, 1998, INURA and Paloscia, 2004).

Theory and practice with Lefebvre

These theoretical and empirical efforts enabled our Zurich group to develop a useful analytical framework, integrating a range of new approaches that were developed at the time, such as global city theory, theories of gentrification, analyses of the development of new centralities in the urban periphery, as well as regulation theory and the new urban–regional economy (see e.g., Hitz et al., 1994, 1996). Together with our friends from Frankfurt, we also engaged in a comparative project on politics and urban development in the two European financial centers Frankfurt and Zurich (Hitz et al., 1997).[4] However, at a certain moment, these concepts also revealed their limits. They were basically midrange concepts addressing specific research questions, which made it difficult to integrate them into a more encompassing analytical framework. In this situation, I decided to go back to Lefebvre's wide-ranging theory of the production of space that had looked so promising some years before, but that had not been fully accessible for us at the time. The great advantage and the great challenge of Lefebvre's approach is its undogmatic and heterodox Marxism and its dialectical and transductive character that opens a wide field for possible applications but also necessitates important efforts to make it operative for concrete empirical research (Schmid, 2014).

However, Lefebvre's reflections on urbanization and the production of space were not really accessible at the time; most significantly, Lefebvre was almost completely absent from debates in the English-speaking academic industry. Most of his major books were not translated into English, and he had been discredited through Castells' sharp critique, in *The Urban Question* (1977/1972), which had deployed Althusser's strategy of "contextual reading" to "unmask" Lefebvre as proposing a theory of (cultural) urban form, while putatively neglecting important economic and political aspects. In the 1990s, a new wave of Lefebvre interpretation emerged, mainly animated by the rise of Anglo-American "postmodern geography" and by the English translation of Lefebvre's *The Production of Space (1991/1974)* (see especially Gregory, 1994; Shields, 1999; Soja, 1989, 1996). Unfortunately, these postmodern interpretations of Lefebvre were severely limited by the small number of Lefebvre books translated into English, struggled considerably with the French and German philosophical context of Lefebvre's writings, and particularly had great difficulties with understanding his unconventional dialectics. Arguably, these interpretations were also hampered by their own "postmodern" ontological assumptions, which proved to be largely incompatible with Lefebvre's approach. These limitations led, as critics have argued in detail, to a range of misunderstandings and misinterpretations (see Brenner and Elden, 2001; Elden 2004; Kipfer et al., 2008, 2013; Kofman and Lebas, 1996; Schmid, 2005, 2008).

I finally embarked upon the rather audacious endeavor of reconstructing Lefebvre's theory of the production of space from scratch. I went to Paris, improved my French, and studied the basics of Lefebvre's approach in the context of French theory, from phenomenology to structuralism, by way of linguistics, as well as the "German dialectics" of Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche. My detailed reconstruction aimed especially to provide a clearer understanding of the inner logic of Lefebvre's three-dimensional dialectics, which is the epistemological key to any understanding of his concepts. I also reconstructed the "blueprint" of his critical spatial social theory, which is based on (a) (historical) modes of the production of space, (b) levels of social reality, and (c) dimensions of social reality (see Schmid, 2005, 2008). A translation of this work into English is in progress (Schmid, 2019).

My theoretical engagement with Lefebvre proved to be a long and lonely journey, in which almost no support was available. Only toward the end of my trip I finally found friends, comrades, and allies who were approaching Lefebvre's work from a similar open-minded and undogmatic point of view. Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas made the first strong critique of postmodern Lefebvre interpretations; they came from a feminist perspective and were especially raising the question of translation and transposition in (urban) theory. Neil Brenner, whom I met for the first time at a conference discussion on "scales" and "levels" of social reality, was especially engaged on Lefebvre's reflections on the state. Stefan Kipfer and Kanishka Goonewardena were embarking upon their ambitious and very rewarding project of developing a thorough postcolonial Lefebvre interpretation, combining some of his ideas with those of, among other authors, Fanon and Gramsci. Meanwhile, Richard Milgrom introduced a Lefebvrian analysis of architecture; Andy Merrifield was exploring the question of the urban revolution; Stuart Elden provided a thorough analysis of Lefebvre's thinking on solid philosophical and epistemological grounds; and Łukas Stanek finally presented a careful, inspiring, and revealing excavation of Lefebvre's own empirical research.[5]

All these efforts and interventions formed the core of a "third wave" of Lefebvre interpretation that not only bridged the gap between "political–economic" and "cultural" readings, but understood Lefebvre's consistent integration of questions of political economy, state theory, language theory, architecture, everyday life, and lived experience in an

encompassing materialist and dialectical framework as the decisive contribution of his theory. In the following years, many more explorations of Lefebvre's thinking, along with further translations of Lefebvre's work into English, were published. However, there was still considerable work ahead until Lefebvre's approach became more accessible and applicable for empirical research (see Schmid, 2014a; Stanek et al., 2014).

My own application of Lefebvre's theory was not only strongly influenced by my experiences as activist and cultural worker, but also shaped by my job as social scientist at the Department of Architecture at ETH Zürich, which I began at the end of the 1990s.[6] This position enables—and requires—a direct relationship to practice, especially in joint research and design projects. Lefebvre's theory proved to be extremely productive in this context. Particularly useful is his three-dimensional concept of the production of space, because it integrates the process of the material production of the built environment with the production of representations of space—the core business of architects—and the lived experiences of the users of those spaces that architects designed. To apply Lefebvre's theory in such a context means developing an analysis that is engaging with the praxis of architects. This was not only a challenge, but also productively advanced the development of new concepts and methods.

This became particularly visible in the project *Switzerland: an Urban Portrait* by ETH Studio Basel (Diener et al., 2006), in which several renowned Swiss architects, together with their assistants and more than a 100 architecture students, embarked on the question: what is the contemporary urban condition in Switzerland? While we were analyzing the urbanization of Switzerland on the tracks of Lefebvre's hypothesis of complete urbanization, we detected differences that we did not expect, concealed behind an entrenched ideology that declared large parts of this country as "rural." Precisely because we applied a radically new approach, and looked without preconceptions at the entire territory of Switzerland, we were able to develop an alternative representation of space that revealed a very different reality: Switzerland is not only urbanized to a very large degree, but at the same time also highly polarized, resulting in very differentiated urbanized landscapes. This project brought also a methodological opening: working with a newly developed method of mapping and a specific combination of qualitative fieldwork, we did not analyze individual cities or urban regions, but the entire territory, including seemingly rural areas that we deciphered as specific urbanized landscapes. In the following years, we applied this method in many different places, and developed a territorial approach to urban analysis that allows grasping various forms of extended urbanization. This project became methodologically, empirically, and theoretically one of the starting points for Neil Brenner's and my research agenda on planetary urbanization.

As I hope the preceding narrative underscores, (critical) theory for me—as for many others—is not the world, and not "the" reality. Critical theory is a theory (Brenner, 2009); it is a tool of thinking, a logical construction that serves as an instrument; it is useful when it enables researchers to illuminate their own situation, to detect new connections, hidden dimensions, and alternative paths of development. In my own intellectual tradition, strongly influenced by German and French thinking, a theory is first and foremost a tool that helps to "re-cognize" the world. The German term *die Erkenntnis*, just as the French notion of *la connaissance*, expresses a certain experience that is directly linked with this moment, when a concept "works," because it allows to see the world in a different light, or from a different perspective. This experience goes far beyond the English term "knowledge" (*das Wissen* in German, *le savoir* in French) that in most understandings is almost directly linked to power.

From my experiences as activist as well as practitioner, I cannot agree with frequent complaints about "abstract" theories. For me, theory is entirely practical, and has to prove its value in the confrontation with social reality. As such, this is always an intervention into a social process and not without risks. Precisely for this reason, critical reflexivity and an orientation towards the possible are so important (see Bourdieu, 1990; Brenner, 2009). I understand the relationship between theory and practice as dialectical, as theory is advancing through the confrontation with practical reality. This implies a transductive procedure through which inductive and deductive moments are linked (for Lefebvre's understanding of theory and practice, see e.g., Lefebvre, 2016/1965; Schmid, 2014a). This also means to confront oneself with the unknown, and in so doing, to refuse all sorts of ideological prohibitions that limit our imagination and our capacity for developing new concepts. It is nothing "radical" in dismissing theoretical efforts as "abstract." Abstraction is a legitimate and a necessary means of theory building and of scientific analysis. Critical researchers should not stop short in their efforts to think the "whole thing" or the "full story" and to try to grasp the totality of a phenomenon or a process. The "encompassing" is neither wrong nor right: it is an option, a possibility that should not be dismissed as such. Critical (urban) studies have to explore and to take the best use of the possibilities that theory has to offer.

Concrete and abstract

Against the background of these experiences, critiques of "abstract," "universalizing," and "totalizing" theory appear in a different light. From my point of view, privileging the concrete, the particular, and the specific against the abstract, the universal, and totality does neither productively advance insights into the urban process nor resolve the basic epistemological contradictions that underpin the analysis of urbanization.

As Marx famously argued in the *Grundrisse* (1973: 41) to start an analysis with an apparently concrete, empirically given category, such as that of the population (for instance, of a country) because it seems to be more "real" is actually based on a wrong assumption. A closer examination reveals that this "population" is itself an abstraction, and indeed a highly problematic one—in Marx's words a "chaotic conception of the whole" (Marx, 1973), if we do not consider its internal composition (for instance, with reference to classes, gender relations, social division of labor, etc.) and many other relevant internal determinations. It is, therefore, analytically necessary to seek out the simplest abstractions, before the analysis can again "ascend from the abstract to the concrete," to borrow Marx's famous phrase, in order to reestablish the concept as a rich totality formed through manifold determinations and relations. Marx concludes: "The concrete is concrete, because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse" (Marx, 1973).

The point, then, is not to engage in an ontological battle of abstract vs. concrete theoretical approaches, but to consider how specific theoretical strategies may productively connect abstract and concrete dimensions of analysis to illuminate social realities. This question has been debated in quite diverse traditions of social theory for a long time. In recent years, it has been a key focus for a heated debate in subaltern studies regarding the distinction between what Chakrabarty (2000) has termed "History 1" and "History 2" (a distinction that has recently been used by several authors to dismiss the concept of planetary urbanization). Superficial readings of Chakrabarty's analysis—among his critics as well as his defenders—have suggested that History 1 is abstract and encompassing, while History 2 concerns concrete experiences and the complex web of struggles in everyday life. In fact, if we consult Chakrabarty's original text, we immediately

dive into volume 1 of *Capital*, where Marx situates the question of the abstract and the concrete in relation to the process of abstraction of human labor under capitalism. This process, Marx argues, is determined by the fundamental contradiction through which labor is transformed into a commodity, which is by necessity based on living labor as the source of value. Through the process of commodification, this living human labor is stripped of all its specific qualities, until it is nothing more than the simple deployment of labor power. Abstraction is thus not a mental operation, but a material process that takes place in and through a concrete praxis.

In Chakrabarty's terms, the worker that sells her/his labor power to the capitalist embodies the universal history of capital. At the same time, this worker has her/his own life, her/his personal habits, and is embedded in collective practices that are not automatically dominated by the logic of capital (Chakrabarty, 2000: 67). Chakrabarty is particularly interested in the question of how these living moments of historical struggle unfold, and how they could be represented in theoretical terms by historical analysis. How, he asks, to write a history of capital that is necessarily universal, and yet at the same time is also a history of differences and subjectivities? As one possible answer, he develops his distinction between the two aspects of historical analysis—History 1 and History 2. The question of the relationship between the concrete and the abstract constitutes the core for any possibility to think subjectivities, lived differences, and moments of rupture in relation to the powerful process of abstraction that is produced and generalized under capitalism, and it has thus inspired many controversial debates. Also Chakrabarty's interpretation, which is amalgamating Marx's conception with some thoughts of Heidegger, has provoked strong critiques. It is clear, however, that History 1 and History 2 presuppose one another; they cannot exist in isolation, but form interconnected moments of the same process of historical development and transformation. From this point of view, appropriations of Chakrabarty's work that simply reject History 1 as an instance of "totalizing" theory, and that correspondingly favor History 2 as a privileged perspective on social reality, are simply destroying the entire concept. The problem is precisely to understand the interrelationship between capitalist forms of abstraction and particular lived experiences as mutually entangled aspects of the same historical process.

There are of course many voices in feminist as well as postcolonial approaches that embrace and adopt a relational understanding of concrete and abstract categories. Thus, Buckley and Strauss (2016) explore Lefebvre's understanding of an *open totality* (see Kipfer et al., 2013) as a possible basis for feminist (as well as critical race and queer urban theory) engagements with the urban and trace in detail the long history of feminist appropriations of Lefebvre's theory. Meanwhile, Hart's (2016) recent work connects Marx's approach to abstraction in the *Grundrisse* to a non-teleological, open conception of dialectics that also resonates with several key agendas in Lefebvre's work. Robinson (2016) has recently connected a reading of Lefebvre's dialectical theory and Marx's notion of a "concrete totality" to her reflections on a postcolonial approach to comparative urban analysis. Finally, Kanishka Goonewardena (2018) carefully analyzes the divergent meanings of "totality" and "totalization" in contemporary debates on the urban question. Rather than rejecting them as theoretical errors, Goonewardena makes a powerful argument for their centrality to anti-colonial and socialist–feminist approaches to theory and practice.

Certainly, for those who adopt a Lefebvrean perspective, the concept of "concrete abstraction"—understood as a form of abstraction that is historically produced, consolidated and contested—is an essential theoretical tool. Lefebvre conceived all his basic concepts—the "urban," the "state," as well as "everyday life"—as concrete abstractions. Thus, everyday life in Lefebvre's understanding is itself the result of a process of abstraction

directly related to capitalist forms of modernization and industrialization (Lefebvre, 2009 [1971]). In a Lefebvrian perspective on everyday life, therefore, we have not only to study concrete situations and moments of rupture but also the diverse processes of commodification, the norms, constraints, and forms of violence that are deeply embedded in everyday life (see e.g., Ross, 1996).

As Stanek (2008) has shown in detail, Lefebvre systematically applied the concept of concrete abstraction to his analysis of the production of space. Lefebvre illuminated how the interplay of the logics of capital circulation and various state strategies led to a social process of abstraction, generating an "abstract space" that is at once homogeneous and broken (*homogène-brisé*). In mobilizing this concept of abstract space, Wilson (2014) has analyzed the "Plan Puebla Panamá," an overarching infrastructure project for southern Mexico and Central America, which was launched in 2001 and abandoned in 2008. He analyses the effects of this plan on the large-scale restructuring of the entire region and shows that it embodies structural, symbolic, and direct forms of violence inherent to the process of abstraction. The strength of Wilson's account is to make visible the contradiction between abstract space, produced by capital and power, and the concrete "differential spaces" generated through local struggle and resistance. Such mobilizations also created new connections between different groups and organizations, such as the movement fighting against airport development in the outskirts of Mexico City, and the resistance against the Isthmus of Tehuantepec Megaproject in southern Mexico. In a related way, Arboleda (2016) analyzed the urbanization of Huasco, a small agricultural village at the edge of the Atacama desert in northern Chile that has recently been literally overbuilt with massive new infrastructure investments, such as energy plants and iron refineries in order to support the nearby mining industry. Through this locally situated but dialectically framed case study, Arboleda brilliantly explores the contradictions in the planetary system of metabolic exchange and its devastating effects for local people and the environment, while also illuminating the new formations of social mobilization, encounter and association that are premised precisely upon the material support of this infrastructure, which helped establish vibrantly oppositional networks of interaction inside the community, and with neighboring villages.

These two inspiring case studies lead my general reflections on the abstract and the concrete back to the specific question of the concept of planetary urbanization and its application in urban research. As they illustrate so convincingly, an analysis of planetary urbanization has not only to look at processes of capital circulation, global production networks and state strategies, but has also to focus on social mobilizations and struggles, the concrete conditions of everyday life, and the embedded social relations, such as gender relations, wage relations, the relation to nature, and so forth. The consideration of everyday life is therefore not an alternative to "abstract" conceptions of planetary urbanization, but a necessary part of its analysis.

Planetary urbanization and critical urban research

The relationship of abstract and concrete discussed above helps to answer a crucial question raised many times in the current debate: Does planetary urbanization allow for the apprehension of complexity and does it respect difference? For Neil Brenner and me, this is the wrong question. We would put it the other way around: does the concept of planetary urbanization makes any sense without attention to differences and complexity? The assertion that an analysis of planetary urbanization entails a "top-down" approach is misguided; it results from what we might call the reification of scale. Neil Brenner and I understand

urbanization as multiscalar, and its scalar configuration as actively contested and thus as malleable (Brenner, 2018). This means thinking through and with different scales and levels of social reality in order to connect various places and territories, and the processes that form and transform them, to each other. This is of course nothing new, as already Massey (1994), Allen (2003), and many others developed such ideas and concepts. To take such a relational understanding seriously means analyzing concrete urban situations, and also contextualizing them in relation to wider processes.

The question of this contextualization has sparked quite some debates. While Neil Brenner and I argue that capitalist forces underlie processes of planetary urbanization, we do not reduce it to a purely economic logic. Precisely in order to widen the scope of analysis, we have theorized urbanization explicitly as a multidimensional process, and proposed to detect its dynamics with reference to spatial practices, territorial regulation and everyday life (see Brenner and Schmid, 2015: 171); this conceptual triad is obviously derived from Lefebvre's theory of the production of space. This multidimensional understanding of urbanization can be illustrated with the project on "specificity" that was developed by researchers at ETH Studio Basel over many years (Diener et al., 2015; Schmid, 2015). By analyzing a wide range of urban territories in great detail, this project explored how the specificity of urban territories is resulting from a dialectical confrontation of generalized processes and strategies with concrete, localized conditions and determinations. Thus, we analyzed the transformation of preexisting material conditions to a "second nature" resulting in a specific urban fabric, examined the various and complex ways, through which power structures are inscribed into the territory and traced the differences that emerged as a result of various conflicts and social contradictions. This project not only examined densely populated urban areas but also forms of extended urbanization, such as the subtle changes occurring in the still largely agrarian Nile Valley, the massive urban transformations generated by tourism on the Canary Islands, and the urbanization of the dangerous zone surrounding Mount Vesuvius.

This project on specificity and urbanization resonates productively with some of the research agendas of postcolonial urban studies—and it was, in fact, strongly inspired by Jennifer Robinson's classic book *Ordinary Cities (2006)*, which represents a programmatic call to free our urban imagination from the constraints of existing dogmas and established concepts. This connection indicates certain important relationships between postcolonial and planetary conceptions of urbanization: both invite urban scholars to go beyond entrenched assumptions, to explore new terrains of research, and moving out of established centers of knowledge production, such as Euro-America, as well as from the geographical center of "the city," to explore places, territories, and landscapes that are not usually considered to be part of the urban world. Without any doubt, postcolonial scholars have fundamentally transformed the field of urban studies by challenging dominant Western concepts and their privileged spatial reference points, and by developing new concepts and approaches that supersede hegemonic geographical imaginaries of urban life (see, amongst many others: Robinson, 2002; Roy, 2009; Sheppard et al., 2013; Simone, 2004). The term "ordinary cities" (Robinson 2006) oyexpresses the idea that there are no privileged places for the generation of insights into the urban: every city can potentially serve as a legitimate and valuable starting point for the construction of urban theory. Following Robinson's call, we might argue that any place on the planet could, at least potentially, become a starting point for generating insights into the urban process, whether the researcher is positioned at the top of Mount Vesuvius, at a palm oil plantation in Indonesia, a highway in the Atacama desert, a shipping lane

in the Barents Sea or accompanies temporary and seasonal laborers on their journeys to Dhaka and Kolkata.[7]

What could be learned from such research? Using the decentering perspective of planetary urbanization as a starting point, Roy (2016) went to Dankuni in the North of the Kolkata metropolitan region, a village that had been constituted as an "urban" municipality a few years ago. She studied how this place is "becoming urban," particularly focusing on the entanglement of the agrarian and urban question, the role of the "urban" as a governmental category and the persistence of historical difference, thereby referring to Chakrabarty's conception of History1/History2 discussed above. She came to the conclusion that such places allow us to think about the urban as an incomplete and contingent process as well as an "undecidable category." I cannot discuss Roy's inspiring study here in detail, but I would like to stress the importance of her exploration of the urban beyond the classical definitions of agglomerations. In a similar move, Kipfer (2018) followed indigenous and allied resistance against the construction of pipelines across Canada in the province Alberta connecting a tar sand extraction site to global markets. Kipfer's provocative question "Is this pipeline urban?" led him to analyze a complex situation in which many indigenous peoples led their lives in trans-local fashion, in and between reserves and off-reserve places of work, residence, and activism. Some of those struggles organized even against the "urban field," defending a different status for indigenous places. These findings are raising important questions about the very meaning of "city" and "non-city," and Kipfer urges us to learn from these experiences and the radical indigenous claims emanating from them. Another study by Castriota and Tonucci (2018) analyzed the history of urbanization of the Brazilian Amazon on the traces of the long-standing work done by Monte-Mór (2004, 2014). Starting their analysis with the clash between urban–industrial colonizers and the indigenous communities in the 1960s, they follow closely the urbanization process and also trace various forms of re-politicizing space through the establishment of networks of social movements, practices of solidarity and modes of appropriation of the urban fabric in everyday practices. All these studies convey important ideas and inspirations on how to study processes of planetary urbanization, and they start a dialogue on some of the crucial questions on the nature of the urban.

A different approach to extended urbanization was applied in the project *Territory* by ETH Studio Basel (Diener et al., 2016) that introduces a territorial approach of urban analysis. The researchers scanned and analyzed vast stripes of the surface of the earth, each several hundred kilometers in length, containing a great variation of urban situations in order to detect the various traces of urbanization emerging on these territories. They carefully analyzed the complex urban topography produced as a result of the entanglement of extended and concentrated forms of urbanization, compared the different ways of producing and appropriating these urbanized landscapes, and revealed that the urban fabric of the six selected territories is considerably more densely woven than might have been assumed.[8] Topalovic (2018) and her team go one step further in analyzing the various hinterlands of Singapore. This is an extraordinary case, because Singapore constitutes a city–state and thus allows the team analyzing all sorts of movements passing the border. In the most radical move of decentering the analytical perspective, Topalovic engages the metaphor of the "eclipse" by masking the entire territory of the city–state in order to make visible all those areas that were concealed so far by the "bright lights" of this global city. In an amazing analysis the team can show how a densely woven urban fabric came into existence around Singapore, forming an extended urban region. But beyond this still relatively compact regional urbanization, an even larger region emerges comprising large parts of South East Asia to supply water, food, and sand for the various landfills, as well as cheap

and heavily controlled (and gendered) labor. Finally, the planet emerges as hinterland supplying all sorts of raw materials, as well as highly qualified labor power.

All these examples make it clear that the concept of planetary urbanization is already applied and realized in many different ways, and from various angles and approaches. Thus, the practical value of the concept of planetary urbanization can already be examined by evaluating the rich theoretical and empirical findings presented in all these case studies, and the many more that are either planned or already in progress.

What is the urban?

These considerations return my reflections to the opening question, which can now be presented in a more specific, contextualized form: what is the urban under conditions of planetary urbanization?

For Lefebvre, the "urban" was an abbreviation for urban society, in his understanding a society that can be realized only in and through a revolution—an urban revolution that would unfold its wings from the ruins of an industrial capitalist society, hopefully taking off before the entire planet is ruined. Henri Lefebvre was profoundly inspired by the famous Paris Commune of 1871 and by the urban moment that he had experienced in May 1968 in Paris. Accordingly, he used the slogan "the right to the city" as basis for his first systematic reflection on the urban, which he published under that title in the same year (Lefebvre, 1996 [1968]). In his understanding, the right to the city is directly linked to the access to centrality as an indispensable social resource; consequently, he also used the term "right to centrality" as an alternative formulation of the same idea. In the following decades, the notion of the right to the city became an important theoretical concept (with or without reference to Lefebvre), as well as a rallying cry for social mobilization and a label for urban governance reform in many parts of the world (Kipfer et al., 2013; Mayer, 2010). Notably, however, in *The Urban Revolution*, published only two years after his earlier formulation of the right to the city, Lefebvre explicitly rejected the concept of the "city" as the central basis for an understanding of the urban—he even called it a "pseudo-concept" and an ideology (Lefebvre, 2003 [1970]; Schmid, 2012). Instead, Lefebvre developed the idea of the urban as a "level" (*niveau*) of social reality, which mediates between the general (*global*) level (the realm of capital and the state) and the private level (everyday life) (Goonewardena, 2005; Kipfer, 2009; Kipfer, 2018). Subsequently, in *The Production of Space*, from a more general perspective, Lefebvre introduced the terms difference, differential space and right to difference into his theorization (see also Lefebvre, 1970). Lefebvre offers with these concepts a series of different access points to approach the "urban," which helps to orient critical urban research towards the possible—the prospects for a "concrete utopia" of an alternative (and revolutionary) differential space. At the same time, these concepts are expressing a floating uncertainty, indicating that they can never be more than approximations; as Lefebvre clearly experienced, the "urban" can never be fully grasped by theoretical analysis. Every analysis generates a residue, an inexplicable rest that can only be expressed by poetic and artistic means (see Lefebvre, 2016/1965).

In linking these three concepts, centrality, mediation, difference, a three-dimensional dialectics of the urban based on (a) the material production of space (centrality); (b) representation and regulation of the production of space (mediation); and (c) the production of lived space (difference) can be elaborated (Schmid, 2005, 2014b). This general understanding of the urban has long underpinned my own research endeavors, and it strongly informs my collaborative work with Neil Brenner on planetary urbanization

(see also Brenner, 2017 on "alter-urbanization"). However, there are many challenges associated with concretizing Lefebvre's framework for purposes of empirical urban research (Schmid, 2014a; Stanek, 2011). This is particularly true if we try to apply the three-dimensional conceptualization of the urban (as centrality, mediation and difference) to the analysis of territories of extended urbanization. Notably, Kipfer (2018) as well as Monte-Mór (2014) and Castriota and Tonucci (2018) clearly demonstrated in their analyses that these concepts, particularly the concept of the urban level, can in fact be productively used for the analysis of such territories. However, a range of pressing questions remains open: How can the urban level be identified in the complex, networked, multi-layered, and multi-scalar extended urban landscapes that are emerging around the globe? What could the right to centrality mean given the massive dispersal of centralities, together with countervailing tendencies towards steepened urban hierarchies on a planetary scale? How could a "right to difference" be realized in a situation in which processes of commodification and incorporation of urban differences advance in an unprecedented extent?

With our proposal for adopting a planetary perspective on the urban, Neil Brenner and I try to encourage a debate on such questions. This has as a consequence to keep the question of what is the urban open, in order not to foreclose possible insights that could emerge from lived experiences, practices, and struggles. For those reasons, we tried to find the most general and at the same time most careful and preliminary formulation: "the urban as a collective project" (Brenner and Schmid, 2015: 176). This is, of course, more a question than an answer.

Conclusion

What is planetary urbanization? I hope I could show that Neil Brenner and I understand the concept of planetary urbanization first and foremost as the outline of a problematique, neither a fully developed, elaborated theory, nor a clearly bounded approach. It is for this reason that Neil Brenner and I published, first, a critique of the concept of the urban age and second, a reflection on the epistemology of the urban. In thus proceeding, our goal has been to engage in a broader debate on some key questions of contemporary urban theory and research. In this sense, the concept of planetary urbanization is intended to offer a different, decentered perspective on the process of urbanization, to illuminate processes and phenomena that are not traditionally considered to be connected to urbanization, and to propose new analytical tools and concepts for such investigations. Along with many other emergent approaches to urban questions today, studies of planetary urbanization could offer some new conceptual frameworks, methods and research questions, and to stimulate new pathways of investigation.

Our proposals to date are no more than a starting point. It is urgent to advance beyond these initial proposals, and experiment with new methodological and theoretical combinations, in diverse sites and scales of investigation. Concepts, vocabularies, and methods for exploring emergent urban realities need be developed and defined, probed, tested, and debated in various contexts. The "blind field" of the urban, identified decades ago by Lefebvre, has to be illuminated through new concepts and modes of investigation, and especially through detailed empirical research.

Finally, to answer a key question in this entire debate: Is there a productive path between the seemingly "universalizing" tendencies of planetary urbanization and the purported "particularism" of poststructuralist and postcolonial approaches? As I have tried to show, this is a false opposition. There are critical scholars who are analyzing planetary

urbanization from postcolonial as well as feminist perspectives—these approaches are not incompatible or mutually exclusive. Furthermore, there are many versions of postcolonial or feminist approaches in urban studies, and they contain diverse epistemological assumptions, which are applied to concrete research in various ways. In the same sense, the *problematique* of planetary urbanization may be explored via diverse pathways, and may be connected to quite a range of epistemological assumptions, concepts, and methods. Therefore, I fully agree with Neil Brenner's exploration of possible shared agendas published in this issue of *Society and Space*.

The urban question is far too important to be pulverized between competing claims in the narrow context of critical urban studies. The engagement with theory should be a pleasure, not a bitter fight. For this reason, I propose a much more open minded, respectful, and joyful dealing with theories. It would be much more fruitful, and more enjoyable, to acknowledge that there are different theoretical positions and languages, and to explore the richness of the philosophical and theoretical reflections available. Such an approach would, hopefully, lead towards more open, less ideological and more productive debates about the urban.

Notes

1. One of these research projects is "Extreme territories of urbanization" of the Urban Theory Lab of the Graduate School of Design, Harvard University. This project put forward a radically alternative mapping of wide-ranging sociospatial and environmental transformations that are currently unfolding in supposedly "remote" or "wilderness" regions (see Urban Theory Lab, 2015). Another important research project is "Patterns and pathways of planetary urbanization in comparative perspective" of the chair of sociology at ETH Zurich and the ETH Future Cities Laboratory Singapore (FCL). By analyzing and comparing urbanization processes in eight large metropolitan territories, this research project applies a dynamic approach, in which urban processes across a wide range of different contexts are put into conversation with each other, in an effort to enrich the urban vocabulary and to better understanding contemporary planetary urbanization. The research team includes Naomi Hanakata, Pascal Kallenberger, Ozan Karaman, Anne Kockelkorn, Lindsay Sawyer, Christian Schmid, Monika Streule, Rob Sullivan, and Kit Ping Wong (see Schmid et al., 2018).
2. The Zurich movement has to be seen in the context of a wider range of movements, starting with Punk (and European Ska) in England and the *movimiento 77* in Italy, which was centered on (mostly squatted) social centers (*centri sociali*). In 1980/1981, a series of revolts and movements

erupted throughout Western Europe, such as the squatter movement in Berlin (*Hausbesetzerbewegung*) and Amsterdam (*kraakers*), including also struggles in smaller cities and towns in Switzerland and Western Germany, and the riots erupting in several inner-city neighbor-hoods in Britain in 1981. The history of these movements is only partially written, and also not fully understood (see e.g., Andresen and van der Steen, 2016).

3. The group that we named "Ssenter for Applied Urbanism (SAU)" consisted of Roger Hartmann, Hansuredi Hitz, Richard Wolff, and me. The word "Ssenter" does not exist in any language—it is a joke; it leads to the acronym SAU. The term *Sau* means "pig" in Swiss German.

4. This project introduced, beneath other concepts, global city theory into German speaking urban studies. It brought together Roger Keil and Klaus Ronneberger from Frankfurt, and Hansruedi Hitz, Ute Lehrer, Richard Wolff, and me from Zurich.

5. These joint efforts led first to various conference sessions and articles, and finally to an edited volume (Goonewardena et al., 2008). See also Kofman and Lebas (1996), Elden (2004), Merrifield (2006), Kipfer (2007), Kipfer and Goonewardena (2013), Brenner and Elden (2009), and Stanek (2011).

6. My Marxist approach made it virtually impossible to find a long-term academic position in German-speaking Geography, which left behind its strong conservative bias only at the beginning of the 2000s. Architects proved to be much more open-minded in this respect. Furthermore, as practitioners, they are more interested in concrete, applicable concepts than in purely "academic debates" and thus constantly challenge my research in very productive ways.

7. See e.g. Kastani and Schmid (2015), Topalovic (2016), Urban Theory Lab (2015), Couling (2017), and Bertuzzo (2018).

8. This project compares the following territories: Rome–Adriatic, Nile Valley, Florida, Red River Delta (Hanoi), Muscat and Oman, and Belo Horizonte. For the detailed results see www.studio-Basel.com/publications/books.

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Christian Schmid is a geographer, sociologist, and urban researcher. He is professor of sociology at the Department of Architecture, ETH Zurich. Schmid has authored, coauthored, and coedited numerous publications on theories of the urban and of space, on Henri Lefebvre, and on urban development. Together with architects Roger Diener, Jacques Herzog, Marcel Meili, and Pierre de Meuron, he coauthored the book "Switzerland: an urban portrait" a pioneering analysis of extended urbanization. He is currently collaborating with Neil Brenner on a long-term project on planetary urbanization, and he leads a project on the comparison of urbanization processes in Tokyo, Pearl River Delta, Kolkata, Istanbul, Lagos, Paris, Mexico City, and Los Angeles, which is based at the ETH Future Cities Laboratory Singapore.