

# – ANIMATING THE URBAN VORTEX: New Sociological Urgencies

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## Abstract

*The current era of global urbanization is defined by a convergence of economic and political crises requiring urgent sociological reflection on the meaning of the ‘urban’ today. This article responds to the current rethinking of worldwide processes of urbanization sparked off by Brenner, and Brenner and Schmid, arguing for a renewed sociological approach to urban formations that probes beyond the economic logic of urban ‘de-territorialization’, towards the capricious life-worlds and forms of planetary organization that define the urban. We pursue a theory of the ‘urban vortex’ to capture the maelstrom of disorienting crises since 2008, and explicate the social formations implicated in the construction, materialization and practice of power and transgression in cities today. Our aim is to consider what forms of social change emerge in volatile, intense and centralized dynamics (the urban vortex), and how this might relate to arrangements of interconnectivity, particularity and variegation (the planetary). The article highlights three prominent processes of urban social formation: accumulation, stratification and hyper-diversity—reinstating the need to theorize the centrality of the city within the formations of twenty-first-century capitalism.*

## Introduction: deeply unstable ‘city’

The accelerated expansion of the urban in the landscapes and mindsets of the twenty-first century has been accompanied by a renewed interest in comprehending current processes of worldwide urbanization. Longstanding questions of definition—‘what is the city?’; ‘what is the urban?’—are posed with new urgency as we engage with urban dynamism across the planet. The emerging orders and energies of contemporary cities transform not only urban and rural interdependencies and centre–periphery formations, but also provoke us to rethink our very meanings of cities themselves. Our article engages with the current rethinking of global urbanization, in particular the economic logic of planetary urbanization presented by Brenner and Schmid (2014) and Brenner (2013), by arguing for a renewed sociological approach to the contemporary city. We will argue that this sociological approach permits us to address the social and cultural formations of the urban, and to focus on the animate and capricious life-worlds and forms of organization that are distinctively ‘of’ the urban. In thinking through the worldwide reach of urbanization, we build on the planetary perspective of human connectedness (Gilroy, 2004) and human reconfigurations of the urban (Sheppard *et al.*, 2013). We thus depart from economic causality as the privileged explanatory logic of the complex compositions of global urbanization. Specifically, we champion the concept of the ‘urban vortex’—an idea initially introduced by Freund and Padayachee (2002)—to engage in the current milieu of turbulent urban formations, exacerbated by the maelstrom effects of the 2008 global financial crisis. Finally, we exemplify urban vortex effects through recent reconfigurations of accumulation, stratification and societal diversification in cities.

The impact of two condensed decades of rapid and highly unequal globalization and urbanization has become increasingly palpable, generating a contemporary milieu that evokes deeply unstable conditions and understandings of ‘city’. The city as a

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(de)stabilized unit of analysis has sparked a variety of current theoretical responses, one being the spread of a voracious capitalism leading to the ubiquitous extension of the urban across the planet (Brenner and Schmid, 2014). Conversely, Scott and Storper (2015) have argued that the city is a measurable agglomeration articulated by concentrated sites of production and consumption. While these two logics of urban process may appear as counter-positions, we contend that they both over-emphasize economic causality over social and cultural processes, and thereby restrict explanations of urbanization as variegated and frequently unpredictable processes of human organization. Further, the specificities of spatial and temporal forms of urban habituation and reconfiguration are omitted from these accounts. Immersed within a turbulent urban century (Roy and Ong, 2011), during an epoch of brutal capitalism (Sassen, 2014) in which a new age of resistance is emerging (Douzinas, 2013), we think it is necessary to pursue a renewed sociological engagement with the city as a constructed habitat that people make and remake. Animating the urban vortex, in theoretical terms, requires us to pay attention to the specificity of planetary urban formations in destabilizing conditions, and to explore the processes of societal transformation that explicitly emerge within the life-worlds of the city.

The recognition of differentiated urbanisms across the planet does not imply analytic dissonance. Rather, our aim is to consider what forms of social change emerge through a volatile, intense and centralized flux (the urban vortex), and how this might relate to global arrangements of interconnectivity, particularity and variegation (the planetary). We have no doubt that the 'city' should be placed within the context of complex global assemblages of economies, politics and cultures that reveal the immense churn of twenty-first-century urbanizations. In this respect, we build on recent transnational and translocal perspectives that show how we are increasingly of multiple scapes, and that urban institutions, organizations and citizenships are increasingly composed across a plethora of virtual, physical and multiscale borders (Brickell and Datta, 2011; Smith and McQuarrie, 2012). Similarly, we acknowledge that there are multi-centred compositions that form within cities, suburbs and villages, just as there are co-constitutions of authorized centres and marginalized locations in urban societies (Merrifield, 2014: 27–34). However, we still think that the significance of urban centralities needs to be emphasized, and it is in this context that we elaborate our concept of the urban vortex.

Scott and Storper (2015: 6) identify the significance of centrality by identifying 'agglomeration, density and proximity' as 'fundamental and defining features of cities everywhere', emerging from the concentration of economic production and a centralized connection with wider systems of exchange. However, although they recognize the significance of urban centrality, they tend towards an economic view. It is in this context that we propose the idea of the urban vortex within a planetary perspective to differentiate (but not to separate) the analysis of highly centralized forms of urbanism; to connect how these urban centralities relate to worldwide processes of transformation; and to contextualize the current era of crisis and its impact on urban formations.

We position our argument in response to the important recent theorization of worldwide processes of urbanization heralded by Brenner and Schmid's (2014) and Brenner's (2013) notion of 'planetary urbanization'. Drawing on a wide range of urban theory (with its roots in Lefebvre), the bedrock of the planetary premise is fundamentally economic: while the organization of capital might concentrate production and consumption within what we may recognize as an efficient delimited 'city', this apparently concentrated mode of economic organization has a subjugated hinterland, not simply from which to extract resources, but also to extend urban consciousness. The tentacles of planetary urbanization are understood to penetrate and fundamentally define suburban, rural and 'virgin' landscapes, extending far beyond Patrick Geddes'

early-twentieth-century transect of regional interdependency depicted in his urban-rural Valley Section (1909). By comparison, the scales of the planetary transect are indeed stratospheric—see for example, visualizations of ‘a thickening web of orbiting satellites and space junk’ (Brenner, 2013: 107). The theorization of planetary urbanization is more inclined in its nascent articulations to attend to the systemic organizations of capital and infrastructure across vast distances than to the empirical emergence of new and differentiated forms of authority, division and allegiance within city spaces.

Following the planetary urbanization thesis, Brenner and Schmid (2014) have recently tackled the question of how to measure world-spanning processes of urbanization. Their focus is on the limited historic constructions of urbanization as defined by density, linked to urban boosterist projects on the part of both institutional and corporate interests. We would argue that the article too readily conflates an urban-age idiom (Burdett and Sudjic, 2008; 2011) with traditional definitions of urbanization based on demographic articulations of the Kingsley Davis trajectory. Paramount in Brenner and Schmid’s article, however, are three underlying questions. What analytic frames do we require to articulate new dimensions of accelerated and extended urbanization? What methodological complex is required to engage with both the systemic and particular dimensions of these processes? How does the theorist/researcher mobilize scales of data necessary to comprehend and communicate (the) planetary system(s) of urbanization? We are given only an outline of their own project, with neither theoretical nor epistemological specificity. While the authors state that ‘it is not possible here to elaborate our alternative approach’ (Brenner and Schmid, 2014: 749), their hypothesis is that we need to analytically and physically de-border to pursue a new lexicon for profoundly extended urbanization processes. It is this broad spatial argument that we contest here, since we feel it fails to address the sociological urgency of the urban today.

At the core of their exploratory journey are seven broad ‘precepts’ (*ibid.*: 749–52) reflecting an overarching theoretical interpretation of urbanization dynamics, over and above the study of urban forms (conceived in the singular terms of ‘isolated “points” or “zones”’). The study of morphologies and ‘settlement-based’ insights are regarded as obsolete, rather than one of many aspects through which to comprehend complex urban assemblages. While we are made aware of the limits to any one demarcation of the urban, there is no reference as to how we might progress our theorizations of place and practice within this expanded frame. Further, urbanization is explored through dense interrelations within and across places, but it is the (Western) urban that is understood as the dominant generator, implicit in their reference to a more pejorative ‘non-urban’ as the places and practices enveloped or indeed ‘obliterated’ and ‘swallowed up’ (Merrifield, 2011a: 469) by the urban world. There is no accommodation as yet as to how rural adjacencies might also reconfigure the urban (Krause, 2013) rather than the unilateral assumption of the reverse under a voracious global capitalism. For more entangled ontologies of centre–periphery formations, or what Parnell and Robinson (2012) articulate as ‘post-neoliberal insights’, we are indebted to writings largely outside of the Western canon (e.g. De Boeck and Plissart, 2004; Simone, 2004). It would be a repeated omission of Western-oriented urban theory if accounts of planetary urbanization disengaged from the significance of these differentiated accounts.

In our view, however, the established heuristic of the ‘urbanization of the world’ and the end of the urban–rural divide—on which see Castells (1977), Saunders (1981), Lefebvre (1991 [1974]) and the more recent reflections of Harding and Blokland (2014)—fails to recognize the significance of increasingly focused forms of urban organization. Recent research amply demonstrates this, yet this sensitivity fails to adequately inform urban analysis. Consider, for instance, Thomas Piketty’s (2014) monumental *Capital in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* that emphatically demonstrates how, over the past 200 years, there

has been a striking shift from capital being fixed in agricultural land to urban property. The implication, therefore, is that there is an increasingly close connection between capital and the city, which we need to recognize in developing a distinctive sociological approach to urbanism today.

This is not to suggest that the urban is a singular entity, but rather points to the interconnected yet distinctive forms of organization and modes of social life that emerge in intense and dynamic urban intersections. By probing at the hierarchies, inequalities and modes of resistance that form and are formed through the convergence of people, ideas and infrastructures, we offer an analysis of how cities reconfigure in contemporary, crisis-ridden, capitalism. Recent decades have seen dramatic shifts of resources and power to urban locations, and we need to find the appropriate analytical tools to understand these new social formations. This article lays out our concept of the urban vortex, outlining three particular social dimensions linked to its volatility, intensity and centrality, which we then illustrate by drawing on our recent research. This allows us to champion a sociological recognition of the ever-changing life-worlds of cities. Taking the specific example of London as emblematic of urban dynamics, as well as site for the concentration of global forces, rather than a singular exemplar of a 'global' metropolis of the 'North', we call for a recognition of urban social reconfiguration that intersect with economic accumulation, producing new and varied urban centralities.

### **The urban vortex in a planetary complex**

A starting point for us is Paul Gilroy's (2004) evocation of the planetary, which allows us to switch to the human register of worldwide interdependencies that 'suggests both contingency and movement. It specifies a smaller scale than the global, which transmits all the triumphalism and complacency of ever-expanding imperial universals' (*ibid.*: xii). While Gilroy's definition of the planetary may be productively contrasted with that of Brenner and Schmid (in that both seek to expose what is made through, and disruptive of, hegemony), the politics of Gilroy's planetary position diverges theoretically to explicitly engage with plurality. Gilroy's *a priori* orientation is the significance of human presence in the active making of planetary life-worlds, emphasizing the capacity of individuals and groups to adapt to and reconfigure the conditions of circumstance, and to combine both particular and connected repertoires in constituting a place in the world. The focus is on the generative possibilities of difference and commonality, and the significance of variation across space despite prevailing global hegemonies and their antecedents of empire and colony—see also Madden's (2012) account of Jean-Luc Nancy's 'mondialization' or 'world-forming' in opposition to globalization. Gilroy's theorization orientates towards the formation of citizens and denizens rather than the formation of cities *per se*. But his cue points to the animate and varied forms of being global, or rather of being connected, within historic and contemporary structures that assert expansive hierarchies of domination and prejudice. Gilroy's planetary position therefore encourages a subversion of globalization as a hegemonic project, highlighting instead the significance of worldwide interconnectedness, contextual particularity and empirical variegation.

In overlaying the current impact of crises in cities with the planetary perspective that encourages a view of transformation outside of a Western-centric explanatory system, we explore the city as an unstable assemblage, one that is neither intrinsically dystopic nor utopic. Urban (trans)formations are analysed by focusing on how accumulation, power and transgression are practised in different urban contexts, and we employ the analytic components of mobilizations of urban infrastructures, the spatialization of networks and the emergence of urban repertoires to highlight distinctive and common aspects of urbanization. Here, we think about the city as the convergence of a multitude of urban practices, connected to many scales of organization from bodies to states, and to varied influences across the planet (Sheppard *et al.*, 2013). We focus on the life-worlds

articulated by Amin and Thrift (2002: 4) as ‘the phenomenality of practices, without relapsing into the romanticism of the everyday’.

Let us turn to our organizing concept of the urban vortex. On the face of it, this may seem to be the latest in a long line of ecological metaphors that have been used to understand the urban. However, as earlier ecological metaphors—such as those of the Chicago School—tended towards definitions of ecological balance oriented towards an evolutionary model, we suggest the metaphor of the vortex might be useful for exploring crisis or instability in two main respects. Firstly, the classic scientific concept of vortex shows how flux and mobility becomes specified around an axis. The important feature for our purposes is the recognition that, while premised on the kinds of intense dynamism and instability which are widely recognized in contemporary urban theory, this also points us to the way these flows become distinctively concentrated and directional. Secondly, the vortex combines and reassembles elements and processes—such as cultural and economic forces—with the result that they become conjoined, producing emergent forms and unpredictable outcomes. Pursuing the approach, vortex flows come to push in one direction, classically upwards (in the tornado) or downwards (as with water escaping down plugholes). This metaphor of dynamism and disruption captures a process that generates turbulence, as those ‘rising’ in the city—benefitting from distortions to the effects of increasing economic disparity—also produce spill-over and stress for those being thrown around in the urban maelstrom.

Metaphorically, we might therefore use the urban vortex concept to explore how cities are sites where distinctive social and cultural formations of wealth and privilege are generated out of a maelstrom. It therefore recognizes the kind of flux which urban theory has long embraced, but is distinctive in also noting that clear direction and current, or spatial and social relationships, can also be generated from this. The urban vortex takes place in environments with high levels of prior investment—in the physical urban infrastructure, as well as in the embodied infrastructures of large numbers of residents. An urban vortex cannot but be highly turbulent, therefore, in drawing these forms into its flow, and in the process its reconfigures what lies around it. Thus the vortex of heightened urban capital accumulation leaves a residue of ‘detritus’ around it, so that it cannot but be highly contradictory in its effects: in being a condition that intensely drives towards accumulation it also disrupts the urban itself. Unlike renderings of urban ‘de-territorialization’ it insists on the specificity of the sites of the vortex and thus on differentiating the particular forms of destabilization in cities. This approach therefore allows us to resist sociological arguments about the shift to a ubiquitous ‘liquid modernity’ and urbanization by insisting on the spatial and temporal specificities of urban reconfigurations in an asymmetrical and interconnected world. We stress the inherent contingency of the vortex and the explanatory inadequacy of any urban essentialism as either a dominant process of urbanization or a delineated condition of the city. We thus aim to more subtly recognize how people and places are affected by powerful urban vortices, and furthermore that the specific effects need to be understood in their particularity.

We argue that the metaphor of the urban vortex allows us a means of reinstating urban centrality without relying on hierarchical, demographic or linear approaches, in Wirth’s (1938) tradition of size, density and diversity. This is therefore an urban sociology that is neither presupposed on the global centrings of London, New York and Tokyo, nor on the global imageries of infrastructures depicted by the spectacular proliferation of illuminated night skies, undersea cables and transportation routes across the planet. This is a sociology recognizing the urban hub of societal dynamics, explored through radical transformations of and within cities, focusing on the recoding of allegiance and resistance, and the reconstitution of urban hierarchy and disparity. It is an urban sociology in which the divergent and urgent vocabularies of Cairo’s Tahir Square (2011 and 2013), Istanbul’s Taksim Gezi Park (2013–14), the Confederations Cup



riots across Brazilian cities (2013) and Athens' *sans-papier* hunger strikes (2011) are not merely diverse empirical highlights of a prevailing neoliberal political economy, but are understood as generative of new conditions of urban (dis)order, possibility and oppression (see e.g. Agathangelou and Soguk, 2013; Kuymulu, 2013; Wallace, 2014). These examples—all explosive registers of resistance emerging in specific locales—form part of our grammar of contemporary urban political formations. Simultaneously, a 'quiet encroachment of the ordinary' (Bayat, 2013: 33) emerges within and across cities as an effective process of claiming rights in urban space. The wider theoretical project of engaging in new 'crowd politics' (Merrifield, 2011b) allows us to explore emerging forms of political subjectivity in the contexts of national and global oppressions, while analysing how the social and material dimensions of the urban are integral to these transformations (Hall, 2015b).

Rather than pursuing a singular systemic theory of global urbanization in an era of crisis or a disconnected analysis of diverse urbanisms, we highlight processes of urban (trans)formation within and across cities to explore commonalities and particularities in the practices of societal reconfiguration. We now turn to engage with three processes of recomposition that provoke epistemological reorientations of the deeply unstable city. These processes present a reinstatement of the need to theorize the centrality of the city through the dynamic forces that both unsettle urban processes and constantly challenge separations between the economic, social, cultural and political. Thus, let us highlight three processes of urban reconfiguration, reflecting on how the urban vortex exaggerates ongoing urban transformation. By focusing on urban formations of hyper-diversity, amplified urban disparity, and urban dynamics of accumulation and stratification, we focus on pervasive dynamisms or contemporary societal practices that are of the urban milieu, as opposed to the 'systemic regularities in urban life' (Scott and Storper, 2015: 12). These brief notes will lead onto more sustained exemplification drawn from our research on London.

– The urban formations of hyper-diversity

Cities are sites of intensive diversification in significantly new ways. Emerging practices of diversity are sustained through accelerated and increased intersections and exchanges between bodies, technologies, localities and materialities; the life-worlds of an animate-and-inanimate synthesis (Amin, 2013). Additional practices of reconfiguration of self, home, heritage and prospect are advanced across mental, physical and virtual spaces—a 'trans-ing' or connecting and combining—including transnational, translocal and transgender recompositions which are core to new sociological imaginations of the 'cosmopolis' (see e.g. Smith, 2005; Appiah, 2006). In contrast to the lived, negotiated and contested experiences of recomposing difference, the cosmopolitan analytic has tended to focus on the relationships of encounter between human subjects as a 'moral' cosmopolitanism broadly infuses with the ideology of a (Western and democratic) tolerance of 'other' within a presumed universal order (Hall, 2013). This recognition of difference arguably establishes a disjuncture between 'cosmopolitanism from above' versus 'cosmopolitanism from below' (Appadurai, 2013: 138) with an impetus to qualify the coherence of tolerance in governed dimensions. By focusing on the cosmopolis as a concentrated space in which far more complex and varied practices of living with difference converge (some of which are convivial and others fraught), we are compelled to theoretically recognize how society is diversifying and (dis)connecting. Familiar analytics of urban public space as 'the place where strangers meet' ought to expand to more complex social transects that include spaces of encounter, familiarity, retreat and exclusion. The complex social transect potentially incorporates a compendium of spatial resources in the city utilized by diverse individuals and groups to be together and apart.

While the city is therefore a key social realm in which to understand more plural forms of (dis)association, the urban vortex exerts new pressures for living with difference, one dimension of which is the intersection of inequality and diversity. Since the 2008 crisis, for example, increasing flows of immigrants into cities have occurred alongside substantial job losses and state cutbacks in both sending and receiving locales. Further, austerity governance in cities has ushered in significant reductions in crucial public resources (such as social housing) in contexts where urban inequality is increasingly pronounced. New processes of social, spatial and political relegation are now integral modes of urban governance, where those with limited financial resources or conditional national status—both the urban poor and the urban immigrant—occupy increasingly precarious and residual territories of the city. While the possibilities and challenges of living with difference in the city continue to emerge (Hall, 2012), so too does a plethora of mechanisms to govern the lived and aesthetic practices of urban multiculturalism through state-prescribed assimilation (see e.g. Jones, 2013; Uitermark *et al.*, 2014). The increasing mutations of difference within cities and the accelerated global processes of migration through cities occur alongside the urban vortex effects of inequality and social sorting. While the diverse human composition of the city will increasingly pose challenges to the idealized composition of the nation state, the violent impact of inequality serves to selectively exacerbate precarity and undermine diverse forms of belonging.

– Amplified urban disparity

At the heart of our understanding of the effects of the urban vortex on distinctive forms of urban disparity today is a period of exacerbated financialization, highlighting the troubling increase in new forms of urban precarity (Tyler, 2013; McKenzie, 2015), the bio-political nature of dispossession and austerity governance, and the elaboration of ‘leading’ cities as centres of contemporary elite formations. Rather than a contrast between ‘global elites’ and ‘local masses’ (Bauman, 2007), contemporary cities are devices for organizing relationships between highly unequal groups who are nonetheless spatially highly proximate, and strongly vested in specific locations. The emergence of these pronounced yet proximate urban disparities produces complex infrastructures of differentiated transportation and communication networks, segregated housing and office types, and the amplification of extensive ‘doorkeeping’ devices in both private and public space (Caldeira, 2011).

Fundamental to these increases in social and spatial ranking, Butler and Robson (2005) and Andreotti *et al.* (2014) have argued that specific place identifiers are central and enduring markers of privileged as well as relegated social identities. Despite communication made possible by global cultural networks associated with digital communication, what still matters is the ability to claim affiliation to a specific urban location and to perform place. Kirsteen Paton (2013) has argued that processes of elective belonging evoked through place extends to working-class urban residents, while Andreotti *et al.* (2014) have focused on the way that the French, Italian and Spanish upper-middle classes continue to affiliate to their ‘home cities’ which they tend to return to. The social processes of place attachment are not merely soft affinities of locality, but are integral to forming dense networks of familiarity and support that are also crucial bolsters to both privilege and precarity. But for whom is place attachment a durable affinity and what impact does the vortex have on established ties to place? Desmond’s (2012) crucial analysis of the under-regulated low-income housing rental market and its gendered and racialized impacts points to the deeply disruptive processes of dispossession and displacement. In parallel, Harvey’s (2004) ‘accumulation by dispossession’ has emerged as a virulent process of displacement through urban redevelopment. In short, contemporary cities need to be seen as marked

by the management of pervasive and accentuating urban disparities. This requires recognition of the complex infrastructural devices and localities which procure hierarchies and differences that co-exist in a spatially proximate environment.

- Urban dynamics of accumulation and stratification  
Scott and Storper (2015: 6) have emphasized the need to recognize cities as concentrated arenas of production, accumulation and specialization:

‘agglomeration, density, and proximity’ ... are fundamental and defining features of cities everywhere, even in a world where cities are increasingly interconnected. But, in addition, agglomeration as process and outcome goes far beyond the narrow question of the technical foundations of economic geography, for it is a quasi-universal feature of human existence. Agglomeration touches many social, cultural and political/administrative, dimensions of human life.

This re-emphasis on urban centrality can be further conceptualized through how cities are distinctive cultural arenas of accumulation and stratification. As cities become the key points of condensation for a variety of global networks, so they have become ‘capitals of capital’, to borrow Bourdieu’s phrase. Bourdieu (1985) emphasizes the significance of transfers of advantage from one realm (‘field’) to another. Within neoliberal capitalism, there is increasing porousness between these different fields, as those with money seek to ‘buy’ educational, cultural or political advantage, those with cultural capital seek to find the most lucrative occupations. Within the maelstrom of the urban vortex, where exchanges between fields accentuate, the city becomes an ever-more important site to procure status. We can therefore understand centralized urban dynamics as a multifaceted arena involving the interplay between different kinds of accumulation, whereby its urban locations allow (for some) the conversion and mobility between capitals. Within this way of thinking, cities are crystallizations of varied forms of status, accumulation and stratification which have economic, social and cultural dimensions.

### **Exploring the vortex, de-categorizing London**

In the remainder of this article we flesh out our exploration of the urban vortex as a condition of the current milieu of crisis, in which the city is destabilized and reconfigured. We refer to two specific exemplifications drawn from our current research, and while these both focus on London, we engage a planetary perspective to contest the mainstream definition of London as a ‘global city’ of the North. We aim to reveal a different imaginary of London, disrupting its conventional urban status and focusing on how the city is constituted through a variety of worldwide influences, which converge in turbulent vortex fashion within the city itself. Here, we briefly draw on the makings of both the ‘elite’ and the ‘street’, reflecting on strategies and tactics to reconfigure urban space within global–urban networks. In challenging the Western analytic of ‘mainstream global urbanism’, Sheppard *et al.* (2013: 896) provide an important steer: ‘Rather than imagining well-defined territories such as global regions of North and South, differentiation emerges at every scale, shaped by how residents of any place, living prosperously or precariously, are differently positioned within and through trans-local processes’.

- The urban axes of elites: the Great British Class Survey  
We can see the power of urban disparity and accumulation marked in the largest survey of the economic, cultural and social dimensions of inequality ever conducted in Britain, the BBC’s Great British Class Survey (Savage *et al.*, 2013; 2015), henceforth



GBCS. The survey reveals the distinctly urban vortex of inequality in stark ways and also shows the interplay between different dimensions of disparity, so emphasizing how we need to broaden our focus away from purely economic processes. The GBCS's unusually large sample size (325,000 respondents in all) makes it possible to map socio-spatial patterns at a fine-grained level, where cities emerge as the sites of concentration of a range of practices of accumulation. We do not have scope here to fully delineate the findings, and the underlying arguments are made elsewhere (Hanquinet and Savage, 2014; Cunningham and Savage, 2015; Savage *et al.*, 2015). For our purposes here, we can extract four key findings which highlight the significance of urban vortex.

Firstly, in mapping the residential localities of elites in the GBCS (a group which forms about 6% of the population and is defined by very high stocks of economic capital alongside substantial social and cultural capital), it appears that London has become the prime location for an 'elite constellation' or 'elite vortex' which cannot be found in other parts of the UK. London is a site that allows different elites to locate into their own distinctive micro-geographies. The business elite command the central quarters of the West End, where property prices reach their apex. It is the most central site—geographically as well as socially—of the elite itself. Different parts of the cultural elite are located in separate quarters of north and south London, as well as around prominent cultural institutions (such as the BBC studios in White City). The legal elite is located further east, towards the City of London, closer to the law courts. Yet, whilst it is possible for different zones of London to be the residential hubs for these different elites, we also need to see the city as an arena in which these groups interact: in this case an urban assemblage of financial, legal and cultural elites which crucially have the scope to interact within the array of these concentrated London venues. In this amplified elite geography it becomes possible for a multitude of exchanges to take place between different fields of activity, within a network of highly specific urban locations. While London is a special case with an unusual pre-eminence within the UK, the general point stands that urban centres are increasingly the key venues where the interplay between elites is maintained. The impact of an 'elite vortex' remains to be understood, in terms of economic and cultural investments, distortions in the urban land markets and in the bordering devices of urban space.

Secondly, we can trace elite formations at work in the deployment of distinctive modes of urban social networking and cultural participation. The GBCS asked whether respondents 'socially knew' people from 37 different occupations and, by assessing the status scores of the occupations which respondents identified, we can tell how exclusive their networks are. Here the spatial patterns are striking. In the urban centres, including London (but also to a lesser degree Edinburgh and Glasgow), people tend to know fewer of the 37 occupations, but those whom they know tend to be of higher status. Respondents in these urban areas have more exclusive social networks of shorter range, which is entirely consistent with identifying cities as 'capitals of capital'. The GBCS suggests that the countryside is more socially open, in that one is likelier to know more people from different walks of life. In cities, the range of one's social contacts is smaller and one is more likely to know people of equivalent status to oneself.

Thirdly, the findings for cultural participation also indicate clear and manifest patterns in seeing the development of 'emerging cultural capital'. In contrast to 'high-brow' engagement (such as visits to the opera and classical music venues, stately homes and museums), famously dissected by Bourdieu (1985) and which is spatially dispersed (the educated, older, white middle class do this throughout the UK), 'emerging cultural capital' appears to have a much more distinctive urban presence. Well-educated younger respondents, often professionals or managers (and often international migrants), are more drawn to 'emerging cultural capital'. They did not endorse what they saw as the closed world of highbrow culture but were more attracted to the 'openness', 'vitality' and even 'turbulence' of music, playing sport and keeping fit, as well as avid computer

gaming, surfing the net and using social media. What matters for our argument here is that this kind of emerging cultural capital and forms of cultural participation are consistent with those engaged in the kind of ‘network sociability’ (Wittel, 2001) which is now central to professional employment and which is often also located in urban areas. This included not only many areas of London, but also Glasgow, Edinburgh, Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, Bristol and Newcastle. Insofar as virtual communication is a key aspect of this emerging cultural capital, it is worthy of note that those predisposed towards it are located in urban, rather than suburban or rural, settings.

Fourthly, the procurement of cultural capital is implicated in the mobilization of a distinctive urban infrastructure. This can be traced with respect to access to transportation, housing and the construction of cultural institutions which act as a funnel for updraft. The example of urban universities is a case in point. In Britain, the dominant university model until the 1980s was based on the monastic and ascetic model of placing ‘seats of learning’ away from urban centres. This practice was marked not only in the enduring power of Oxbridge, but also the location of the ‘plateglass’ universities of the 1960s, which tended to be placed in the cathedral towns (such as Canterbury, Norwich and York). Evidence from the GBCS indicates that it is now the larger urban universities—along with Oxbridge, which can now be seen as part of the southeast metropolitan system—which have become those most affiliated with elite positions. Graduates from Oxbridge and the elite London colleges have marked advantages over those from prestigious universities outside the southeast of England (Wakeling and Savage, 2014) and stratification between universities is increasing, with the ‘urban elite’ universities becoming increasingly distinctive. This urban infrastructure serves as a vehicle for the axes of the urban vortex to operate, creating highly unequal outcomes for those placed in the heart of the ‘updraft’.

These findings from the GBCS point to the power of the urban location, specifically (though not only) London, and the way that the city is defined in vortex fashion, where directed flows of advantaged individuals within the city establish the formation of distinctive elite blocs. There are undoubted specificities about the British case, but if we are more broadly interested in understanding the accumulation and exchange of advantages across the planet and the way that contemporary social divisions are organized, then we need to place cities at the heart of our analysis. In doing this, we also need to recognize how disparities are multifaceted and that the urban vortex is a dynamic site in which interplay between the economic and the social is inculcated and materialized. We emphasize that in making this analysis we are not claiming that cities are in general terms wealthier or more advantaged than other locations (although they often are). Central to our argument is that, in becoming centres of accumulation and exchange, cities also engage very large numbers of the poor and disadvantaged. For this reason we evoke the analytic of the ‘urban vortex’, a site of unstable mobility, emplacement and displacement, which are produced through the dynamics of voracious accumulation and dispossession.

– Urban micro-economies: the worldwide street

Global urban centrality is typically understood as an economic convergence of large corporate capital, which funnels and amplifies accumulation and power. This is one aspect of the vortex. However, we also need to recognize that the urban vortex is not driven simply by large corporate or financial ‘players’, but is assembled in the particles associated with myriad intense activities including much smaller-scale urban agents. We ask how cities attract and channel micro-economies, and what urban infrastructures are required for more eclectic small-scale productivity. These urban micro-economies are increasingly variegated, their specializations emerging not only from particular products or services, but also from particular bodies and their cross-cultural

assemblages. Here, we focus on migrant urban economies and explore the urban vortex effects as a dynamic mixing together of urban localities and migrant repertoires, producing new economic practices and urban spaces. Like Wilson and Keil (2008), we expand the exclusive interpretation of ‘creative economies’ beyond the confines of the professional classes and legitimized creative subjects to incorporate experimentation that emerges in less affluent as well as more ethnically diverse parts of the city. As with the preceding section drawing on the Great British Class Survey, we explore dimensions of urbanization that are not simply explicable as distinctly economic processes, namely: the development of highly ‘spatialized global–urban networks’; the emergence of ‘adaptive repertoires’; and the ‘mobilizations of distinctive urban infrastructures’—in this case broadly conceived of as the street. We draw empirically on the research of multi-ethnic streets in London (Hall, 2012; 2015a), but aim to contribute to the understanding of wider urban combinations of emerging micro-economies outside of corporate structures.

Firstly, the pronounced increase in global migration corresponds with contemporary processes of urbanization. Migration into the UK over the past two decades can be viewed as a largely urban phenomenon, with Greater London accommodating 41.6% of the UK’s migrant population. The figure is distinctive not only for its quantum but its variety of composition, with ten migrant groups featuring prominently—Indians, Poles, Irish, Nigerians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Jamaicans, Sri Lankans, French and Somalis—and with 113 of the world’s nations having at least 1,000 representatives in the metropolitan area (Paccoud, 2013). In this sense it is inaccurate to define London in the singular terms of a global city of the North, when so many of its spaces are significantly shaped by inhabitants from across the planet. At the same time, the vortex metaphor allows us to see how London acts as a distinctive ‘attractor’ and ‘sorter’ of human expertise, skill and agency. While the strong presence of certain migrant groups reflects the UK’s colonial history, increases in migration since 2012 show a sharp increase from EU15 countries with the global economic crisis pushing migrants from Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain into UK cities. We can conceive of ‘urban vortex’ effects compounding historic political economies of expansion and domination, as well as exacerbating the precarity of racialized and ethnicized individuals and groups.

Secondly, we ask to what extent contemporary migration processes are also city-making processes. We elaborate on the global exchange of diverse human capital through cities, exploring how these migratory circuits become spatialized. Crucial to the networks of urban micro-economies are the spaces in which small-scale endeavours are incubated, and the fragile and flexible networks of supply and exchange. Our research on Rye Lane in Peckham, south London revealed an increasing demand for micro-retail spaces with flexible rental terms. Micro-economies on the street are sustained by small increments: access to space the size of a table or premises rental by the hour. One in four shops out of a total of 199 retail units had been extensively subdivided into ever-smaller spaces. This reconfiguration of street infrastructure reflects the necessity to reduce overheads in a retail environment damaged by the 2008 crisis, the needs of less affluent newcomers to access affordable space and the benefits of cross-cultural retail practices (Hall, 2015a). The complexity of ethnically diverse and fine-grained urban micro-economies therefore engages with the dynamics of precarity and ingenuity, and the finely composed global networks that are both intra- and inter-cultural.

Thirdly, we focus on adaptive repertoires endemic to turbulent environments and how they shape the material and cultural life of economic space. The multilingual practices of the independent proprietors on Rye Lane are in part suggested by language proficiency: 61% spoke two to three languages and 28% spoke four languages or more (*ibid.*). Languages do not simply denote regional dialects, but a twenty-first-century citizenship capacity to transact in a mobile world. This fluency further permeates how

shop signs and spaces are configured, creating hybrid urban streetscapes. Michael Ondaatje (2013: 62) evokes the hybrid cultures of high-intensity economic exchange through ‘port accents’:

the talk in those ports would be not so much the language of a country but a language based on commerce and transport. It would be speedy and efficient, a casually invented Esperanto, a lingo that did not involve translation so much as a crashing together of nouns and phrases ... a useful but non-existent language, a ‘connecting’ language, the word ‘pidgin’ deriving from the old Chinese pronunciation of the English word for ‘business’.

Finally, the anthropology of ports, market places and streets (see e.g. Tranberg Hansen *et al.*, 2013) indicates the mobilization of particular urban infrastructures as channels for micro-economic and translocal activity. A plethora of new globally connected economies emerge in the backrooms, basements, attics and street interiors of the city; an active if unrecognized hinterland to its financial centres and IT hubs. In the context of diverse but unequal cities, it is useful to broadly extend the conceptualization of the ‘street’ as the urban infrastructure mobilized by the marginalized in central and peripheral urban locations: it makes visible everyday rituals of economic and cultural exchange; it remains an urban public space available to those increasingly excluded from the public realm; and it is a space as much for prospect as it is for protest—what Sassen (2011) refers to as the ‘global street’.

### **Conclusions: coming to terms with the deeply unstable city**

The primary focus of our article is to move away from an over-generic argument that the world itself is urbanized and towards an insistence on the need to recognize specific stakes associated with the urban vortex. This allows us to acknowledge urban centrality as an increasingly significant aspect of worldwide processes of urbanization and societal reconfiguration in ways that are not configured in linear or economic terms. Although rooted in a wider political economy, placing urbanization in a planetary perspective requires a wide-ranging awareness of the social formations of cultural, political and economic processes that are now rendering the contemporary urban as more urgent, more extreme. We need to foreground the specific ways that cities are significant sites for practices of societal transformation and in this article we have addressed emergent modes and forms of accumulation, stratification and hyper-diversity.

We have emphasized a sociological approach that focuses on complex processes of urban reconfiguration rather than a delimited analysis of systemic trends, and have explicitly drawn on the turbulent vitality of our time and place by reflecting on the profound intersection of economic and political crises constituting the deeply unstable condition of the twenty-first-century ‘city’. We are compelled by Brenner and Schmid’s (2014) recent theorization of an extended process of urbanization in a planetary system, but remain unsatisfied by the lack of particularity in their systemic exploration, as well as the singular fixity in the theorization of the city offered as a counter-position by Scott and Storper (2015). As a point of departure, we suggest that a contemporary planetary perspective of urbanization and the transformation of cities needs to address:

- 1 Systemic variation, acknowledging the urban as an ongoing volatile process of directed emergence organized on powerful axes which produce unpredictable forms of inequality, rendered more extreme in a global milieu of pronounced economic and political crisis.
- 2 Planetary differentiation, demanding an analysis of the capricious life-worlds of cities in their specific and interconnected dimensions, where a focus on practice

as emergent modes and forms of urban organization allows for a theorization of practice and plurality that does not imply analytic erraticism.

- 3 The specificity of urban transformations, through comprehending the recomposition of societal dynamics that are ‘of’ the urban; that are distinct in that they are formed by and form the urban.

It is in developing this planetary perspective that we find the metaphor of the ‘urban vortex’ useful. It directs attention to the urban as a turbulent, frictional and dynamic condition which manifests powerful drives, sucking in surrounding elements and simultaneously creating residual detritus. While its organizing axis is dependent on the changing forces of the global economy, the vortex can only be understood as a much more complex and multifaceted intersection of social processes of reconfiguration, which demands sociological attention. We therefore view the urgent vocabularies of new conditions of urban (dis)order, providing a contemporary urban lexicon not only of particular practices and places, but of wider processes of planetary transformations that are connected.

In our article, we have sought to de-categorize London, removing the overt labels of ‘global’ and ‘North’ in order to analyse the social formations of ‘elite’ and ‘street’ that connect the city to a multitude of planetary influences, comprehend the place-specificities of London, and indicate the varied forms and practices of centrality that shape the city. Finally, we have identified the analytic components of the mobilization of urban infrastructures, spatialization of networks and development of complex urban repertoires through which distinctions of class and diversifications of society emerge. Here, we aim to show that the city destabilized by the urban vortex reshapes conditions of power and inequality in an era of crisis, entailing the exacerbation of hierarchy and disparity. However, within the energy of the vortex, new frictions are formed, and with it ordinary and extraordinary forms of resistance provide new urban elaborations of our time and place.

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