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Stuck Inside the Urban with the Dialectical Blues Again:

Abstraction and Generality in Urban Theory

Abstract: This paper discusses how critical urban theory understands generalization and particularity by unpacking the process of abstraction. It develops an urban interpretation of dialectics through the philosophy of internal relations to: (1) heuristically examine conceptual and political fissures within contemporary urban studies; and (2) critically recalibrate neo-Marxist planetary urban theorizing. Examining the conceptual extension, levels of generality, and vantage points of our abstractions can assist in constructively negotiating relations between urban difference and generality. The challenge is not which assertions are true based on a given epistemological position, but which abstractions are appropriate to address specific issues given the range of politics and possibilities each establishes.

[Planetary urbanization] aspires to supersede the urban/nonurban divide that has long anchored the epistemology of urban research, and on this basis, to develop a new vision of urban theory *without an outside* (Brenner, 2014, p. 8, original emphasis).

post-colonial urban theory['s]… comparative analyses of 'provincial' knowledges seems to be all the foundation we need, developing new knowledge in which we learn from one another but remain grounded (Meagher, 2015, p. 811).

… can we cut through this Gordian knot to reveal a coherent concept of the city as an object of theoretical inquiry? (Scott and Storper, 2015, p. 10).

Reflecting a decade of innovative theorization and intense debate, the field of urban studies is currently inundated with calls for more explicit comparative research that adopts a global perspective (Hart, 2018; Lawhon et al., 2020; Nijman, 2015; Robinson, 2016; Schmid et al., 2018). Contemporary (neo-)Marxist accounts draw attention to how the urban process under capitalism now encompasses places and relations well beyond the city (as traditionally understood) into an extended, if highly-differentiated, worldwide urban fabric (Brenner, 2014, 2019; Merrifield, 2013a). At the same time, post-colonial, feminist, and queer critiques have done much to disrupt the universalizing tendencies of North American and Euro-centric urban theory. In doing so, this scholarship claims space for the ordinary cities and subaltern ways of life residing on the margins of urban thought (Jazeel, 2018; Oswin, 2018a; Peake, 2016). However, disputes about the portability of theory – including efforts to theorize the 'complete urbanization of society', identify the nature of cities, and validate heterodox urban experiences – have reached a stand-off with ideological and post-ideological overtones.[1]

As conceptual ships pass in the night, deep epistemological and political fissures raise questions about the production and politics of (global) urban knowledge and the conceptual

utility of the urban itself. It is important to consider the roots and implications of these schisms, particularly in light of recent calls for engaged pluralism across critical urban studies (e.g. Brenner, 2018; Sheppard, 2015; van Meeteren, Bassens, and Derudder, 2016) and their rejection (e.g. Jazeel, 2019; Oswin, 2018b; Roy 2020). My contention is that this impasse partly reflects how dissonant processes of abstraction result in divergent theorizations of, and engagement with, the situatedness of (urban) knowledge. Abstraction is a profoundly political process as each abstraction establishes a bounded range of theoretical and political possibilities. Urban scholars need to explicitly unpack what our urban concepts include/exclude, their scope and applicability, and the relationships they express between concrete-abstract and general-particular phenomenon. In this paper, I suggest an urban reading of Marx's non-teleological dialectical method – mobilized via: (1) conceptual extension; (2) multiple levels of generality; and (3) distinct vantage points (following Ollman, 2003) – is instructive in differentiating the parameters of urban concepts and delineating the type and scope of problems each can address.

I situate my arguments in relation to, and as a critical defense of, planetary urbanization: a series of interventions that follow Lefebvre (2003) to unmoor urban theory from the territorial confines of the city, and which have inspired intense debate and sighs of conceptual fatigue in equal measure (e.g. Peake et al., 2018; Wilson and Jonas, 2018). This paper has two aims. First, it looks to provide some clarity on the epistemological and methodological divergences currently shaping critical urban theory (and the partiality of the perspectives these permit).[2] Second, it critiques planetary urbanization on its own terms to help recalibrate a more precise and reflexive mode of urban theorizing. In this context, I suggest that reading planetary urbanization through an open dialectical mode of abstraction (after Harvey, 1996b; Ollman, 2003) deepens the framework's capacity to explain both generalized urban phenomena and their place-based social differences. It further discloses that urbanity is necessarily only a partial, if 'ecologically dominant', element of the relations internalized in ostensibly 'urban' socio-spatial processes.

My argument is organized as follows: I begin by outlining the central tenets of planetary urbanization and highlight four key critiques that expose the fault lines characteristic of current critical urbanism. I then offer a detailed interpretation of Marx's dialectics that responds to these critiques *and* holds the theoretical and methodological foundations of neo-Marxian urban theory to account. The paper concludes by positing a rejoinder to planetary urbanization's proponents and critics by considering the extent to which the *urban* logics internalized within the production, governance, or use of space may assert themselves over other social relations forged at alternative scales and levels of social reality.

Planetary Urbanization and its Discontents

The broad parameters of planetary urbanization have been discussed in detail by proponents and critics elsewhere (Brenner, 2014, 2018; Oswin, 2018b; Peake et al., 2018; Wilson and Jonas, 2018). A few notes will suffice here, focusing primarily on the contributions of Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid but acknowledging a variety of approaches exists.[3] Emerging from a novel extension of Lefebvre's (2003) argument in *The Urban Revolution*, the foundations of Brenner and Schmid's (2014, 2015) (provocation towards a) 'new epistemology of the urban' are seven theses: (1) the urban and urbanization are theoretical constructs; (2) the urban is a process, not a universal form; (3) urbanization involves mutually-constitutive moments of concentration, extension, and differentiation; (4) the fabric of urbanization is multi-dimensional; (5) urbanization has become planetary; (6) urbanization unfolds through variegated patterns and pathways; and (7) the urban is a collective, but essentially contested, project.

Spaces well beyond cities (and their suburban hinterlands) are woven into the planetary urban fabric, but "these… worlds aren't defined by any simple urban-rural divide, nor by anything North-South; instead, centers and peripheries are immanent within the accumulation of capital itself" (Merrifield, 2011, p. 474). Urban reality, it is suggested, can no longer be conceptually or analytically grasped through the city as traditionally understood (Angelo, 2017;

Keil, 2018b; Wachsmuth, 2014). Rather, it must be engaged through the analytical concepts of urban society: mediation (at the level of social reality), centrality (in terms of social form), and difference (as foundational to everyday life) (Addie, 2017; Schmid, 2014). Planetary urbanization's radical challenges to urban theory and research seeks to conceptualize the imprint of urban processes on the planetary landscape (Brenner, 2014, p. 5). It is "the relentless implosion-explosion of socio-spatial relations through capitalist industrialization" that Brenner claims "must today be placed at the analytical epicenter of critical urban theory" (2019, p. 388). The result, as quoted in the epigraph, is a radical shift towards urban theory *without an outside*, or in more measured terms, "without an inside/outside dualism" (Brenner, 2018, pp. 576-577).

Planetary urbanization's provocation to urban theory and praxis has generally been welcomed for foregrounding investigations of the urban rather than cities and asserting the dialectical connections between moments of agglomeration (*implosions*) and decentralization (*explosions*) (Goonewardena, 2018; Keil, 2018b; Wilson and Jonas, 2018, pp. 1578-1579). It has also catalyzed heated debate (both substantive and polemic) at conferences, in journals, and on social media (see Brenner, 2018; Pratt, 2018; Walker, 2015). For my present purposes, I engage four prominent critiques of the planetary urbanization theses that expose the contested epistemic and political nature of generality, particularity, and comparison in contemporary urban theory.

First, theorizing the planetary reach of urbanization has led critics to problematize what this means for the urban's normative 'Other': the rural (Catterall, 2016). Walker (2015, p. 188) suggests that Brenner and Schmid "effectively erase the rural" by claiming its internalization within urban social relations. Elsewhere, Krause (2013) warns against 'intellectual imperialism' of the urban and, alongside Meagher (2015), shares a desire to uncover the persistence of the rural within the urban; whether by mobilizing new metaphors or destabilizing the problematic equation of the urban with modernity (see Robinson, 2006).

Second, diverse appraisals informed by post-structuralism, post-colonialism, and feminism contend that by denying the existence of an 'outside', planetary urbanization subsumes

difference within the functionalism of a universalizing theoretical artifice. Merrifield's teleological rhetoric in arguing "the term 'planetary' really charts the final frontier, the telos of any earthly spatial fix" (2013a, p. 6) adds fuel to this fire. Such arguments permit accusations that the "planetary urbanization thesis has taken universalizing from the European experience to a new extreme" (Derickson, 2015, p. 654); subjecting planetary space to the imperatives of capitalist accumulation and class relations (Jefferson, 2018) and denying (space for) "the existence of the many outsides within critical urban theory" (Oswin, 2018a, p. 542). Roy (2016) and Jazeel (2018, 2019) each argue for the persistence of the urban's 'constituent outside' through appeals to the 'undecidability' of overdetermined social worlds in the case of the former, and the urban's irreducible 'singularity' in the latter. Others reject planetary urban discourse for producing "familiar hierarchies and exclusion" through a "totalizing… telescopic view from nowhere" (McLean, 2018, p. 548). For Derickson (2015), we're dealing with a binary between 'cosmic' scale universalizing meta-narratives (*Urbanization 1*) on the one hand, and the rich, diverse everyday experiences highlighted by queer, feminist, and post-colonial readings of urban life on the other (*Urbanization 2*).

Third, against this god's-eye critique, a range of critical urban theorists remind us that where we theorize from has significant impacts on how we define the urban, and for the transferability of particular concepts and policies (Oswin, 2018a; Sheppard, Leitner, and Maringanti, 2013; Simone, 2015). While the Lefebvrian and Marxist-influenced scholarship bracketed under Urbanization 1 purportedly operates from a standpoint where the researcher in 'omniscient and more-than-global', Derickson contends Urbanization 2's emphasis on the geographies and politics of knowledge means its' vantage points are much more open to encounters with urban trajectories beyond European and world cities. Alternative feminist readings of Lefebvre further "[open] up the category of 'the urban' in radical ways that [decenter] empirically-defined, spatially bounded models in which the materialization of capital flows (the spatial fix) implied a clear divide between public and private space and the analytical privileging

of collective reproduction and consumption" (Buckley and Strauss, 2016, p. 621). Such manoeuvres position "difference [as] an essential dimension of how urbanization happens, materially and otherwise" (Derickson, 2015, pp. 650-651). Robinson's (2006, 2016) call for comparative practices that 'think (cities) through elsewhere' has gained traction in this context (e.g. Lawhon et al., 2020). Rejecting Brenner and Schmid's (2015) contention that understanding 'the context of contexts' is a necessary step for urban theory-building, Meagher (2015, p. 811) asserts the juxtaposition of specificities is all the foundation needed for grounded urban knowledge production.

Fourth, the conceptual heterodoxy of recent critical scholarship (planetary or otherwise) has led some to decry urban studies is losing its grasp on its central object of analysis – the city – as "a distinctive, concrete social phenomenon" (Scott and Storper, 2015, p. 7). Walker (2015) suggests many of Brenner and Schmid's theses are generalized spatial propositions, not urban ones. Others critique planetary urbanization's elevation of process over form by viewing the city as an 'ideological representation of urbanization processes' not an 'empirical object'. Shaw (2015, p. 592) rebukes: "of course the urban and urbanization are processes, but both also have form, in the most concrete of ways… Why are we being asked to consider forms and processes as mutually exclusive?" For Walker (2015, p. 185), "the urban and urbanization are empirical objects, even if they are not self-evident or easily delineated". The conclusion is that beneath an over-theorized veneer, planetary urbanization offers little added explanatory value (Storper and Scott, 2016).

These arguments hold planetary urbanization's conceptual interventions to a robust and multi-faceted critique while offering important correctives. Taking these debates seriously, in what follows, I argue that Bertell Ollman's (2003) account of Marx's mode of abstraction offers a rigorous framework to interrogate the nature of the claims made in the name of, and against, planetary urbanization on its own terms.[4] Ollman's non-teleological reading of Marx's dialectics, as Hart (2018, pp. 378-381) argues, offers an open, flexible, and contingent way to understand

the world as grounded in the constant interplay between the concrete and abstract. This reading

contributes to the necessary task of acknowledging, but not negating, the limitations, omissions,

and privileges present in contemporary global urban theory. It further serves as a foundation to

explicitly (re)animate planetary urbanization as a mode of political praxis that can place its feet

on the street (per Keil, 2018a).[5] My goal is to open opportunities for new forms of solidarity by

sharpening what can be said through a more precise and reflexive planetary urban theory while

respecting (rather than subsuming) diverse urban experiences and struggles for social justice.

Dialectical Manoeuvres in the Urban: Internal Relations and Abstraction

Where we begin our analysis from matters: empirically and conceptually. Dialectical

investigations begin from the whole (as much of it as it understood) and attempts to understand

the position and connections of individual units within this totality. Dialectics therefore:

> restructures our thinking about reality by replacing the commonsense notion of 'thing'
>
> (as something that has a history and has external connections with other things) with
>
> notions of 'process' (which contains its history and possible futures) and 'relation' (which
>
> contains as part of what it is its ties with other relations) (Ollman, 2003, p. 13).

The notion of relations in this context is deployed in two ways: firstly, as relations "containing

within themselves the very interactions to which they belong", and secondly in terms of "ties

between parts that are momentarily viewed as separate" (ibid, p. 73). The distinction between

things existing *and* undergoing change is collapsed as relations are internalized by their bearer.

Processes are regarded as more fundamental than things, even as they are "mediated through the

things they produce, sustain and dissolve" (Harvey, 1996a, p. 50). Consequently, "the material

embeddedness of spatial structures created in the course of urbanization [cities] are in persistent

tension with the fluidity of social processes, such as capital accumulation and social

reproduction" (Harvey, 1996b, p. 419). Rather than treating things and systems as irreducible and

therefore unproblematic, dialectical thought views them as internally contradictory as a result of

the processes and relations constituting them. Social reality is not only characterized by contractions but can only be understood through their comprehension (Schmid, 2008, p. 30).

This mode of dialectical thinking is evident in Brenner and Schmid's assertion that "The idea of specificity is logically intelligible only in relation to an encompassing notion of generality against which it is defined; it is thus best understood as a relational, dialectical concept, one that presupposes a broader totality, rather than as a demarcation of ontological singularity" (2015, p. 161). The appeal to a broader totality – a system, whether globalized capitalism or another over-determined set of relations – marks a central epistemic and methodological incommensurability between Marxist and 'post-' urban studies (Goonewardena, 2018). Robinson's (2016) and Hart's (2018) exegeses on comparative urbanism have sought to find space for constructive dialogue across this fissure, but other prominent strands of post-colonial, queer, and feminist urbanism are less sanguine. Whereas Brenner and Schmid (2015, p. 162) view comparison as a step in the process of theory-building, their post-structural critics reject overarching context in the face of multiplicity (a critique also applicable to Walker, Scott and Storper et al.):

> we see patterns, connections and differences, not over and against some general or universal claim of 'the city', but in comparisons between our experiences and analyses of various urban phenomena… if we reject the concept of the 'general' as an immovable frame, how can it be the backdrop against which we view and understand specific contexts?" (Meagher, 2015, p. 807).

Presenting a rejoinder to this question necessitates examining the conceptual and methodological mode of abstraction offered when deploying dialectics through the philosophy of internal relations.

Concrete Abstraction as Method

Marx's dialectics offer a specific epistemology, method of inquiry, form of exposition, and mode of praxis (Harvey, 2012a). In the methodological notes sketched out in the *Grundrisse*, Marx

warns against privileging specificities over the concrete as more 'real', or introducing a category before its premises are developed:

> The concrete is the concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence the unity of the diverse. It appears in the process of thinking, therefore, as a process of concentration, as a result, not as a point of departure, even though it is the point of departure in reality and hence also the point of departure for observation and conception (Marx, 1973, p. 101).

The power of abstraction is fundamental in moving from observations of the 'real concrete' (the world as it appears to us) to the 'thought concrete' (the reconstitution of the whole, understood in the mind which may be reconciled with the real world) in Marx's materialism (Hall, 2003; Lebowitz, 2005, p. 203). Lefebvre, in *Dialectical Materialism*, stresses that this is an on-going process that realizes a 'concrete totality':

> The analysis of the given reality, from the point of view of political economy, leads to 'general abstract relations': division of labor, value, money, etc. If we confine ourselves to the analysis we 'volatilize' the concrete representation into abstract determinations, and lose the concrete presupposed by economic categories, which are simply 'abstract, one-sided relations of an already given concrete and living whole'. *This whole must be recovered by moving from the abstract to the concrete.* The concrete totality is thus the conceptual elaboration of the content grasped in perception and representation (2009, p. 75, emphasis added).

Two points are worth stressing considering these assertions. First, both Marx and Lefebvre see starting an analysis from a singular, concrete urban experience, or juxtaposition of urban experiences as unintelligible: we need to have some sense of what is being compared so that we are not juxtaposing 'apples and oranges'. However overdetermined our social worlds, abstractions (which are developed in specific social contexts) are necessary for us to encounter them (Sayer, 1992, p. 86). Second, the methodological movement from concrete to abstract *and*

back generates concepts – 'concrete abstractions' – that do not contain some now-unearthed ontological essence but are "conditioned directly by concrete sociospatial transformations that have rendered them essential as interpretive tools" (Brenner, 2019, p. 64). The concept of concrete abstraction refers to a form of abstraction that becomes true in practice through their historical production, consolidation, and contestation (Merrifield, 2013a, pp. 7-8; Schmid, 2018, pp. 599-600; Stanek, 2008).[6] The specific historical and geographic context captured in concrete abstractions belies the notion that the urban in (neo-)Marxist urban theory is "a universal and taken-as-given knowledge object" (Jazeel, 2019, p. 7). The general (context of contexts) is not 'an immovable frame' but is a geographically and historically produced abstraction that is continually struggled over in material and conceptual terms.

Examining the process of abstraction and what concrete abstractions contain in more detail offers a compelling heuristic to engage current schisms in urban theory. Ollman (2003) demonstrates that abstraction sits at a pivotal moment in Marx's methodology but is utilized in a deeper, more systematic way than simply asserting that understanding reality begins by breaking it down into manageable units. Specifically, Ollman details how the theory of internal relations underpinning Marx's dialectical method enables complex abstraction and re-abstraction across three modalities: (1) extension; (2) level of generality; and (3) vantage point. This framework, as with all abstractions, is political and must therefore remain open to critical exploration and epistemological reconstruction.

In what follows, I interpret how an urban reading of Ollman's non-teleological dialectics can enable neo-Marxist urban theory to navigate some of the legitimate concerns and reductionist truisms raised by its critics. This reading provides a rejoinder to the assertion that planetary urbanization coopts specifically feminist "concepts of relationality and hybridity while jettisoning the political-epistemological corollary that there is not 'innocent' or objective place from which to know" (Derrickson, 2018, p. 557). With this, it recalibrates planetary urbanization by: (1) foregrounding the centrality of *internal relationality* within humanist Marxism (see Hart,

2018; Massey, 2004; Sheppard, 2008); and (2) establishing a mode of critical-theory-as-praxis whose political-epistemological corollary acknowledges a particular situatedness of urban knowledge.

Extension

Abstraction is essentially a process of boundary setting. Each abstraction achieves a particular extension in space and time that brings together people, places, processes but – importantly in the context of debates surrounding generality and particularity – *not everything about them* (Ollman, 2003, p. 80). Because this moment of abstraction includes deciding what is included and excluded from our interpretative tools, it is a profoundly political process. Marx favored large-scale abstractions with a significant degree of extension with fluid boundaries treated in accordance with the present analytical concern. His abstraction of class illuminates how such shifting extensions incorporate both processes and relations and the history embedded within them. People may be grouped into a two-class society premised on minimal aspects of an extended large abstraction, or with a smaller extension be placed into categories including, ruling classes, rentiers, petty bourgeoisie etc. (ibid, pp. 80-81). Similarly, capital in Marx's writings appears at varying times as value in motion, as a class in itself and as a social relation, as labor-time (variable capital), money, commodities, property that exploits wage labor, and so on. What emerges from these perspectives "is a conception of many tied facets whose sense depends upon the relations Marx believes to exist between its components: property, wage-labor, worker, work, product, commodities, means of production, capitalist, money, and value [etc.]" (ibid, p. 25). A strict definition is not the aim. That one, as Vilfredo Paredo famously contended, can see both birds and rats in Marx's polysemic bat-like words, is illustrative, and a vital component, of his dialectical method. The nature of dialectical abstractions reveals apparently contradictory claims to be complementary. How we view these philosophical concerns has a fundamental influence on the questions we ask, the answers we find, and political actions we take.

Surveying contemporary urban studies reveals a comparable array of applications of 'the urban' (as built form, political arena, socio-technical assemblage, agglomeration…) albeit outside of a singular theory. Differing abstractions of extension in urban theory have led to several foundational disputes, including elements of the four critiques of planetary urbanization outlined above. Scholars seeking more stable, trans-historical urban concepts (e.g. Scott and Storper, 2015; Taylor, 2012; Walker, 2015) fix boundaries of extension but concretize their own blind fields. Defining the urban relative to the rural as planetary urbanists have tended to do (even if urban-rural binaries are being problematized) limits an understanding of urbanization as a developmental force emerging from, but now surpassing, industrialization within the capitalist mode of production (Lefebvre, 2003; Merrifield, 2013b; Schafran, et al., 2018). Indeed, the idea of urban society exceeding industrial (capitalist) society is a central dialectical argument presented in the *Urban Revolution* (Keil, 2018a).

What is at stake when we consider abstractions of extension is clarity regarding what falls within the analytical purview of our urban concepts, what does not, and the epistemological and political impacts of making such claims. Acknowledging queer urban theorists' refusal to be incorporated into planetary urbanization's 'analytical epicenter' (Oswin, 2018a), we must recognize the partiality of our abstractions and their fields of application. On its own terms, planetary urbanization tends not to make assertions about cities, even as its conceptual abstractions have emerged in concert with (often overlooked) empirical studies "intended to underscore the historically specific, growth- and profit-oriented mode of industrial development that so powerfully animates and meditates the *urban process under capitalism*" (Brenner, 2019, p. 43 emphasis added, also see Brenner, 2018; Schmid, 2018; Schmid et al., 2018). The focus placed on process does not negate the city but directs attention to the (capitalist) processes and relations they internalize. It is important to underscore that such interventions center on *urbanization*, not *urbanism* (Brenner, 2018, p. 574) even as critics tend to conflate these concepts. Per Merrifield's theorization of dialectical urbanism, we are talking about "two epistemological moments within

an ontological unity: one we experience – *urbanism* – and one we don't – *urbanization* – but we know it really exists nonetheless" (2002, p. 160).

Levels of Generality

As abstractions engender extensions and set boundaries, they bring into focus particular levels of generality to examine both parts and the system (totality) as a whole. Ollman (2003, pp. 88-89) posits seven levels with which Marx subdivides the world: (1) the individual; whatever is unique about a person (or situation) that differentiates them from everyone else; (2) generalizations about people in the recent past that abstract common qualities as general to a group of people, their products and activities (e.g. engineers, weavers, bankers etc.). These generalities, akin to Marx's discussions of 'production in a particular industry', shift focus from specific individuals to include more people over a longer period (20-50 years) and in a larger area (usually one or a few countries); (3) capitalism; production as a whole and what is particular to people and social activity in capitalist society; (4) class society, and generalizations that are particular to class-based divisions of labor, whether in capitalist, feudal, or slave-based societies; (5) human society, abstractions that are understood as common to the human condition; (6) the animal world, framing qualities that are common to humans and other animals; and, (7) nature as a whole, which generalizes qualities about material nature (weight, movement etc.). Marx, intuitively, is concerned with the third level of generality, but also devotes significant attention to levels 2 and 4 as levels that center the significance of historical context. He also occasionally abstracts on level 1, which affords individuals a prominent place in his historical writings. In contrast, Ollman suggests non-critical liberal formulations tend to move from level one to five without adequately focusing on the relations in-between, and consequently assign blame for social ills on 'bad' individuals or human nature (ibid, pp. 90-91).

Table 1 heuristically interprets urban levels of generality from the levels of generality present in Marx's method. Generalities at 'level 1' concern the distinct experiences of individual

urbanites or exceptional/unique case cities while 'level 2' draws attention to particular (types of) cities in the recent past (global, world, ordinary, Sunbelt etc.). It also enables us to abstract generalities regarding the common qualities of particular cities or urban inhabitants in the spaces and over the period these qualities have existed (e.g. the subjectivities of urbanites under 'actually existing' neoliberalism). Abstractions at this level of generality provide ample scope to analyze difference, divergence, and variegation. This is the level at which it is perhaps most effective to "think cities through elsewhere" (Robinson, 2016). 'Level 3' is constituted by broad social structures including capitalism, patriarchy, and imperialism whereby everything that is peculiar about urbanization and urbanism related to their appearance and functioning in these structures is brought into focus. Qualities of individuals or particular cities are irrelevant here as the focus of the analysis is urban process itself under capitalism, colonialism etc. Importantly, these structures are not totalizing even as they form an (open) totality (Sheppard, 2008) and continue to produce their own other: their own constitutive outside. Continuing to move from micro to macro levels, urban society – whether virtual or actualized (per Lefebvre, 2003) – frames abstractions at 'level 4'; i.e. the times and spaces where human societies have been divided by settlement type. 'Level 5' through 'level 7' correspond to Ollman's most general levels.

<div align="center"><<TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE>></div>

Theorizing pitched at differing levels of generality discloses the roots of certain tensions in comparative urban debates. Broadly, post-structural urban theorists have tended to see abstractions made at higher levels of generality as universalizing – presenting meta-theoretical statements from a detached gods' eye perspective and subsuming difference into the artifices of structuralism. Similar issues are evident as scholars try to identify the difference between the city and the rest of geographic space across the grand sweep of history (Storper and Scott, 2016; Taylor, 2012). Where Walker (2015, p. 184) sees "a troubling elision between general social-philosophical propositions and urban-spatial ones", he is pointing to a critique strongly-tied to general abstractions made, broadly, at 'level 5' at the expense of explorations interrogating levels

3 and 4. And current accounts of planetary urbanization have struggled to adequately situate their analysis across levels of generality, remaining locked-in at the relatively meso-level of capitalism and failing to mobilize concomitant analyses at more fine-grained levels of social reality.

Paying attention to levels of generality in urban theory-building can help constructively negotiate discursive and analytical islands of practice in urban and regional studies. The key insight to be gleaned here is that the problem is not which assertions are true based on the level of generality, but which level of abstraction is appropriate for grappling with specific problems given that each level establishes a range of possibilities for what can occur (Ollman, 2003, p. 98). The 'constituent inside' of the urban may be rearticulated at differing levels, with no single level/interpretation being sufficient to account for all that needs to be explained. The relevant question then becomes not which general or specific approaches are correct, but "which is the appropriate abstraction for dealing with a particular set of problems?" (Ollman, 2003, p. 91). This assertion is essential as it stresses that levels of generality are not mutually exclusive or hierarchically ordered (see Brenner, 2019). Further, Level 1 is not the most concrete, nor level 7 the most abstract, since concrete phenomena and experiences can be large and generalized at same time as abstract concepts can be discrete and localized. Levels of generality may be moved between in ways that highlight elements of the general and particular that can serve as the foundation for multiple political actions and solidarities – as demonstrated in the conjunctural method advocated by Doreen Massey, Stuart Hall (1995; Hall and Massey, 2010) and Jamie Peck (2017) amongst others.

Table 1 presents a provisional framework that should be mobilized – and critiqued – in the process of theorizing urban socio-spatial relations. Lefebvre (2003, pp. 79-81) offers useful formulation in this context by framing the urban as a mediatory level (M) that resides in an open dialectic with the global level of abstract relations, institutional knowledges, and distant orders (G) and the private level of inhabiting and everyday experience (P). Contra to Smith (2003, p.

xiv), who reads this schema through the lens of the politics of scale in his introduction to *The Urban Revolution*, and Derickson (2015, p. 654), who sees planetary urbanization as a "scalar move", Lefebvre's *levels* highlight the differing concrete through abstract aspects of social reality presented by capitalist modernity, not the more customary notion of territorial *scale* (Brenner, 2000, p. 368; Schmid, 2014, p. 70). Kipfer (2009) effectively unpacks G-M-P as "dialectically interrelated, mutually implicated aspects of reality or distinctions in a differentiated whole" that themselves can be analytically scaled. Large social orders (capital, the state) can be concretized in built and unbuilt urban forms while the level of everyday life encompasses the "geographically stretched character of modern social relations" (ibid, pp. 74, 75). As a result, the urban not only always has an outside (as presented in global and private levels) but considerations of everyday life (P) are essential to understanding urban phenomenon at higher levels of abstraction, rather than functioning as discrete alternatives to abstract relations (per Schmid, 2018, p. 600). Planetary urbanization can effectively be understood as a systematic, always incomplete, dialectical manoeuvre to articulate levels M and P as a worldwide concern.

Vantage Point

Where we see our abstractions from matters. Vantage point as a mode of abstraction highlights the way our position within a system leads to differing perceptual outcomes. Capital and labor, while linked within a central contradiction, clearly have differing viewpoints on the nature and experience of capitalism. Looking from one perspective onto an object of study may reveal a lot but shifting to another 'window' can illuminate things which were previously hidden (Harvey, 2007, pp. 1-4). This process is central to dialectical thinking – viewing the commodity from the viewpoint of use-value, value, and exchange-value as the basis for abstraction in *Capital* – and opens up alternative strategies of political action.

For Harvey and Ollman, vantage point is not only something that belongs to people, as shaped by the particularities of their life history and social characteristics. Evocative of the fault

lines in critical urban theory, Harvey draws a distinction between what he terms 'vulgar' appeals to situatedness that "[dwell] almost entirely on the relevance of individual biographies", and what he sees as a more nuanced and productive approach in which "Situatedness is not seen as *separate and unrelated* difference, but as a *dialectical power relation* between oppressor and oppressed. Both need the other and both internalize a relation to the other in their own identity" (1996b, pp. 354, 355, original emphasis). Individuals' and collectives' perceptions may be more profoundly embedded "in the nature of [their] habitual abstractions" that in turn serve as a vital starting point for how they make sense of the world (Ollman, 2003, p. 101). Marx posits that workers have a better grasp of the workings of capitalism, not as a result of their individual experiences, but because they begin to make sense of their world through concepts tied to the activity of production (including 'labor', 'factory' etc.) whereas capitalists approach the world through abstractions derived from the marketplace ('price', 'profit', 'competition' etc.) that leave the process of production black-boxed (ibid, pp. 101-102). Incorporating nuanced and historicized understandings of individual and structural standpoints is necessary to understand a social structure as a whole, but the direction and logic of political action hinges on the positions we validate and prioritize.

Brenner and Schmid's 7th thesis asserts the urban is a collective but essentially contested political project. However, despite some exceptions (e.g. Harvey, 2012b; Lesutis, 2020; Merrifield 2013a), there is clearly work to be done to demonstrate how a politics of planetary urbanization can be tackled in more extensive forms (open to other political articulations and actions). By examining the implosion/explosion of urban society primarily from the vantage point of global capital(ism), planetary urbanization has had an easier time explaining the structural dynamics shaping the expansion of urban social relations and forms – notably by drawing attention to the relevance of situated urban knowledge generated from its spatial hinterlands (Brenner and Katsikis, 2020). In contrast, urbanists starting from a position of peripherality (relative to dominant power structures and mainstream subjectivities) are more adept at exposing the

complexity and heterogeneity of the subaltern and the everyday. Critics and sympathizers alike have pointed out that the conversation at present remains detached from the 'experience of urbanites' (Derickson, 2015; Keil, 2018a).

Assessing the vantage points of our abstractions is a central terrain over which the fissures between (neo-)Marxist and 'marginal' critical approaches must be understood and negotiated. Seeing capitalism from the perspective of persons of color, for example, (through abstractions grouping common qualities as general to a group of people) helps us know more about capitalism as a mode of production and social totality. Yet as critics have asserted, if we view such a standpoint interpretation through narrow political-economic categories, we run the risks of: (1) reifying problematic social structures, with powerful material consequences; and (2) overlooking how actually existing capitalism emerges historically in ways that are co-constitutive with other externally-related social formations (Virdee, 2019). Theories of racial capitalism insist we see racial formation and capitalism as deeply co-emergent; challenging the established concepts and assumptions of Anglo-European Marxism and demanding that race and class are viewed relationally in sophisticated and rigorous ways (DuBois, 1962; McKittrick, 2011; Robinson, 1983; Woods, 2017). Comparably, extending work on capitalist patriarchy (Federici, 2004; Hartsock, 1983), Federci (2014, p. 86) provides another productive way forward, arguing that "if Marxist theory is to speak to twenty-first-century anti-capitalist movements, it must rethink the question of 'reproduction' from a planetary perspective" (also see Buckley and Strauss, 2016). In these instances, race and gender are not viewed as something that is separate from the totality of capitalist social relations but offer correctives that situate racism, colonialism, and sexism within capitalism's most foundational structures. Each, then asks us to consider 'socio-spatial postionalities' as relational concepts that "[emphasize] the connectivities between differently positioned but also unequally empowered" (Sheppard 2015, p. 1116). Again, how we mobilize such thinking in practice is a political act with strategic and material implications. Black liberation may not be realized solely within the Marxist tradition as Robinson (1983) argues, but

– from a historical materialist perspective that asserts diverse social struggles do not exist in isolated terms – it cannot be realized solely from without it either. This is not narrow economic determinism but an acknowledgement of the complex determinations at work in particular concrete circumstances (Hall, 1980; Blaut, 1987; Harvey, 2005, p. 929).

Working through these complex theoretical and methodological issues require further elaboration beyond the scope of this paper. What I want to stress here is that working with and through notions of vantage point and situated knowledge compels planetary urbanization – and urban theory in general – to engage in an on-going process of theoretical scrutiny and critical reflexivity. Generating concrete abstractions is useful in this context because, rather than aspiring to the objectivity of generalization, they seek to capture the historical and geographic specificity of their production *and* demand to be returned to in a continual cycle of reappraisal. The concrete, empirical situation remains "as a privileged and undissolved 'moment' within a theoretical analysis without thereby making it empiricist" (Hall, 2003, p. 128, cf. Hart, 2018, p. 379). The philosophy of internal relations presents methodological parameters for this process by focusing on the dialectical influence of worldwide events on specific phenomena and engaging concrete events as a window upon the 'concentration of many determinations' that make up the social totality (Harvey, 2005). This involves seeing extended and concentrated landscapes of urbanization as dialectically produced (Brenner and Schmid, 2015). It also involves approaching questions of positionality in relational terms (Sheppard, 2015).

However partial the modality of knowledge production encapsulated in concrete abstractions, the dialectical nature of such concepts captures the dynamics and contradictions of particular social structures. Unpacking abstractions through their socio-spatial positionalities can generate collective imaginations capable of catalyzing social change. This task, though, obligates dialectical thinkers to give concerted attention to "the complex mediations, both in space and over time, that make up the joints of any social problem" (Ollman, 2003, p. 19). For geographical historical materialist planetary urban theory, this involves prioritizing capitalist accumulation to

the extent that it creates and mobilize distinct patterns of urbanization while not glossing over specific particularities and differences in the face a presumptive common generative process (ibid.). We must therefore engage with multiple vantage points in order to better understand the position and connections of individuals within the social process as a totality while recognizing that specific vantage points do not capture everything about individual or collective subject positions. There are significant political implications here for critical urbanism as historically contingent mode of praxis. Abstractions constructed from particular vantage points (which are embedded in concrete situations) differentially frame the immanent critique of oppressive and unjust social structures. And in doing so, they delineate the possibilities of both opening and foreclosing strategic alliances and cross-cutting collective action.

Towards the Ecological Dominance of the Urban as Comparative Maneuver

At the core of this paper is a call to better account for how abstractions and generalities are built when we theorize the urban. The critique I have offered attempts to hold planetary urbanization to account on its own terms while pointing to instances where its mode of theorization can be constructively reoriented in a humbler and more reflexive manner. The paper has approached this task on two levels: first, interpreting Ollman's dialectical method as a heuristic entry-point to debate questions of generality and particularity in urban theorizing; and second, arguing for the excavation of the mode of abstraction underpinning the *process* of planetary urban theoriz*ing*. Rather than unreflexively restating Marxist dogma or reifying its concepts, taking seriously – and explicitly articulating – the extension, generality, and vantage point of our abstractions provides a means to evaluate the internal logics, consistency, and scope (including the omissions) of our urban concepts. Interrogating the appropriateness of specific abstractions, and accounting for the process through which they are generated, forces us to re-center the underlying theoretical and empirical issues that drive the analytical interpretations we make. In this context, I forward that planetary urbanization is a partial and situated framework to address the urban question but

emphasize the tremendous conceptual value and openness of its method, interpretive tools, and materialist foundations.

Returning to the four critiques of planetary urbanization introduced at the outset, I can now reappraise how an open and non-teleological dialectics reframes the theoretical, methodological, and political issues raised. First, dialectical abstraction reveals that rather than erasing or negating the rural, the urban and the rural are best conceptualized as concrete abstractions that dialectically fold into each other to create new centralities and peripheries – and emancipatory possibilities – urban society at macro- and micro-levels of generality (Merrifield, 2011, p. 474). Moreover, narrowly theorizing the rural as the urban's 'Other' overlooks alternative lines of analysis. For example, urbanization may be constructively framed as developmental force capable of "converting industrial contradictions into contradictions of the city" (Merrifield, 2013b, p. 911; Schafran et al., 2018) or as a political ecology that sublates distinctions between town and country (Angelo and Wachsmuth, 2015).

Second, it is necessary to reject the notion that there is 'no outside' to the urban. Contradictions between the socio-spatiality of the urban and its constituent outside create the conditions for immanent change as a social totality seeks to internalize and transform what it external into a functioning part of the whole. However, Schmid's (2008) examination of Lefebvre's dialectical approach asserts that this method does not subsume the 'other' or 'outside' into the urban, but rather serves to illuminate how they may be brought together in unresolved tension. We can this acknowledge the urban has an outside while working with abstractions of extension that bring particular characteristics into our collective urban imaginaries and explanatory toolkits.

Third, abstractions framed by particular levels of generality and vantage points are vital in setting the parameters of analysis and the validity of knowledge claims. We can find common space and synergies between critical and radical perspectives by recognizing that no one theory should be expected to answer all dimensions of the urban question. Critical theory requires an

understanding of the situatedness and politics of knowledge. However, the imperative to recognize context dependency, positionality, and 'provincialize' theory (Oswin, 2018b; Sheppard et al., 2013), ultimately "does not absolve us from the responsibilities and opportunities of generalization" (Dear, 2005, p. 248) or negate the central utility of the abstract, the general, and of totality itself (Goonewardena, 2018; Kipfer, 2009). They support the generation of strong theoretical arguments regarding structural inequalities and provide necessary conceptual abstractions that enable us to compare and render specificities legible relative to each other (Brenner, 2019, p. 39). As I have argued, planetary urbanization should therefore not be read, or mobilized, as prohibitively totalizing if clearly operationalized through a dialectical methodology that situates how and from where it is theorized.

Finally, rather than retreating back into bounded and readily differentiated definitions of the urban, dialectics enable the examination and exploration of fuzzy, complex, and dynamic lifeworlds. Relational comparisons move beyond analyses of bounded units or ideal types (Mould, 2016; Ward, 2010) and allow us to engage and mobilize the urban as an appropriately malleable multilevel and multiscalar field of analysis. Rather, than returning to singular methodologies or universalizing meta-narratives, seeing the urban as a concrete abstraction encourages an exploration of the processes through which urban society is produced *and* its potential for human emancipation (Keil, 2018a; Streule, 2019). I find it more productive not to succumb to a need to define what the urban is or cities are, but to explore what they can enable us to become.

In sum, this leads us towards a recalibrated planetary urbanization that: (1) is more precise and explicit in terms of (the politics of) its abstractions; (2) is compelled to work across levels of generality, including taking seriously the contention that engaging with contextual difference and everyday life is essential to understand abstract social relations; and (3) functions as a critically-reflexive method of theory-building.

In concluding, I want to consider how mobilizing an urban reading of Jessop's (2000) 'ecological dominance' as a comparative maneuver that might move planetary urbanization, and debates in critical urban studies, beyond their present impasses. While urban places, populations, processes, relations, and modes of thought may hold a position of primacy in the current period of human history, following Jessop, they do not 'dominate' other socio-spatial dynamics involved in their production. The ecological dominance of the urban suggests urban society's capacity "to imprint its developmental logics on other systems' operations through structural coupling, strategic coordination and blind co-evolution to a greater extent than the latter can impose their respective logics on that system" (ibid, p. 329). The concept of ecological dominance, as such, illustrates how, and the extent to which, "one system or order is a problem-*maker* for others rather than a problem-*taker*" (Jessop, 2014, p. 54), even as it can be contested and struggled over.

As finance capital has assumed a position of primacy in global capitalist circuits, urbanization reinforces capital's over-arching ecological dominance (Jessop, 2000, p. 331). But, following Jessop's argument, urbanization does not subsume the rural, other developmental forces, or experience of difference within a dominant, universal social order. The ecological dominance of the urban is an outcome of relationships between systems rather than pre-given qualities of individual systems themselves. It is always relative, relational, and contingent upon the specificities of particular spatiotemporal conjunctures (per Jessop, 2000, pp. 329-330; 2014, p. 49). And it brings with it new contradiction, vulnerabilities, risks, and emancipatory potential.

Assessing the ecological dominance of the urban consequently forces us to consider the extent to which the *urban* developmental and structuring logics internalized within the social process – including the production, governance, or use of space – may assert themselves over other social relations forged at alternatives scales and levels of social reality. To do so points to the extension of urban processes and relations *and* dialectically asserts their necessary variations as they interact with systems that are not subsumed within a universalizing logic of urbanization. The concrete totality of the urban remains open (Goonewardena, 2018; Ollman, 2003; Robinson,

2016). The process and extent to which socio-spatial relations are *urban(ized)* in different regions and specific cities and at different levels of generality therefore opens potentially constructive avenues for future empirical and comparative work.

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[1] We have been here before, with current debates in particular echoing feminist critiques of Harvey's *Condition of Postmodernity* (Deutsche, 1991; Harvey, 1992; Massey, 1991). This points to foundational tensions between structuralism and post-structuralism, the continuing political struggle to recognize marginalized subjects and modes of theorizing within urban studies (see Barnes and Sheppard, 2019), and the persistence of 'rascal concepts' in minimizing complex discourses (Smith, 1987).

[2] Following appeals for humbler theory (Derickson, 2018; Katz, 1996; Temenos, 2017), I do not claim it is possible to reconcile incompatible theoretical positions or that we should pull towards some singular mode of urban thought (planetary or otherwise). No one theory should be expected to answer all dimensions of the urban question.

[3] Important distinctions exist between Brenner and Schmid's (2014, 2015) framing of planetary urbanization, Schmid's (2014) theorization of 'urban society', Angelo and Wachsmuth's (2015) critique of 'methodological cityism', Monte-Mor's (2005) extended urbanization, Keil's (2018b) global suburbanisms, Merrifield's (2013) planetary encounters with difference, and Harvey's (2012b) account of the financialization of the urban process.

[4] My argument does not come with an expectation that those who are considered marginal, or theorizing from positions of marginality (following Asher, 2019, p. 26) must situate themselves within this framework. We will not find a resolution to critical urban theory's current stand-offs solely on the terrain of planetary urbanization. While I am critical of post-structural approaches and unconvinced by several of their critiques, it is important, as Gibson (2014) has argued, not to close the door on substantive dialogue that can disclose the conceptual, methodological, and political limits of our urban theories.

[5] Planetary urbanization *is* partial and contains significant blind fields. Brenner's opus, *New Urban Spaces* (2019), for example, identifies few, if any, social actors who mobilize or experience the monumental urban and governance transformations of our planetary urban condition. And when we might hope for an engagement with urban inhabitants on the street, Brenner slips terrestrial gravity to uncover extended urbanization's imprint in the detritus of satellites orbiting the globe (ibid. p. 368).

[6] While the method involved here has tended to be absent or treated implicitly in extent scholarship, Schmid (2018, pp. 599-600) and Brenner (2019, pp. 31-45) have both drawn explicit attention to the centrality of concrete abstractions in their mode of theorizing.

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Tables:

	Ollman's levels of generality in Marx	**Urban levels of generality**
1	Individual	Specific individuals or the experiences of a particular city
2	Particular industry (recent past) [industrial capitalism]	Particular (types of) cities/urbanites (recent past) [financial capitalism/urbanization as dominant developmental force]
3	Capitalism	Urban process under capitalism [imperialism, patriarchy, and so on]
4	Class society	Urban society [as society seen through settlement type]
5	Human society	Human society
6	Animal world	Animal world
7	Nature as a whole	Nature as a whole

Table 1: Levels of generality