Theses on Urbanization

Neil Brenner

In the early 1970s, a young Marxist sociologist named Manuel Castells, then living in exile in Paris, began his soon-to-be-classic intervention, *The Urban Question*, by declaring his "astonishment" that debates on "urban problems" were becoming "an essential element in the policies of governments, in the concerns of the mass media and, consequently, in the everyday life of a large section of the population" (1977 [1972]: 1). For Castells, this astonishment was born of his orthodox Marxist assumption that the concern with urban questions was ideological. The real motor of social change, he believed, lay elsewhere, in working-class action and anti-imperialist mobilization. On this basis, Castells proceeded to deconstruct what he viewed as the prevalent "urban ideology" under postwar managerial capitalism: his theory took seriously the social construction of the urban phenomenon in academic and political discourse, but ultimately derived such representations from purportedly more foundational processes associated with capitalism and the state's role in the reproduction of labor power.

Four decades after Castells's classic intervention, it is easy to confront early twenty-first-century discourse on urban questions with a similar sense of astonishment—not because it masks the operations of capitalism but because it has become one of the dominant metanarratives through which our current planetary situation is interpreted, both in academic circles and in the public sphere. Today advanced interdisciplinary education in urban social science, planning, and design

is flourishing in major universities, and urban questions are being confronted energetically by historians, literary critics, and other humanities-based scholars. Physical and computational scientists and ecologists are likewise contributing to urban studies through their explorations of new satellite-based data sources, geo-referencing analytics, and geographic information systems (GIS) technologies, which are offering more differentiated perspectives on the geographies of urban-ization than have ever before been possible (Potere and Schneider 2007; Gamba and Herold 2009; Angel 2011). Classic texts such as Jane Jacobs's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1965) and Mike Davis's *City of Quartz* (1991) continue to animate discussions of contemporary urbanism, and more recent, popular books on cities, such as Edward Glaeser's *Triumph of the City* (2011), Jeb Brugmann's *Welcome to the Urban Revolution* (2010), and Richard Florida's *Who's Your City?* (2008), along with documentary films such as *Urbanized* (dir. Gary Hustwit; 2011) and *Megacities* (dir. Michael Glawogger; 1998), are widely discussed in the public sphere.[1] The 2010 Shanghai World Expo's theme was "A Better City, a Better Life," and major museums, expos, and biennales from New York City and Venice to Christchurch and Hong Kong are devoting extensive attention to questions of urban culture, design, and development (Seijdel 2009; Kroeber 2012; Madden, forthcoming). The United Nations Human Settlement Programme (UN-Habitat 1996) has famously declared the advent of an "Urban Age" due to the world's rapidly increasing urban population.[2] This city-centric vision of the current geohistorical moment has been further popularized through a series of urban age conferences in some of the world's major cities, organized and funded through a joint initiative of the London School of Economics and the Deutsche Bank (Burdett and Sudjic 2006). Even debates on climate change and the future of the biosphere are being directly connected to questions about urban-ization. The planetary built environment—in effect, the sociomaterial infrastruc-ture of urbanization—is now recognized as contributing directly to far-reaching transformations of the atmosphere, biotic habitats, land-use surfaces, and oceanic conditions that have long-term implications for the metabolism of both human and nonhuman life-forms (Luke 1997; Sayre 2010).

These intellectual and cultural reorientations are synchronous with a num-ber of large-scale spatial transformations, institutional reorientations, and social mobilizations that have intensified the significance and scale of urban conditions.

1. For a strong critique of Florida 2008, Brugmann 2010, and Glaeser 2011, among others, see Gleeson 2012.
2. For a historical contextualization and detailed critique of this UN proposition, see Brenner and Schmid 2012a.
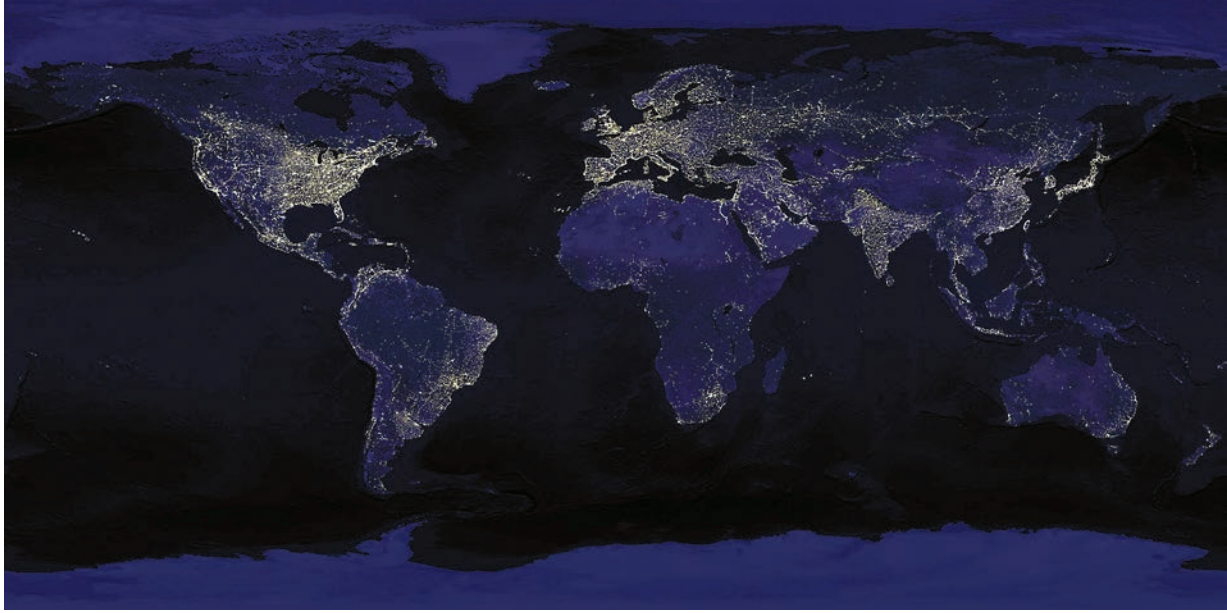
First, the geographies of urbanization, which have long been understood with reference to the densely concentrated populations and built environments of cities, are assuming new, increasingly large-scale morphologies that perforate, crosscut, and ultimately explode the erstwhile urban/rural divide (see fig. 1). As Edward Soja and Miguel Kanai (2006: 58) explain:

> Urbanism as a way of life, once confined to the historical central city, has been spreading outwards, creating urban densities and new "outer" and "edge" cities in what were formerly suburban fringes and green field or rural sites. In some areas, urbanization has expanded on even larger regional scales, creating giant urban galaxies with population sizes and degrees of polycentricity far beyond anything imagined only a few decades ago. . . . [I]n some cases city regions are coalescing into even larger agglomerations in a process that can be called "extended regional urbanization."

Second, across each of the major world economic regions, spatially selective policy initiatives have been mobilized by national, state, and provincial governments to create new matrices of transnational capital investment and urban development across vast zones of their territories (Ong 2000; Brenner 2004; Correa 2011; Park, Child Hill, and Saito 2011). While these state strategies sometimes target

Figure 1   As this satellite image of nighttime lights illustrates, the geographies of urbanization have exploded the boundaries of city, metropolis, region, and territory: they have assumed a planetary scale. Source: National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)

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traditional metropolitan cores, they are also articulating vast grids of accumulation and spatial regulation that cascade along intercontinental transportation corridors; large-scale infrastructural, telecommunications, and energy networks; free trade zones; transnational growth triangles; and international border regions. This extended landscape of urbanization is now a force field of crisscrossing state regulatory strategies designed to territorialize long-term, large-scale investments in the built environment and to channel flows of raw materials, energy, commodities, labor, and capital across transnational space (see figs. 2 and 3).

Third, within this tumult of worldwide sociospatial and regulatory reorganization, new vectors of urban social struggle are crystallizing. Michael Hardt and

Figure 2 New forms of spatial planning in the European Union envision an integrated, continent-wide infrastructure for transportation and communication—in effect, a European matrix of urbanization. Source: INGEROP, *Elaboration of a Long Term Polycentric Vision of the European Space* Paris: *Delegation pour l'Aménagement du Territoire et l'Action Régionale* (DATAR), December 2000

Figure 3 New transnational geographies of state intervention into the urban process are emerging, as illustrated in this 2011 map of the project portfolio for the Initiative for the Integration of Regional Infrastructure in South America (IIRSA) Project Portfolio. Map by Felipe Correa / South America Project

Antonio Negri have recently suggested that the contemporary metropolis has become a locus of sociopolitical mobilization analogous to the role of the factory during the industrial epoch. For them, the metropolis has become the "space of the common" (Hardt and Negri 2009: 250) and thus the territorial basis for collective action under conditions of globalizing capitalism, neoliberalizing states, and reconstituted Empire. In many urban regions around the world, the notion of the right to the city, developed in the late 1960s by Henri Lefebvre, has now become a rallying cry for social movements, coalitions, and reformers, both mainstream and radical, as well as for diverse global nongovernmental organizations, the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the World Urban Forum (Harvey 2012; Mayer 2012; Merrifield 2012; Schmid 2012). The urban is thus no longer only a site or arena of contentious politics but has become one of its primary stakes. Reorganizing urban conditions is increasingly seen as a means to transform the broader political-economic structures and spatial formations of early twenty-first-century world capitalism as a whole (see fig. 4).

These trends are multifaceted, volatile, and contradictory, and their cumulative significance is certainly a matter for ongoing interpretation and intensive debate. At minimum, however, they appear to signify that urban spaces have become essential to planetary political-economic, social, and cultural life and socioenvironmental conditions. Across diverse terrains of social research, policy intervention, and public discourse, the configuration of urbanizing built environments and urban institutional configurations is now thought to have major consequences for the futures of capitalism, politics, and indeed the planetary ecosystem as a whole. For those who have long been concerned with urban questions, whether in theory, research, or

Figure 4 Another city, another world. 2011. Ange Tran, Not an Alternative

practice, these are obviously exciting developments. But they are also accompanied by new challenges and dangers—not the least of which is the proliferation
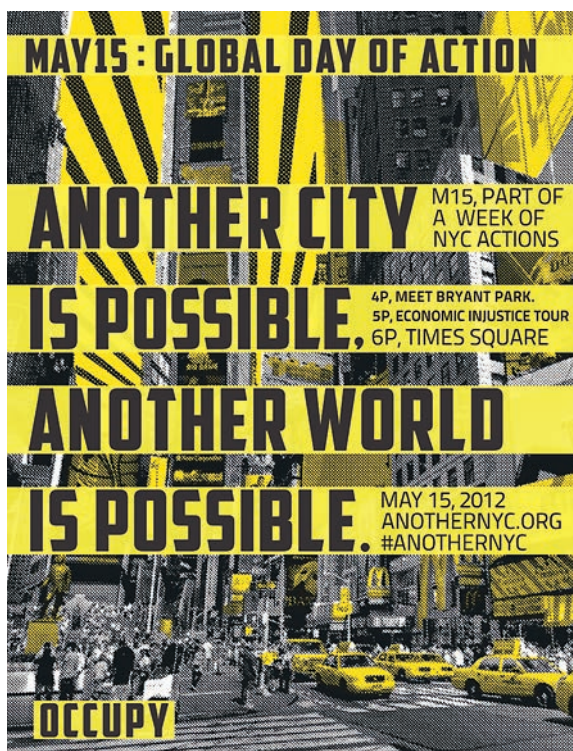
of deep confusion regarding the specificity of the urban itself, both as a category of analysis for social theory and research and as a category of practice in politics and everyday life.[3]

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Writing in the late 1930s, Chicago School urban sociologist Louis Wirth (1969 [1937]) famously delineated the analytical contours of urbanism with reference to a classic triad of sociological properties—large population size, high population density, and high levels of demographic heterogeneity. For Wirth, the spatial coexistence of these properties within urban areas distinguished such zones from all other settlement types and justified the deployment of specific research strategies, the tools of a distinct field of urban sociology, to investigate them. By contrast, in the early twenty-first century, the urban appears to have become a quintessential floating signifier: devoid of any clear definitional parameters, morphological coherence, or cartographic fixity, it is used to reference a seemingly boundless range of contemporary sociospatial conditions, processes, transformations, trajectories, and potentials. Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift (2002: 1) describe this state of affairs as follows:

> The city is everywhere and in everything. If the urbanized world now is a chain of metropolitan areas connected by places/corridors of communication (airports and airways, stations and railways, parking lots and motorways, teleports and information highways), then what is not the urban? Is it the town, the village, the countryside? Maybe, but only to a limited degree. The footprints of the city are all over these places, in the form of city commuters, tourists, teleworking, the media, and the urbanization of lifestyles. The traditional divide between the city and the countryside has been perforated.

The emergent process of extended urbanization is producing a variegated urban fabric that, rather than being simply concentrated within nodal points or confined within bounded regions, is now woven unevenly and yet ever more densely across vast stretches of the entire world. Such a formation cannot be grasped adequately through traditional concepts of cityness, metropolitanism, or urban/rural binarisms, which presuppose the coherent areal separation of distinct set-

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3. The distinction between categories of analysis and categories of practice is productively developed by Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper (2000). For a powerful meditation on its applications to urban questions, see Wachsmuth, forthcoming-a, and, in an earlier context, Sayer 1984.

tlement types. Nor can it be understood effectively on the basis of more recent concepts of global and globalizing cities, since most of their variants likewise presuppose the territorial boundedness of urban units, albeit now understood to be relationally networked with other cities via transnational webs of capital, labor, and transportation/communication infrastructures.[4] Paradoxically, therefore, at the very moment in which the urban appears to have acquired an unprecedented strategic significance for an extraordinarily broad array of institutions, organizations, researchers, actors, and activists, its definitional contours have become unmanageably slippery. The apparent ubiquity of the contemporary urban condition makes it now seem impossible to pin down.

Under these conditions, the field of urban theory, as inherited from Wirth, Castells, and other major twentieth-century urbanists, is in a state of disarray. If the urban can no longer be understood as a particular kind of place—that is, as a discreet, distinctive, and relatively bounded type of settlement in which specific kinds of social relations obtain—then what could possibly justify the existence of an intellectual field devoted to its investigation?

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At present, the world of academic urban studies is host to a variety of "morbid symptoms" that appear to signify the latest among a long succession of epistemological crises that have periodically ricocheted through the field since its origins nearly a century ago.[5] Among the most specialized, empirically oriented researchers, the formidable tasks of data collection, methodological refinement, and concrete investigation continue to take precedence over the challenges of grappling with the field's decaying epistemological foundations. Disciplinary and subdisciplinary specialization thus produces what Lefebvre (2003 [1970]: 29, 53) once termed a "blind field" in which concrete investigations of time-honored themes continue to accumulate, even as the "urban phenomenon, taken as a whole" is hidden from view.[6] Meanwhile, among those urbanists who are reflexively concerned to confront such questions, there is growing confusion

4. See Brenner and Schmid 2012a. Amin and Thrift's *Cities* (2002) develops a productive version of this critique, albeit one oriented toward a very different methodological pathway than that forged here.

5. On earlier crises, see Castells 1976 and Abu-Lughod 1969. On contemporary challenges, see, among other works, Roy 2009; Roy and Ong 2011; Zukin 2011; and Schmid, n.d.

6. The concept of a blind field is borrowed from Lefebvre's ferocious polemic against overspecialization in mainstream urban studies, a situation that in his view contributes to a fragmentation of its basic object of analysis and to a masking of the worldwide totality formed by capitalist urbanization. See Lefebvre 2003 (1970).

regarding the analytic foundations and raison d'être of the field as a whole. Even a cursory examination of recent works of urban theory reveals that foundational disagreements prevail regarding nearly every imaginable issue—from the conceptualization of *what* urbanists are (or should be) trying to study to the justification for *why* they are (or should be) doing so and the elaboration of *how* best to pursue their agendas.[7] This situation has engendered a kind of "academic Babel" (Lefebvre 2003 [1970]: 54) in which, even amid productive conceptual innovations, the fragmentation of urban realities in everyday political-economic and cultural practice is being replicated relatively uncritically within the discursive terrain of urban theory.

A particularly problematic tendency, in this context, is the contextualist turn that has become fashionable among many urbanists who have been influenced by Latourian actor-network theory and associated, neo-Deleuzian concepts of assemblage. Especially in their ontologically inflected variants, such approaches reject abstract or macrostructural forms of argumentation in favor of place-based narratives and thick descriptions, which are claimed to offer a more direct means of accessing the microsocial contours of a rapidly changing urban landscape.[8] Such positions may partially circumvent some of the structuralist blind spots of earlier metatheoretical positions, and some also succeed in opening up fruitful new horizons for inquiry into urban processes, particularly in relation to the role of nonhuman agents in the structuration of places. Unfortunately, however, most work on urban assemblages does not begin to confront, much less resolve, the foundational epistemological conundrums outlined above.[9] Here, too, the concept of the urban is attached to an extraordinarily diffuse array of referents, connotations, and conditions, all too frequently derived from everyday categories of practice, which are then unreflexively converted into analytical commitments. The field's theoretical indeterminacy is thus further entrenched, while the *context of context*—the broader geopolitical and geoeconomic dimensions of con-

7. For useful overviews and critical assessments of this state of affairs, see Soja 2000 and Roy 2009. Another useful resource on such debates is the journal *CITY: Analysis of Urban Trends, Culture, Theory, Policy, Action*, which devotes extensive attention to discussions of theoretical/epistemological foundations and their political ramifications.

8. Key texts in this line of research include Latour and Hermant 2006 (1998); Farías and Bender 2010; and McFarlane 2011a, 2011b.

9. An important exception to this generalization is the work of Ignacio Farías (2010), who explicitly confronts such issues and proposes a radical, if controversial, rethinking of the urban question. A more cautious assessment of the potential of such approaches in urban research is presented in Bender 2010.

temporary urbanization processes and associated forms of worldwide capitalist restructuring, dispossession, and uneven spatial development—is analytically "black-boxed."[10]

Is there any future for urban theory in a world in which urbanization has been generalized? Should urbanists simply affirm the apparent amorphousness of their chosen terrain of investigation and resign themselves to the task of tracking the social life and spatial form of generically defined places? Or should urban studies today be pursued using the aspatial framework controversially proposed by Peter Saunders in the 1980s (1986 [1981]), which emphasized constitutive social processes (in particular, collective consumption) rather than their materializations in spatial forms? Or, more radically still, is it perhaps time to speak of *the field formerly known as urban studies*, consigning work in this realm of inquiry to a phase of capitalist modernity whose sociospatial preconditions have now been superseded? In a provocative recent reflection, the eminent urban sociologist Herbert Gans (2009) suggests as much, proposing to replace the inherited *problematique* of urban studies with that of a "sociology of settlements" based on reinvented typologies of human spatial organization and a less rigid understanding of interplace boundaries. Unlike Saunders, Gans insists that the field under discussion must retain a spatial component, but he opts to abandon the cartography of urban settlement space that has long underpinned urban sociology, including his own pioneering investigations since the 1960s.

It is tempting to follow Gans's lead and thus to confront emergent landscapes of urbanization with a more or less blank conceptual slate, devoid of the unwieldy epistemological baggage associated with the previous century of debates on cities, metropolitan forms, and urban questions. But doing so would entail reintroducing a version of Castells's earlier rejection of urban discourse as pure ideology. Such a position would be poorly equipped to explain the continued, powerful resonance of the urban across diverse realms of theory and research, as well as its widespread invocation as a site, target, or project in so many arenas of institutional reorganization, political-economic strategy, and popular struggle. Surely, the intensified engagement with urban conditions and potentialities, as broadly sketched above, is indicative of systemic sociospatial transformations under way across the contemporary world and of the ongoing effort to construct what Fredric

10. On the notion of a context of context, see Brenner, Peck, and Theodore 2010. A version of this line of critique is developed in Brenner, Madden, and Wachsmuth 2010 and also Wachsmuth, Madden, and Brenner 2011.

Jameson (1988: 347–57) once called a *cognitive map* through which to secure cartographic orientation under conditions of deep phenomenological dislocation.[11]

Whatever its ideological dimensions, and they are considerable, the notion of the urban cannot be reduced to a category of practice; it remains a critical conceptual tool in any attempt to theorize the ongoing creative destruction of political-economic space under early twenty-first-century capitalism.[12] As Lefebvre (2003 [1970]) recognized, this process of creative destruction (in his terms, "implosion-explosion") is not confined to any specific place, territory, or scale; it engenders a "problematic," a syndrome of emergent conditions, processes, transformations, projects, and struggles, that is connected to the uneven generalization of urbanization on a planetary scale. A case must be made, therefore, for the continuation of urban theory, albeit in a critically reinvented form that recognizes the relentlessly dynamic, creatively destructive character of "the urban phenomenon" (Lefebvre 2003 [1970]) under capitalism and on this basis aspires to decipher newly emergent patterns of planetary urbanization. In Ananya Roy's (2009: 820) appropriately combative formulation, this is surely an ideal moment in which "to blast open new theoretical geographies" for a rejuvenated approach to critical urban studies.

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Without intending to short-circuit the process of restless, open-ended theoretical experimentation that such an endeavor will require, the remainder of this essay presents a series of theses intended to provoke debate regarding the contemporary planetary urban condition, the state of our intellectual inheritance in the academic fields devoted to its investigation, and the prospects for developing new conceptual strategies for deciphering emergent urban realities and potentialities across places, territories, and scales. Several of these theses are connected to the vast academic literature on urban studies that has been under development for nearly a century. Other theses confront an analytical terrain to which little urban research corresponds, or which has previously been approached via routes that generally fall outside the rubric of urban studies, at least in the sense in which that field has traditionally been understood.

While these theses advance an argument for continued attention to urban questions, they propose a reconstituted vision of the "site" of such questions. As Andrea

11. Jameson's neo-Althusserian concept builds on yet supersedes the strictly phenomenological notion introduced by urban designer Kevin Lynch in his classic text *The Image of the City* (1960).

12. On the creative destruction of urban space, see Harvey 1989.

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Kahn (2005: 287) has productively emphasized, the demarcation of urban sites always entails complex epistemological, political, and cartographic maneuvers; urban sites are "multiscalar, heteroglot settings for interactions and intersections" rather than discrete, pregiven, or self-contained spatial artifacts. More abstractly, however, the theoretical orientation developed here suggests that the urban character of *any* site, from the scale of the neighborhood to that of the entire world, can only be defined in substantive terms, with reference to the historically specific sociospatial processes that produce it. As conceived here, therefore, the urban is a "concrete abstraction" in which the contradictory sociospatial relations of capitalism (commodification, capital circulation, capital accumulation, and associated forms of political regulation/contestation) are at once territorialized (embedded within concrete contexts and thus fragmented) and generalized (extended across place, territory, and scale and thus universalized) (Brenner 1998; Schmid 2005; Stanek 2011: 151–56). As such, the concept of the urban has the potential to illuminate the creatively destructive *patterning* of modern sociospatial landscapes, not only within cities, metropolitan regions, and other zones traditionally considered to be impacted by urbanism but across the space of the world as a whole.[13]

In methodology, if not also in substance, these propositions take inspiration from Lefebvre's (2003 [1970]: 66) call for a metaphilosophy of urbanization—an exploratory approach that "provides an orientation, . . . opens pathways and reveals a horizon" rather than making pronouncements regarding an actualized condition or a completed process. Insofar as inherited cognitive maps of the urban condition have proved increasingly inadequate, if not obsolete, the tentative, experimental quality of this method appears highly salient. A new cognitive map is urgently needed, but its core elements have yet to cohere in an intelligible form. Accordingly, many of the propositions outlined below are no more than speculative outlines for avenues of conceptualization and investigation that have yet to be pursued. Their potential to inform future mappings of the planetary urban condition remains to be explored and elaborated. Diagram 1 offers a schematic summary of some of the distinctions presented in the text.

13. The notions of the global, the planetary, and the world are likewise philosophically and politically contested and require further unpacking. See Elden 2011; Sarkis 2011; Madden, forthcoming; and the various texts assembled in Lefebvre 2009. For present purposes, it must suffice simply to note that the "world," as used here, refers to a planet-encompassing zone of action, imagination, and potentiality that is dialectically coproduced with the urban: it is not simply "filled in" through the global extension of urbanization but is actively constituted and perpetually reorganized in and through urban sociospatial relations. This point is lucidly developed in Madden, forthcoming.

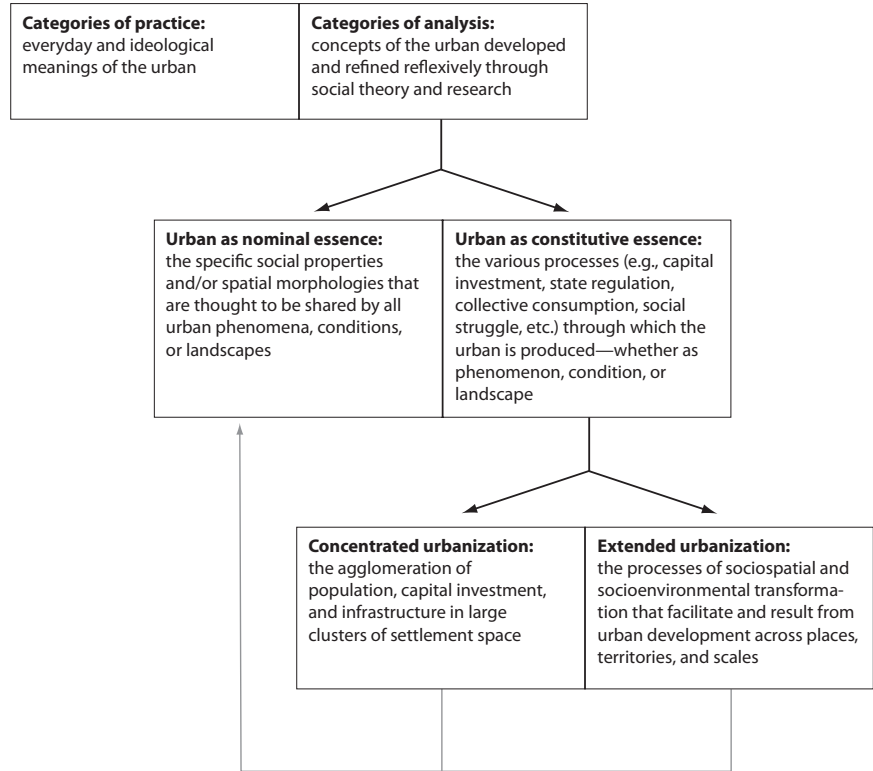| **Categories of practice:** everyday and ideological meanings of the urban	**Categories of analysis:** concepts of the urban developed and refined reflexively through social theory and research

Urban as nominal essence: the specific social properties and/or spatial morphologies that are thought to be shared by all urban phenomena, conditions, or landscapes	**Urban as constitutive essence:** the various processes (e.g., capital investment, state regulation, collective consumption, social struggle, etc.) through which the urban is produced—whether as phenomenon, condition, or landscape

Concentrated urbanization: the agglomeration of population, capital investment, and infrastructure in large clusters of settlement space	**Extended urbanization:** the processes of sociospatial and socioenvironmental transforma- tion that facilitate and result from urban development across places, territories, and scales

Diagram 1   Some useful distinctions for a theory of planetary urbanization.

1. *The urban is a theoretical construct.* The urban is not a pregiven site, space, or object—its demarcation as a zone of thought, representation, imagination, or action can only occur through a process of theoretical abstraction (Martindale 1958; Abu-Lughod 1969; Castells 1977 [1972]). Such abstractions condition "how we 'carve up' our object of study and what properties we take particular objects to have" (Sayer 1984: 281; see also Sayer 1981). As such, they have a massively structuring impact on concrete investigations of all aspects of the built environ- ment and sociospatial restructuring. In this sense, questions of conceptualization lie at the heart of all forms of urban research, even the most empirical, contextu- ally embedded, and detail oriented. They are not mere background conditions or framing devices but constitute the very interpretive fabric through which urban- ists weave together metanarratives, normative-political orientations, analyses of empirical data, and strategies of intervention.

2. *The site and object of urban research are essentially contested.* Since the formal institutionalization of urban sociology in the early twentieth century, the conceptual demarcation of the urban has been a matter of intense debate and disagreement across the social sciences. Since that time, the trajectory of urban research has involved not only an accumulation of concrete investigations in and of urbanizing spaces but also the continual theoretical rearticulation of their specificity as such, both socially and spatially. During the past century, many of the great leaps forward in the field of urban studies have occurred through the elaboration of new theoretical "cuts" into the nature of the urban question (Gottdiener 1985; Saunders 1986 [1981]; Merrifield 2002).

3. *Major strands of urban studies fail to demarcate their site and object in reflexively theoretical terms.* In much of twentieth-century urban studies, cities and urban spaces have been taken for granted as empirically coherent, transparent sites of research. Consequently, the urban character of urban research has been conceived simply with reference to the circumstance that its focal point is located within a place labeled a "city." However, such mainstream, empiricist positions cannot account for their own historical and geographic conditions of possibility: they necessarily presuppose determinate theoretical assumptions regarding the specificity of the city and/or the urban that powerfully shape the trajectory of concrete research, generally in unexamined ways. Critical reflexivity in urban studies may only be accomplished if such assumptions are made explicit, subjected to systematic analysis, and revised continually in relation to evolving research questions, normative-political orientations, and practical concerns (Castells 1976).

4. *Urban studies has traditionally demarcated the urban in contrast to putatively nonurban spaces.* Since its origins, the field of urban studies has conceived the urban as a specific type of settlement space, one that is thought to be different, in some qualitative way, from the putatively nonurban spaces that surround it—from the suburb, the town, and the village to the rural, the countryside, and the wilderness (Wirth 1969 [1937]; Gans 2009). Chicago School urban sociologists, mainstream land economists, central place theorists, urban demographers, neo-Marxian geographers, and global city theorists may disagree on the basis of this specificity, but all engage in the shared analytical maneuver of delineating urban distinctiveness through an explicit or implied contrast to sociospatial conditions located "elsewhere."[14] In effect, the terrain of the nonurban, this perpetually pres-

14. Debates on the urban question as a scale question (Brenner 2009) represent a partial exception to this generalization, since they entail analytically contrasting the urban to supraurban scales (a vertical comparative vector) rather than to extraurban territories (a horizontal comparative vector).

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Urbanisation in the Detroit region in 1900

Urbanisation in the Detroit region in 1920

Urbanisation in the Detroit region in 1940
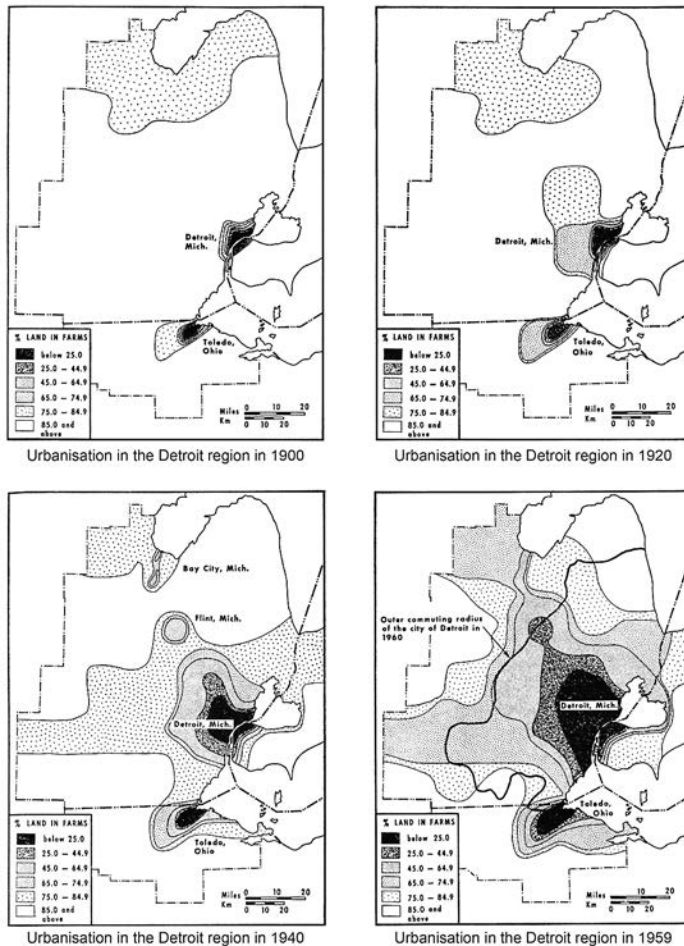
Urbanisation in the Detroit region in 1959

Figure 5 In this time-series representation, geographer Brian J. L. Berry used a simple empirical indicator to demarcate the changing urban/rural interface—percentage of land allocated to agricultural functions. Brian J. L. Berry, *The Human Consequences of Urbanization: Divergent Paths in the Urban Experience of the Twentieth Century.* New York: St. Martin's, 1973

ent "elsewhere," has long served as a *constitutive outside* that stabilizes the very intelligibility of the field of urban studies. The nonurban appears simultaneously as the ontological Other of the urban, its radical opposite, and as its epistemological condition of possibility, the basis on which it can be recognized as such (see figs. 5 and 6).[15]

5. *The concern with settlement typologies (nominal essences) must be superseded by the analysis of sociospatial processes (constitutive essences).* The development of typologies of settlement space, urban and otherwise, requires the delineation of a nominal essence through which the distinctiveness of particular sociospatial forms or conditions is to be understood. This methodological aspiration has long preoccupied major strands of twentieth-century urban theory, and it persists within several important contemporary urban research traditions. However, it is time for urbanists to abandon the search for a nominal essence that might distinguish the urban as a type of settlement (whether conceived as a city, a city-region, a metropolis, a megalopolis, or otherwise) and the closely associated conception of other spaces (suburban,

15. The urban/nonurban binarism is productively exploded in William Cronon's classic book on the simultaneous development of Chicago and the Great West, *Nature's Metropolis* (1991). The same set of issues is powerfully explored in Alan Berger's (2006) brilliant study of waste landscapes and horizontal urbanization in deindustrializing North America. One of the first attempts explicitly to treat the nonurban as a zone of theoretical significance to the project of urban theory is the 2012 issue of *MONU* (*Magazine on Urbanism*) titled *Non-urbanism* (no. 16).

rural, wilderness, or otherwise) as being nonurban due to their supposed separation from urban conditions, trends, and effects. Instead, to grasp the production and relentless transformation of spatial differentiation, urban theory must prioritize the investigation of constitutive essences—the *processes* through which the variegated landscapes of modern capitalism are produced.[16]

6. *A new lexicon of sociospatial differentiation is needed*. The geographies of capitalism are as intensely variegated as ever: contemporary urbanization processes hardly signify the transcendence of uneven spatial development and territorial inequality at any geographic scale. However, a new lexicon of sociospatial differentiation is needed to grasp

SPATIAL SYSTEM

- (1) Major cities
- (2) Peri-urban
- (3) Desakota
- (4) Densely populated rural
- (5) Sparsely populated frontier
- O Smaller cities and towns
- — Communication routes

Figure 6 Terry McGee introduced the concept of a *desakota* region (the term literally means "village-city" in Indonesian) to map the uneven boundary between urban and nonurban spaces in Asia. Terry McGee, "The Emergence of *Desakota* Regions in Asia: Expanding a Hypothesis," in *The Extended Metropolis: Settlement Transition in Asia*, edited by Norton Ginsburg, Bruce Koppel, and Terry McGee. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991

emergent patterns and pathways of planetary urban reorganization. Today spatial difference no longer assumes the form of an urban/rural divide but is articulated through an explosion of developmental patterns and potentials *within* a thickening, if unevenly woven, fabric of worldwide urbanization.[17] Consequently, inherited vocabularies of settlement space, both vernacular and social-scientific, may offer no more than a working epistemological starting point for such an endeavor. They can only be rendered critically effective within a framework that emphasizes the perpetual *churning* of sociospatial formations under capitalism rather than presupposing their stabilization within built environments, jurisdictional envelopes, or ecological landscapes. Such an approach has been pioneered with impressive systematicity by a team of scholars, architects, and designers at the ETH Studio
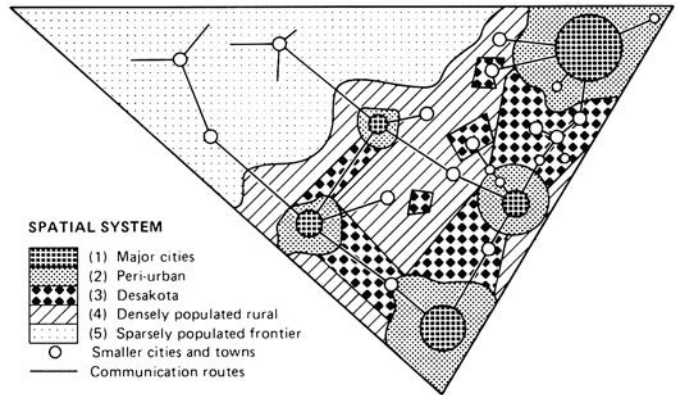
16. The distinction between nominal and constitutive essences is derived from Sayer 1984. On process-based theorizing, see Harvey 1982 and Ollman 1993. The process-based methodology proposed here has long underpinned historical-geographic materialist approaches to sociospatial theory, but with a few major exceptions (Heynen, Kaika, and Swyngedouw 2006; Swyngedouw 2006) its full ramifications for the theoretical foundations of urban research have yet to be fully elaborated. Particularly when it is divested of its latent "methodological cityism" (Angelo and Wachsmuth, n.d.; Wachsmuth, forthcoming-b), the concept of urban "metabolism" is an extremely fruitful analytical tool for advancing such a methodology.
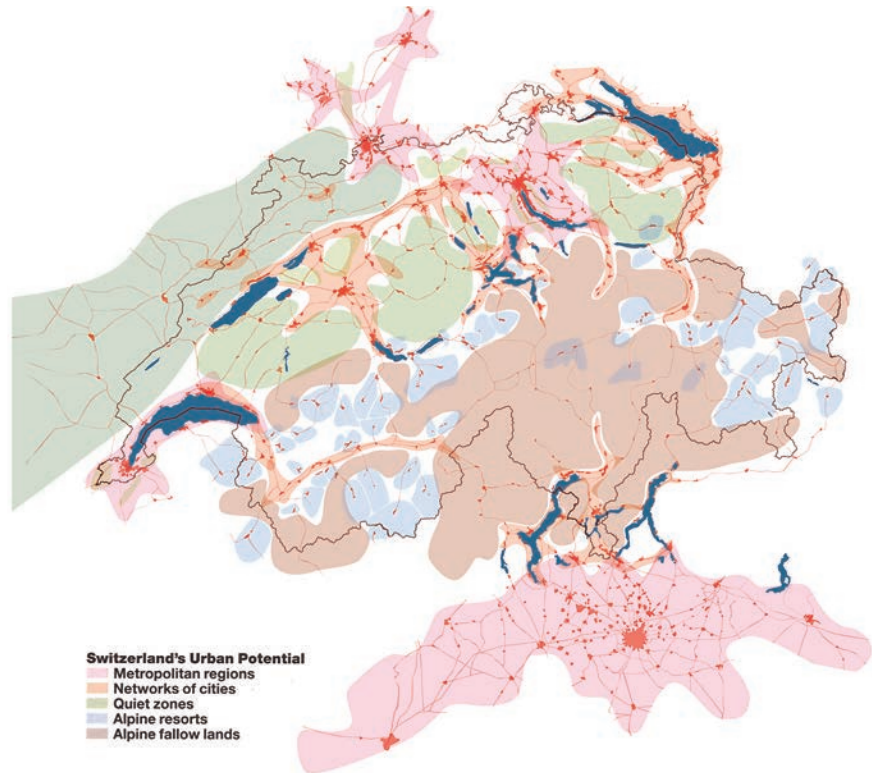
17. This is the core thesis of Diener et al. 2001.

Figure 7 This map of the Swiss urban landscape by the ETH Studio Basel replaces the traditional urban/rural binarism with a fivefold classification of metropolitan regions, city networks, quiet zones, alpine resorts, and alpine fallow lands. ETH Studio Basel, 2005

Basel, leading to the development of the "urban portrait" of Switzerland illustrated in figure 7 (Schmid 2001, 2012b).

Crucially, the zones depicted on the map are conceived not as enclosed territorial arenas or as embodiments of distinct settlement types but rather as indicators of contradictory yet interconnected processes of sociospatial restructuring under conditions of ongoing industrial, labor, politico-regulatory, and environmental reorganization. They demarcate the geographic inheritance of earlier rounds of urban restructuring as well as the territorial framework in which future urban pathways and potentials are to be produced.

7. *Urban effects persist within an intensely variegated sociospatial landscape.* This endeavor must also attend systematically to the ongoing production and

reconstitution of urban ideologies, including those that propagate visions of the city as a discrete, distinct, and territorially bounded unit, whether in opposition to the rural or nature, as a self-contained system, as an ideal type, or as a strategic target for intervention (Wachsmuth, forthcoming-a; see also Goonewardena 2005). While the critical deconstruction of such urban effects has long been central to the project of critical urban theory, this task has acquired renewed urgency under conditions of planetary urbanization, in which the gulf between everyday cognitive maps and worldwide landscapes of creative destruction appears to be widening.[18] What practices and strategies produce the persistent experiential effect of urban social discreteness, territorial boundedness, or structured coherence? How do the latter vary across places and territories? How have such practices and strategies, and their effects, been transformed during the course of world capitalist development and under contemporary conditions?

8. *The concept of urbanization requires systematic reinvention.* Because of its attunement to the *problematique* of constitutive essences, the concept of urbanization is a crucial tool for investigating the planetary urban process. To serve this purpose, however, the concept must be reclaimed from the city-centric, methodologically territorialist, and predominantly demographic traditions that have to date monopolized its deployment. Traditional approaches equate urbanization with the growth of particular types of settlement (cities, urban areas, metropolises), which are conceived as territorially discrete, bounded, and self-contained units embedded within a broader nonurban or rural landscape. Additionally, such approaches usually privilege purely demographic criteria, such as population thresholds and/or density gradients, as the basis on which to classify urban development patterns and pathways. Urbanization is thus reduced to a process in which, within each national territory, the populations of densely settled places ("cities") are said to expand in relative and absolute terms. This is the model that has been used by the UN since it began producing data on world urban population levels in the early 1970s, and it underpins contemporary declarations that an "urban age" is now under way because more than half the world's population purportedly lives within cities (see fig. 8).[19] While such understandings capture meaningful dimensions of demographic change within an evolving global settlement system, they are limited both empirically (the criteria for urban settlement types vary massively across national contexts) and theoretically (they lack a coherent, reflexive, and historically dynamic conceptual-

18. A similar concern with the gulf between experience and the totality produced by capital animates Jameson's (1988) classic theorization of cognitive mapping.

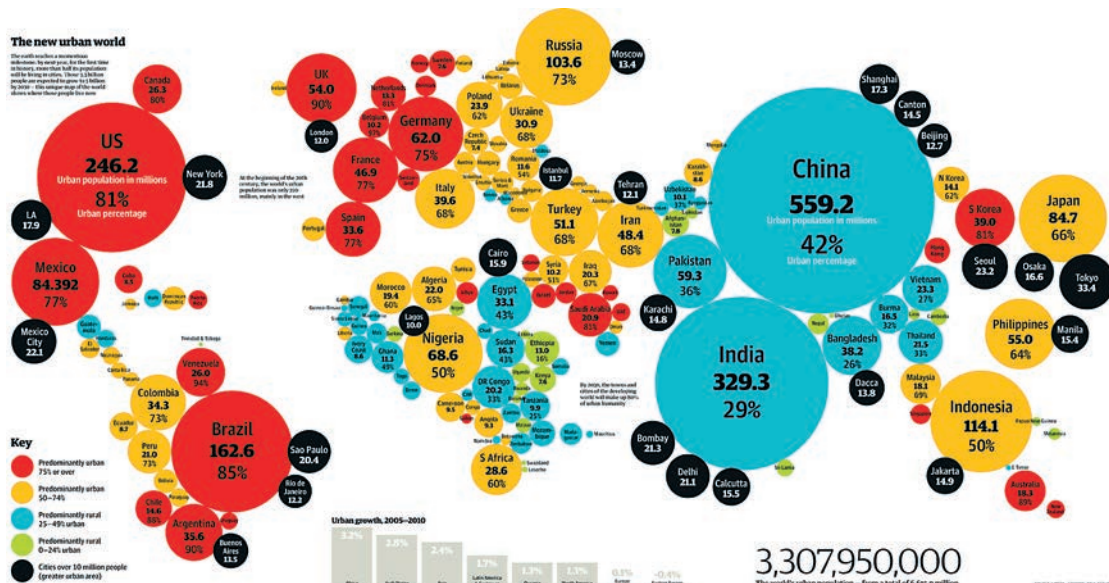19. Such claims are criticized at length in Brenner and Schmid 2012a.

Figure 8 The currently popular notion of an urban age is grounded on the problematic assumption that urbanization can be understood primarily with reference to expanding city population levels. Graphic by Paul Scruton, from an article by John Vidal, "Burgeoning Cities Face Catastrophe, Says UN," in *The Guardian*, June 27, 2007, www .guardian.co.uk

ization of urban specificity). By contrast, several previously marginalized or subterranean traditions of twentieth-century urban theory may offer useful conceptual elements and cartographic orientations for a revitalized theory of urbanization (see, e.g., Gottmann 1961; Friedmann and Miller 1965; Doxiadis and Papaioannou 1974; and, above all, Lefebvre 2003 [1970]). The possibility that the geographies of urbanization transcend city, metropolis, and region was only occasionally considered by postwar urban theorists, but under contemporary planetary conditions it has an extraordinarily powerful intellectual resonance (see fig. 9).

9. *Urbanization contains two dialectically intertwined moments—concentration and extension*.[20] Urban theory has long conceived urbanization primarily in terms of agglomeration—the dense concentration of population, infrastructure, and investment at certain locations on a broader, less densely settled territorial plane. While the scale and morphology of such concentrations is recognized to shift dramatically over time, it is above all with reference to this basic sociospatial tendency that urbanization has generally been defined (see figs. 10 and 11).

20. This thesis, and in particular the distinction between concentrated and extended urbanization, is derived from ongoing collaborative work with Christian Schmid; I am grateful for his permission to present it here in this highly abbreviated form. This conceptualization is developed at length in Brenner and Schmid 2012b and also in our book manuscript, "Planetary Urbanization." The concept of extended urbanization was initially proposed by Roberto Luis de Melo Monte-Mór (2004, 2005) in a pioneering investigation of the Brazilian Amazon.
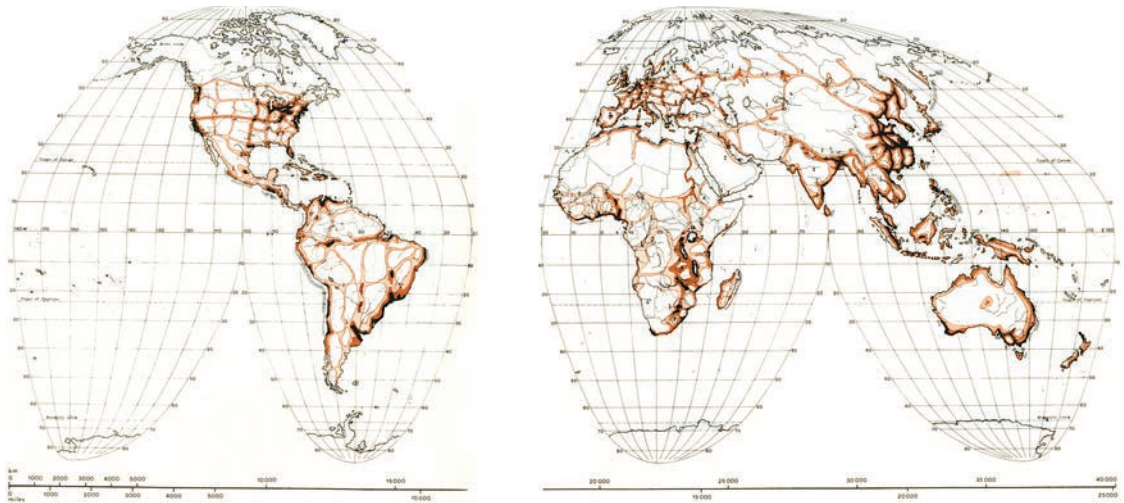
Considerably less attention has been devoted to the ways in which the process of agglomeration has been premised on, and in turn contributes to, wide-ranging transformations of sociospatial organization and ecological/environmental conditions across the rest of the world. Though largely ignored or relegated to the analytic background by urban theorists, such transformations—materialized in densely tangled circuits of labor, commodities, cultural forms, energy, raw materials, and nutrients—simultaneously radiate outward from the immediate zone of agglomeration and implode back into it as the urbanization process unfolds. Within this extended, increasingly worldwide field of urban development, agglomerations form, expand, shrink, and morph continuously, but always via dense webs of relations to other places, territories, and scales, including to realms that are traditionally classified as being outside the urban condition. The latter include, for example, small- and medium-size towns and villages in peripheralized regions and agroindustrial zones, intercontinental transportation corridors, transoceanic shipping lanes, large-scale energy circuits and communications infrastructures, underground landscapes of resource extraction, satellite orbits, and even the biosphere itself. As conceived here, therefore, urbanization involves both concentration and extension: these moments are dialectically intertwined insofar as they simultaneously presuppose and counteract one another.

This proposition suggests that the conditions and trajectories of agglomerations (cities, city-regions, etc.) must be connected analytically to larger-scale processes of territorial reorganization, circulation (of labor, commodities, raw materials, nutrients, and energy), and resource extraction that ultimately encompass the space
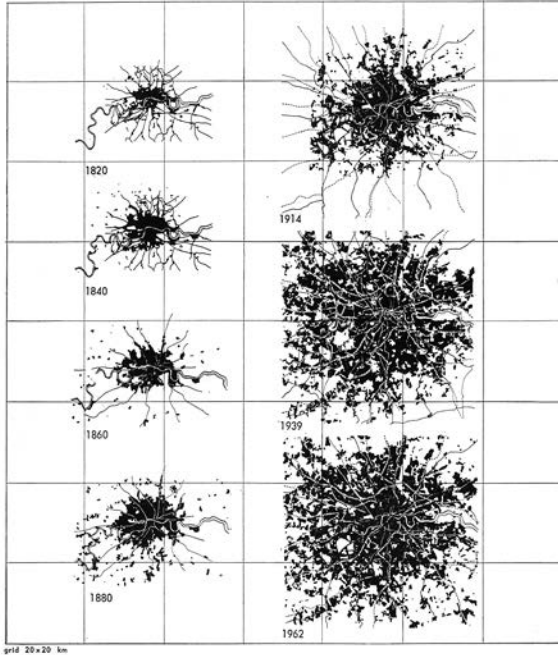
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Figure 10 During the evolution of modern capitalism, the scale of concentrated urbanization has expanded considerably—as this map of London's long-term spatial evolution illustrates. Constantinos Doxiadis, *Ekistics: An Introduction to the Science of Human Settlements*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968. By permission of Oxford University Press Inc., www.oup.com

of the entire world (see figs. 12 and 13). At the same time, this perspective suggests that important socioenvironmental transformations in zones that are not generally linked to urban conditions, from circuits of agribusiness and extractive landscapes for oil, natural gas, and coal to transoceanic infrastructural networks, underground pipelines, and satellite orbits, have in fact been ever more tightly intertwined with the developmental rhythms of urban agglomerations. Consequently, whatever their administrative demarcation, sociospatial morphology, population density, or positionality within the global capitalist system, such spaces must be considered integral components of an extended, worldwide urban fabric (see figs. 14 and 15). This dialectic of implosion (concentration, agglomeration) and explosion (extension of the urban fabric, intensification of interspatial connectivity across places, territories, and scales) is an essential analytical, empirical, and political horizon for any critical theory of urbanization in the early twenty-first century.

. . . .

We thus return to the classic question posed by Castells in *The Urban Question* four decades ago: "Are there specific urban units?" (1977 [1972]: 101). Under conditions in which urbanization is being generalized on a planetary scale, this question must be reformulated as "Is there an urban *process*?"

Much like the nation-form, as analyzed by radical critics of nationalism, the urban-form under capitalism is an ideological effect of historically and geographically specific practices that create the structural appearance of territorial distinctiveness, coherence, and boundedness within a broader, worldwide maelstrom of rapid sociospatial transformation (Goswami 2002).[21] Insofar as the field of urban studies has long presupposed the "unit-like" character of the urban, or sought to

21. This claim is developed productively in relation to urban ideology in Wachsmuth, forthcoming-a; a closely analogous account is implicit within David Harvey's (1989) concept of structured coherence.
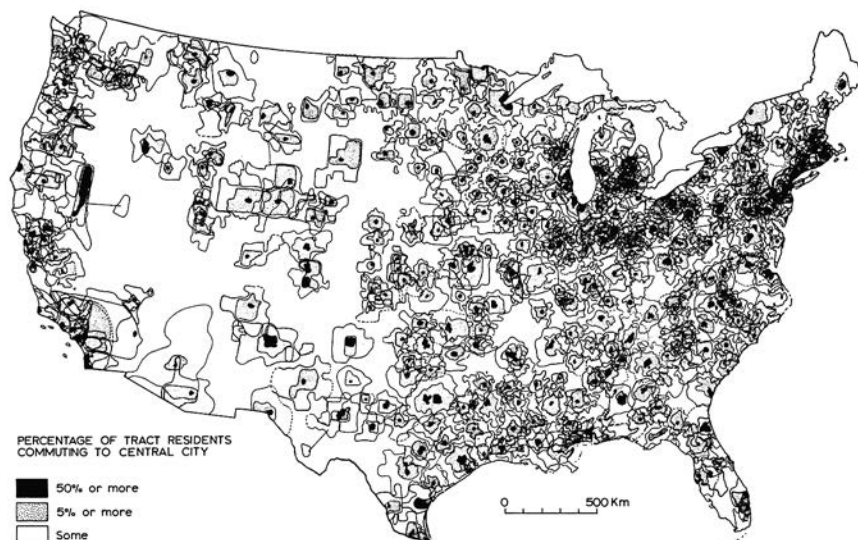
Figure 11   The process of concentrated urbanization encompasses flows of workers within and around large-scale agglomerations. Brian J. L. Berry, *Geographic Perspectives on Urban Systems: With Integrated Readings.* Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970. Reprinted by permission of Pearson Education, Inc., Upper Saddle River, N.J.

explain it with reference to a putative nominal essence that inheres within the organization of settlement space, the urban effect has been naturalized rather than viewed as a puzzle requiring theorization and analysis. To the degree that urbanists perpetuate this naturalization through their choices of categories of analysis, the field remains bound within an epistemological straitjacket analogous to that which constrained nationalism studies before the process-oriented interventions of scholars such as Nicos Poulantzas, Benedict Anderson, and Étienne Balibar, among others, over three decades ago. The task of deciphering the interplay between urbanization and patterns of uneven spatial development remains as urgent as ever, but territorialist notions of the city, the urban, and the metropolis are today increasingly blunt conceptual tools for that purpose.

These considerations suggest several possible future horizons for urban theory and research, including the following:

• *The creative destruction of urban landscapes.* Capitalist forms of urbanization have long entailed processes of creative destruction in which socially produced infrastructures for capital circulation, state regulation, and sociopolitical struggle, as well as socioenvironmental landscapes, are subjected to systemic

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Figure 12   The development of urban agglomerations hinges on increasingly dense, worldwide transportation infrastructures: they are an essential expression of extended urbanization. Images and text copyright © 2012 Photo Researchers, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
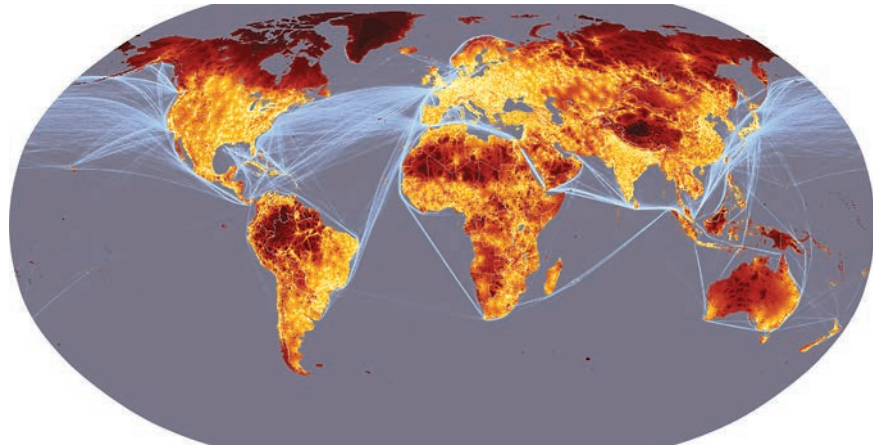

Figure 13   The extended field of urbanization is characterized by heightening levels of mobility across very large territories—as illustrated by the sprawling zones of "high accessibility" that are shaded in bright yellow on this map. (Note: the brightest yellow shadings on the map demarcate travel times of less than one day to big urban centers, whereas darker shadings on the map signify progressively longer travel times. Andrew Nelson, "Estimated Travel Time to the Nearest City of Fifty Thousand or More People in Year 2000," Global Environment Monitoring Unit, Joint Research Centre of the European Commission, Ispra, Italy, 2008. © European Union, 1995–2012
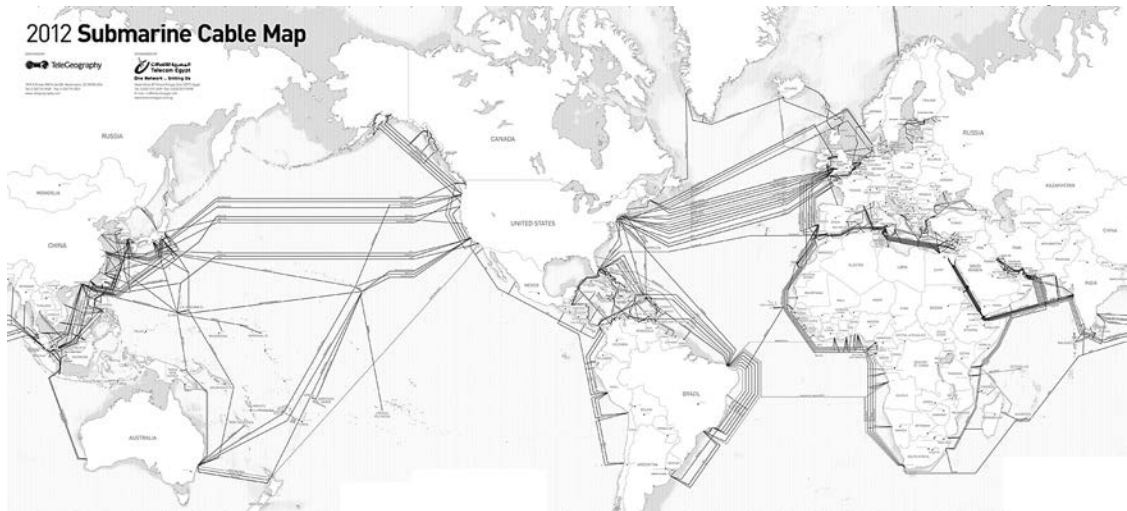
2012 **Submarine Cable Map**

Figure 14 The vast territories of the world's oceans have become strategic terrains of extended urbanization through undersea cable infrastructures (shown here) and through shipping lanes and undersea resource extraction systems. Source: TeleGeography, www.telegeography.com
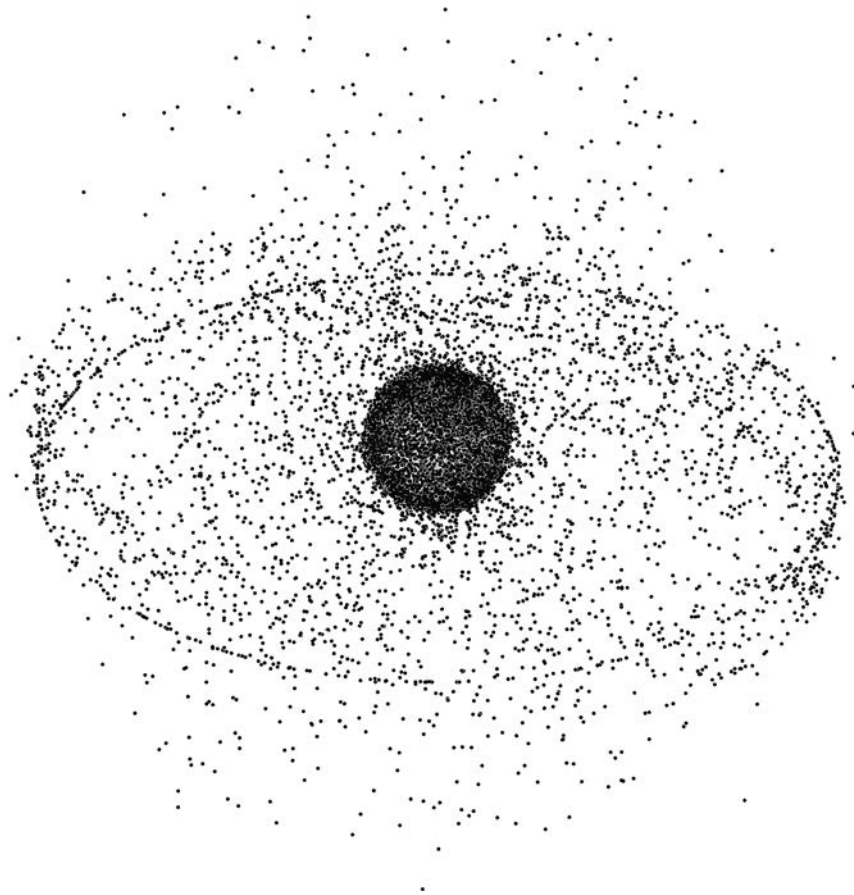
Figure 15 The field of extended urbanization is pushed upward into the earth's atmosphere through a thickening web of orbiting satellites and space junk. Source: NASA

crisis tendencies and are radically reorganized. Urban agglomerations are merely one among many strategic sociospatial sites in which such processes of creative destruction have unfolded during the geohistory of capitalist development. What is the specificity of contemporary forms of creative destruction across place, territory, and scale, and how are they transforming inherited global/urban geographies, socioenvironmental landscapes, and patterns of uneven spatial development? What are the competing political projects, neoliberal and otherwise, that aspire to shape and rechannel them?

• *Geographies of urbanization*. How has the relation between concentrated and extended urbanization evolved during the history of capitalism? Since the first industrial revolution of the nineteenth century, the big agglomerations and metropolitan centers have long been among the primary arenas of capitalist creative destruction—they have served as the "front lines" of strategies to produce, circulate, and absorb surpluses of capital and labor and thus to facilitate the dynamics of world-scale capital accumulation (Harvey 1989). To what degree has the extended landscape of urbanization, with its increasingly planetary infrastructures of capital circulation, nutrient and energy flow, and resource extraction, today become a strategically essential, if not primary, terrain of capitalist creative destruction? In the age of the Anthropocene, in which the logics of capitalist industrialization have indelibly transformed the systems of planetary life, are there new crisis-tendencies and socioecological barriers—including food supply disruptions, resource depletion, water scarcity, new forms of environmental vulnerability, and the manifold, place-specific expressions of global climate change—that are destabilizing the developmental rhythms of extended urbanization? What are the implications of such processes for the future forms and pathways of concentrated urbanization and, more generally, for the organization of human built environments?

• *Political horizons*. Current debates on the right to the city have productively drawn attention to the politics of space and the struggle for the local commons within the world's giant cities, the densely agglomerated zones associated with the process of concentrated urbanization. However, the foregoing analysis suggests that such struggles must be linked to a broader politics of the global commons that is also being fought out elsewhere, by peasants, small landholders, farmworkers, indigenous populations, and their advocates, across the variegated landscapes of extended urbanization. Here, too, the dynamics of accumulation by dispossession and enclosure have had creatively destructive effects on everyday life, social reproduction, and socioenvironmental conditions, and these are being politicized by a range of social movements across places, territories, and scales. Increasingly,

such transformations and contestations of the extended built environment of capital circulation resonate with, and occur in parallel to, those that have long been percolating within and around urban agglomerations.[22] The approach proposed here opens up a perspective for critical urban theory in which connections are made, both analytically and strategically, among the various forms of dispossession that are being produced and contested across the planetary sociospatial landscape.

Once the "unit-like" character of the urban is understood as a structural product of social practices and political strategies, and no longer as their presupposition, it is possible to position the investigation of urbanization, the creative destruction of political-economic space under capitalism, at the analytical epicenter of urban theory. It is the uneven extension of this process of capitalist creative destruction onto the scale of the entire planet, rather than the formation of a worldwide network of global cities or a single, world-encompassing megalopolis, that underpins the contemporary *problematique* of planetary urbanization.

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22. An argument along these lines is suggested in the literature on the "new enclosures," especially De Angelis 2007. For wide-ranging analyses of emergent forms of contestation over the global commons (including issues related to the appropriation of land, water, air, and food), see Heynen et al. 2007; Magdoff and Tokar 2010; and Peet, Robbins, and Watts 2011.

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