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Can the straw man speak? An engagement with postcolonial critiques of 'global cities research'

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Abstract

This paper engages with postcolonial critiques of global cities research. We argue that such criticisms are generally hampered by their tendency to be polemical rather than engaging, as evidenced by both the quasi-systematic misrepresentation of the core objectives of global cities research and the skating-over of its internal diversity. We present a genealogy of postcolonial critiques starting from Robinson's (2002) agenda-setting discussion of global cities research, followed by an analysis of how her legitimate concerns have subsequently morphed into a set of apparent truisms. These misrepresentations are then contrasted with the purposes, diversity and critical character of global cities research as actually practiced. We interpret this discrepancy to be part of a gradually routinized straw man rhetoric that emerged as an unfortunate rallying point for postcolonial urban scholars. The consequence is that global cities research tends to be casually invoked to distinguish one's own position. We conclude by advocating practices of 'engaged pluralism' rather than 'polemical pluralism' when 'doing global urban research', and propose that critical realism can provide an important epistemological bridge to make different positions communicate.

Keywords: postcolonial urbanism, world cities, global cities, ordinary cities, engaged pluralism, polemical pluralism, critical realism

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Introduction

In his recent paper *'Dubai in the middle'*, Michele Acuto (2014) discusses the 21st century trajectory of Dubai with a focus on its framing as a 'global city'. His paper's broader objective is to develop a productive encounter between 'global cities research' and 'ordinary cities research' in academic studies of globalized urbanization. Hence, Acuto (2014: 1732) suggests that it may be worthwhile to explore the continued relevance of what some apparently believe to be a 'pre-crisis concept': that of 'the global city', of which Dubai seemed 'an apotheosis in the early 2000s'. Our contribution's starting point is that we agree with Acuto (2014) that such an encounter is indeed a potentially interesting and most certainly overdue project. We argue, however, that one of the main reasons why this dialogue is hampered relates to the partial and oversimplified manner in which GCR is presented in a range of contemporary postcolonial writings on globalized urbanization.

Although Acuto's (2014) paper explicitly seeks to bridge the divides between 'global cities research' (GCR)¹ and 'ordinary cities research', some of these issues of oversimplification are also noticeable in his paper. For instance, when we examine how Acuto (2014) portrays GCR, the most obvious thing to note is that although his paper is said to explicitly engage with renderings of 'Dubai as a global city', it is actually very economical with academic references on the matter (although these most certainly exist, see for instance Bassens, 2013; Sigler, 2013). Allegedly, Dubai-as-a-global-city has 'disappeared from the headlines, to be subject only to sporadic and cynical attention' (p. 1732). Without proper evidence, readers cannot but take Acuto's interpretation of (Dubai within) GCR at face value. They are thus presented with the observation that 'the global cities approach' to the study of globalized urbanization tends to hold 'top-down views' (p. 1733), which results in 'static, synchronic models of global city hierarchies' (p. 1733, the latter quote being taken from Brenner and Keil, 2006: 393 paraphrasing the position of Olds and Yeung, 2004). Meanwhile, the question what a 'global city' is becomes stretched, as it is variably invoked as a 'concept' (p. 1732), a 'theory' (p. 1733), and a 'modernist model' (p. 1740). This slippery language suggests the near-equivalence of social-scientific renderings of global cities and boosterist planning practices. This is also evident when Acuto (2014: 1733) states his aim to recuperate our understanding of global cities from the 'ephemeral "global city" types now so common in the media and academia.' Indeed, the difference between 'scholarship, policy and media attention' becomes blurred as, at the end of the day, they apparently share a 'big-picture mentality' (p. 1745). Taken together, for readers unfamiliar with the literature, a vague picture emerges of a GCR research agenda that is allegedly normatively charged, establishes global hierarchies, and is in dire need of 'other models' – such as 'ordinary cities' – to 'see beyond' structuralist accounts of global economic flows.

Acuto (2014) seeks to engage with the GCR literature in a constructive manner, and our misgivings therefore concentrate on the paper's unfortunate one-sided representation of the GCR literature. Discouragingly, this representation is prevalent in many postcolonial and 'ordinary city' writings on globalized urbanization. In our reading, the core purposes of GCR tend to be misrepresented, while its sizable ontological, epistemological, and methodological diversity is *de facto* ignored or deemed irrelevant in the broad-brush stroke of criticism. Moreover, with each iteration of the critique, GCR is further compressed into a homogenous and allegedly fundamentally flawed 'Other'. Having all the rhetorical bearings of a classical straw man fallacy², the GCR Other is only summoned in order to casually reject it – it merely serves to distinguish one's own position from an imagined mainstream in human geography or urban studies more widely.

Witnessing this trend, our key concern is not to deplore the silencing of GCR voices per se: in spite of our title's playful reference to Spivak (1988), GCR *can* speak for itself, as it constitutes an active circuit of knowledge for critical urban scholars. What we regret is the under- or misrepresentation of these critical voices in many postcolonial writings, which we interpret as a way to provincialize GCR and stress its limits for comprehending globalized urbanization. The common misrepresentation of GCR generates a barrier, an unproductive silence, for intellectual exchange across polemically accentuated global city/ordinary city divides, which ultimately hinders the development of the broader literature on globalized urbanization. This paper is therefore not intended as an exegetic excursion into what GCR is 'really' about, but rather – not unlike Acuto's (2014) stated purpose – as a step toward a more open and engaged field of global urban studies that recognizes and respects theoretical diversity.

Below, we commence with a discussion of Jennifer Robinson's postcolonial critique of GCR, which has clearly been a catalyst for a part of the field to distance itself from GCR. Robinson has raised a number of legitimate concerns with respect to GCR as she cautioned against particular tendencies in the urban studies literature of that time. However, when reading the plethora of postcolonial writings following Robinson (2002), we observe that these legitimate concerns have gradually morphed – through iteration – into a set of apparent truisms. By outlining the field's core tenets as well as its rich internal diversity we demonstrate where these truisms fall short as an interpretation of GCR. We interpret this discrepancy to be part of a gradually routinized straw man rhetoric that emerged as a rallying signifier for postcolonial urban scholars. Given this rhetoric's potentially debilitating effects on the field, we conclude by advocating the idea of 'engaged pluralism' as outlined in Barnes and

Sheppard (2010) as a possible way out of this problematic 'Othering'.

The substance of postcolonial critiques

- *A well-taken critical view from off the map*

Postcolonial criticisms of GCR have increased in number following the work of Jennifer Robinson (2002, 2005, 2006). In our interpretation, her critique of GCR – most concisely stated in Robinson (2002) – revolves around three inter-related concerns that can be paraphrased as follows: (i) the subjugation of alternative accounts of globalized urbanization and/or research on allegedly non-global cities and the consequent need for the parochialization of GCR; (ii) GCR's economism as visible in its narrow focus on specific sets of economic processes as well as an associated focus on hierarchies of 'performance'; and (iii) the tendency for (research on) 'the global city' to travel as an aspirational model and standard for urban economic dynamism around the world. We interpret these critiques to be legitimate concerns that, when properly addressed, can push the field forward. A brief appraisal of Robinson's argument is required to better understand how and when it risks derailing.

First, Robinson's (2002) remark that cities fall 'off the map' signals a key postcolonial concern that a dominant ('hegemonic') body of knowledge subjugates knowledge about histories and geographies of what it constructs as the Other (Gregory, 1994; cf. Jazeel, 2014). Geography, and in particular cartography, is fundamentally implicated here. As Harley (1992, cited in Gregory 1994: 74) explains: 'cartography's "mask of a seemingly neutral science" hides and denies the modalities of power that are embedded in and enframed by the map text.' [...This implies that...] 'ostensibly "scientific", "objective" maps cannot escape their (sometimes unwitting) complicity in ideology'. There are two important dimensions inherent in this critique of subjugation: against 'objectivity' and against 'silencing'. As regards 'objectivity', Barnes (2004) reminds us that the rationalist account of knowledge production is a myth. All knowledge is produced in a specific place and context and with a specific research problem in mind. Consequently, maps are always a selection of 'what to show and what to leave out' and the yardstick of that selection is based on a specific research goal. When knowledge is decontextualized from its practices of origin, for some – the rationalist position – knowledge might become decoupled 'universal truths' valid everywhere in the same manner. Criticizing rationalism is a possible interpretation of the notion of 'provincializing' knowledge (cf. Chakrabarty 2008 [2000]; Sheppard *et al.* 2013): revealing knowledge's origins in particular debates and questioning its applicability in other contexts. We will explicate the origins, 'the

place' of GCR more specifically below. The second dimension bears on the question whether GCR has unwillingly subjugated other geographies. We recognize that this concern had an immediate appeal at the time when it was first formulated (e.g. in Robinson, 2002). Historical accounts of urban studies in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Davis, 2005³; Peck, 2015) describe a certain dominance of a burgeoning literature that sought to construct inventories of global cities based upon their level of economic functions such as producer services firms (e.g., Beaverstock et al., 1999, 2000). One can imagine that pursuing this project would have led GCR to act as a catalyst in the production of uneven geographies of urban studies.

Second, given the immediate citation success of the Beaverstock et al. (1999, 2000) papers, concerns about an urban studies preoccupied with particular economic indicators and sectors (e.g., corporate headquarters and producer services) seemed valid. The associated critique regarding 'economism' in GCR has been most strongly voiced by Michael Peter Smith (1998, 2001). Economism, however, is a slippery concept with a complex genealogy. According to Callari (1991), 'classical orthodox Marxism' was economistic because it assumed that capital predefined politics, i.e. the base determined the superstructure. Although criticizing this orthodox position was part of the genesis of the postcolonial project of subaltern studies (Chibber, 2013), this strict form of economic determinism is rejected by many contemporary Marxists, and certainly the Marx-inspired scholars who are cited in urban studies (see, for example, Gibson-Graham, 2006 [1996]; Harvey, 2010: 113-116; Lee, 2002; Massey, 1995 [1984]: 6; Sayer, 2000). However, even if we dismiss such an outdated deterministic stance, we could still state that economism occurs when one attributes too much causal power to economic processes in explaining a particular outcome, given that another focus would have rendered other results⁴. According to King (1990: 32), this kind of economism is discernable in Friedmann's pioneering work on world cities when he states in his seminal piece that in this line of research 'the economic variable [...would likely...] be decisive for all attempts at explanation' (Friedmann, 1986: 69). More generally, economism could unintentionally emerge in large-scale quantitative model-based approaches within GCR, if one repeatedly assumes, rather than tests, the relevance and validity of structure-oriented hypotheses that underlie the model (Parnreiter, 2014; Verweijen and van Meeteren, 2015, for methodological elaborations of this fallacy).

Third and finally: global city rankings, one of the most conspicuous academic products of GCR in the late 1990s, were indeed starting to become part of a mobile policy world as they were marketed as league tables or other for-profit products by a range of global consultancy firms (e.g., AT Kearney). Meanwhile, key scholars from the field had become much sought-after speakers in academic and policy circles alike, and were sometimes hired as advisors to

for-profit organizations⁵. Hence, the concern of GCR as co-producing a social construct that would help normalizing neoliberal urban policies did seem reasonable.

- *Straw man rising*

Curiously, Robinson's (2002, 2005, 2006) critique has provoked limited dialogue with GCR itself. GCR contributions that reflect on Robinson's initial critique (2002) or its credence, such as Bassens et al. (2010), Parnreiter (2010), Surborg (2011), and Derudder et al. (2013), have received limited acknowledgement from the critics' side (however, see Smith, 2013). This lack of dialogue has probably contributed to the gradual morphing of Robinson's legitimate concerns into overstretched truisms that are not debated. The procedure of these truism-based studies tends to be to (re)present, and subsequently often discard, GCR as a unified paradigm or theory that *de facto* (1) silences or misrepresents processes in 'other' cities, (2) does so because it is flawed by economism and/or structuralism, as visible in its goal to devise 'city hierarchies', and (3) usefully serves the boosterist planning practices of political elites around the world.

Although the (re)production of these apparent truisms is obviously not a feature of all postcolonial writings on globalized urbanization, nor are all of these truisms (equally) (re)presented (see, for instance, Bunnell, 2015; Bunnell and Maringanti, 2010; McFarlane, 2010; Mohammad and Sidaway, 2012), we observe that this has become a common way in which GCR is portrayed. While it is of course impossible to provide a detailed or comprehensive account of GCR's (re)presentation across the literature, a number of concrete examples should suffice to illustrate our point. To be absolutely clear, by no means do we aspire to deny or doubt the obvious merits of the (individual) academic work discussed below in terms of its research questions, methods, and insights. Yet, we do wish to explain how generally good quality scholarship has the unfortunate habit of rhetorically mischaracterizing GCR.

First, GCR as a whole is casually condensed into 'being about' devising hierarchical rankings, which are held reflective of the literature's economism and structuralism, given the focus on the location strategies of multinational firms (but see Smith and Timberlake, 2001). A favorite target is Beaverstock et al.'s (1999) identification of different 'levels' of global cities (alpha/beta/gamma), which is deemed to be the core preoccupation of GCR at large. Thus, when Bunnell and Sidaway (2012: xvi) state that in 'the world/global cities literature [...] the assumption of hierarchical relations continues to present alpha [or, most recently, alpha++] cities as the leading edge of urban innovation, dynamism, and aspiration,' they single out a

very particular project within GCR to address the literature at large. Furthermore, Beaverstock et al.'s (1999: 454) identification of 'hierarchical layers' of GC-formation, which they themselves interpret as a sign of 'a very uneven globalization' in the spirit of dependency and world-systems thinking (*cf.* Knox and Taylor, 1995; Brown et al., 2010; Derudder and Parnreiter, 2014), is subtly recast by Bunnell and Sidaway (2012) into an aspirational message which never was intended in the scholarly work they refer to.⁶

A second example is Roy's (2009) account of GCR in her call for 'new geographies of theory' for the 21st century metropolis. In her paper, GCR is presented as a body of 'authoritative knowledge from the North ... [mapping] a hierarchy of city-regions', which translates into a 'Darwinian logic' of 'the survival of the fittest in the keen competition of network capitalism.' In a reference to the title of Robinson's (2002) paper, Roy (2009: 821) observes that 'in the alpha-beta-gamma worldwide rankings, "mega-cities" are usually off the map, seen as big but powerless entities, while global/world cities are presented as nodes of a globalization that is unidimensionally driven by finance capital.' Roy (2009: 820) clearly envisages her work as being in the spirit of Robinson's (2002) paper, as it is also praised as having 'launched an unrelenting critique of the geography of urban theory, sharply noting the enduring divide between "First World" cities (read: global cities) that are seen as models, generating theory and policy, and "Third World" cities (read: mega-cities) that are seen as problems, requiring diagnosis and reform.' This implies that Robinson's (2002) legitimate points of attention are posited as factual scientific weaknesses in Roy (2009), and this dubious stretching of the argument presented in what has become an authoritative text in its own right precludes a proper engagement with GCR itself. This can also be observed from the – in our view unfounded – mentioning of the literature's focus on 'finance capital' and the lack of a proper reference to the original source of the alpha-beta-gamma ranking (Beaverstock et al., 1999), which is thus implicitly presented as what GCR at large is about. The apotheosis of the straw man erected in Roy (2009: 824) is the assertion that GCR thus deems (especially) megacities in the Global South to be 'structurally irrelevant to the functioning of economic globalization'. In our reading, this interpretation clashes with the world-systems language adopted in the targeted Knox and Taylor (1995) volume in general and some of the chapters in that volume in particular (Grosfoguel, 1995; Simon, 1995). Roy (2009: 822) provides a number of more specific examples of the assumed meta-problem with GCR, and argues that these can be mended through 'strategic essentialisms' derived from area studies, 'authoritative knowledge that is fine-grained and nuanced but exceeds its empiricism through theoretical generalization' – a type of 'process geographies' apparently out of reach for GCR. Although Roy aims to view all cities from particular places on the map, we believe this move towards area-based strategic essentialisms risks becoming a mere regional heuristic – the

'Middle East' to name just one of the more contentious examples – that in turn reaffirms and reifies the (arbitrary) regionalizations that have long typified area studies (van Schendel, 2002) and pre-1960s regional geography (Blaut, 1962; Saey, 2007; Cox, 2014). Moreover, and as we will argue below, many of GCR's assumed meta-fallacies of which Roy (2009) claims they could be addressed through this notion of 'strategic essentialisms' – the poor treatise of informality in discussions of the urban poor, uneven development and relational geographies – are in fact very central to the cited work of Sassen (2001a [1991]) and many other GCR contributions.

A third and more recent example is Koch's (2013: 111) analysis of urban policy-making in Astana. The paper interestingly shows how Astana's policy makers are primarily oriented towards mimicking Ankara, hence making the point that aspirational models are not necessarily grounded in paradigmatic global cities in the region (e.g. Dubai) or beyond (e.g. London). While these insights could serve to pluralize the politics of global-city formation, they are instead utilized to distance her research from GCR, which is hyperbolically constructed to have (Koch, 2013, 111):

'the unfortunate habit of implying that cities in the global "south" simply "mimic" successful cities (overwhelmingly found in the global "north"), which effectively inscribed a moral geographic imaginary in which the "winners" of neoliberal globalization were to be admired and imitated.'

What academic literature has this 'unfortunate habit' remains completely unclear as the only references to GCR scholars in the text include those that in fact paint a nuanced picture of the politics of world-city formation beyond a number of paradigmatic cases (e.g. Bassens et al., 2010 on Gulf cities, and Parnreiter, 2010 on Mexico City). It seems a poorly specified 'Other' is only constructed to be unceremoniously rejected, and in the process affirm the self-evident relevance of one's own research.

The consequence of this routine dismissing is that academics who only incidentally engage in debates on globalizing urbanization might take the validity of the criticism at face value. This can be illustrated best by the fourth example, a recent extended editorial of several financial geographers in the British newspaper *The Guardian* (Engelen et al., 2014):

'So a new research agenda [was] developed for World/Global City research led by new urbanists like Sassen, Peter Taylor, John Freidmann [sic] and others. They initially built sweeping statements on sparse empirical foundations, but 30 years later

this has evolved into a powerful performative marketing machine. As well as conferences, journals, websites, consultants, the new urbanists have their city rankings. Their rankings are used, maintained and reproduced by a transnational urban growth coalition consisting of politicians, academics, pundits, civil servants and – in particular – real-estate developers, builders, realtors, architects, investors, accountants and bankers.'

The most striking feature of this particular example is that Saskia Sassen and others, who have spent their careers as critical scholars of globalized capitalist urbanization and its uneven consequences occurring in and through cities, seem to be suggestively recast as the masterminds of global city formation themselves. It is their 'sweeping statements' that evolved into a 'marketing machine' in which 'their rankings' are used by 'academics' in a 'transnational growth coalition'. The authors seem thoroughly misinformed about the actual work of the academics they criticize.

This last example shows that at the very least, the actual knowledge of what global cities scholars do and the questions they ask are absent from the debate. It almost seems like the sequential iterations of postcolonial critiques have become like the game of telephone where you whisper something in each other's ear in a circle to find out that the meaning has changed beyond recognition upon finishing the round. In each iteration of the postcolonial critique on GCR, contextual information is lost, and the critique becomes more hyperbolic at every turn: an apparent truism void of nuance. This mechanism of simplification by reiteration is reminiscent of processes of conceptual stretching (cf. Sartori, 1970; van Meeteren et al., 2016). Especially when it is used polemically, such stretching processes are bound to hamper substantial academic debate. It seems, therefore, that there is no shortcut to academic debate in spite of the growth of urban studies: we have to read closely everybody we cite and criticize.

But even when postcolonial scholars do acknowledge nuance, there seems to be a solid but empty box left that can be criticized relentlessly. The construction of this empty box is visible in the fifth and final example, which is a paper by McCann (2004) on Lexington. Although McCann (2004: 2316-2317, emphasis added) usefully and convincingly shows that the globalization-urbanization nexus can be studied in and through a diverse range of cities, his introduction contains a curious appraisal of GCR including, importantly, an incorrect attribution of the words 'exception' and 'majority' to Robinson (2002):

'While I argue that there is a general tendency to understand the world in rigidly dualistic terms in most global cities work, a number of those working in the field acknowledge the complex and overlapping character of urban social relations (for example, Sassen 2001a [1991]) while others continue to develop new and innovative ways of theorising global cities that offer a path beyond dualism (Brenner, 1998a; Taylor, 2003 [2004]; R.G. Smith, 2003a, 2003b). Nonetheless, as Robinson (2002, p. 535) puts it, *the problem is that these are exceptions and that, in the majority of global cities research*, "a limited range of cities still end up categorized in boxes or in diagrammatic maps, and assigned a place in relation to a priori analytical hierarchies."

Bearing in mind that some of the 'exceptions' mentioned by McCann (2004) are the scholars featured in Roy's (2009) and Engelen et al.'s (2014) criticism, let us ask the rhetorical question of what the – again unreferenced – 'majority of global cities research' actually is, if the likes of Sassen, Taylor, Smith and Brenner and their associated co-authors are left out of the equation? Does that majority exist, or is it a phantom that merely functions as an imaginary yardstick for one's own argument? A brief appraisal of GCR's subject matter and internal diversity is required to rectify the picture being painted here.

The pluralist substance of contemporary global cities research

- *No paradigm, but an invisible college*

While Robinson (2002) herself was pretty clear as to *whom* she targeted in her critique and *why* she targeted them, this has become increasingly unclear over time. The indiscriminate critique of GCR is aimed at an invisible, yet apparently comprehensive, literature. Speaking from 'the inside', we first wish to question Acuto's (2014) characterization of the GCR field as a unified 'paradigm' or even 'theory' (see also Brenner and Keil, 2006). It is true that John Friedmann (1995) casually characterized GCR as a paradigm, but – following Saey (2007) – we do not think this is the case. Instead Saey (2007), in his assessment of the disparate roots of GCR, distinguishes political-economic, cultural, critical, and 'politically naive' perspectives coming together in GCR (*cf.* Parnreiter, 2013), which do not add up to a paradigm in the sense of Kuhn (1970 [1962]).

Admittedly, the most important (in terms of output) of these threads running through the GCR literature aims at understanding urban-economic geographies of (capabilities for) capitalist command and control on a global scale, while the effects of the changing geographies of

command and control are critically related to socio-spatial changes within the cities involved. Sassen's *The Global City* (2001a [1991]) is representative for this approach. The book fundamentally deals with the rise of producer services economies catering to a global economy in a de facto limited number of cities, focusing on how power is organized in a global age, while accounting for the growth of inequality in these cities. GCR in this political-economic tradition can be traced back to at least the 1980s, when a number of researchers hypothesized the role of a limited set of 'core' cities in the spatial organization of global capitalism (Friedmann and Wolff, 1982; Friedmann, 1986; Sassen, 2001a [1991]; Timberlake, 1985). In this literature, the effects of centralities in globalization (Sassen, 2007) were always studied in a critical vein. Accordingly, many of the elements that GCR is deemed to lack in postcolonial critiques – the 'urban poor', 'unequal development' and 'relational geographies' (pace Roy, 2009) – have actually always been part and parcel of, or even the impetus for, research on global cities (see Friedmann and Wolff 1982; Sassen, 2001a [1991]; Taylor, 2004a).

However, neither Sassen's (2001a [1991]) most-cited writings nor their systematic consideration in Beaverstock et al. (1999, 2000), Taylor (2004a) and Timberlake et al. (2012) can be taken to be a wholesale characterization of 'the' GCR literature. GCR is characterized by a pronounced pluralism, as is evident from the wide variety of research topics, epistemologies, and methodologies marshaled by 'global city researchers'. We observe that GCR as practiced is drawn as much toward model-based approaches (e.g., Mahutga et al., 2010; Taylor, 2004a) as to more qualitative research methods (e.g., Beaverstock, 2005; Parnreiter, 2010). Some conduct detailed empirical studies (e.g., Bassens et al., 2013; Lai, 2012), while others take a more theoretical approach to global cities (e.g., Brenner, 1998; Taylor, 2013). Furthermore, some authors emphasize structure (e.g., Alderson and Beckfield, 2004; Mahutga et al., 2010), while others underscore agency (e.g.; Beaverstock, 2002; Faulconbridge, 2007); some focus on issues of capitalist expansion (Brown et al., 2010; Wójcik, 2013a), while others have a strong interest in methods for analysis and visualization (e.g., Hennemann and Derudder, 2014; Liu, 2014; Neal, 2011). Additionally, certain scholars primarily try to understand the remit of the notion of (capabilities for) capitalist command and control (Allen, 2010; Bassens and van Meeteren, 2015; Smith and Doel, 2011), while others mainly deal with socio-spatial changes within cities (Chiu and Lui, 2004; van der Waal and Burgers, 2009) and/or the politics of world-city formation 'on the ground' (Golubchikov, 2010; Keil and Ronneberger, 1994; Olds and Yeung, 2004). Interestingly, within this diversity there are also plenty of authors that critically examine the applicability of GCR to less-obvious cases (e.g. Grant and Nijman, 2002; Rossi et al., 2007; Short et al., 2000; Sigler, 2013; Sokol et al., 2008). And finally, GCR is an *evolving* literature, which implies that exclusively drawing

on older references has the effect of neglecting developments that may be meaningful when appraising the literature. The second edition of *'World City Network'* (Taylor and Derudder, 2016), for instance, is not simply an update of a variety of empirical patterns, but represents a comprehensive revision that involves engaging with new developments, interesting critiques, refined and improved methods and, generally, a broader appreciation of how the research relates to other urban and globalization studies.

In the light of this diversity and continuing developments, it may be better to think of (and therefore address) GCR as an 'invisible college', as has been proposed earlier by Acuto (2011, drawing on Friedmann, 1995: 28). An invisible college refers to the sociological formation of a group of authors in a particular research field who constitute a social circle, but have varying degrees of involvement on the basis of diverging research interests. This circle has an (informal) stratification, and is characterized by internal disagreements, debate, and openness to internal mavericks and criticism⁷ (Crane, 1969, cf. Price and Beaver, 1966; van Meeteren et al. 2016). As Crane (1969: 348) elaborates: 'Certain characteristics are more common to members of a particular social circle than to non-members, but members do not necessarily share all or even most of these defining characteristics. Each member is usually aware of some but not all other members. The exact boundaries of the social circle are difficult to locate.' To a large extent, then, GCR is simply what global city researchers do: the praxis of doing research defines the evolving research subject and prevails over a rigid definition or conceptualization of what a world or global city is (Derudder, 2006), how it should be researched, and how one should interpret the results. Even one of the arguably most prominent emblems of GCR – the model-based mappings and measurements of the world city network by a specific team within GaWC⁸ – can best be read as one particular building block within an international division of labor among those interested in understanding and studying global city formation.

Ironically, reducing GCR to global city rankings or league tables – besides often resting on a misrepresentation of that exercise (Taylor, 2012) – is to take one particular line of research to stand for the whole. The result is a narrow essentialization of GCR by the rhetorical strategy of the *pars pro toto*, which resultantly, to paraphrase Robinson (2002), drops numerous other GCR contributions 'off the map' of urban studies. Resultantly, postcolonial critiques largely ignore ongoing debates within GCR. To illustrate the vibrancy of these debates we can point to the GaWC website: even the most trenchant poststructuralist critiques on (model-based approaches in) GCR that want to can get a platform there (e.g., Smith, 2014, earlier published online as GaWC Research Bulletin 390). As a result, they are actively considered by and have effects on subsequent contributions to the field. This last example illustrates that

even in practice, the invisible college is not some secret society with closed boundaries, and has shown to be willing to incorporate anyone who seriously intends to join the debate.

- *The straw man speaks*

Now that we have addressed the 'truisms' that are stifling debate, we can return to the question of how *actually existing* GCR ought to deal with the legitimate concerns that are at the root of postcolonial critiques. *En route*, we take the opportunity to further elaborate on some features of GCR that are in our view commonly misrepresented. We will reflect on three elements that were originally raised by Robinson (2002), namely the tendency towards economism, the subjugation of alternative geographies, and the performativity of GCR, to structure our response.

First, we evaluate the risk of economism. Before we start, it should be clear by now that the varieties of GCR addressed here do not intend to provide a comprehensive account of globalized urbanization or construct a universally valid urban theory (cf. Derudder et al., 2013; Sassen, 2007, 2010a; Smith, 2013; Taylor et al., 2002). Instead, GCR has a long tradition of focusing on the changing role of cities in the global capitalist system. Relatedly, making hierarchical worldwide rankings and projecting zero-sum interurban competition is not what the work of Alderson and Beckfield (2004; with Sprague-Jones, 2010), Krätke (2014a), Mahutga et al. (2010), Smith and Timberlake (2001), and the GaWC model (Derudder et al., 2013; Taylor, 2012) is about. Instead, they serve as critical tools to analyze and visualize geographies of uneven development under global capitalism and not as building blocks for aspirational models (pace Bunnell and Sidaway, 2012).

The very diversity within the invisible college is the best guarantee that the assumptions of GCR are critically evaluated and that a reduction to economism – as defined above – is averted. For instance, some have provided critical reflections of practices of command and control (often termed governance) in producer service networks (Allen, 2010; Jones, 2002; Wójcik, 2013b) and how these interrelate with global commodity chains (Brown et al., 2010; Parnreiter, 2015; Surborg, 2011). Others have built a substantial body of empirical work on how world-city formation is linked to the agency of transnational elites, for instance through their work practices and mobility patterns (e.g. Beaverstock, 2002; Beaverstock et al., 2013). This research thread has been picked up by others interested in studying how global cities 'work' through practices (e.g., Faulconbridge, 2007; Jones, 2007). More recently, there has been a call to start evaluating producer services even more critically under the current global

financialized accumulation regime, as these services construct new outlets for capital and provide opportunities for capital switching (Bassens and van Meeteren, 2015; Krätke, 2014b).

The trends described above point to a fundamental endeavor to re-theorize the spatialities of power running through global cities (Allen, 2010). This leads us to suggest that GCR is not a collective exercise in ignoring agency as Ley (2004) argues: the structure of the world city network is not simply treated as the 'outcome' of globalization, but as the collective product of the agency of – amongst others – world city network makers in producer services (Watson and Beaverstock, 2014; van Meeteren and Bassens, 2016). Admittedly, the focus in this emerging literature continues to be almost exclusively on political-economic processes and agents, especially when global city formation is linked to wider processes of rescaling (Allen et al., 1998; Brenner, 1998; Massey, 2007; Scott, 2001). This emphasis on political-economy is, however, not simply a fallacy of economism but the result of a deliberate focus on the articulation of global economic processes in cities (Derudder and Parnreiter, 2014), which are a key force of neoliberal social change in many parts of the world. Moreover, a focus on economic processes does not equate to economic reductionism. For one, it is explicitly acknowledged that those individuals employed in producer services are key actors in the social construction of material circuits of value (Bassens and van Meeteren, 2015; Lee, 2002). This is most evident in the engagements of GCR with research on emerging markets, where imaginaries and discourses are considered crucial infrastructure to set up new investment vehicles (Bassens et al., 2013; Lai, 2006; Sidaway and Pryke, 2000). In those engagements, the urban-economic geographies under scrutiny stretch well beyond the global city shortlists as they explicitly probe the contours of the world city network by studying world-city formation beyond the 'old core' (van Meeteren and Bassens, 2016).

Second, we come to address the legitimate concerns about GCR's tendency to subjugate alternative geographies of globalized urbanization, especially when considering cities in the Global South. Inexorably, a critical focus on the how, why and where of capitalist accumulation as organized from global cities makes particular modes of accumulation seem inevitable and alternatives unreachable (Gibson-Graham, 2006 [1996]). We acknowledge this epistemological problem, but see no other way out of it than a division of labor between scholars who critically research capitalism-as-practiced on the one hand and people who investigate alternatives on the other. In hindsight, it is clear that the GCR agenda has emerged from issues located in very specific geo-historical circumstances (cf. Friedmann and Wolff, 1982; a point also recognized by Roy, 2009: 820, before embarking on her discussion of GCR). The starting point of 'deindustrializing cities' in the Global North as the 'place' of origin of GCR has influenced the research questions that were asked (cf. Barnes,

2004). One consequence of this is the paradigmatic status some 'extraordinary' cities received as ideal types of globalized urbanization (Peck, 2015, reading Amin and Graham, 1997). For example, it was the deindustrialization of Los Angeles that led Friedmann and Wolff (1982) to look what was happening in the export processing zones all over the world. A relational perspective starting from within those zones (e.g. Werner, 2011) provides us with a complementary picture where different aspects of the same processes come into focus, different subalterns come into view, and different problems are highlighted. It is this very juxtaposition of perspectives that can pre-empt the rationalist fallacy (Barnes, 2004). Hence, while we are supportive of Roy's (2009: 821) purpose of decentering urban theory-making, and agree this enterprise does not per definition entail 'adding' the experience of the Global South to already existing frameworks of the city-region', such an exercise would benefit from a more accurate description of what existing frameworks put forward. Such an 'engagement with pluralism' is equally welcome within the scope of GCR. The project on Islamic finance spearheaded by Bassens (e.g. Bassens et al., 2010; 2013; Bassens, 2013), in which research questions and hypotheses were inspired by the body of GCR literature is a case in point. Research revealed that APS firms engaged in Islamic finance in Gulf cities were very atypical in nature, making Gulf cities a 'most unlikely case' of world-city formation. This pulled the project in the direction of a bottom-up mapping of corporate geographies of Islamic finance, its institutions, regulators, elites, and products. The resulting geographies of emerging Islamic financial circuits and nodes, apart from unveiling South-South systems (e.g. a system centered on Malaysia and the Gulf, and a Middle East North Africa system) also had one unexpected throwback. Despite its discourse of alterity based on Shari'a-compliance and its intimate connections with petrodollar recycling, these Islamic circuits appeared to be entangled to a major degree with mainstay financial centers, and most importantly, the City of London and its conventional investment banks. Altogether, this is a practical case where indeed, learning from other regions (Slater, 1992) enhanced both GCR and alternatives (cf. Krijnen et al., 2016 using a similar procedure on Beirut).

Taking the above as example, we argue that GCR has been reflexive of, and has acted upon, the acclaimed 'parochialism'. The most obvious indications for this are: i) the reduction in the number of places and processes that are effectively 'off the map' in new rounds of quantitative data gathering (Taylor and Derudder, 2016, Chapters 4-5); ii) the application of analytical moves to decenter the economic geographies through which cities are enrolled in global urban networks (e.g., Bassens et al., 2010; Krijnen et al., 2016), and iii) the deliberate effort to include more and more cities, actors and geographies in empirical case studies of the world city network (e.g., Hoyler and Watson, 2013; Jacobs et al., 2011; Taylor, 2004b; Toly et al., 2012). Furthermore, we should also be sensitive to potential academic power

inversions in the wider urban studies field: Robinson's (2002) paper is by now the second most cited article featuring 'world cities' in its title in the ISI Web of Knowledge, while other postcolonial treatises on globalized urbanization are also highly cited. It seems that – contrary to the late 1990s – alternatives prominently feature in the academic literature, so that laments about the baleful dominance of GCR (in academia at least) seem to blow its current influence out of proportion.

Third, postcolonial critiques have heightened our awareness of processes pertaining to the performativity of knowledge. The problems anticipated by Smith (1998) and Robinson (2002) have partially materialized. In an Orwellian turn of discourse (Theodore and Peck, 2012: 24), particular practices associated with GCR did end up reinforcing neoliberalism despite its critical origins, as is evident from the popularity of 'league tables' amongst policy-makers and global firms alike (Derudder et al., 2013; Dupont, 2011; Goldman, 2010; Harris, 2012; McCann et al., 2013). The image that has been 'consumed' and 'internalized' by policy makers (Bunnell, 2015) has conspicuously been stripped of its critical antecedents, vulgarizing it to the level of the 'deliberate cultivation of concepts for apologetic purpose' (Harvey, 2006 [1982]: 41). The genealogy of how this vulgarized conception of 'global city rankings' exactly ended up in the toolbox of 'business consultant urbanism' (Amin, 2014) remains to be written (cf. Bunnell, 2015; Theodore and Peck, 2012), although we stress that scientific city rankings and typologies certainly predate the emergence of the GCR, as does their use in consultancy circles (Ward, 2010). Yet, despite these material effects, it is useful to recall Sayer (2000: 11), who reminds us not to put too much weight on the performativity of our knowledge in the present. For him, social scientists are mostly in the business of 'construing' rather than 'constructing' the social world. That we call something an 'alpha city' probably has limited effects in the short run on neoliberal urban development, the development could very likely have occurred anyhow with a different marketing slogan. Hence, to easily attribute causes of neoliberal urbanism to GCR, as discernable in Engelen et al. (2014), can equally be diverting attention from the fact that there are far more important and powerful explanations out there that cause uneven development.

Nevertheless, we agree with the problem identified by Jazeel and McFarlane (2007) that a critical researcher needs to take the (unintended) effects of research into account. Relatedly, we have to acknowledge the power-effects that, even critical, accounts have had in our historical understanding of capitalism by muting voices emerging from the Global South (Slater, 1992). But this should not hold us back from developing critical concepts and analyses that aspire to say something about capitalist urbanization worldwide. For instance, Gibson-Graham (2006 [1996]: xxi) is very ambivalent whether 'a concept should be

abandoned (out of purity) at the risk of subsequently being ignored'. We sense that such abandonment is currently occurring with renewed emphasis on 'worlding cities' (Roy, 2009), 'worlds of cities' (Robinson, 2005) and 'globalizing cities' (Marcuse and van Kempen, 1999). For some of these projects, emphasizing difference from GCR might indeed be for the better (see Sheppard et al., 2013, for a genealogy of the term 'worlding' in this context), but there is a danger of throwing out the baby with the bath water. It should be clear that (predatory) accumulation organized from global cities, including its influence on cities that are regarded to be 'off the map', will not stop if we stop researching it. We will simply understand it less well (cf. Peck, 2015; Scott and Storper, 2015).

That said, a few influential voices from GCR, such as Sassen and Taylor, could be considered part of wider global urban policy circuits through their visible and frantic academic and/or policy-oriented lecture calendar in cities across the world. In a context where mainstream (neoclassical) 'economists in the wild' tend to have the ear of policy makers and have the power to influence the economy instead of merely describing it (Callon, 2007), the work of global city scholars provides a rare opportunity for critical social scientists to influence policy makers across the globe and make a difference (cf. Peck, 1999). Dismissing that possibility up-front would be engaging in the very base-determines-superstructure economism that postcolonial critics so wholeheartedly despise. In our view, there is at the very least hope that influential voices from a critical and self-reflexive field of GCR are the more likely candidates to sketch a balanced and critical picture of what global-city formation possibly entails in terms of adverse effects on urban labor and housing markets and many other elements of social, economic, and cultural life in the city. In any case, we are quite convinced that Acuto's (2014: 1733) reference to 'ephemeral global city-types now so common in the media and academia' cannot refer to academic scholars pursuing the project of critical GCR.

Prospective remarks: Toward engaged pluralism

Our discussion of the variety and critical character of GCR as practiced contrasts remarkably with the strong claims made by postcolonial critics. How can we explain the emergence of this gap between actual research and perception? We have argued above that critics of GCR have gradually erected a straw man. But how did it emerge, and more interestingly, why has so little response been voiced by researchers engaged in GCR? The absence of a comprehensive response is in fact the logical outcome of the straw man fallacy itself since a straw man, by its very nature of being a misrepresentation, 'cannot speak' – it has no real existing interlocutors. Everybody who does respond is therefore rendered not to be part of the Other.

The muteness of the straw man is reinforced by the deafness of postcolonial critics to revisions and refinements in the field of GCR over the years. It does not seem to matter whether Saskia Sassen nuances and refines her argument to make explicit that '*The Global City*' is not a comprehensive account of the contemporary city (Sassen, 1998; 2007; 2010a), is not Western focused (2000a; 2010a), does not imply homogenization of cities (2007; 2008), does not address intercity competition (2001b), and is highly critical of its role in uneven development (2000b; 2010b). These nuances may or may not be convincing (and thus be subject to scientific debate), but the point here is that they hardly get taken into account when postcolonial critiques are repeated in each cycle of academic publishing. Surprisingly often an argument is made in opposition to some alleged and often unnamed 'mainstream' urban theory (e.g. Brenner and Schmid 2015; Sheppard et al., 2013; see also Jazeel, 2014), but if it is not the invisible college of GCR described above, we cannot locate that mainstream anywhere in either the urban studies journals we read or the citation indexes we observe.⁹

We contend that the examples presented above point to a rhetorical strategy that Barnes and Sheppard (2010: 194, following Bernstein, 1988) have called 'polemical pluralism', in which an invocation of other viewpoints in academic debates only serves as an ideological weapon to advance one's own orientation. This ideological weapon is most clearly expressed by Gibson-Graham (2006 [1996]: 5-11) where they make the case that erecting a straw man, 'a non-existing hyperbolic monster', can be productive to elucidate alternative perspectives. However, comparisons between real world cases on the one hand and such *hyperreal* representations on the other, carry methodological risks (Beauregard, 2003; Chibber, 2013). For example, Chibber (2013: 126-129) argues that it is exactly this comparative fallacy that made postcolonial historiography draw wrong theoretical conclusions regarding the (in)validity of Marxist theorizing in India on the basis of miscomparing an accurate Indian representation with a *hyperreal* representation of European cases. We interpret Roy's (2009) call for 'strategic essentialisms' as a similar kind of polemic rhetorical strategy: as the putative 'process geographies' of the former are contrasted with the putative 'trait geographies' of GCR, research findings are (mis)represented as merely pertaining to major-cities-in-the-First-World theoretical ideal types to be falsified elsewhere.

In our opinion, this rhetorical strategy is counterproductive to the research agenda of globalizing urbanization for three important reasons. First, it might lead scholars to draw wrong conclusions about the value of the work of colleagues. As our examples above have shown the postcolonial discourse on GCR has increasingly diverged from the actual research

practice up to the point where GCR can no longer recognize itself in the critique. Studies critical of GCR could be far more productive if they would challenge GCR's actual assumptions and the 'process geographies' it produces, instead of taking issue with its imagined 'trait geographies' assumptions. Such engagement could help thwart faulty assumptions being uncritically reproduced, which in turn prevent 'the global city' from indeed becoming the neoliberal construct it has been to some all along (Smith, 1998). Second, it leads to a toxic culture of dialogue. Speaking counterfactually, if postcolonial critics would have truly engaged with 'real life' GC researchers – much like the above-mentioned GCR mavericks, who would probably not position themselves in the 'mainstream' of the field (e.g., John Allen, Richard Smith, Jennifer Robinson) – they would have crossed the diffuse line of GCR's invisible college and likely participated in the collective process of setting research agendas from the inside. While we do not wish to argue that this makes GCR the only viable candidate to have such critical encounters, it does illustrate how that community is open and receptive to critique on its central assumptions. And third, and by far the most important reason is that as global capitalism relentlessly expands and induces intensified urbanization and crisis on a planetary scale (Brenner and Schmid, 2014; Dawson and Edwards, 2004), we need each other's insights in order to comprehend these processes and hopefully change them for the better. But foremost, we need to strive for an intellectual atmosphere where that exchange can be productive.

In order to 'clear the air' for such an intellectual atmosphere, some remarks on divergent ontologies are important. Although we obviously cannot resolve the 'big ontological debates' that have fragmented urban studies and human geography in the last five decades (see Cox, 2014), we believe that critical realism (Bashkar, 1975; Sayer, 2000; 2013) can provide an important epistemological bridge to make the GCR and postcolonial positions communicate.¹⁰ Bashkar's (1975) notion regarding the differences between the 'transitive and the intransitive dimensions of knowledge' are particularly helpful in this regard. In Sayer's (2000: 10-11) reading, the intransitive dimensions of knowledge refer to the 'objects of science', i.e. the physical processes and social phenomena we study. The transitive dimensions, in turn, constitute the media and resources of science, which can be objects of study in themselves. As Sayer (idem, paraphrasing Collier 1994: 51) explains: 'Rival theories and sciences have different transitive objects (theories about the world) but the world they are about – the intransitive dimension – is the same; otherwise, they would not be rivals.' Of course this still constitutes a particular ontological position, but as long as we acknowledge that it is the same intransitive world our theories pertain to *and* that there are intransitive dimensions of knowledge in the first place, it is a position which allows rival theories – on GCR or other scientific objects – to be put into dialogue.

Ultimately, the only way in which postcolonial theory would be incompatible with a critical realist account of GCR would be if it fundamentally adheres to a 'flat ontology' (e.g. Smith, 2003; 2003b; Marston et al., 2005) where epistemology is collapsed into ontology (Bashkar, 1975: 30). In recent works, it has indeed become more common to combine the postcolonial debates in urban studies with arguments associated with a wide variety of poststructuralist criticism related, but not limited, to Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and assemblage urbanism (e.g., McCann et al., 2013; McFarlane and Robinson, 2012; Smith, 2003a; 2013).¹¹ The postcolonial critique, however, is foremost an argument against rationalism (cf. Barnes, 2004) which is shared by critical realism (Sayer, 2009), and not a flat ontology argument. Some versions of conjoining postcolonial with other poststructuralist arguments may adhere to a flat ontology, but this is not necessarily the case (Allen, 2012; Anderson et al., 2012; Sayer, 2013). Moreover, even if studies do have different ontological underpinnings, that does not preclude fruitful academic debate (Pratt, 2013). Especially in this latter situation the style of polemical pluralism, where genuine disagreement is compounded with rhetorical hyperbole, is most detrimental to productive dialogue.

By means of conclusion, let us reiterate unambiguously that we believe that at the heart of the postcolonial critique are a number of legitimate concerns that may help GCR to retain its critical edge. Scientific fields can only flourish when theories are challenged and when different research methods alternate in probing different assumptions and validities of a body of knowledge. The epistemological and ontological differences that characterize urban studies have been effective in sharpening debate, providing room for difference, and safeguarding valid knowledge from the risk of being unduly subjugated (cf. Barnes and Sheppard, 2010; Gibson-Graham, 2006 [1996]). Divisions of labor between the critic and the criticized – as long as the roles tend to alternate – are important in any healthy research field. Thus we would like to conclude this intervention with a call to continue the substantial debates on GCR as sharp as it can be; but in the spirit of engaged pluralism. In our view, recent moves to consolidate comparative urbanism (e.g. McFarlane, 2010; Robinson, 2014; 2016; Ward, 2010) offer great potential to start 'stress testing' (Peck, 2015; cf. Burawoy, 2009) the explanatory value of a variety of situated theories – GCR and others – in cities in both the Global North and South. As a virtue when encountering difference, engaged pluralism encourages us to 'however much we are committed to our styles of thinking, we are willing to listen to others without denying or suppressing the otherness of the other' (Barnes and Shepard, 2010: 194, following Bernstein, 1988, following James, 1912 [1908]).

¹ Although 'global cities' and 'world cities' are often thought – and sometimes even specifically constructed – to cover different concepts (Sassen, 2001a: xxi), they tend to be conflated and/or homogenized in much of the global/world cities literature and the postcolonial critique. For the sake of our argument, we will not attempt to discriminate between both terms; we stick to 'global cities' as a common signifier for the literature(s) at large, even if certain authors refer to 'world cities'.

² Such a fallacy is committed when one – willingly or not – misrepresents a (perceived) opponent's position by imputing it implausible commitments, and then refutes the misrepresentation instead of the (perceived) opponent's actual view. Additionally, the fallacy occurs when an exception is taken to be representative of an argument as a whole (Talisce and Aikin, 2006).

³ Although Davis (2005: 99-100) also simply asserts, without providing any qualification, quantification or reference, that [emphasis added] '*much* of the contemporary research has been *normatively* oriented towards understanding contemporary cities in light of how they stack up to these paradigmatically 'prototypical' global cities of the affluent north which means the focus is often on certain positive economic indicators and whether they have been achieved.'

⁴ Note that from this perspective, accusing an outcome as being too economy-focused is not a methodological fallacy. One can argue for a plethora of reasons that other subjects ought to have been taken into account, but this does not render a focus on economic mechanisms or outcomes obsolete.

⁵ Saskia Sassen and Peter Taylor, for instance, were hired by Mastercard (2008) to advise the development of a research instrument. The corollary of this research project was that it allowed for the confirmation of hypotheses emanating from their own research. As conveyed through personal communication with Saskia Sassen (e-mail, December 24, 2014), the study taught her there was far less competition among the 60 major cities studied than the global corporate world wanted city governments to believe.

⁶ Furthermore, even when 'urban innovation' or 'urban dynamism' is explicitly invoked in this context as it is in Taylor and Derudder (2016, Chapter 1), the framework rests on an application of Jane Jacobs' (1984) ideas about import-replacement built upon *structural mutuality* between cities in the diffusion of innovations, which is similar to Robinson's (2006, Chapters 5-6) 'ordinary city' account of urban dynamism. This notion of mutuality runs counter to the supposed hierarchical treatment of inter-city relations between a dynamic core and a static periphery (see Parnreiter, 2014; Bassens and van Meeteren, 2015 for counterpoints).

⁷ The differences and creative tensions between the intellectual projects of the three authors of this paper is a case in point. Author 2 has set his mind to the fine-tuning of a large-scale model to measure the world city network. Inspired by that model, but dissatisfied with its explanatory depth, author 3 has commenced to decenter 'traditional' GCR formulations of producer services to understand the incorporation of cities in 'emerging' economies markets into the WCN. Authors 1 and 3 have recently embarked upon the project of rethinking the theoretical underpinnings and geographical mechanisms of world-city formation through a rejoinder with geographies of global finance. Conversely, authors 1 and 2 share a strong interest in deepening the ontological foundations of GCR.

⁸ Some scholars around Peter Taylor organized themselves under the umbrella of the Globalization and World Cities Research (GaWC) network, which is merely a subset, albeit perhaps an influential one, of the wider field of 'global city researchers'.

⁹ Another option is that this 'mainstream' is wholly located outside urban studies and human geography more widely and solely resides in non-academic situations or unconnected academic fields. The examples of 'mainstream' that Brenner and Schmid (2015: 156-158) provide do indicate in that direction. But if that is the case, we have to reflect what it means that the mainstream is largely disconnected from our debates in human geography and urban studies. The consequence would be

that the mainstream is decreasingly bound to (any variety of) the epistemological rules and practices of academia by which we iteratively refine our knowledge of the world (see also Walker, 2015).

¹⁰ Recent interventions such as Taylor and Derudder (2016) and van Meeteren and Bassens (2016) all attempt to more formally embed GCR in critical realist terms.

¹¹ A related but different final elephant in the room might the classic postcolonial argument about to what extent 'capital' or 'uneven development' (Chakrabarty 2008 [2000]) are too 'Western' or 'Euro-American' concepts to be useful for critical research in the global South. This critique is addressed in Krijnen et al. (2016).

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