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Toward a Critical Understanding of the World/Global City Paradigm

Ravi Ghadge

Kennesaw State University, rghadge@kennesaw.edu

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Toward a Critical Understanding of the World/Global City Paradigm

Cover Page Footnote

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[E]fforts to construct urban hierarchies on the basis of positivist taxonomies and map the 'real' causes and consequences of global cities overlook the fact that the notion of a global city is socially constructed 'within a wider public discourse on globalization' and is in itself 'a contested political project advanced by powerful social actors'.¹

Introduction

In the last few decades, "the city" has emerged as an important entity in our understanding of contemporary globalization, both as a place and as a discourse.

As a *place*, it has become critical in shaping the contours of the world economy. Increased mobility of capital has created a need for effective management and control of finance within global capitalism. This has led to new forms of territorial centralization and renewed importance of major cities ("global cities") that serve as command points within a globally integrated economic system (Sassen 1991; 2000a). The "release of cities toward a more global destiny" (Segbers, Raiser, and Volkmann 2005:4) has further led to a rescaling of the relationship between states and cities (Brenner 1999; Sassen 1995).

The city ("world/global city") has also become an important *site* of discourse in social sciences and policy formulation due to its strategic role in articulating the dynamics between the global and the local. On the one hand, in the social sciences (particularly in urban geography), the "world/global city paradigm" (henceforth, the "paradigm") has become a hegemonic discourse that advocates a place-centered analysis of globalization.² On the other hand (especially in the global South), "world/global city" has become a critical policy tool that directs and justifies restructuring of urban space.

In the above context, this paper does two things. First, it explains the particular social and intellectual historical context within which the "paradigm" developed and gained prominence in the urban literature in the North (particularly the United States). Second, in light of the particular spatial-historical origins of the paradigm, the paper critically evaluates the "paradigm's" effectiveness in explaining urbanism in the global South by synthesizing recent urban literature.³

¹ Brenda S. A. Yeoh (1999:608) paraphrasing Smith (1998:482).

² Even though the 'world city' and the 'global city' theories have evolved differently, I see them belong to the same paradigm due to their complementary nature.

³ The term global South is used in the paper to broadly refer to regions of Latin America, Asia, and Africa. It denotes regions outside of Europe and North America which are mostly (but not always) low-income and often politically or culturally marginalized. As explained by Dados and Connell (2012:13), the term global South refers to the history of colonialism, neo-imperialism and uneven economic and social change that result in vast inequalities in social development and access to material resources.

The paper is organized as follows. The first section discusses how the “paradigm” was socially constructed within the unique material and intellectual developments in the North in the 1960s and 70s (particularly the United States). These material and intellectual changes in the 1960s and 70s provided the foundation for the subsequent formulation of the “paradigm.” Based on the above insights, the paper later raises epistemological questions on the validity of the “paradigm” in explaining the diversity of urbanization in the South. The second section unpacks the specific “paradigm” through a discussion of the two distinct, yet complementary, theories that constitute it, namely, the “world city” and the “global city.” The third section critiques the “paradigm” based on a review of recent literature on cities of the South. The concluding section discusses the limitations of the “paradigm” and offers insights for a more critical and historically relevant understanding of urbanism in the South.

Locating the “paradigm”

Several theoretical perspectives and approaches laid the groundwork for the “world city” and “global city” theories. Urban scholars in the late 1970s and early 80s were responding to profound structural changes in the world economy in the 1960s and 70s. Some of these changes included the international division of labor, increased mobility of capital, deindustrialization and the emergence of new flexible systems of production, growth in transportation and communication technologies, and the increasing role of finance in the world economy (Dicken 2003). According to Dicken (2003), these theories addressed a fundamental shift in globalization from “shallow integration” premised on an *international* division of labor organized within national boundaries, to “deep integration” based on a new *global* division of labor organized within the production networks of transnational corporations (TNCs). The “world city” and “global city” theories are a theoretical amalgamation of the theoretical approaches discussed in the next section.

New urban sociology

There was a paradigm shift in urban studies in the late 1970s and early 80s that questioned the functionalist approach of the dominant ecological perspective of the Chicago School (Gottdiener and Feagin 1988; Walton 1993).⁴ The main thrust of this “new urban sociology” (Zukin 1980) or urban political economy was to understand urbanization as a manifestation of a particular mode of production and

⁴ For example, see Castells (1983) and Harvey (1973). Despite being labeled as ‘new urban sociology,’ this new approach represented scholars from diverse disciplines such as planning, political science, and geography (Gottdiener and Feagin 1988).

capitalist accumulation (King 1990:72). Thus, rather than seeing urbanism as an inevitable or natural process, it was understood as a “created” environment produced by capitalist accumulation. King (1990:71), citing Aikens and Castells (1977), highlights that this new approach spawned three new trends in urban research: 1) to examine broader social, economic, and political contexts of cities 2) to use a historical perspective to study urban problems, and 3) to explore how the economic system shapes the nature of urban systems.

The new political economy approach had a profound impact on the development of new urban theory, especially in explaining the dynamic of globalization and space. One theoretical concept worth mentioning is David Harvey’s (1982) concept of the “spatial fix” which explains how capitalism tried to resolve the internal crisis of geographic expansion. Harvey (1989a) explains that contemporary globalization is characterized by an apparent contradiction—on the one hand, capitalist accumulation was increasingly contingent on the elimination of geographical barriers (deterritorialization)⁵, while on the other hand, this geographical expansion of capitalist accumulation is, in turn, materialized through the production of relatively stable and immobile geographical landscapes (reterritorialization) such as the built environments, transportation infrastructure, manufacturing and business complexes, and communication networks. As Brenner sums it succinctly: “social space operates at once as a presupposition, medium, and outcome of capitalism’s globalizing developmental dynamic... [and is] continually constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed through historically specific, multi-scalar dialectic of de-and reterritorialization” (Brenner 1999:43).

In addition to explaining the inner workings of capitalism and its impact on urban space, urban scholars also tried to understand the impact of economic processes on social relations within a city. For example, Castells (1983) highlights how “urban contradictions” in the production, distribution, and management of collective consumption of goods and services engendered new social movements centered around women’s rights, environment, housing, water, and sanitation.

Despite reshaping our understanding of the urban world, the political economy approach of the “new urban sociology” is criticized on several grounds. First, it was found to be too “economistic” and “technical.” Critics such as Walton point out that there was a “tendency for political economy to become enamored of the seeming causal potency of economistic analyses—to collapse complex social issues into elusively precise technical and organizational terms” (1993:318). King (1990) argues that by privileging economic perspectives, it ignored the cultural variation in urbanism. Second, most research of “new urban sociology” had an *intra*-national focus, and there was less focus on the cross-national urban processes or systems. Finally, most of this research was grounded in the global North in

⁵ David Harvey (1989a) refers to this as “space-time compression.”

countries and cities of Europe and North America, and there was less focus on the urban contexts of the global South, particularly Asia and Africa.

World systems and dependency theories

While “new urban sociology” provided the critical tools to understand the inherently conflictual nature of urbanism, the world systems theory (Wallerstein 1984) provided the framework to connect the process of urbanization to structural economic changes in the world economy. Urbanization could not be understood solely through the political economy of regions or within the boundaries of nation-states, and there was a need for an “analytic disarticulation of cities and nations” (Davis 2005:97). Moreover, with the publication of the English translation of F.E. Cardoso and E. Falleto’s work on dependency which focused on the global context of national development, urban sociologists began to understand cities by capitalist development on a global scale (Davis 2005).

These two approaches linked urbanism in the “periphery” with the capitalist processes in the “core.” Therefore, urban development in the South was analyzed in broader terms through the incorporation of cities into the world economy and their function, organization, and form understood in this broader world-economic context (King 1990).

Research on deindustrialization and urban restructuring

In the 1970s, most of the industrial cities of the US underwent economic restructuring as capital became increasingly mobile. Corporations used the hypermobile capital to their advantage by thwarting unionization and expanding production to newer areas of the world (Bluestone and Harrison 1982; Logan and Swanstrom 1990). This movement of capital to areas where labor was cheap resulted in the industrialization of the global periphery and the corresponding deindustrialization of the advanced capitalist core. This new dynamic of accumulation also led to the formation of a new international division of labor (NIDL). The rise of transnational corporations (TNCs) and advances in science and technology further transformed the nature of capitalist accumulation (Bluestone and Harrison 1982).

At the urban scale, there emerged new regimes of accumulation based on flexible production (Harvey 1989a; Piore and Sabel 1983). In this new accumulation context, cities were at the forefront of accumulation serving critical managerial, financial, research and development, and information processing functions (Knox and Taylor 1995:7). Harvey (1989b) argues that the earlier “managerial approach” to cities in the advanced capitalist world in the 1960s was giving way to an “entrepreneurial” form of economic development in the 1970s and

80s. Harvey further notes that the roots of “urban entrepreneurialism” lay in the transformation of the Fordist-Keynesian economy to flexible accumulation (Harvey 1989b:5). Urban entrepreneurialism led to several contradictions at the city level. The local state had to cater to a need-based approach to the development of its working people. At the same time, the ability of the state to serve its people was now increasingly premised on the city’s competitiveness in securing comparative advantages, eventually leading to growing inter-urban competition.

Understanding the “paradigm”

The world city theory

Although the “paradigm” owes its initial debt to the literature discussed above, its specific origin can be traced to an essay entitled, “The world city hypothesis,” written by John Friedmann, initially published in 1986. Although the actual term “world city” has a much longer history (Geddes 1915; Hall 1966), it was popularized mainly through the writings of Friedmann. Friedmann (1995a [1986]) argues that the urban system is a single (spatial) manifestation of the “new international division of labor.” He develops this argument further through a series of hypotheses.

Friedmann’s primary argument is that the form and structure of a city will depend on its integration into the world economy and the specific function it serves. Thus, he viewed the city mainly in economic terms, rather than political or cultural. Cities could either serve as headquarters or financial centers. As cities get further integrated with the world economy, the changes in the world economy such as transnational capital flows, production and control, and employment patterns affect the internal structure of cities. Moreover, these external influences, are in turn modified by the internal conditions of these cities such as its history, national policies, and culture. However, Friedmann argued that the exogenous structural factors were more influential in determining the internal structure of cities.

Friedmann further argues that cities can be ranked into a complex spatial hierarchical division of labor based on the functional role cities perform in the world economy. Within this hierarchy, certain cities emerge as the key “basing points” in the spatial organization and articulation of production and markets (Friedmann 1995a [1986]:319). From this argument, Friedmann (like world systems theory) maps the world in three parts: core countries, semi-periphery countries, and periphery countries. He proposes a two-tier system of classification: primary and secondary cities. According to this scheme, except for two (São Paulo and the city-state of Singapore), all primary cities are located in the core countries.

Later, Friedmann (1995b:24) revised his hierarchical ranking of cities by adopting a multi-scalar classification of cities based on their functions: global

financial articulations, multinational articulations, and significant national and subnational regional articulations. However, he notes that these are unstable hierarchies due to the volatile nature of the world economy. Therefore, rather than focusing on the ranking itself, it was essential to highlight the functional difference between the cities and how they relate to each other. Associated with the shift in the hierarchical ordering of cities is a shift in the definition of world cities from “basing points” to “control and command centers” that control and coordinate global economic flows. The driving force behind these cities is a small number of rapidly expanding globally oriented sectors such as corporate headquarters, international finance, global transport and communications, and high-level businesses (production of services). This shift in Friedmann’s conceptualization was indicative of the increasing role of finance in globalization and the cities were ranked by their ability to control global capital flows.

In the latter part of the essay, Friedmann (1995a [1986]) discusses the impact of global economic sectors on the spatial, social, economic, and political structure of the cities. He also observes an intra-city polarization between the “economic space” dominated by capital involving the transnational actors within the economic sectors and the “life space” constituted by ordinary residents.

The global city theory/model

Saskia Sassen builds upon the world city theory through an empirical analysis of three “global cities”: New York, London, Tokyo (Sassen 1991; 2001). She argues that in addition to performing a control and command function, these cities are essential in the production of services. She prefers to use the term “global city” over “world city” to differentiate cities in contemporary globalization from other “world cities” that existed historically for centuries, before industrialization. Scholars have confirmed that cross-border exchange of capital, goods, and people led by cities is not necessarily a new phenomenon of contemporary globalization if we take a much longer view of history (Arrighi 1994, Hopkins 2002). In fact, non-Western cities have historically played a more pivotal role in shaping globalization. Recently, this argument has been made more forcefully under the rubric of “oriental globalization” (Hobson 2004, Nederveen Pieterse 2006). Although Sassen acknowledges the above fact, she argues that most of the cross-border exchange historically took place in the context of empires or an inter-state system. According to Sassen, what is new in contemporary globalization is a re-scaling of strategic territories due to privatization, deregulation, and opening up of national economies to foreign capital (Sassen 1991:xviii). As a result, the national states have become weaker in comparison to the growing power of cities and regions. It is this particular context that Sassen locates the rise of “global cities.”

Sassen argues that with the geographical dispersal of economic activities, there is a simultaneous integration or centralization of such geographically dispersed activities as reflected in the rise of central corporate functions of managing, coordinating, servicing, and financing of a firm's network of operations (Sassen 1991; 2000a). In this context, "global cities" acquire new functions such as command points in the organization of the world economy, key locations for finance and specialized firms, sites of production and innovations, and markets for new financial products (Sassen 1991). Thus, unlike Friedmann, Sassen argues that global cities are not merely nodal points for coordination of global economic processes but have specific command functions in which "cities have become postindustrial production sites for the leading industries of this period—finance and specialized services" (Sassen 2000a:22). Thus, a global city is "a place where certain kinds of work can get done," and the "things" it makes are highly specialized services and financial goods (Sassen 2001:5). In defining the role of global cities in such a manner, Sassen forces us to rethink the dichotomy of manufacturing and services by focusing on the *practice* of global control where global cities *produce* high-level business services. However, this global control is not possible through a single city and requires coordination through a network of cities, leading to what she calls a "geography of centrality," bringing together major international financial and business centers such as New York, London, Tokyo, Paris, and Frankfurt (Sassen 2000a). As a result, former important manufacturing centers and port cities become peripheral in the process, simultaneously creating a "geography of marginality" (Sassen 2000a). This inequality is also reflected within cities where along with the rise of highly specialized jobs, there is growing informalization of the economy.

Over the years, the "paradigm" has gained dominance not only as an academic discourse but has also become dominant urban policy rhetoric, especially in the cities of the South. Here "world/global city" models serve as frames of reference for "development." The growing prominence of "world/global city" discourses has also attracted a growing number of critics (particularly those who study cities in the South) who question the validity of urban theories produced in the global North in understanding urbanism in the global South. Some scholars have even advocated abandoning terms such as the "global city" altogether for less definitive terms such as "globalizing cities" (Marcuse and van Kempen 2000). The following section presents a critique of the "paradigm" through a synthesis of recent scholarship on cities in the global South raising epistemological questions about the "paradigm" and its validity in explaining urbanization in the South.

Critiquing the “paradigm”

The thesis of convergence

One of the criticisms of the “paradigm” is about the thesis of convergence—the assumption that cities around the world converge to a model of urbanization found in the North, particularly United States (Shatkin 2007). This claim rests on the fact that “world/global city” discourses privilege the role of global actors and institutions, underestimating local agency and contingency (Shatkin 2007:1). In response to this criticism, Sassen (2001) clarifies that not *all* the cities around the world are becoming alike, but there is *some* convergence around specific specialized global city functions.

However, given the specific history of capitalist development and industrialization in the South (influenced in no small extent by colonialism), the process of incorporation of global city functions remains institutionally differentiated in the South. The state continues to play a pivotal role in development in these regions driving the process of integration of national economies to the rest of the world. Therefore, cities in the South are unlikely to experience similar spatial and social characteristics as some of the “post-Fordist” cities in the North. For example, there are major differences found in terms of city functions, urban land markets (where the public sector continues to play a dominant role), as well as the economic role of the central business districts (CBDs), which continue to remain the locus of employment, unlike cities in the global North (Chakravorty 2000:57). Therefore, the precise nature and form of “convergence” remain an empirical question.

Narrow focus on “stylish sectors”

The “world/global city” theorists are criticized for prioritizing specific specialized global economic sectors of finance and producer services, leading to questionable universal claims about cities. Further, hierarchical models differentiating cities on a world-wide scale built on such a restrictive view of economic sectors marginalizes cities of the South where such forms of economic integration are not well established, precluding any explanation on diversity of outcomes of cities in the South. Robinson (2002) discusses this point articulately when she writes:

Elements of urban theory have become transfixed with the apparent success and dynamism of certain stylish sectors of the global economy...but it is the leap from this very restricted and clearly defined economic analysis, to claims regarding the success and power of these few cities, their overall categorization on this restricted basis, and the implied broader structural irrelevance of all other cities, which is of concern. These theoretical claims and

categorizing moves are both inaccurate and harmful to the fortunes of cities defined 'off the map' (Robinson 2002:532-537).

There are numerous ways in which a city is connected to other places of the world based on the historically specific articulation of global flows of money, goods, ideas, and people. Therefore, a predominant focus on powerful actors such as multinational producer service firms presents a restricted view of globalization that either ignore or devalue other connections that a city has with other cities and regions around the world.

West-centric, developmental bias

The "structural irrelevance" or marginality of non-western cities within "world/global city" discourses is not merely a methodological issue where interconnectedness is measured largely on economic terms through positivist methodologies. This "structural irrelevance" also reflects a deeper political and epistemological issue related to how we study the "urban." Robinson (2002:531) argues that in urban studies, cities outside the West are assessed with a "pre-given standard of (world) city-ness." Moreover, urban hierarchies constructed by world/global city theorists using terms such as "First"-, "Second"-, "Third"-, and "Fourth"-World cities are not mere analytical tools. These are, as Yeoh (1999:608) puts it, "status yardsticks...to measure cities in terms of their global economic linkages, to locate their place in a hierarchy of nested cities and to assess their potential to join the superleague." Further, developmental hierarchies in urban studies are constructed from experiences of cities in the North, such as Chicago (Chicago School), Los Angeles (Postmodern school), or New York, London, Tokyo (global cities). This *particular* knowledge is then used to construct grand narratives of modernity and development for the rest of the world. Therefore, there is a need for a deeper understanding of knowledge and power that is at work here.

This politics of "alterity" (Alsayyad and Roy 2006) of cities around the world reflects a fundamental separation of time and space (history and geography). The developmental models produced by "world/global city" theorists reflects (using Chakrabarty's [2000]) phrase) the "practice of anachronism." In other words, if specific contemporary social forms or processes do not conform to those in the West, they are understood as "pre-modern" or "non-modern" as they do not fit neatly into the Western developmental history and therefore are seen as relics of the past. Further, history itself is objectified to privilege contemporary social forms or practices. As Chakrabarty argues, the practice of anachronism objectifies the past to create "the true present," limiting our understanding of the temporal heterogeneity of the "now" (Chakrabarty 2000). Therefore, the West becomes the historical referent, and non-Western societies are seen to follow a similar trajectory of development as experienced by the West. This developmental scheme of history

reduces the “present” to the singular, reducing the other “nows” to the vestiges of history.

Further, this politics of “alterity” not only negates the presence of the “other,” but also ignores the knowledge produced by it. Again, Chakrabarty (2003) in the context of social theory has questioned the naturalization of West-centric discourses based on what he terms as “asymmetric ignorance” in which Europe works as a “silent referent in historical knowledge.” As he puts it, “third world historians feel a need to refer to works in European history; historians of Europe do not feel any need to reciprocate” (Chakrabarty 2003:429). In urban studies, this “asymmetric ignorance” exemplifies insular approaches that do not take into account the historical experience of cities in the South. Thus, as King (1990:78) puts it very succinctly: “the question is whether the real development of London or Manchester can be understood without reference to India, Africa, and Latin America any more than can the development of Kingston (Jamaica) or Bombay be understood without the former.” Even when cities of the South are acknowledged, they are placed at the lower-end of developmental hierarchies with the presupposition that they are yet to *arrive*.

Ahistori-City

Is the contemporary relationship between cities and globalization new? Recent scholarship on cities of the South has argued for a need to historicize the seemingly new urban practices not as an exception, but as fundamental components of urban landscapes produced historically (Alsayyad and Roy 2006). According to Alsayyad and Roy (2006) contemporary urban spatial forms such as the gated enclaves or squatter settlements or the notion of fragmentation, localization, and dissolution of national citizenship are examples of what they call “medieval modernity” (Alsayyad and Roy 2006). Here the “medieval city” is used as a “transhistorical analytical category” to interrogate some of the modern discourses about the city. According to Alsayyad and Roy (2006:2,5), much of the “paradoxes, exclusions, and segmentations have always been associated with city form, and urban organization.... [thus] the medieval forms of organization and community can lurk at the heart of modernity.”

Further, the novelty of the cities as command centers and central nodes of international trade in today’s context is also debatable. For example, in the 11th and 12th centuries, there was a widespread revival of cities as centers of international trade and economic exchange. Scholars advocating a *longue durée* approach in globalization have documented cities as critical nodes engaged in broader circuits

of production, exchange, and culture throughout history (Abu-Lughod 1989; Arigghi 1994; Braudel 1986; King 1990).⁶

From a hegemonic analytic to a dominant policy agenda

The hegemony of the “paradigm” and its developmental bias is reflected most starkly in the adoption of the “world or global city” as dominant policy rhetoric in the South. Anthony King (2000:266) highlights this fact succinctly when he writes: “the effect of the ‘world’ and ‘global city’ paradigm has been to prompt scholars as well as municipal officials worldwide to ask, ‘Is this, or is this not a ‘world city?’” This faithful adoption of the model is in part due to the overly simplified nature of the “paradigm” which unwittingly presents a formulaic model of development based on restrictive economic sectors as discussed earlier. This formula of development is particularly appealing to cities in the South where visions of “fast-growth” are constructed to catch-up with Western “global cities.” For example, in Mumbai since the early 1990s, urban planning is self-consciously geared toward restructuring city space to render it “global” or “world class” by transforming it into a significant financial and service center at the cost of growing insecurity of the urban poor (Banerjee-Guha 2002, Ghadge 2010).

Conclusion

To conclude, there is no denying that cities across the world are critical in articulating the process of contemporary globalization and recent urban theory has done well to highlight some of the specific patterns. However, whether these processes are noticeably new to merit new terms such as “world/global cities” is contestable. Although the “paradigm” adds “social thickness” to the analysis of globalization based on a “fuzzy logic” of hyper-mobility of capital (Sassen 2000b), it unwittingly ends up reifying cities as abstract economic spaces. Moreover, such discourses are located within specific socio-historical contexts in the North; thus, they are unable to critically address unique geometries of power and inequality in the South and how they shape urbanism in these regions.

The critical question is: Is there is a better way to articulate contemporary realities of cities and globalization that do not perpetuate the developmental and marginalizing discourses? One suggestion is to abandon terms such as “global city” and use terms such as “globalizing cities” to focus on the processual dimension of globalization (Marcuse and van Kempen 2000). Other scholars have suggested using more value-neutral terms such as “ordinary cities” and emphasize the “multiple webs of social relations” that produce them in order to avoid the

⁶ For a recent exposition of the *longue durée* approach to understanding cities in the South see Ghadge (2018).

economic reductionism and hierarchies (Robinson 2002:542). These are positive moves, but there are more fundamental issues at work here. It has to do with nature of urban research and knowledge production in the academia.

In addition to global actors and processes, urban research must take into account the historical, institutional, cultural, and political context within which global forces take root and are produced. Thus, rather than applying ready-made models, empirical research should understand how global and local actors interact with particular histories of cities. Further, there is a need to acknowledge the diverse experience of cities. The economic or accumulative dimension is just one aspect (indeed a significant one) of urbanism. In addition to accumulation, the city is also a locus of popular culture, creativity, innovation, urban movements, other spatial articulations, governance, and identity politics to name a few. We need to understand how various economic processes interact with social, cultural, and political processes in the city. The city by its very nature is a fragmented space, and any attempt of trying to represent the city in the singular is bound to be partial and hegemonic.

Regarding the city and its relationship with the world, a “command and control centric” approach highlights only one aspect of global economic connection based on capitalist accumulation. However, multiple networks connect the city with the larger world (such as media and tourism) that produce distinct socio-cultural forms. Any analysis of cities and globalization must take into account these connections. Rather than focusing on city-as-command-center, we need to use a more fluid framework based on “connectivity” that does not reproduce the dominant categories and hierarchies of cities.

On a fundamental level, our understanding of cities is shaped by the process of knowledge production. Therefore, we need inter-disciplinary perspectives in understanding contemporary urbanism. There is a need to foster a dialogue between researchers in the North and the South to counter the “asymmetric ignorance” in the academia. To correct such asymmetries is not an easy task as they are produced historically within deeply entrenched structures of power. However, acknowledging that “world/global city” are social constructs shaped by particular spatial and historical contexts is a step toward dismantling the power structures.

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