ASSEMBLING/WORLDING CITIES

Eugene McCann
Department of Geography
Simon Fraser University

Ananya Roy
Department of City and Regional Planning
University of California-Berkeley

Kevin Ward
Geography, School of Environment and Development
University of Manchester


Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Kevin Ward, Geography, School of Environment and Development, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL, UK; tel: 44 161 275 6866; fax:44 161 275 7365; email: kevin.ward@manchester.ac.uk
INTRODUCTION

How are we to understand the current urban juncture, in which cities are regularly being compared and referenced against each other on a global scale? There seems to be an unending number of benchmarks, measures, metrics, and rankings produced by various sources, from international and national state agencies to NGOs, from activist groups to consultants and media outlets. All seek to position cities within a global frame. In some cases the coordinates used to put cities in their (global) place are ‘aspirational’, highlighting certain characteristics or features that cities should exhibit: the tallest building, the most creative ‘types’, the most sustainable industries, the highest growth rates, or the most progressive social policies. In other cases, these metrics can be ‘disciplining’, highlighting absences that are defined as problematic: high crime rates, prevalent disease, large informal economies, ‘corruption’, failing infrastructure, etc. These criteria are all evaluative and normative, they form the benchmarks against which cities are compared and judged. They influence powerful mental maps of the world of cities that, themselves, influence policy-making and city-making.

These calculations, conversions, evaluations, and metrics involve the labour of analysts, academics, consultants, engineers, journalists, planners, politicians, researchers, activists and others – a disparate and internally heterogeneous ‘industry’ held together by a common practices of classifying and categorizing cities. ‘Extrospective’ practices of ‘inter-referencing’ (Peck and Tickell, 2002; Ong, 2011) abound, with profound consequences for the uneven power geometries that characterize the current urban condition. As models are run and tables produced, a global matrix of comparisons is continually assembled, disassembled and reassembled. An ever-expanding comparative field is populated by over-referenced places like Amsterdam, Barcelona, London, New York, Sydney, and Vancouver,
but increasingly also by cities like Bogota, Curitiba, Mumbai and Shanghai. Global South urbanism is, thus, also being ‘worlded’ (Bunnell and Maringanti, 2010; Roy, 2011), even if the cities being brought in from ‘off the map’ (Robinson, 2005) are as unrepresentative as those Western cities that have long stood for ‘globalness’.

How to best develop a conceptualization of contemporary cities in global-relational context has long been a concern of urbanists. A dominant approach has focused on a particular characterization of global/world cities (Brenner and Keil, 2006). Yet, there have been critiques of this broad literature that, themselves, draw on earlier global-relational conceptualizations of cities (e.g., Massey, 1994). Here is not the place to reiterate these critiques (see Robinson, 2005), instead our purpose is to re-evaluate, recalibrate, and recombine critical academic approaches to better grasp and intervene in debates about the future of global-urban society.

Here we want to explore the linkages between two recent volumes that we have co-edited (McCann and Ward, 2011; Roy and Ong, 2011). Both books are influenced by attempts to re-theorize the relationships between the urban and the global (Robinson, 2005; McFarlane, 2011a). To a great extent, both volumes focus on the practices of policy actors, broadly defined, as they create and maintain inter-city, urban-global connections through their everyday activities. These involve the global circulation of expertise, best practices, models, and technologies related to how best develop and govern cities. The *assembling and worlding of cities* is both an aspirational and evaluative process in which cities are assembled, compared, and ‘positioned.’ Here we outline how we conceive of the practices of assembling and worlding cities, then turn to what we see as the useful connections between the two notions.
ASSEMBLING URBANISM

Assemblage is a concept with such a diverse and rich genealogy that it is impossible to do it justice in this short piece. It has multiple origins and its various strands have grown across a range of disciplines, with geographers only recently addressing it (Anderson and McFarlane, 2011). For Ong and Collier (2005, p. 12), to speak of assemblage is to emphasize the “heterogenous, contingent, unstable, partial, and situated.” According to McFarlane (2011b, p. 206, following Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) assemblage is “increasingly used … to connote indeterminacy, emergence, becoming, processuality turbulence and the sociomateriality of phenomena.” These concerns have lent ‘assemblage’ some purchase within urban studies (Farias and Bender, 2009; McCann, 2011a; McCann and Ward, 2011; McFarlane, 2011a, 2011b).

Here we deploy assemblage as “a descriptor for some sort of provisional unity across difference” (Anderson and McFarlane, 2011, p. 125, original emphasis) and to point to the work involved in assembling socio-material phenomena (McFarlane, 2009). Specifically, we use ‘assemblage’ to describe the practices of actors who assemble policies from parts of close-by and elsewhere (Allen & Cochrane 2007). Their work entails engaging with various policy networks and communities, stretched across the globe, in order to learn, teach, and share knowledge about best practice models. Through their assemblage work – work always constrained and directed by overarching legacies and imperatives (Peck, 2001a, 2001b) – they produce cities and policies as emergent trans-local policy assemblages “deducted” from wider flows (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, Prince 2010).

In the contemporary globalized context, almost every policy can be seen as an assemblage of expertise and resources from elsewhere. Business Improvement Districts are a model of privatized governance that mutates as it is mobilized, being (re)combined in
different contexts over time (Ward, 2006); anti-poverty programs (Peck and Theodore, 2010), planning strategies (Robinson, 2011; McCann 2011b), creativity policies (Peck 2011, Prince 2010), all display similar characteristics of global-relationality and territorial embeddedness. Similarly, the material objects and outcomes of policy-making can be understood as assemblages.

Take, for example, a type of medical facility – a Drug Consumption Room (DCR). There are almost 100 of these in 58 cities in 9 countries (in Europe, Canada, and Australia). The offer users of illicit drugs, such as heroin or crack, a place to consume their drugs in supervised conditions with sterile equipment and with access to medical, counselling, and social services. They are usually fixed facilities, in buildings in neighbourhoods with prevalent drug scenes, yet their fixity must be seen as only one part of their character. They are also moments in global circuits of policy. Their similar elements – the procedures for enrolling participants, often using pseudonyms, the booths at which participants sit to inject, the availability of space for hanging out after use (offering opportunities both to monitor participants for signs of overdose and also to create relationships that might lead to counselling or other services), the relationships between the facilities and neighbouring residents, local police, etc. – speak to a process of borrowing and moulding starting in the late 1980s and early 1990s in countries like the Netherlands and Germany and continuing through their controversial openings in Sydney and Vancouver, to the recent decision to establish ten in France.

Paying attention to and following things, big and small, things like buildings, as Jacobs (2006) suggests, as well as following the policy and the policy actors, highlights how DCRs, as urban policy assemblages, affect the health of some of the most marginalized and stigmatized of the urban poor. They are policy interventions that are both intensely local and also implicated in the on-going circulation of ideas about how best to reduce the health and
social harms of illicit drug use. They are assemblages, or works, crafted by activists, advocates, and institutions from drug users and social service providers, to local and some national governments, to international advocacy organizations, to intergovernmental organizations (McCann, 2008, 2011a, 2011b).

Yet, as we suggest, DCRs, like BIDs and other policies, are very much embedded in localities. Following Harvey’s (1982) conceptualisation of the necessity of fixity for the flow of capital, we therefore emphasise that the circulation of policy knowledge happened through the embeddedness and operation of policies and policy actors in specific places. Territory and territorialisation are still crucial to a global-relational, or mobilities-influenced conception of urbanism. Relationality and territoriality not in dualities, but mutually constitutive, for as Massey (2011, p. 4) puts it, “[t]erritories are constituted, and are to be conceptualized, relationally. . . . They exist in constant tension with each other, each contributing to the formation, and the explanation, of the other (Massey, 2011, p. 4; see also McCann and Ward, 2011). The politics of whether and how to open a DCR in an urban neighbourhood, for example, revolves around intense local politics involving locally-embedded interests and local social and health conditions (McCann, 2008) as much as references to places and models elsewhere (McCann, 2011b).

In this regard, we argue, first, that assemblage work is central to policy-making and city-making – there is then a recursive relationship between urbanism and the collages and compositions that are brought together in its constitution. Second, we suggest that a critical attention to assemblages allows us to overcome the easy analytical dichotomies – fixity/mobility, global/local – that sometimes characterize urban studies (Collier and Ong, 2005). Third, we argue that urban policy assemblages are achievements involving uneven origins, contexts, interests, and consequences. To speak of urban policy assemblages is, in other words, to speak of – and emphasize the crucial importance of – power and politics
(Temenos and McCann, 2012). These processes of assembling, of gathering, also serve to center a practice of worlding to which we now turn.

**WORLDING CITIES**

The concept of ‘worlding cities’ is part of a heterodox project to challenge and disrupt the established maps of global urbanism, especially those of global and world cities. It is also an attempt to wrestle with how postcolonial theory may shift the analysis of contemporary urbanism. While Ong (2011) is wary of postcolonial theory’s tendency to chart the politics of subaltern subjects, a tendency that she sees to be as universalizing as grand narratives of global capital, Roy (2011) seeks to recover the postcolonial as a critical, deconstructive methodology, one that is concerned not so much with the subaltern subject as with subalternity – and thereby worlding – as archival structures. In other words, as an approach, worlding is fundamentally concerned with how cities – of both the global North and global South – are represented in the canon of urban studies and its archives of knowledge.

There are at least three meanings attached to the concept of worlding cities. First, the canon of urban theory, with its emphasis on global cities, fails to capture the role of Southern cities as worlding nodes: those that create global connections and global regimes of value. The worlding city is thus a milieu of intervention, a claim to instantiate the world understood as world view. From Indian “world-class cities” to influential world models of urbanism such as Singapore, the worlding of the South is a complex and dynamic story of flows of capital, labor, ideas, and visions. To pay attention to such ambitious experiments - inherently unstable, always contested, always incomplete – is to move beyond the handful of stereotypes through which cities of the global South are mapped, as glittering icons of hyper-urbanism or slum-ridden megacities.
Here it is worth noting that global mobilities and experiments are not new. Rabinow (1989) shows how fin-de-siècle modern urbanism was forged in the crucible of a set of ambitious urban experiments in the colonies of Europe. What then is distinctive about this historical moment and its urban experiments? Roy and Ong (2011) have argued that today’s worlding cities are nodes of an emergent global order marked by the ascendancy of Asian powerhouses, from the Gulf States to India and China. The Asian city then is a specific ‘milieu of intervention’ formed and reformed through the assembling of what Allen and Cochrane (2007, p. 1171) have called “parts of elsewhere.” These elsewhere are often Asianscapes, deterritorialized images of Asian capitalism through which new territories of accumulation and hegemony are produced. Put another way, worlding cities is a conceptual framework for crafting a latitudinal analysis of the urbanism of the global South, be it Simone’s (2010, p. 16) understanding of such latitudes being “hundreds and hundreds of small initiatives” or Ong’s (2006) analysis of “lateral spaces of production” or Roy’s (2010) concern with the citationary structures of 21st century capitalism.

Second, worlding practices are not simply the domain of governing and transnational elites. In his work on African cities, Simone (2001: 17), for example, highlights how practices of worlding are set into motion through the “state of being ‘cast out’ into the world.” For Simone, “worlding from below” involve “circuits of migration, resource evacuation, and commodity exchange.” It is in this sense that worlding cities are mass dreams rather than imposed visions. And it is in this sense that worlding cities is about new understandings of the political, those that exceed and elude the standard formats of social mobilization or subaltern resistance and instead are complex compositions – or assemblages - of collusions and subversions in the interstices of global urbanism. Indeed, it is precisely because worlding cities are ‘precarious accomplishments’ that it is possible to consider new horizons of politics, especially those that disrupt the referential practices of assembling and
worlding. There is thus the poignant story of endangered slum-dwellers in Delhi who are as convinced with the aesthetic normativity of the Asian world-class city as the technocratic keepers of the master-plan (Ghertner, 2011). There is thus the fragility of middle-class desire as migrants to Dubai search desperately for the prosperity promised by the Dubai model and global cities like Hong Kong are overtaken by entrepreneurial “cities at the speed of light” (Haines, 2011; Siu, 2011). In other words, worlding cities are how postcolonial subjects make a place in the world.

Finally, worlding emphasizes how cities, especially cities of the global South, are ‘worlded’ in the discourses and imaginaries of urban studies as well as in the professional epistemes of urban planning, architecture, and design. This meaning of worlding is closely related to Heidegger’s concept of a “world view,” “not a view of the world but the world understood as a view” (Heidegger 1976: 350). There are many ways in which Heidegger’s world view is of use to urban scholars, but in this case, we wish to make note of the world view of urban theory itself. Worlding is thus a way of interrogating our own scholarly practices, of how, as Spivak (1999: 228) notes, cartographies are inscribed and represented as “impeccable.” One broad example may illuminate our point.

Urban theory, we argue, remains structured through a divide between Theory and ethnography. While cities of the global South are often narrated through empirical description, through ethnography, through idiosyncratic knowledge, accounts of cities of the global North, also provincial, travel as Theory. Note our deliberate capitalization of Theory, as that which masquerades as a universal, as that which has global purchase, as that which can be capitalized. While Theory is assumed to have universal applicability, ethnography is seen to be homebound, unique, lacking the reach of generalization. Thus, in their recent treatise, Theory from the South, Comaroff and Comaroff (2012: 1) note that too often the “non-West…now the global south” is presented “primarily as a place of parochial
wisdom…of unprocessed data…as reservoirs of raw fact: of the historical, natural, and ethnographic minutiae from which Euromodernity might fashion its testable theories and transcendent truths.” In urban studies, worlding must be understood as an intervention in this structured divide between Theory and ethnography. It is an effort to undertake what Spivak (1999:200) suggests is the possibility of an “alternative geography of the ‘worlding’ of today’s global South.”

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have explored the resonances between the notions of ‘assemblage’ and ‘worlding’ that frame recent work on global urbanism. Assemblage encourages a relational perspective that focuses on the labour of making, remaking, and unmaking particular configurations of urbanism and it maintains a focus on the ‘elsewhere’ in circulations of knowledge about urbanism. Worlding focuses on the city as a milieu of intervention and on the referential character of such urban experiments. It also emphasizes the practices of intervention and imagination through which cities come to be positioned in cartographies of reason. Both notions are intended to highlight the importance of geographies of knowledge to the life of cities. Yet, the use of either term on its own or in combination has still yet to provide settled answers to questions about the contemporary urban-global condition. Indeed, these notions of assemblage and worlding probably generate more questions than they answer – both about how best to conceptualize the current urban pulse and with regard to specific empirical aspects of global urbanism. Therefore, we end our paper with a number of questions that we hope invite further discussion and exploration of the worlding and assembling of cities.
First, how might our use of the notions of assembling and worlding resonate with or strike a discordant note with other key concepts used by urbanists to analyze global-urban interconnections. How, for example, do these terms and their connotations relate to concepts such as scale, world/global cities, globalization, and networks, among others, and what are the implications of separating or combining some or all of these in the study of contemporary cities? Second, since both assembling and worlding are concerned with practices of citation and reference in a world of inter-connected urbanism, do these approaches thus risk overlooking geographies of connection which are marginal to such dominant globalities? Put another way, do assembling and worlding produce their own ‘off the map’ absences?

These epistemological and conceptual questions are paralleled by others that attend more specifically to the lived experience of cities. Thus, a third question might be: in paying attention to urban relationalities and mobilities, how do we take up Siu’s (2011) mandate to study the “historical global”? For example, what are the genealogies of trans-local assemblages and worlding cities? What is distinctive about contemporary urbanism and its globalities? Fourth, assembling and worlding are related and yet different approaches to urban politics. What concepts of the political are implicated in each framework? Worlding is concerned with new geographies of hegemony, while assemblage is more attuned to their fragilities and indeterminacies. Worlding is also intent on foregrounding how what is at stake in such assemblages is not only the making and unmaking of urban policy or global flows of capital but also lived subjectivities.

Fifth, and finally, reflecting on how Robinson (2005) has argued that the notion of world/global cities has become performative in that it has had effects on the world that it was developed to analyze through its adoption by policy actors, we can ask how terms like assembling cities and worlding cities might also hold critical performative potential? In other
words, how (if at all) might these visions of cities in global context aid critical political action through rethinking the practice of making cities?
REFERENCES


McCann, E., 2011c, Urban policy mobilities and global circuits of knowledge: Toward a research agenda Annals of the Association of American Geographers 101(1) 107-130


McFarlane, C., 2009, Translocal assemblages: space, power and social movements Geoforum 40 561-567


