THOUGHT PIECE 1

The city centre: 'Inside the urban'

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Background

In undertaking this AHRC funded project, our 'gaze' has like much of the populous been drawn to the physical and spatial notion of the city centre as being the geographical and economic heart of the city. It has focussed our attention on the ways in which change – either transformational or evolutionary – is occurring in the city centre and how it is being understood and managed. In looking forward, this gaze has been exploring visions for the future of the city centre and considering some of the challenges faced in our four different cities as they respond to internal needs and external pressures.

In this thought piece, the intention is to change the 'gaze', adopting what Deleuze terms 'left' (*), looking for the horizon as a point of reference. Under this perspective, the city centre is part of an interdependent totality. It is not just a distinctive urban space but part of 'planetary urbanisation'. Like Merrifield (2018) we view this perspective as offering the advantage of expressing commonality rather difference, on contributions to urban futures rather than just the competition between cities (and their centres), and crucially for both academic and policy studies, a contribution to addressing global (planetary) issues which are (arguably) not just urban in focus.

In the 21st century the field of critical urban studies has been recalibrated (or reconstructed) largely because of a set of critiques around more established engagement with political economy. Critiques emerging from feminist, post-structuralist and postcolonial perspectives have asked new questions about the urban, and in turn spawned new approaches to exploring the processes of urbanisation. The resulting diversity has pointed positively to the advantages of a variegated set of practices and a rejection of a single, totalising theoretical and practical approach to urban studies. Less positively it has – at least to those who are less engaged with theoretical thinking – suggested a lack of clarity about the 'direction of travel' of the discipline. And for those involved in more pragmatic thinking and decision making difficulties in applying such theoretical musing to help resolve the immediate issues of urban living.

For those reading this piece therefore some navigational advice.

If your interest is more about the conceptualising and theorising about the urban and urbanisation, then I suggest you read **section 1** where I position our discussion of the city centre as 'inside' the urban at a time when the notion of the 'urban as everywhere' has some currency. If you feel such discussions are too esoteric and distant from urban realities, then skip to **section 2**. Here the focus is more on the implications for the city centre and its analysis that arise from considering the city centre as firmly inside the urban.

The hope and intention is however that whatever your starting point, everyone will engage with **Section 3** where we reflect on some of the key questions and issues arising from considering the city centre as 'inside the urban'. This final section is designed to provoke and stimulate reflection and debate … and in turn to invite you the reader of this piece to contribute.

Section 1 - Ontological reorientation

Although there has long been a desire to construct a coherent, stable theory of the city (Scott and Storper, 2015) this has become even more elusive as various critiques of 'established' theories have arisen. In essence, differences emerging in urban studies reflect variations in how to define "the urban" as a subject of study. This is not the place to review all of these – see Merrifield (2013), Brenner & Schmid (2014), Storper & Scott (2016), Brenner (2016) and Roy, (2016) for some reviews – other than to note that the ways in which cities are positioned within urban theory has been subjected to scrutiny. At least three positions are emerging.

First, for some of those involved in critical urban studies, the city is *the* key expression of the urban, able to be treated as a distinct, discrete object subjected to similar processes globally, but whose character is dependent on local spatio-temporal contexts. Understanding these local contexts are thus important in discussing 'actually existing urbanisation'.

Second, for others, also viewing the city as a key, specific expression of the urban, it nevertheless is embedded within a spatial economy that sustains it although without compromising its integrity (Fujita et al, 1999). Advocates here critique pre-existing theoretical standpoints developed in Euro– American urban studies as inappropriate to apply elsewhere in the world, arguing that theories 'indigenous' to the postcolony offer alternative perspectives more appropriate to postcolonial contexts (Roy, 2011; Leitner and Sheppard, 2015).

Third for others still, the expression of urban characteristics is not only found in the city but stretches well beyond that specific form of agglomeration to include the planet, with the city being only one result of the urbanisation processes. Under this perspective, often termed planetary urbanisation (Brenner and Schmid, 2013; 2015), urbanisation as a process of capitalist agglomeration has become the "basic parameter for planetary social and environmental relations" (Brenner, 2014, 18) making a focus on the city as *the* key expression of such relations misplaced.

In grappling with global urbanisation, the vigorous debates over new imaginations of the urban have also sought to dislodge and re-invent concepts and ideas that have permeated urban studies to date. Here too the intentions vary; with some challenging the desire for a new totalising and universal urban theory (see Scott and Storper, 2015; Brenner and Schmid, 2014) – especially where this is based on the experience of cities in the global North (Robinson and Roy, 2016) – creating space for the potential of a multiplicity of theoretical perspectives. For others, their attention has been given to the development of more agile and innovation methodological approaches to examine the city (Robinson, 2016).

As the centre of gravity of urban studies has shifted between these conceptions of the city and urbanisation, by definition these epistemological positions also have differing views of the non-urban – or what has been termed 'outside' of the urban. This had moved from the hinterland beyond the city in the first two notions of the urban, to a position where theoretically at least the non-urban no longer exists under the planetary perspective - or as Amin and Thrift (2002) expressed it the city is everywhere and nowhere.

Positioning the city centre

Within these debates, the constitutive and existentialist position of the city centre as 'inside' the urban remains unchallenged. It part this reflects an acceptance that the city centre has retained an ontologically distinctiveness, because it "*poses uniquely problematical scientific and political questions* deriving from its mode(s) of operation" (Storper & Scott, 2016, 1129; italics in original) as

well as its distinctive empirical character. Set within the wider urban agglomeration, the city centre – or its various other variants such as downtown, central district, or urban core - is epitomised by the specialised land uses, dense networks of interaction, economic and institutional functions, and its impact of social dynamics, cultures and mentalities.

Despite this, theories such as postcolonial urbanism and planetary urbanisation which have challenged past orthodoxy of urban studies remind us that contemporary critical urban analysis needs to revise systematically inherited concepts and representations of the urban. Like the term 'city', analysis of the city centre risks being constrained by definition bounded spatiality, distinct from other parts of the urban agglomeration, and with an empirical focus on stability and equilibrium.

Our argument in this research project is that the seemingly familiar form of the 'city centre' as a distinctive, extensive expression of agglomeration is itself being fundamentally transformed across the planet (Schmid, 2018). Attention needs to switch away from stasis to questions of change over time, as the gravitational pull of the city centre is weakened by externalities resulting from its agglomeration, proximity and density, and further reduced by changing patterns of sharing, matching and learning linked to new technologies and universal online access.

Section 2 – Managing the urban inside

Just as with academic working where a new generation of ideas faces difficulties in getting traction with the previous generation (Leitner et al, 2018) the same can be said of those whose job or role is to engage with the city centre and its future. They too often seek to defend the subject (the city centre) as 'territories' to be fought over and resisted, especially when alternative spatial lenses (eg city regions) gain political and practical resonance. One critical point from section 1 is that what constitutes the 'urban' and the place of the 'city centre' in the urban needs to reviewed critically. It is no longer desirable (and arguably from section 1 theoretically sound) to assume the existence of the city centre as a distinct entity which can (unquestioned) be addressed and in turn defended.

Nevertheless, one feature of contemporary urban planning is the desire to maintain the ontological existence of the city centre as a distinct, identifiable and meaningful spatial entity which can be managed and planned in its (re-)development. Across the research project to date, it is has been evident that retaining the city centre as an 'urban inside' is a shared vision amongst professionals and practitioners.

But challenges to this have also emerged. Three examples – as diverse as retailing, public spaces and private hospitality - underline the complexity of being 'inside the urban' in the contemporary city centre.

First, and perhaps one of the most visible and publicised elements of the repositioning – a form of 'hollowing out' - of the city centre has been **the flight of retail**, first to the edge of cities and more recently challenged by shifts to online retail consumption. Once a mainstay function of the city centre, and a defining characteristic of the city as whole, retailing is being transformed, with new forms of connection being made between the citizen and retailers. The association of the city centre with mainstream retailers and with shopping experiences has largely dissolved.

Against this tide of structural change altering the retail hierarchy (Jones & Livingstone, 2018), city centre management has often sought to revitalise levels of street footfall – including diversification of the high street through more complex alluring propositions, and altering consumer's image of the

city centre (Hart et al, 2013). Strengthening and marketing the connections between retail and the city has been a feature of many downtown renaissances in the USA (Wilson and Hodges, 2018) with locally-owned retailers returning to downtown areas and consumers following to support these efforts. Local patronage has been shown to increase where there is perceived commitment to local communities by businesses (Yildiz et al, 2017), including local sourcing of produce and active involvement in the city centre. This acts as a rebuttal of high street success through what Phil Hubbard (2016) terms retail gentrification.

Second**, public or civic spaces** have increasing significance as part of the place making and identification with the city, and especially the city centre, as crucial locations for the production of a politically and social diverse public sphere. They are an important facet of civic life for urban dwellers, with the idealisation of a good public space (Muminovic, 2016) being one where citizens can socialise and be part of the inside of the city (eg in pedestrian-oriented environments) as they encounter others, whilst also functioning to the benefit of citizens (eg assisting urban sustainability and air quality). They have the ability to support and promote all public and communal life, reinforcing their performative role of representing the urban inside.

But often these are also spaces where the 'outside' can be visible. As sites of protest and demonstration, frequently by those who do not feel they have a right to the city, these public spaces become locations where others can project their desires in urban struggles (Stavrides, 2016). These spaces become central to the voicing of grievances and demand for policy change, and become active parts of the formation of global urbanism (see for example Hou & Kneirbein, 2017).

For those whose role is to manage public spaces, these contrasting performative aspects is a real challenge. The recent 'conversation' about the future of George Square in the heart of the city centre of Glasgow epitomises this (see https://www.glasgow.gov.uk/article/25523/Findings-of-George-Square-Conversation-released for the outcomes of the conversation). In wishing to continue to ensure these spaces are for citizens (of the city) they were involved in the conversation – but others beyond were not as involved.

In considering how to manage these tensions and achieve more just provision and governance of public space, there may be merit in pursuing the provision of socially just public spaces "achieved through processes that seek to *redistribute* resources, *recognize* difference, foster *encounter/interaction*, establish an ethic of *care* and ensure *procedural fairness*" (Low & Iveson, 2016, 12)

As a third example, the rise of the **networked hospitality business** has become a significant challenge to the traditional role of the city centre as the primarily locus for hotel and tourist accommodation, repositioning spatially this function across the city and beyond (see example from Cape Town).

As a result in the most popular urban destinations, tourism is starting to be viewed less positively, mobilising local resistance to different forms of city tourism (Garcia-Heranandez et al, 2017). Associated with the rapid and spectacular growth in visitor numbers and the boom in tourist rental accommodation, favoured by peer-to-peer (P2P) platforms like Airbnb, the 'external' influx is being perceived as a 'threat' to the urban inside (Gurran & Phibbs, 2017).

Although the effects of this expansion require more in-depth analys3s, this new pattern is raising concerns around the disruption to everyday life (Romero et al, 2019) and the extent to which such trends are redefining notions of (external) tourists as 'temporary citizens' inside the city, and local residents are tourists in their own city (Richards, 2017).

Section 3 – Issues and questions

In engaging with this debate, there is general agreement that the understanding of urban problems and questions of the past offer useful insights but fail to address some of the essential components of urbanisation and urban processes in the 21st century evolving nature of the urban question. Whilst they may differ on the solution, there is acceptance that like previous phases of capitalist development, the contemporary period raises new issues around the 'urban'.

One feature of the development of the city centre has been a renewed focus on the forms of institutional architecture required to drive forward renewal in the city centre. Although Scott (2008, 765) refers to the city itself as a whole, the following is just as pertinent for the city centre:

> *"Accordingly, many cities are experiencing major internal transformations in their economic and social character, and are under unprecedented pressures to take the initiative in building local institutions to secure their own future prosperity and social stability."*

And where some there is an absence of coordination and dispersed patterns of land and property ownership it can have a negative impact on transformation of the city centre – see for example Gorzczynska et al (2019)'s analysis of the development of Warsaw city centre.

The Future of the City Centre research highlights the global reach of this trend – with the (re)construction of local institutional coalitions being a feature of all four cities as they seek to reposition their city centres within the context of the 'urban' (see www.futurecitycentre.com symposia papers).

Scott's assumption is that the lead in these coalitions will be local agents, perhaps by the local state or by private sector; what Molotch (1976) famously described as the development 'growth machines'. Barke and Clarke's (2016) analysis of residential development in the city centre of Newcastle upon Tyne has, for example, shown that successfully bringing people back into the area has been a political project where the role of the public sector has been absolutely fundamental. As they note, although the private sector has in the last few decades been a significant contributor to development, it has required a pivotal role by local government to enable, facilitate and at times fund, residential development – ameliorating the risk involved for the private sector. If repopulation of the city centre forms a key part of continuing agglomeration, then support from the public sector remains crucial.

Those involved in the accumulation strategies of urban growth have shifted, now wider than the land owners considered by Molotch (Cox, 2017). *There is a need to explore further the property capitals who are forming the contemporary coalitions shaping the city centre future.*

Second, if the city centre is to act as a liberator of urban agglomeration, then who are the liberators? Increasingly and especially in the context of the city centre, the position of the public local government has been weakened – including in the strategic planning for the future of the city centre. As the territorial 'edges' of the city dissolve – not just theoretically as noted in Section 1 but also politically as city region governance becomes more prevalent – the focus of attention on a single 'heart' is lessened. Whilst agreeing with Allen and Cochrane (2014, 1610) that the permeability of city boundaries "does not diminish their significance as meaningful political entities through which institutional actors – from councils to mayors, chief executives to social workers, town planners to local community associations – define their day-to-day political practice", there has been a growing trend nevertheless to reform such political practices. The formation of cross-

council collaboration (as in Newcastle upon Tyne), the creation of new 'city deal' regional bodies to give more regional strategic planning powers to regional governance (as in Newcastle NSW – see also Sigler et al, 2019), and the extension of the city political boundary (as in Tshwane) each represents ways of hollowing out the role of the individual city government. As too is the formation of new multi-city growth coalitions in the USA (Wachsmuth, 2016) or the development of new 'change agents' that bridge the governance gap in Indian cities (Dhindaw et al, 2017).

A shared feature of these shifts in governance is an emphasis on the expansion and intensification of infrastructure networks, much of which is to reinforce the impact of urban sprawl, raising further pressures on the city centre. *There is a need to explore further how the rise of urban regional governance is impacting on the management of the city centre and how it can continued to be 'inside' multi-centred agglomerations.*

Third, from this wider gaze at the urban horizon, there is arguably a more positive future role for the city centre – one that is focussed on responding to pressures to reduce carbon footprints and respond to climate change. In short, to be more environmental sustainable. There is a growing recognition that urbanisation has often led to a reactive, patchwork-like approach to city design creating inefficient layouts, technologies and infrastructure that consume large amounts of energy and water, and significant amounts of pollution (Shell International, 2014). With pressure to minimise its environmental impact, attention has again been given to the city centre to lead initiatives seeking to reduce car-dependency, to switch to clean energy, and to improve air quality and healthiness. As Mark Gladysz (2018) notes, the drive to address climate change may become a great impetus to make our downtowns even better. With pressure on governments at national and city scales to take the lead, the need to respond to climate change may once again lead to the city centre at the 'inside' heart of the urban.

(*Footnote – we are grateful to Andy Merrifield for his encouragement to consider Deleuze's ideas in his recent paper in Urban Geography – see Merrifield, 2018}

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