



Combat, Caricature & Critique in the Study of Planetary Urbanization

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Richard Walker has written a sharply dismissive response to our article, "Towards a new epistemology of the urban?"¹ Although he opens by stating that his intervention is intended in the spirit of "friendly combat," the bulk of Walker's text is composed of a series of castigations suggesting that our work is misguided, confused, unoriginal, ahistorical, hypertheoretical, idealist, metaphysical and undialectical. Particularly because we have found Walker's writings on urbanization and territorial development so essential for our own developing theorization of extended urbanization, we were surprised to learn that he views our ideas as an unhelpful detour from what he considers to be the "hard work" of urban research. Are our recent writings really in such dramatic tension with those of an author whose theories, categories and methods have so powerfully shaped our own, and which continue to inform our thinking about urban questions? Perhaps there are other issues at stake here, related less to substantive disagreements than to different ways of responding, on an epistemological level, to the rapidly shifting terrain of urban theory and research under contemporary conditions.

In fact, once we managed to burrow a path through Walker's polemic, and to circumvent the many caricatures, misrepresentations and misunderstandings that pervade his diatribe, we were left with the impression that only a few areas of genuine disagreement actually separate us. In fact, notwithstanding the strongly antagonistic rhetoric that pervades Walker's text, a careful reading reveals that he basically agrees with no less than 5 out of our 7 theses, but is seeking a more substantial elaboration of several points, at once in relation to the scholarly literature and through a more sustained analysis of historical and contemporary transformations. Unfortunately, the style and substance of Walker's critique make a dialogue about such issues, as well as regarding the few areas of genuine disagreement, extremely difficult to orchestrate: he attacks our work from so many disparate angles at once, raising so many issues and objections, that it may be difficult even for those who are somewhat familiar with our writings to discern what the real lines of division in the debate actually are. One thing, though, is clear: Walker wants readers to know his view that

¹ Both the article and the response are published in *CITY*, 19, 2/3 (2015). While Walker informed us via email that he was writing a critique of our article (a pre-publication copy of which had been shared with him by a colleague) neither he nor the journal's Editor, Bob Catterall, sent us the text in advance of publication. We learned of its existence, and of the Editor's plans to publish it immediately alongside our own text, only several days before the journal issue went into production.

we have gone off track; and he is prepared to joust with us regarding literally every step in our argument—even on our use of “sociological” tables and on our writing style—in order to drive home this point, and thus presumably to dissuade others from taking our work seriously or being influenced by it.

Despite his friendly tone in the opening paragraph, Walker’s text is framed around a pretty hostile rhetorical strategy: he suggests repeatedly that we are restating truisms and that there is “nothing new” or “original” in our work. For several reasons, it is difficult to debate against an opponent who leverages this charge so liberally in relation to so many elements of a multifaceted line of argumentation. For one, there is the question of who decides what constitutes originality in social science research. As an eminent senior scholar in our field, Walker knows that the “nothing new here!” charge, issued from his keyboard, carries a lot of authority; it is a means of delegitimizing the work of others by appealing to a criterion of scientific validity that is supposedly shared by all others in the field. But what specific criteria are actually being presupposed to issue this weighty judgement? Even the most well-intentioned colleagues within an intellectual community may disagree vociferously about what constitutes “original” work. Especially in an increasingly fragmented, methodologically heterodox and postdisciplinary research field such as contemporary urban studies, that criterion can hardly be neutral or “scientific”—it reflects a variety of less-than-objective factors, including institutional/disciplinary positionality, philosophical/methodological orientation, substantive research interests/ geographical specialization, as well as (often merely implicit) normative-political considerations.

For our part, following from the tradition of critical social theory, we are less interested in claiming pure originality than in situating our search for a new conceptual framework in relation to a rapidly changing world that has, we have argued, destabilized many inherited intellectual assumptions and research paradigms. As Walker surely knows, and despite his repeated injunction to “get on with our empirical work,” we are not the only contemporary urbanists who are engaged in such a search. Nearly every major journal in our field is now regularly populated with articles that reflect on such issues in the context of ongoing efforts to decipher contemporary patterns and pathways of urbanization across every region of the world. Postcolonial theorists, assemblage theorists, urban political ecologists, feminist urbanists, scholars of planetary urbanization and many others may disagree intensely about which emergent framework is

best suited for their own specific research purposes. But, amidst the clamor of debates, scholars in each of these intellectual traditions, and many others, are struggling precisely with the limits of inherited conceptual assumptions and models, and with the daunting task of developing updated or re-invented interpretive frameworks that can more effectively orient and animate their research. In these developing lines of conceptual experimentation, pure originality is probably a lot less essential to intellectual progress than the capacity to respond forcefully, nimbly and reflexively to new intellectual challenges, at once on a theoretical level and, indeed, through concrete, contextually grounded research.

Rather than getting mired in a debate about what does and does not represent a “new” or “original” insight in urban studies, therefore, we believe it is more productive to focus on the intellectual and political challenges we currently confront in the field of urban theory. This includes, we have argued, critically interrogating the capacities and limitations of established models—whether of agglomeration economies, urban form, suburbanization, uneven spatial development, and so forth—for illuminating emergent patterns and pathways of urbanization in specific regions and territories, and on a world scale. We view ourselves simply as contributors to a broader, increasingly lively conversation and debate about the urban question, one that has been provoked not through the self-contained insight or disruptive impulse of any single author or team of authors, but due to the changing political-economic, social and geographical contexts in which urbanization processes are today unfolding. This is a point we make explicitly throughout our paper, and elsewhere in our writings. Such debates on the appropriate “paradigm” for urban studies are hardly unique to our own historical moment; they have animated the field since its origins over a century ago; and they are directly connected even to the most concrete, place-based research forays.

Walker never alludes to this aspect of our argument, presumably because he believes that extant urban research paradigms already provide fully adequate research tools; “originality” can thus flow only from their creative application on the terrain of the “empirical.” This point is in fact one of the few issues raised in Walker’s text on which there is genuine, substantive disagreement with our own intellectual position. Before demarcating such issues, however, we must “clear the air” of the many caricatures, ungrounded assertions, misrepresentations and misunderstandings that are churned up as Walker bulldozes his way through our article. Some of our colleagues advised

us simply to ignore the latter, since readers will of course be able to decide for themselves whether or not our arguments are being depicted accurately. We have decided, however, to address directly some of Walker's most egregious misrepresentations; without doing so, the few genuine points of disagreement in this exchange cannot be brought into clear focus. Readers who are not interested in such corrections should simply skip to the end of this essay, after the list of bullet points below, where we outline the more substantial issues which are at stake here.²

- Contrary to Walker's assertion, urban age discourse cannot be dismissed as a merely a journalistic posture (183); it fundamentally informs major strands of contemporary social science research, including that of economists such as Edward Glaeser, as well as dominant strands of contemporary urban design, planning and policy practice. This is a claim we make clearly in the article under discussion, and that we develop at length elsewhere, in an article Walker is at least aware of because he cites it in his text.³
- We do not claim that the United Nations, Edward Glaeser, or other major contemporary urban theorists embrace identical substantive positions on cities (183). Our contention is that they share certain underlying or "higher-order" conceptual assumptions—in particular, the view of the city as a relatively self-enclosed, bounded, distinctive and discrete settlement type.
- We do not reject the insights of postcolonial urban theory on megacities (183). Our claim is simply that major strands of this literature could productively advance their agendas by transcending a purely city-centric understanding of the urban question. We also argue that, rather than emphasizing the putatively unique properties of "southern" megacities, contributors to this literature could proceed more productively by embedding their local case studies in relation to broader geopolitical and geoeconomic transformations—the "context of context."
- We do not deny the role of transnational inter-urban connections during the history of capitalism, and indeed under pre-capitalist

² Parenthetical page numbers in the text hereafter refer to those in Walker's article.

³ Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid, "The 'urban age' in question," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 38, 3, (2014): 731-755.

social formations (184). Our claim regarding urban governance is that, with the breakdown of national-developmental formations of territorial regulation and associated dynamics of state rescaling in the post-1980s period, new geographies of urban governance have emerged. This argument is today fairly well established in the literature on global cities (especially by Saskia Sassen), in David Harvey's writings on urban entrepreneurialism, in Allen J. Scott's work on global city-regions, in the state-theoretical writings of Bob Jessop, as well as in some of our own writings on state rescaling and urban regulatory restructuring. In his response to our text, Walker authoritatively asserts that such claims are "patently false," but he does not elaborate why he holds this view.

- Walker declares that we need to be "more materialist" in our ontology and "more dialectical" in our conceptualizations; he insists that "reflexivity is not enough" (184). He does not, however, elaborate any examples in which we commit these putative errors. Meanwhile, his own discussion of social "objects" is in considerable tension with the critical realist tenets he claims to embrace. In comparing the city to the sun, a human body or a river as a research object (185), Walker appears to embrace a naïve materialism in which social relations are considered, like planets, physical bodies or fluvial systems, as pregiven objects whose intrinsic properties can simply be revealed through "scientific" investigation. Such analogies can hardly be considered dialectical, since they bracket the embeddedness of social knowledge within the very world it aspires to understand, as well as the continual historical evolution of both research activity and social practice (subject and object, in the terminology of critical theory). Reflexivity may not be the only methodological ingredient within critical urban studies, but we do consider it quite essential to that project. It is also arguably a foundational feature of the dialectical method upon which historical-geographical materialist approaches are grounded.
- In emphasizing the importance of theory in urban studies, we most certainly do not deny the role of concrete research in advancing social science knowledge (184). Nor, obviously, are we denying the existence of real urban processes and thereby falling into an "idealist trap" (185). Our point is a very simple one: our access to the real is mediated through abstract conceptualizations and interpretations ("theory"), and the latter have major conse-

quences for understanding, for research and for action. This is an argument that, as Walker well knows, can readily be found in Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach" and in the "Introduction" to the *Grundrisse*, and which is further elaborated in some of the key works of critical realist philosophy, including those of Andrew Sayer, upon which we likewise rely in developing our ideas. We are not, therefore, conflating epistemology with ontology; we are insisting precisely on their necessary interconnections, and on the need for a reflexive approach to the latter.

- In insisting on the processual character of cities and urbanization, we do not deny the materiality, solidity or fixity of built environments, infrastructures and territorial arrangements, whose long-term cycles of amortization as investments renders them relatively stable over lengthy time-periods (185-6). Rather, for the reasons we outline in our text, we are arguing for a social science method that avoids reifying such socio-territorial configurations—that is, treating them as epistemologically self-evident as material objects, "cities" or otherwise. As we acknowledge, such arguments are hardly "original"—we build strongly, for instance, upon David Harvey's work in this context, as well as upon that of Henri Lefebvre and Doreen Massey. But, for reasons we explicate, processual approaches to socio-material artifacts, buildings and infrastructures have acquired renewed urgency in the context of contemporary urbanization patterns, which are seriously destabilizing inherited models of cityness and territorial organization. As solid and materially fixed as it may be, the built environment of the world is rapidly changing; we need to ask whether established concepts enable us to grasp these changes effectively. A strongly processual methodological orientation is, we believe, highly salient this context.
- Despite Walker's suggestions to the contrary, we are quite well acquainted with the "latest work" demonstrating how agglomeration economies are emerging at the very large scale of mega-urban regions, as well as with the closely related literatures on urban expansion, suburbanization, post-suburbanization and informalization (186). Indeed, we invoke much of that work precisely to illustrate our understanding of how the geographies of concentrated urbanization have evolved under contemporary conditions. Like Walker, we continue to view this research terrain as fundamental to the intellectual mission of global urban studies. However, our formulations on such issues in the article are ori-

ented towards distinguishing agglomeration processes from those associated with *extended* urbanization, which—in contrast to Edward Soja’s formulations—we define as the dialectical “other” of agglomeration, not as its new, regionally scaled morphological expression.

- We are not neglecting the role of smaller cities and towns within rural zones or the extension of cities and urban infrastructures into less densely populated zones and growth peripheries (186). We are, rather, proposing to theorize such formations and transformations using a different conceptual vocabulary than that adopted by Walker in his earlier work on such topics.
- Walker objects to our use of a few “sociological” tables, suggesting that they embody a “faux-scientific” aspiration (187). As our discussion of reflexivity indicates, this is not the case; as Walker well knows, we embrace a very different epistemology, derived from the tradition of critical social theory which flows from Marx and the Frankfurt School up through Lefebvre, Harvey, P. Marcuse and Sayer. Our presentation of several tables in the article is simply a device to summarize a multifaceted argument and to emphasize the multidimensional qualities of urbanization—in particular, that it is not a purely economic process, as many agglomeration theorists often seem to imply.
- Walker invokes the exploratory nature of our arguments about planetary urbanization as evidence that we lack a rudimentary knowledge of urban history (188). We are not denying that earlier urban formations had dispersed, non-contiguous hinterlands; nor are we claiming that the emergent formation of planetary urbanization has no continuities with what preceded it. Rather, we explicitly acknowledge that extended urbanization has a very long legacy under capitalism, with considerable ramifications for worldwide spatial divisions of labor and socio-environmental relations. We also insist on embedding post-1980s patterns of urban restructuring in relation to previous cycles of industrialization, urbanization, territorial regulation, environmental transformation, social struggle and crisis formation. Indeed, as we indicate, a central element of our ongoing research involves precisely a reconceptualization of how, within the reformulated approach to urbanization we have developed, the geohistory of capitalist urbanization might be re-periodized relative to established models, and also as a means to explore the possible distinctiveness

of our current historical moment. We are surprised that Walker dismisses such an endeavor as being contingent upon a presentist fallacy, rather than welcoming it as an engagement with some of his own long-standing concerns regarding capitalist territorial development.

- Our presentation of planetary urbanization as an “epistemological orientation” is hardly a denial that this process is grounded in real, ongoing social struggles and material-institutional conditions (189). Our simple claim is that present urban contestations require a realignment in our ways of knowing and influencing urban life across diverse sites, places and territories. We would never deny or ignore the socio-material realities that ground such struggles; on the contrary, we actively underscore their essential role in mediating and transforming the very conditions for social science knowledge of urban processes.
- Finally, because we argue for a series of conceptual realignments, Walker interprets us as rejecting the legacies of modern social theory—Marx, Weber, Lefebvre, Braudel and so forth—in order to develop our own alternative framework (189). The claim that conceptual reinvention is needed does not mean we reject everything that came before us and propose to “start from scratch.” We are building directly upon the enduring legacies of these and many other social and urban theorists; we emphasize the need to do so throughout our discussion, as is clearly evidenced in our bibliographic apparatus. In fact, we continue to encounter fascinating insights in previously subterranean traditions of urban theory, as well as in canonical texts, that are being brought into relief precisely in the context of our own concerns and emergent research agendas.

Especially when intellectual paradigms are shifting and established concepts and methods are being called into question, a productive exchange cannot occur unless the participants in a debate take care to represent the positions under scrutiny precisely, accurately and completely. Once that is accomplished, then certainly, the hard work of critique should begin. This cannot happen, however, if a critic’s main goal is to discredit rather than to engage the positions under consideration. Alas, in the bulk of Walker’s essay, the former agenda seems to prevail over the latter. It is unfortunate, from our point of view, that so much of Walker’s text is occupied with the caricatures, distractions and misconceptions enumerated above, leaving precious

little space left for him to elaborate his views on some of the more substantive issues at stake.

Once the dust clears from the dismissive rhetoric and egregious misrepresentations that pervade Walker's text, we are left with three important issues about which there are, indeed, some genuine disagreements:

1. *The status of "theory" relative to "concrete" research.* Walker urges urbanists to "get on with their work," by which he means concrete, empirical research. For Walker, "theory" is a specialization for philosophers alone; urbanists should stick to what they know best—studies of concrete places and spatial transformations. We, by contrast, insist on the fundamental role of conceptualizations—interpretive frameworks—in mediating that research activity. Indeed, our own concern to develop a new epistemology of the urban is derived quite directly from our wide-ranging experiences in concrete research and practice—at once in the urban social sciences and in the planning and design disciplines—that have revealed the limitations of existing frameworks in relation to emerging patterns of urbanization around the world. A serious engagement with epistemological questions is thus essential, we believe, for all forms of reflexive urban social science, since this enables researchers to interrogate, and when necessary, to update and re-invent, the underlying conceptual assumptions upon which their concrete investigations are necessarily grounded. Epistemology is not some abstract, esoteric or "metaphysical" cloud to which only philosophers can ascend; it is necessary moment of reflexivity in all forms of critical social science, including critical urban studies. Especially during periods in which inherited research paradigms are being called into question, it is important to interrogate not only "middle range" theoretical assumptions, but the broader, higher-order conceptual frameworks within which diverse research operations are organized. Leaving that work to the philosophers is not an option, from our point of view; it is up to us to critically interrogate the abstract categories of analysis we have inherited from earlier rounds of urban inquiry, and which we presuppose even in the most mundane, concrete practices of social research. This is an important part of what we have undertaken in our project on planetary urbanization—hence our interest in questions of theory and epistemology.

2. *The parameters of the "urban" as an analytical concept.* Walker insists that the "city" and the "urban" are essentially identical concepts, and expresses his concern that we are overstretching the concept of the urban to the point of meaninglessness. This is a question we encounter regularly in discussions of our work, in part because these terms have been used more or less synonymously for so long, both in the social sciences and in everyday language. By contrast, building upon the ideas of Lefebvre and others, we do insist on the city/urban distinction; much of our argument explores various ways in which a reworked notion of urbanization may be applied to illuminate important dimensions of uneven spatial development, land use intensification, the geopolitics of infrastructure and processes of socio-environmental transformation far beyond the city limits. While we do not deny the connection between urbanization and city-building (agglomeration), we view the latter as only one among many morphological patterns that are associated with the urbanization process. Walker's concerns about conceptual overstretch appear to stem from his assumption that the urban must necessarily be defined in morphological terms. However, because we emphasize process rather than morphology, the parameters for a definitional specification of the urban (as well as of urbanization) are reframed. This point is elaborated in detail in our discussion of the distinction between concentrated, extended and differentiation urbanization (Thesis 4), and subsequently in our text. Only time will tell whether the intellectual payoffs of this conceptual realignment will outweigh the methodological hazards to which Walker alludes. Our work to date gives us reason to believe that significantly expanded notions of the urban and urbanization do indeed open up some useful, productive new horizons for engaging with contemporary sociospatial transformations. We will thus continue to elaborate our conceptualization, and its implications, in future work.

3. *The status of "rural" space in the study of extended urbanization.* Walker insists on preserving the urban/rural distinction, even while giving several examples that underscore the manifold ways in which major zones of the erstwhile "countryside" are being industrialized, traversed by new, large-scale logistics and communications infrastructures, spatially reorganized and environmentally degraded. By contrast, we propose to interpret such transformations, and many others in putatively "rural" zones, as core dimensions and expressions of urbanization itself: the notion

of an “urban fabric” explodes the urban/rural divide and, we contend, offers a more effective basis on which to investigate the interconnected political-economic, social, infrastructural and environmental transformations that animate both city growth and the evolution of associated “operational landscapes.” The urban/rural distinction generates a vision of possible connections between distinct, externally related zones; their properties as distinct “urban” or “rural” entities are assumed to result from discrete, internally generated processes, rather than being formed through their evolving connections to each other. We reject this set of assumptions and insist on a resolutely relational approach: the notion of an urban fabric (and the closely associated distinction between concentrated and extended urbanization) internalizes the city/countryside divide within a singular, unevenly developed process—urbanization—and explores their co-evolution and mutual transformation within broader spatial divisions of labor. For reasons we have elaborated at length in other writings, we view the concept of the “rural” as an increasingly obfuscatory basis for understanding some of the major dynamics of political-economic, infrastructural and environmental transformation that are currently unfolding, for instance, in low-population and/or predominantly agricultural zones across much of the planet. In replacing it with those of the urban fabric, extended urbanization and the operational landscape, our goal is not to deny the existence of sociospatial differentiation and territorial inequality, but precisely to offer an alternative basis for investigating emergent patterns of uneven spatial development in relation to accelerating processes of city growth around the world. Today, we argue, a new analytical vocabulary is needed that underscores the dense, relational, evolving connections between cities and their operational landscapes, rather than demarcating them in advance of the inquiry as discrete, separate areal zones that may happen to impact one another. In fact, we view Walker’s earlier works on agro-business systems and growth peripheries as major contributions to our understanding of the processes we are exploring under the rubric of extended urbanization. Walker’s own research, in other words, offers powerful evidence for the very conceptual realignment we are advocating in our article.

We will continue to develop, clarify and elaborate our positions on these points in future writings, hopefully in dialogue with other researchers are likewise concerned to advance our collective capacity to understand and to influence urbanization processes.