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Paper:

Smith, R. (2013). The ordinary city trap. *Environment and Planning A*, 45(10), 2290-2304.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1068/a45516>

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The ordinary city trap

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Received 20 September 2012; in revised form 28 November 2012

Abstract. The paper is a critique of a critique; it explains why the most salient and influential critiques of the neo-Marxist world city and global city concepts, made by those arguing to further postcolonialize urban studies through such suppositions that all cities are ‘ordinary’, are misguided. First, it is explained how the charges of economism and ethnocentrism against the world city and global city concepts are *ignoratio elenchi*: they do not even begin to address or critique their neo-Marxist argument that, across the difference and diversity of the world’s cities, a few major cities have the necessary economic specialization and therefore extraordinary function of commanding and controlling neoliberal globalization. Second, the error made by advocates of ordinary cities of supposing that world-systems analysis and the world city concept are forms of developmentalism is understood as the source for a wider postcolonial mistake of conflating the neo-Marxist world city and global city literatures with the very neoliberal practices toward urban development that they have long attempted to disclose and counter. Finally, the charges against the world city and global city concepts as paradigmatic, peripheralizing, and normative are also rebutted, not only to highlight how those critiques are consequentialist and dependent on the respective charges of economism, ethnocentrism, and developmentalism having veracity, but to demonstrate how an acceptance of the ordinary cities argument for an idiographic, provincial, nominalist, and comparative approach to urban studies, as an alternative to the two neo-Marxist concepts, is only to fall into the trap of making the mistake of confusing *evidence of absence for absence of evidence*.

Keywords: ordinary cities, postcolonial urbanisms, world city, global city

1 Introduction

A chorus of postcolonial voices has over the past decade deployed a host of phrases—eg, ‘ordinary cities’, ‘Southern cities’, ‘subaltern cities’, ‘global cities of the South’, ‘the Other global city’, ‘African cities’, ‘black urbanism’, ‘worlding cities’, ‘postcolonial urbanism’, the ‘trans-territorial city’ (eg, see Dawson and Edwards, 2004; McCann, 2004; McFarlane, 2008; Mayaram, 2009; Myers, 2011; Robinson, 2002; 2005; 2006; 2011; Roy, 2009; 2011; Roy and Ong, 2011; Simone, 2010)—to press for the importance of either a ‘Southern turn’ in urban studies or for a recognition of the diversity ‘between [sic]’ all the world’s cities—especially with regard to calling for the production of more cosmopolitan urban theories that explicitly draw inspiration from the experiences of, and the knowledge produced within, all the world’s cities. Among the most vocal of these voices has been the idiographic contention that all cities are ordinary in the sense that each and every city is distinct in its own specificity, creativity, authenticity, modernity, and city life, with the consequent argument that extant global metropolitan studies needs to be ‘decentred’ (Robinson, 2003; 2006; Roy, 2009; 2011), not only to represent that difference and diversity between cities but also to accept, learn, and draw from it in producing “new geographies of theory” (Roy, 2009, page 819).

The term ‘ordinary city’ was coined by Amin and Graham (1997) before being drawn upon by several authors (eg, McCann, 2004; McFarlane, 2008; Robinson, 2002; 2006; 2008) to further a postcolonial argument for an idiographic, provincial, and nominalist urban studies that would supposedly, through its championing of a comparative approach (McFarlane, 2008; 2010; Robinson, 2004; 2011; Ward, 2012), be more attentive to the diversity between all the world’s cities than is the case with the neo-Marxist world city and global city concepts.⁽¹⁾ The problem is that this postcolonial call to order has not only taken Amin and Graham’s (1997, page 421) exemplary presentation of the ordinary city as ‘multiplex’—an attentiveness to “urban multiplicity stressing the interconnections between the complex time–space circuits and dimensions of urban life, as well as the diversity and contingency of the urban world”—as its starting point (eg, see Myers, 2011, page 197; Robinson, 2008; Simone, 2004, page 241) to further postcolonialize urban studies, but has also chosen to significantly *overextend* Amin and Graham’s (1997, page 418) desire to “overcome the risks of resorting to totalizing paradigmatic examples and overgeneralizing from narrow, partial perspectives” in urban studies by launching a series of critiques against the neo-Marxist world city and global city concepts⁽²⁾ (eg, Robinson, 2002; 2006; 2008). An unfortunate manoeuvre because, as this paper will demonstrate, those critiques have not only missed their target, but have also—because the nature of those critiques are consequentialist, *ignoratio elenchi*, and erroneous—served to highlight the inherent idiographic and nominalist limitations of the ordinary cities supposition.

To make the argument that the ordinary cities agenda has momentum and credibility only through a troika of misrepresentations—economism, ethnocentrism, and developmentalism—about the world city and global city concepts, the paper proceeds in three parts. First, the *ignoratio elenchi* of ordinary cities proponents with regard to supposing that both concepts are blighted by economism and ethnocentrism is explained. Second, how and why the two neo-Marxist concepts have been misrepresented as forms of developmentalism, as a resurgence of modernisation theory and a policy recommendation, by ordinary cities advocates is discussed. Thirdly, it is argued that the error of that trilogy of critiques also explains the fallacy of three other respective consequentialist critiques—the charges that the world city and global city concepts are paradigmatic, peripheralizing, and normative—a fact that further evidences how attempts to postcolonialize urban studies are concerned with chastising the *shadows* that the world city and global city are imagined to cast, rather than the veracity of the two neo-Marxist concepts in themselves. Finally, it is argued that the consequentialism that invalidates all six critiques of the world city and global city concepts exposes how the intellectual trap of attempts to postcolonialize urban studies, through notions such as ‘ordinary cities’, is their confusion (*ignoratio elenchi*) of *evidence of absence* (that something is not present) for *absence of evidence* [that something is

⁽¹⁾ A paradox of the ordinary cities critique is that its insistence on the need for a comparative approach is blind to the fact that the world city and global city literatures are, in fact, founded on a comparative tradition (see Friedmann, 1995)—be it within individual nation-states (eg, Abu-Lughod, 1999), across the so-called ‘global North’ (eg, Sassen, 1991), or across the world-system as a whole (eg, Amin et al, 2006; Knox and Taylor, 1995; Timberlake, 1985)—that considers all cities, and draws on the in situ knowledge of a diverse and worldwide network of many hundreds of urban specialists to evidence the different economic specializations of the world’s cities.

⁽²⁾ Postcolonial and ordinary cities critics make the mistake of critiquing the world city and global city concepts together as though they are synonymous. However, both neo-Marxist concepts are different, both theoretically and empirically, especially with regard to their key purposes of supposing and evidencing command and control [for a detailed explanation see Smith (2013)]. The superficiality of postcolonial and ordinary cities advocates engagement with the detail of the two neo-Marxist concepts only serves to further question the credibility of their critiques and the need for the alternative they propose.

missing because it has been “overlooked” (McCann, 2004, page 2315) or excluded through “prejudice” (Robinson, 2005, page 760), and so on]. A trap because it means that ordinary cities critics have singularly failed to address the issue in question—command and control, the very *raison d’être* of the world city and global city concepts—and consequently it is argued that those working in the world city and global city paradigms can rightly suppose such postcolonial critiques to be at best irrelevant and, at worst, a politically conservative attempt to move progressive international urban studies onto safer and less relevant ground. A (re)turn to a kind of idiographic, provincial nominalist, and comparative area studies (Robinson, 2003) which by calling to abandon categorization, hierarchies, and a focus on the uneven geographies of intercity relations (the empirical fact that some cities are dominant ‘connectors’ within networks), in favour of ‘emplaced heterogeneity’ and a ‘provincialized urban studies’, risks both essentialism—the fallacy of the idiographic as more ‘authentic’—and “veiling vast asymmetries of power and influence between cities” (Huysen, 2008, page 11).

2 Economism, ethnocentrism, and the *ignoratio elenchi* of ordinary cities critics

The habit of launching *ignoratio elenchi* critiques against the world city and global city concepts is prevalent amongst those who have allied themselves to a postcolonial approach (eg, Bunnell and Maringanti, 2010; Harker, 2011; Mayaram, 2009), and to the ordinary cities supposition in particular (eg, McCann, 2004; McFarlane, 2008; Myers, 2011; Robinson, 2002; 2005; 2006). Such commentators are convinced that the world city and global city concepts are economistic and ethnocentric and therefore are culpable with respect to rendering the majority of the world’s cities as invisible and irrelevant through their production of a singular, dominant, and exclusionary perspective on global urbanism that overshadows either whole cities or the dimensions of cities other than their multinational, financial, and corporate service aspects. This section will now expose both charges as myths.⁽³⁾

2.1 The economism myth

The charge of economism made by ordinary cities advocates against the world city and global city concepts is a *fallacy of distraction* because said critics fail to address the neo-Marxist argument that the evident centralization of a particular economic specialization in just a few major cities equates to only those strategic sites having, and being necessary for, command-and-control functionality. Indeed, when critics levy the charge of economism against the world city and global city concepts it is only to suppose that the two neo-Marxist concepts are economistic for reasons other than command and control, such as prejudice, forgetfulness, blindness, or just for no reason at all. Three examples are illustrative. First, Robinson (2005) supposes that the world city and global city concepts exhibit “a *prejudice* against many important cities because of the[ir] rigid focus on advanced producer services” (page 760, my emphasis). Second, McCann (2004) contends that economic change in Lexington in Kentucky (USA)—along with that in most of the world’s thousands of other cities—has simply been “*forgotten or overlooked* by global cities researchers” (page 2315, my emphasis). Third, Bunnell and Maringanti (2010, page 416; also see McCann, 2004) simply imagine that the world city and global city concepts are narrow, have “been heavily skewed towards

⁽³⁾ Surborg (2011) makes reference to my (Smith, 2007) critical review of Gugler (2004) to suppose that: “Smith’s critique goes hand in hand with that of other authors such as Jennifer Robinson (2002, 2006) or Colin McFarlane (2008), who view the world city concept as Western-centric and privileging the economic aspects of contemporary urbanisation around the world.” However, Surborg’s reading is actually antithetical to my argument. In fact, my review founds the basis of this paper’s argument that the charges of economism and ethnocentrism are *ignoratio elenchi*, a distraction because such critiques fail to either explicate or challenge the actual neo-Marxist argument that world cities or global cities only have *presence*, a *raison d’être*, through *evidence of absence* elsewhere.

larger financial centres and the particular kinds of economic networks upon which their putative centrality is based”, for *no* reason. In short, the two neo-Marxist concepts are not irrational (Robinson), amnesic or myopic (McCann), or parochial for no reason (Bunnell and Maringanti). Ordinary cities critics have missed the point that the very reason for being of the world city and global city concepts is to evidence and critique the functionality of some major cities as centres for command and control through their particular economic specialization: that is why the world city and global city concepts are economistic and parochial, and that is why—by not engaging with the neo-Marxist argument of authors such as Friedmann (1986), Sassen (1991), and Taylor (2004)—ordinary cities critics have not launched an effective critique.

Similarly, when Massey (2007), like many others, repeats Amin and Graham’s (1997) concerns about understanding cities through synecdoche to critique the global city concept she is also guilty of missing the point:

“The manoeuvre of highlighting only one part—and often only a small part—of the urban economy is typical of global-city discourse. It is a strategy of synecdoche, where the part is made to stand in for the whole. So London and New York are classified as global cities on the basis of their finance and associated industries; but that is a characterisation that *obscures* all the other *vital* elements of their economies and societies” (page 41, my emphases).

In fact, there are three problems with Massey’s (2007) argument. First, it is not at all clear how the study of a city’s function as a financial and corporate service centre obscures everything else about it.⁽⁴⁾ Second, other elements of London’s and New York’s economies and societies beyond their economic specialization in financial and commercial services are not assumed by the global city concept to be vital for their command-and-control functionality, and in this sense Massey is avoiding Sassen’s thesis. Third, the purpose of the neo-Marxist global city concept as a critique of neoliberalism’s prioritisation of financial and commercial services in urban economies is ignored by Massey, a neo-Marxist critique which is precisely about valorizing the city beyond the narrow interests of neoliberal elites. Keen to point out the diversity of London’s economy as *somehow* amounting to a critique of the global city concept, Massey (like Robinson, 2006) nevertheless paradoxically affirms Sassen’s (1991) contention that London is “a global centre of command, playing a crucial role in framing the world economy in neoliberal form. That is agreed by all” (Massey, 2007, pages 39–40),⁽⁵⁾ because she wants to claim she is critiquing in order to *extend*—with no concept [cf Sassen’s (1991) ‘joint production’ between financial and advanced producer service firms; or Taylor’s (2004) equating of command and control to the structural effect of networks (see Smith, 2013)] to explain exactly how command and control is said to occur—the neo-Marxist platform for what ‘counts’ as a part of command-and-control functionality.

In sum, the world city and global city concepts do not “parade as universal while being in reality rather parochial” (Robinson, 2006, page 169; cf Friedmann, 1995, pages 22–23), precisely because they are designed to identify just one geography amongst many geographies; to focus on locating the economic specialization that is assumed to be constituted to command and control neoliberal globalization. The world city concept (Friedmann, 1986) and the global city concept (Sassen, 1991)—because of their shared neo-Marxist heritage [for a detailed explanation see Smith (2013)]—are extremely specific: they are not, nor

⁽⁴⁾ Massey’s is an all-too-common consequentialist critique. For example, Mayaram (2006) is seemingly unaware of works such as Fenster’s (2004) on the global city and the holy city when she claims that other dimensions of the urban world—her specific example is the “globality of religious centers” (page 6)—have been negated by the economism of the global city literature.

⁽⁵⁾ In fact, there is not a consensus over the contention that some major cities, such as London, are centres for command and control of the global economy (eg, see Smith, 2013; Thrift, 1993).

were they ever intended to be, descriptors for all cities, from New York to the proverbial ‘nowheresville’, to capture the multiple dimensions of all cities, or of any individual city for that matter. The two neo-Marxist concepts are not catch-all “universal models” (Myers, 2011, page 1) applicable to all cities and their many dimensions. Only the major cities with a particular economic specialization are necessary, say these neo-Marxists, for the command and control of the global economy; other cities are of a different modality—of either lesser or no importance for that particular end. The world city and global city concepts only have a singular concern with critiquing how command and control is the prerogative of just those cities that contain the headquarters of multinational corporations (MNCs) and/or dominate the market in international finance and global corporate service provision, an assumption that is taken as proof that neoliberal globalization functions because of its exceptions.

2.2 The ethnocentrism myth

The charge of ethnocentrism—‘Anglophone’, ‘Eurocentric’, ‘Euro-American(ism)’, ‘Western-centred’, ‘metrocentric’, and so on (eg, see Bunnell and Maringanti, 2010; Massey, 2007; Robinson, 2002; 2003; 2006; Rossi and Vanolo, 2012; Roy, 2009)—against the world city and global city concepts has been repeated on numerous occasions: “It’s easy enough to *raise* a critique of ethnocentrism in urban studies” (Robinson, 2006, page 167, my emphasis). It has been alleged that the world city and global city concepts are ‘Euro-American’ because they were invented and developed out of a North American and European context.⁽⁶⁾ Thus, the two neo-Marxist concepts, it is claimed, are unconsciously ethnocentric, with little purchase for capturing and accounting for the diversity—the meanings, values, and practices—of the world’s urban geographies that are de facto always already beyond the bias of such Western-centred conceptualizations. However, such claims of ethnocentrism—and consequent calls to ‘provincialize’ (Robinson, 2003; Varma, 2004) urban theory—are *ignoratio elenchi*.

For example, Robinson (2002, page 534) simply engages in assertion—there is no explication—when she cites King’s (1990) postcolonial perspective on urbanism, colonialism, and the world economy:

“In his account of cities across the world, King provocatively noted that ‘all cities today are “world cities”’ (1990, page 82). Unfortunately, research and writing within the rubric of the world cities approach, or hypothesis, has generally not chosen to build on this observation.”

However, King’s (1990) global perspective was to explain the transition from colonialisms of discrete national, regional, and imperial urban systems to a world urban system that captures and affects all capitalist cities:

“The world city literature as a cumulative and collective intellectual enterprise begins only when the economic restructuring of the world-economy makes the idea of a mosaic of separate urban systems appear anachronistic and frankly irrelevant” (Taylor, 2004, page 21).

⁽⁶⁾In fact, the world city approach was developed to a significant extent from a study by Browning and Roberts (1980) of “the emerging world economy as a means for interpreting the changing character of Latin American urbanization” (Friedmann and Wolff, 1982, page 329). Also see Timberlake (1985) for similar early discussions with regard to the urbanization of Guatemala, Australia, South Korea, the Philippines, and Thailand; and, for example, see Keil et al (1996) to understand how a consideration of all the world’s cities has always been, and continues to be (eg, see Taylor et al, 2011), a constant of the world city and global city literatures precisely because they understand the economic dominance of the ‘core’ of the global economy to be actively produced through an exploitation that cuts across the less developed ‘semiperiphery’ and ‘periphery’. [It is also the case that world-systems analysis challenges ‘Eurocentric’ accounts of the history of global urbanization (eg, see Taylor, 1989, pages 314–317).]

Thus, King was not making his observation to identify an oversight that should be corrected as Robinson contends, but was explicitly following Friedmann and Wolff's (1982) observation that the world economy is everywhere:

“The cosy viewpoint of looking at our cities from within must be replaced by the more uncomfortable view of seeing them from outside” (King, 1990, page 82).

Indeed, Robinson's citation of King in this passage is doubly misleading—the mistake is repeated by Mayaram (2009, page 6)—because it is used to suggest that the world city and global city concepts do not consider the specificity of all the world's capitalist cities and the differences between them through a comparative approach, whilst also understanding them as belonging and functioning within one world system. But, of course, that is exactly the approach of the world city and global city concepts and the literatures they have fostered. The point is that the world city and global city concepts *become* centred on the major cities of what the International Monetary Fund terms the world's most ‘advanced economies’, because of the *evidence of absence* across the vast majority of the world's cities as to them not containing the headquarters of MNCs and/or a specialization in financial and commercial services. Thus, the world city and global city concepts only *appear* ethnocentric—all the world's cities are not off their “radar screen” as ordinary cities advocates such as McCann (2004, page 2317) suppose—because they are based on attributing a fundamental significance to the world's actual economic *geography*, the differing economic specializations of cities across neoliberal globalization.

In nuce, critics are mistaken when they imagine the world city and global city concepts to be ethnocentric. Just because Sassen's (1991) comparative study was of three leading examples of global cities spaced across the most significant triumvirate of neoliberal globalization,⁽⁷⁾ or because Beaverstock et al's (1999; 2000) research classified only cities from the so-called ‘Global North’ as ‘alpha’, or that Taylor (2004) ranked only London and New York as ‘mega’ command centres, does not *eo ipso* mean that their approaches, findings, and conclusions are ethnocentric, Eurocentric, Western-centred, parochial, elitist, prejudiced, or self-important. The results of neo-Marxist world city and global city studies are not the product of tautology, a self-fulfilling prophecy resulting from an inherent prejudice or myopia. The majority of cities are not somehow beyond the purview of the world city and global city concepts, not ‘off the map’ (Robinson, 2002) to only be discussed and mentioned now and then for tokenistic purposes. The focus on a minority of cities is because of the *evidence of absence* in all but those few cities which have overwhelming economic specialization with regard to the headquarters of MNCs and/or financial and producer services. It is not a research exercise centred on favouritism and excommunication, that is happy to ignore, for example, ‘African cities’ (Robinson, 2002), or to eye them from afar in order to stigmatize them as “inconvenient” (Myers, 2011, page 165), backward, or undeveloped through recourse to a developmentalist imagination.

⁽⁷⁾ Both the world city and global city concepts were significantly developed out of a Japanese context. According to Abu-Lughod (1989), the list of world cities identified by Friedmann and Wolff (1982) was devised according to a base map provided by Japan airlines [although there is no published evidence for her claim (see Smith, 2005)]. Furthermore, Sassen's (1991) comparative study identified the megacity of Tokyo—then the biggest city in the history of the world—as one of the three leading examples of a global city. Indeed, “[i]n 1990, the Tokyo Stock Exchange accounted for 60 per cent of the world stock market value. However, today its market value is about as large as the NASDAQ” (Anon, 2012); a decline that is consonant with those studies (eg, Beaverstock et al, 1999; 2000; Taylor, 2004) now evidencing how Hong Kong has greater capacity and connections through financial and corporate services than Tokyo becoming—as a limited number of other cities may do—another leading example of a global city (ie, where the practice of command and control takes place).

3 The world (city) is not a ladder: the development myth

In an era of urban competition and the entrepreneurial city, the idea of becoming and being a ‘world city’ or ‘global city’⁽⁸⁾ to foster economic vitality and growth in order to outcompete other cities, has spread to become something of an obsession with city elites—both business and civic—around the world. This *idée fixe* has shaped and framed the imaginaries, discourses, and policy choices of numerous cities, not just in North America and Europe, but in Africa, Australasia, the Middle East, Asia, Latin and South America, and postsocialist countries. However, analogous to a game of Chinese whispers where the original message becomes deformed through its retelling, it is not the neo-Marxist world city or global city concept that has been deployed, circulated, and put to work worldwide.

What has been mobilized by practitioners (policy makers and planners) is an empty phrase—the ‘world city’ or ‘global city’—devoid of its original neo-Marxist meaning and critical import against the very idea of the neoliberal ‘world city’ or ‘global city’ as a desirable goal, hollowed out to be no more than a relatively autonomous politico-economic agent and echo chamber for the interests of neoliberal globalization. Devoid of content and critique, the neo-Marxist world city and global city concepts have been turned into slogans and bywords by neoliberals for their agenda of fostering a particular kind of economic growth. In other words, the two neo-Marxist concepts have been circulated as a policy recommendation by being stripped of their epistemological substance and critical intent, hollowed out by city practitioners to lose their referent to be no more than either a shorthand for the multitude of issues shaping cities in neoliberal globalization, or a label and meaningless catchphrase, a branding logo, part of the image and rhetoric that city elites roll out to justify their governance and marketing of cities under neoliberal globalization as merely centres for business and wealth creation for the few. Indeed, across the globe there is a widespread belief—encouraged by many urban practitioners and vested interests—that dozens of the world’s cities can further globalize to become the omphalos of neoliberal globalization like London or New York, when the very point of the neo-Marxist world city and global city concepts is to draw on the economic geography of the world’s cities to envision and critique the global economy as a structural totality that consequently only *needs* (see Smith, 2013) a limited and very resilient, though not immutable, set of *eyrie* cities for the purpose of command and control.

By capitalizing on cities as being ever more international in outlook, a hegemonic neoliberal ideology has successfully legitimized the idea of urban competition and consequently the fallacy of a world populated with ‘global cities’. Now, recognizing that the neoliberal ideology of the entrepreneurial city has inverted the ‘world city’ and ‘global city’ to its own conception and ends is fundamentally important for not making the mistake of conflating the neo-Marxist conceptualizations and critiques of the world city and global city with the neoliberal usage—by elected officials, technocrats, and a cadre of business elites—of the slogans ‘world city’ and ‘global city’ for urban promotion, redevelopment, and economic growth.

With this in mind, consider the following passage from Robinson (2002, page 534, my emphasis):

“In world-systems theory more generally, countries across the world are seen to occupy a place within the hierarchy of the world-economy, and *possibly* make their way up through the categories (core, periphery, semi-periphery) embedded in the world-economy approach. Following this, the world cities approach assumes that cities occupy similar placings with similar capacity to progress up or fall down the ranks. The country categorizations of core, periphery, and semi-periphery in world-systems theory have therefore been transferred to the analysis of cities, and overlain, albeit with a slightly

⁽⁸⁾ ‘World city’ and ‘global city’ have been placed in inverted commas when they are discussed as neoliberal slogans rather than as neo-Marxist concepts.

different geography, on an extant but outdated vocabulary of categorizations (such as first/third world) within the field of urban studies.”

There are at least four points to note. First, the word *possibly* in the above quotation is problematic because it is so misleading. The word that Robinson could have used to communicate an accurate account of world-systems analysis is *rarely*. Indeed, this is not mere semantics for the choice of the word *possibly* evidences Robinson’s (2006) failure to engage with Wallerstein’s (2004) world-systems analysis and thus to acknowledge the critique of developmentalism at the heart of his analysis of historical capitalism (eg, see Taylor, 1989), and consequently also at the core of the world city concept (eg, see Friedmann, 1986; 1995; Knox and Taylor, 1995; Timberlake, 1985). Wallerstein’s world-systems analysis draws on both the structural history of Braudel, and Fröbel’s idea of a New International Division of Labour, to envision historical capitalism as constituted by a process of fixed structural exploitation—ie, core countries exploit semiperiphery and periphery countries; semiperiphery countries are exploited by the core countries whilst exploiting the periphery countries; the periphery countries are only exploited—which works to ensure a worldwide geography of domination and subordination. It is this structural exploitation, inherent to the historical development of a capitalist world economy, which explains how the development of underdevelopment is, from the perspective of world-systems analysis, a necessary process for the (re)production of capitalism.

Second, world-systems analysis does not simply overlay the dichotomous First and Third World representation of the world with core, semiperiphery, and periphery as Robinson claims. Rather, Wallerstein (2004) *subverts* the First/Third World dichotomy by both drawing on dependency theory for the categories of core and periphery, and by inventing an additional third category of the semiperiphery to explain the persistence of the myth of development. Furthermore, the world city concept, in fact, cuts across Wallerstein’s categorizations because it is “ever alert to economic and political changes that may lead to the rise and fall of world cities that are linked to each other in ‘antagonistic co-operation’” (Friedmann, 1995, page 21).

Third, we can also see in Robinson’s quotation the source of the error, committed by her and other ordinary cities advocates, of confusing the Weltanschauung of neo-Marxism—both world-systems analysis and the world city concept—with neoliberal forms of urban governance.⁽⁹⁾ With making the mistake of thinking that world-systems analysis and the concept of the world city has an investment in the neoliberal myth—akin to Rostow’s infamous stage catch-up model of economic growth—of a pathway to urban development, whereby less developed cities can further modernize to fully develop and so catch up with those cities that sit atop the world city hierarchy: “[The world city] allows us ... to question the general validity of economic growth theory which is the foundation of development ideology” (Friedmann, 1995, page 43).

Finally, Robinson’s error is the source of another consequentialism that has unfortunately come to be repeated by several postcolonial authors (eg, Roy, 2009). For Robinson (2006, page 94) “placing cities in hierarchical relation to one another, implicitly establish[es] some cities as exemplars and others as imitators”, and consequently casts the world city concept as guilty of a form of developmentalism. But, of course, Robinson is *ignoratio elenchi*. The purpose of the identification of a hierarchy of world cities in the world economy with regard to the function of command and control by neo-Marxist authors such as Friedmann (1986) is to identify and critique the concentration of power and wealth in and across those cities. Only those beholden to neoliberalism should think that the world city hierarchy is flexible,

⁽⁹⁾The neo-Marxist world city and global city literatures are concerned with studying and critiquing neoliberal attempts to make cities ‘world class’ and ‘global’. Postcolonial and ordinary cities advocates are also motivated to challenge such neoliberal practices (eg, see Roy and Ong, 2011).

a context in which cities can emulate one another for the purpose of a particular kind of inequitable urban development: world city and global city neo-Marxism is not concerned with producing “Darwinian mappings” as, for example, Roy (2009, page 825; cf Friedmann, 1995, page 23) contends, and it is most certainly not the case that “Within a GAWC [sic] framework, the prioritisation of globalising networks lends support to urban development policies which are often far from redistributive” as Robinson (2008, page 75) asserts, rather than demonstrates through evidence from the writings of GaWC (Globalization and World Cities Research Network) researchers such as Beaverstock et al (1999; 2000).

And Robinson is not alone. For example, Rossi and Vanolo (2012, page 38, my emphasis) make an analogous claim when they write that: “The small circle of global cities is not immutable, but is *constantly* subject to change.”⁽¹⁰⁾ Indeed, both Robinson (2002) and Rossi and Vanolo (2012) fail to appreciate that it is not a coincidence that across the research of the neo-Marxist world city and global city literatures there is only ever a limited set of common cities that are afforded significance for command-and-control functionality. We have been repeatedly treated over the past four decades to numerous déjà vu tours of a remarkably consistent set of metropolises—Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, Rio/São Paulo, London, Paris, Singapore, Tokyo (Friedmann, 1986); New York, London, Tokyo (Sassen, 1991); London, Paris, New York, Tokyo, Chicago, Frankfurt, Hong Kong, Los Angeles, Milan, Singapore (Beaverstock et al, 1999); London, New York, Hong Kong, Paris, Tokyo, Chicago, Frankfurt, Miami (Taylor, 2004)—precisely because all these neo-Marxist studies are concerned with locating the economic specialization that is thought to produce either control (Cohen, 1981; Friedmann, 1986; Hymer, 1972) or command and control (Sassen, 1991; Taylor, 2004). It should be no surprise that the same cities recur across so many neo-Marxist studies, precisely because—as world-systems analysis has argued—development is a myth; the economic specialization assumed necessary for command and control will necessarily be concentrated and centralized in/across a few cities from the world’s most advanced economies. And that is precisely the point—it is all a question of *what* you attach significance to and *why*. The world city and global city concepts attach significance to a particular urban economic specialization because they claim that that is where command-and-control functionality is located, the neoliberal clamour to become ‘world’ or ‘global’ cities serves only to emphasize the sense in which development is a myth because there is overwhelming *evidence of absence*, not an *absence of evidence* to be addressed through empirical research, for command-and-control functions in the majority of cities, be they so-called ‘wannabe global cities’, or otherwise.

⁽¹⁰⁾Rossi and Vanolo (2012) mirror Robinson (2002) in equating the neoliberal usage of the slogan ‘global city’ with the neo-Marxist global city concept itself and thus assume that the latter is developmentalist: “Consider the influence of an analytical tool such as that of global cities, deriving from the empirical observation of the economic and social transformations that have occurred in a selected circle of cities (only three in the first formulation provided by Sassen, 1991), which have been imitated by ‘wannabe global cities’ across the world” (Rossi and Vanolo, 2012, page 49). But, of course, it is not the neo-Marxist global city concept which has been imitated. Note also that Rossi and Vanolo make the all-too-common error (eg, also see Bunnell and Maringanti, 2010, page 417; Mayaram, 2009, page 6) of claiming that in her initial formulation Sassen discusses three global cities. This is not really true because it is rather that Sassen (1991, page 4) discusses three “leading examples” of global cities. This is an important point, not merely semantics, because it is indicative of how the global city concept identifies a process—the *practice* of global control—not a threshold through which cities can pass to become a fully developed global city.

4 Lost in the shadows

The ordinary cities critique of the world city and global city concepts as economic, ethnocentric, and guilty of developmentalism, is consequentialist in that those critiques only pertain to the outcomes, the findings, of the two neo-Marxist concepts. A convincing immanent critique of the two neo-Marxist concepts on their own terms, to expose their inherent assumptions as fallacious, has not been formulated by those beholden to postcolonial perspectives (cf Smith, 2013; Smith and Doel, 2011). In other words, it is only the implications of the evidence that has been amassed within the paradigm of the neo-Marxist world city and global city concepts over several decades that the ordinary cities advocates have, in fact, objected to. It is only the *shadow*, not the substance, of the world city and global city concepts that troubles those who are trying to legitimate the ordinary cities supposition.

Neo-Marxists working through the world city and global city concepts can, as this paper demonstrates, defend their approaches against the consequentialist critiques of postcolonial and ordinary cities scholars because they can rightly point to those critics as mistaking *evidence of absence* for *absence of evidence*. Indeed, a rebuttal of three further influential, yet consequentialist, critiques—that the world city and global city concepts are paradigmatic, peripheralizing, and normalizing—will serve to highlight not only the error of extant postcolonial critiques against the world city and global city strands of neo-Marxist urban studies, but also how the consequentialist nature of those critiques highlights how the weakness at the core of both the ordinary cities supposition and related calls to postcolonialize urban studies is that they are idiographic and nominalist.

First, avoiding the issue of command and control to make the mistake of contending that the world city and global city concepts are parochial and economic for other reasons leads ordinary cities critics to imagine that the world city and global city concepts are paradigmatic. In their original paper Amin and Graham (1997, page 411) claimed that “Too often, single cities—most recently, Los Angeles—are wheeled out as paradigmatic cases, alleged conveniently to encompass all urban trends everywhere”, and subsequent ordinary cities advocates have erroneously assumed that world cities or global cities have been held up by neo-Marxists as paradigmatic for *all* cities in a way that is analogous to the Chicago school of the 1920s and the LA school of the 1980s.⁽¹¹⁾

For ordinary cities critics the neo-Marxist world city and global city concepts are an example of an ideology of the exceptional whereby world cities and global cities are held up as paradigms for the world’s other cities: “literatures identify global cities as archetypes, or paradigmatic examples, of processes that are shaping all urban areas” (McCann, 2004, page 2318). However, the truth these critics assert is that no cities are paradigmatic, and consequently the geographical compass of urban studies must be widened beyond the world city and global city concepts, just as it was widened beyond Chicago and Los Angeles, to incorporate the singularity of every city everywhere. But, the fact of the matter is that by design and necessity the two neo-Marxist concepts are selective, world cities and global cities are actually antithetical to being paradigmatic (cf Amin and Graham, 1997, page 416; Bunnell and Maringanti, 2010) because they are inherently designed not to be appropriate for talking about the overwhelming majority of the world’s cities because if they were they would have no *raison d’être*. The fact is that, since 1972, a neo-Marxist argument has been developed, refined, and burnished, to make the argument that, because business headquarters, international stock markets, banks, and specialized advanced producer firms are overwhelmingly concentrated, and work together, in just a few major cities, this provides

⁽¹¹⁾The habit of making claims for any one city as paradigmatic—as the future of cities everywhere—is a relatively ubiquitous one, eg, “Bombay is the future of urban civilisation on the planet” (Mehta, 2004, page 3).

ipso facto evidence that those cities are in one way (Sassen, 1991) or another (Taylor, 2004) *atypical* centres for the command and control of global capitalism (see Smith, 2013).

Second, is the critique that supposes that most of the world's cities are devalued, are peripheralized, because the world city and global city concepts prejudicially assume the West to be the core of neoliberal globalization. However, this critique is merely consequentialist because it concerns itself only with what the two neo-Marxist concepts *are not* including, rather than critiquing the world city and global city concepts' theoretical justification for *why* they are arguing that the overwhelming majority of cities—be they 'Southern' cities, 'subaltern' cities, 'African' cities, or so on—do not have command-and-control functionality. Indeed, akin to the world's many urban governors and practitioners, who are busy trying to make their cities 'world cities' or 'global cities', these postcolonial critics have failed to grasp that the neo-Marxist world city and global city literatures are an *attempted* theoretical explanation for the asymmetrical urban concentration of command-and-control functionality in a global economy where trade and foreign investment—activities that require all manner of producer and financial services—overwhelmingly take place between the world's richest places, not between rich and poor places. In short, any claim that the majority of cities are peripheralized because the world city and global city literature is inward looking, self-absorbed, preoccupied with navel-gazing through "Western indicators" (Myers, 2011, page 1), with self-interrogation or *nombriisme*, can only be made if one ignores the specificity of the neo-Marxist world city and global city argument about the need for different economic specializations across the world's cities to (re)produce the functionality of neoliberal globalization—eg, "Cities in Africa belong to the world. Models of world cities and global cities either disregard the continent's cities or push them to peripheral margins" (Myers, 2011, page 191; also see pages 164–165).

The general thrust of such notions as 'world cities beyond the West' (Gugler, 2004), 'global cities of the South' (Dawson and Edwards, 2004), 'the Other global city' (Mayaram, 2009), or 'urban theory beyond the West' (Edensor and Jayne, 2012), is not only the claim that non-Western cities require attention and representation in urban studies, but also that urban theory needs to pay more attention to how the rest of the world is involved in Western cities through all manner of transnational connections [eg, see King (1990); repeated more recently by Massey (2007)]. However, such arguments are not valid critiques of the world city and global city concepts because they fail to address their neo-Marxist explanation as to *why*, and *how*, the economic specialization of some cities means they are far more important than others for the function of neoliberal globalization. Indeed, the geographical fact that economic wealth and neoliberal globalization are very geographically concentrated, with just a few cities in advanced economies being the preferred locations for the world's major stock exchanges, for the headquarters of banks and other producer service firms, cannot be wished away through either an *argumentum ad lazarum* (appeal to poverty) or appreciation for the diversity of urban cultures (eg, see Myers, 2011). In short, the ordinary cities supposition valorises all of the world's cities but only to understand them in an idiographic, provincial, nominalist, and comparative sense (eg, Robinson, 2011), rather than in the categorical and metalevel way pioneered by the neo-Marxist world city and global city concepts which account for all the world's cities in order to attempt to understand the diversity and difference of their functionality within a global capitalism that is envisioned as a structural totality.

Third, a consequence of incorrectly supposing the world city and global city concepts to be developmentalist is that ordinary cities advocates worry that the majority of cities will be regarded as pale reflections or weak copies of those cities that such neo-Marxist concepts identify as leading examples of command-and-control centres. Thus, postcolonial critics contend that the neo-Marxist world city and global city concepts have a *normalizing* effect on urban studies. Harker's (2011, page 120, my emphasis) assertion that "we should avoid

gauging cities around the world by a single measuring stick or set of criteria, a maneuver that *inevitably* casts most ‘southern’ cities as inadequate or failed in one way or another” is illustrative (also see Massey, 2007, page 35) of this concern with normalization [with the supposed ‘regulating fiction’ (Robinson, 2002) of the world city and global city concepts]. However, this critique is no more than a distraction from the issue of command and control. Indeed, neo-Marxists can argue that such postcolonial critiques are not only erroneous—the neo-Marxist world city and global city concepts are, in fact, diametrically opposed to being, as Ward (2012, page 5) supposes, a “benchmark against which the performance of other cities should be judged”—but politically conservative because rather than being taken as an inclusive call for urban studies to value all cities, they can be equally understood as an attempt to ‘flatten’ the diversity and difference of the urban world and consequently move away from the critical focus on the concentration of power, control, command, and the vested interests of neoliberal capitalism in and across a few strategic cities; a critique which has long been the essence of the world city and global city concepts.

In sum, through the ordinary cities critique all the world’s cities are afforded significance through a kind of *halo effect* whereby it is asserted that if the character and functionality of a city can be judged at all, it cannot be through categorisation but only through an overall impression of that city as being as ordinary as every other city—hence the inherent nominalism of the ordinary cities approach.⁽¹²⁾ However, what this paper has demonstrated is that the ordinary cities supposition is merely a *pro hominem* argument. Ordinary cities advocates have merely attempted—through misrepresenting the world city and global city concepts—to argue against a particular neo-Marxist tradition in contemporary urban studies (eg, see Robinson, 2008). Indeed, the *ignoratio elenchi* of ordinary cities critics, ignoring the issue of how the world city and global city concepts assume strategic centralization of command, and control within a minority of cities across capitalism’s global urban system, explains why the attempt of ordinary cities advocates to conceive an urban studies which is idiographic, provincial, nominalist, and comparative, is a trap for progressive international urbanism.

5 Conclusion

Six critiques against the neo-Marxist world city and global city concepts have been shown to be misguided. Critics have fallen into the intellectual trap (*ignoratio elenchi*) of imagining that *evidence of absence* actually means an *absence of evidence*, and so have merely invented a false problem to assert that the alleged failings of the neo-Marxist world city and global city concepts can be addressed through the solution of an ordinary cities approach that will now valorise all cities and therefore include and evidence that which has been overlooked or negated (eg, McCann, 2004; Mayaram, 2009; Robinson, 2005). In short, postcolonial and ordinary cities advocates have misunderstood the neo-Marxist work of authors such as Friedmann (1986), Sassen (1991), Beaverstock et al (1999; 2000), and Taylor (2004) inasmuch as they have imagined them to have invented a supplicant urban world—containing the majority of the world’s cities—which is notable for its absence(s), rather than having over several decades of research into the urban geography of command and control actually found one.

⁽¹²⁾ Robinson (2004, page 711) writes that “Urban studies has fixated on categorizing different kinds of cities, for example, as successful or powerful cities (the wealthy global cities), or as cities of decline and despair (the poor megacities).” However, this caricature of urban studies (also see Roy and Ong, 2011, page 308), and the function of extant categories within it, is not credible. For example, Tokyo and New York-Newark are the original global cities and megacities, and have been discussed at length in terms of how their poverty [eg, Sassen’s (1991) social polarization thesis; Friedmann’s (1986) class polarization thesis] is a product of a particular model of wealth creation which predominantly and disproportionately rewards only a minority of citizens to the detriment of others both within those cities and beyond them.

However, whilst this paper is a critique of a critique, it is not intended as a defence (cf Parnreiter, 2010; Surborg, 2011) of the neo-Marxist world city and global city concepts.⁽¹³⁾ I am not seeking to promote the world city and global city concepts, I think these literatures are flawed, just not for the reasons that postcolonial and ordinary cities advocates suppose. Indeed, I have launched lengthy immanent critiques of both concepts elsewhere (see Smith, 2013; Smith and Doel, 2011) to expose how neo-Marxist conceptualizations of command and control are a myth. Rather, the intention of this paper has been to highlight how, in addition to taking up the ‘ordinary city’ challenge set by Amin and Graham (1997) of reconceptualizing the city as ‘multiplex’, the postcolonial and ordinary cities movement have also chosen to “overcome the limits of partial perspectives” and a reliance on “paradigmatic cases” (Amin and Graham, 1997, page 420) in urban studies by misrepresenting—making a straw man and *bête noire* of—the neo-Marxist world city and global city concepts. A fact that not only throws into question the *need* for the idiographic, provincial, nominalist, and comparative alternative for urban studies that ordinary cities advocates have been so keen to promote over recent years, but also explains why those working in the research agendas set by the neo-Marxist world city and global city concepts have failed to be disrupted by the arguments and concerns of those rallying under the ‘ordinary cities’ banner.

Acknowledgements. Thank you to Dave Clarke and Marcus Doel for their comments on the first draft of this paper. Arguments from this article were presented to audiences in Bogotá and Medellín. I would like to thank the National University of Colombia for inviting me to lecture on poststructuralist cities.

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⁽¹³⁾ Indeed, the title of this paper is an allusion to Harvey (1987).

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