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Geography: rethinking the 'urban' and urbanization

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Chapter 3: Geography

Rethinking the “Urban” and Urbanization

Hyun Bang Shin

1. Introduction

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the etymology of the word ‘geography’ is the combination of *γῆ* (earth) and *γραφία* (act of writing) in Hellenistic Greek, thus referring to the ‘act of earth writing’ (Oxford University Press 2012). Geography is broadly concerned with the study of the nature that shapes and is shaped by human activities, and of the built environment that results from and circumscribes human interventions in nature. Therefore, a range of topics come under the purview of geographical studies, including the distribution of population, resources, and social/political/economic/cultural activities that are manifested at various geographical scales.

Writing in late 1970s, Herbert and Johnston (1978, 1, cited in Pacione 2009, 24) note that it would have been “quite exceptional” to have “in the early 1950s a separate course on urban geography at an English-speaking university.” Nowadays, it would be unthinkable not to have an urban course in the geography curriculum, particularly as we hear a frequent laudatory reference to the arrival of an “urban age,” celebrating the global demographic transition towards larger urban than rural populations (see Gleeson 2012, and Brenner and Schmid 2015a for a critical review).

As a sub-discipline, urban geography “may be defined as the study of cities as systems within a system of cities” (Pacione 2009, 18). It considers questions of society, economy, culture, and politics that have urban dimensions. Inevitably, it encompasses an array of topics, interacting with other sub-disciplines within geography (e.g., political geography, cultural geography, and economic geography) and outside (e.g., anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, and economics). What makes urban geography distinct is perhaps “the centrality of a spatial perspective” (Pacione 2009, 18), which is explained later herein.

This chapter examines the ways in which urban geography has defined the urban and what urbanization means as a process. The chapter begins with a concise intellectual history of geography (Section 2). Section 3 explores the two different approaches to defining the urban in urban geography: as a territorially-bounded entity based on statistical enumeration (Section 3.1), and as a social construct (Section 3.2). The chapter then brings attention to some of the emerging research themes within urban geography (Section 4) before summarizing the definitions of the urban within geography (Section 5).

2. Development of Geography

2.1. The Shifting Focus of Geography

Geography had traditionally been concerned with the study of regions, examining the spatial distribution of population or industries. As Doreen Massey (1984, 2) sums up, at the focus of the discipline was regional geography, accompanying “an essentially descriptive and untheorized collection of facts.” It primarily attended to the specificities of each region and to the understanding of the ways in which different elements of spatial organization were organized.

From the 1960s, social sciences were engulfed by what is often referred to as the “quantitative turn,” resulting in the proliferation of attempts to quantify every measurable

aspect of society and economy. Geography was not exempt, witnessing the establishment of spatial analysis that internalized mathematical modelling to measure the degree of spatial interactions. Influenced by positivism, geographers reduced space “to a concern with distance,” replacing “the interest in particularity and uniqueness” of place with “a search for spatial regularities” (Massey 1984, 2).

Social sciences in the 1970s further experienced what is known as the “spatial turn,” leading to the increasing awareness that social processes had a spatial dimension (Warf and Arias 2009). This meant that for geographers, space was to be no longer considered as a separate entity, subject to its own laws of production, but to be understood as socially produced. However, during the early years of the “spatial turn,” there was still a prevailing perception among social scientists that “the world operated, and society existed, on the head of a pin, in a spaceless, geographically undifferentiated world” (Massey 1984, 4). In other words, “‘space’ was seen as only an outcome; geographical distributions as only the *results* of social processes” (Massey 1984, 4, original emphasis).

This acknowledgement of the spatial construction of the social has been very important. This is where contributions by radical geographers such as David Harvey and Edward Soja, among others, were inspirational. David Harvey in particular called for a “geographical imagination” that “enables the individual to recognize the role of space and place in his [*sic*] own biography, to relate to the spaces he sees around him, and to recognize how transactions between individuals and between organizations are affected by the space that separates them” (Harvey 1973/2009, 24). Edward Soja (2009, 11) goes as far as to claim that space “is a vital existential force shaping our lives, an influential aspect of everything that ever was, is, or will be” (see Chapter 8).

From the late 1980s and 1990s, urban geography was further influenced by postmodernist thoughts, which attempted to turn away from grand theories and emphasize

differences in human experiences. This led to the “cultural turn” in human geography that emphasized the importance of analyzing the immaterial dimension of human life (Philo 2009), and encouraged urban geography to recognize the importance of studying the voice of “others,” their representation and ideological interpretation of texts generated by urban-scape (Pacione 2009, 28-29). More recently, postcolonial approaches have produced counter-attacks on urban theories generated mostly out of the experiences of Western cities, introducing postcolonial urban dimensions that question existing concepts from the West (for instance, Robinson 2006, Roy and Ong 2011).

In terms of its study scope, urban geography as a sub-discipline of geography has grown from studying systems of cities using central place theory, settlement classification, and patterns of settlements, to the position of cities in the national political economy as well as in the global economy, including studies on the network of world cities and the rise of mega-cities and city-regions (Pacione 2009, 5). For studying the dynamics within cities, urban geography covers a wide range of topics from urban morphology, ecology and mobility to territorial and social justice, cultural diversity, housing, economic restructuring and deprivation. The list can be endless.

Urban geographers increasingly seek to understand the interconnectedness of social, cultural, political, and economic activities that go beyond an immediate geographical boundary, and vice versa, from a multi-scalar perspective. In other words, as Massey (2007) emphasizes, the global is produced locally, while the local globally. It remains a task for geographers to analyze and comprehend the mutual constitution and co-production and the (oftentimes conflictual) relationships between uniqueness and generality (Massey 1984, 8-10).

2.2. Methods in Urban Geography

Methodologically, the “quantitative turn” of the 1960s and the persistent positivist approaches to urban geographical analysis led to the rise of a spatial science that included

spatial analysis of urban settlement patterns, rank-size relationships and population density (see Chapter 17), and, more recently, the modelling of urban structure informed by neoclassical economics (Pacione 2009, 26-27). Since the 1970s, an important strand of investigation has come from (neo-)Marxist perspectives, providing structuralist approaches to critically examine the underlying political economic processes of accumulation and structural forces that shape individual and collective human actions (see Chapter 18). Humanistic approaches, on the contrary, have emphasized the importance of human agents in shaping cities, thus countering the positivist perspective that tends to undermine human agents as influenced by spatial attributes. There is continuous tension between humanistic and structuralist approaches in terms of understanding the role of human agents and their association with the underlying/overarching structures of society.

When it comes to the methods used in studying urban geography, Schneider-Silwa (2015) refers largely to quantitative methods such as (a) urban social monitoring that makes use of statistical approaches, including GIS, to discern socio-economic structure, constituent elements and the patterns of their changing relationships; and (b) social survey that aims to generate first-hand data to investigate, for instance, patterns of behavior, perceived needs of individuals/groups, consumption preferences, and so on. However, this may be a gross under-representation of a diverse range of qualitative and mixed approaches that humanistic geographers have come to mobilize to enhance our contextual understanding of urbanizing societies. These qualitative methods, such as semi-structured or unstructured interviews, participant observation, visual mapping, and so on, can also be thought of as results of cross-disciplinary dialogues with adjacent disciplines such as anthropology (see Chapter 4) and sociology (see Chapter 2).

3. Defining the Urban and its Different Conceptions in Urban Geography

In urban geography, “urban” as a concept can be defined in terms of both spatial characteristics and social processes. On the one hand, the urban is defined as a territorially bound physical entity where social processes unfold. In these cases, administratively defined boundaries do not necessarily coincide with aspects of urban activity.

A second definition of the urban reflects the creative merges of urban geography with other social science since the 1970s. Viewed from a relational and processual perspective, this definition sees the urban not simply as a mere container accommodating social relations and activities, but as a social construct with a set of subjective meanings (or interpretations) ascribed by people to a place.

3.1. The Urban as Territorially Bound

As a physical attribute, “urban” can be described using various demographic, functional and administrative criteria (McGranahan 2015, 959). A place may be known to be urban if the size of its population within a territory is above a certain threshold set by the national government for statistical purposes. A place may also be considered as urban if the share of its local population engaging with non-primary industries (for example, manufacturing) passes a threshold level, or if it accommodates particular administrative functions (Tettey 2007, 164). Often, governments may use a combination of multiple criteria to define a place as urban in order to determine the rate of urbanization.¹

However, the use of physical attributes such as population size to define an area as urban frequently faces a number of complications, particularly as there is hardly any

¹ Here, urbanization rate is simply defined demographically as the share of urban population in the national population.

universal definition that facilitates effective cross-country comparisons. For instance, countries employ different criteria for the definition of urban settlement. In Sweden, a settlement may be categorized as urban if its population size exceeds 200, while the minimum threshold in Switzerland would be 10,000, and in Japan 30,000 (Pacione 2009, 20). Even the United Nations Population Division admits that “[t]here is no common global definition of what constitutes an urban settlement” (United Nations 2014, 4). The arbitrariness involved in definitional practices makes it difficult to carry out comparative analyses across regions and countries.

Furthermore, it is not straightforward to compare data historically within the same country. The population threshold itself also changes over time, calling for caution when producing a historical trend of urbanization in a country. For example, in Mali, censuses were known to use 5,000 individuals as the cut-off threshold for defining a settlement as urban in 1987, but this threshold increased to 30,000 in 1998 and then 40,000 in 2009 (McGranahan 2015, 959).

Scholars such as Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid (2014, 734) go as far as to conclude that the urban age thesis based on statistical enumeration of urban population is an artificial construct or “a statistical artifact” that is held together with practices that are “theoretically incoherent.” Keeping the enumeration consistent over time is a challenge, particularly for rapidly urbanizing countries such as China (Box 1).

Box 3.1: Influences of city designation in China on estimated urbanization rates.

An example can be found in mainland China. Until 1982, China’s State Statistics Bureau defined urban population as the population in urban administrative areas, that is, cities and officially designated towns located in suburban counties. According to Kam Wing Chan’s (1994) summary, from 1983 until at least before 1990, China’s urbanization data was

distorted due to the designation of rural settlements as official towns and towns as cities. Sometimes a whole county was reclassified as a city, turning a substantial amount of rural areas into officially urban overnight. Had the old method of estimating the urban population been applied without modification, such changes to designation would have resulted in a sudden increase in urbanization rates from about 20.8% in 1982 to 52.9% in 1990 (Chan 1994). In 1990, in order to correct the artificial bloating of the urban population size, the State Statistical Bureau adopted a new definition of urban population: without changing existing administrative structures, it introduced smaller, sub-settlement divisions based on (urban) “residents’ committees” (*jumin weiyuanhui*) and (rural) “villagers’ committees” (*cunmin weiyuanhui*), and combined them with the existing settlement classification (cities and towns). Thus, under the new definition urban population consisted of the whole population within urban districts in the case of provincial- and prefectural-level cities; and of members of residents’ committees in county-level cities and administrative counties. Members of villagers’ committees were excluded. China’s State Statistical Bureau used this method to rework its 1982-1990 population data and officially announced the share of the urban population 1990 as 26.4 percent.

To some extent, carrying out head counts as above had been a century-long problem. Already in the early twentieth century, Louis Wirth (1938), one of the early protagonists of the Chicago School of urban sociology (see Chapter 2), was skeptical of the shortfalls of demographic approaches, arguing that resorting to population size to classify an area as urban is “obviously arbitrary” and that “no definition of urbanism can hope to be completely satisfying as long as numbers are regarded as the sole criterion” (Wirth 1938, 4). As he suggests, “while the city is the characteristic locus of urbanism, the urban mode of life is not confined to cities” (Wirth 1938, 1). A small community lying in the shadow of a metropolitan

region may be more urban than a larger community found in a predominantly rural area (Wirth 1938, 1).

3.2. *The Urban as Socially Constructed*

The “quantitative turn” of social sciences led to the rise of the separation between the social and the spatial (Section 2.1). However, by the 1970s, social scientists—including human geographers—became increasingly cautious about the notion of the spatial being treated as independent of the social.² The resulting “spatial turn” gave rise to the understanding that space was a social product, or the social production of space (Massey 1984, 3-4). This resulted in urban geographers going beyond their comfort zone and interacting with other disciplines that would equip them to comprehend what lies underneath such spatial processes. Considering space as a social construct meant that “[t]he spatial’ is not just an outcome; it is also part of the explanation” (Massey 1984, 4).

In this regard, thinking of the urban as being more than a territorially bound entity is to critically perceive the relationship between the spatial and the social, no longer viewing space as a mere container of or an objective setting for social relations and activities (see also Amin 2004). For urban geographers in particular, the influence of the French philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre has been quite noteworthy (see Chapter 2). Not only did his work on the (social) production of space (Lefebvre 1991) inspire geographers like Edward Soja to put forward a “spatial turn” of geographical thinking (Soja 1989, 2009); Lefebvre’s

² For example, sociologist Kevin Gotham (2003, 731-732) laments the lack of attention to spatiality in the study of urban poverty, arguing that urban problematics such as poverty cannot be comprehended “without understanding how meanings and interpretations of space play a major role in shaping those situations.” Here, he stresses the importance of analyzing “spatial meanings” that “are both products of human interaction and producers of certain forms of human interaction” (ibid).

conceptualization of “urban society” emphasized how “becoming urban” means more than achieving a constellation of objectively existing constituent elements that are deemed urban (Lefebvre 1996, 2003).

Thinking of the urban as a social construct requires the understanding of subjective meanings ascribed to urban spaces. It is therefore paramount for critical scholarship to apprehend what the urban symbolizes in real politics. For a critical geographer like David Harvey (1985), urbanization was equated with “the urbanization of capital.” In this respect, the expansion of urban areas can be understood in the context of the capitalist accumulation that makes use of spatial fix as a means to address inherent contradictions of accumulation at a diverse range of geographical scales (see chapters 2, 18). The city as a concept is here utilized to uphold the existing capitalist accumulation system (see Wachsmuth 2014). There is a real process of materialist exploitation in the process of capitalist urbanization. Urbanization in this regard is not a value-neutral process. Sometimes it may be deemed to be a political as well as an ideological project (Shin 2014, 2016, Datta 2015). There is a real need to understand the hidden meanings and motivations behind the economic and political emphasis on the urban and the city, which produce uneven consequences on populations.

Furthermore, conceptualizing the “urban” as a social construct is to think of space and time from a relational and processual perspective. As Harvey (1996, 53) ascertains, “it is the process and its relational attributes of space and time that must be the fundamental focus of enquiry. The question of urbanization in the twenty-first century then becomes one of defining how space and time will be produced within what social processes.” Following Harvey’s lines of enquiry, it is possible to define urbanization not simply as demographic transformation, but as a process that entails the manifestation of capital accumulation that takes the form of investments in the built environment, accompanied by changes to the political, social, and economic institutions to facilitate such accumulation. Particularly in

emerging economies and developing countries, urbanization increasingly entails speculative expansion of the secondary circuit of capital accumulation, which reproduces distinctive social relations (Goldman 2011, Shin 2016).

The importance of a processual perspective in conceptualizing the urban and urbanization is evident in a number of debates such as, for example, the study of gentrification. Until recently, gentrification research has been primarily paying attention to inner-city neighborhoods as the site of unfolding gentrification. To some extent, this was an inevitable outcome of the scholarship especially in the 1980s and 1990s, which faced the challenges of explaining the re-emergence of the inner-city as the site of capital re-investment (see Chapter 9). Such “back-to-the-city” movement was boosted by urban policies that privileged property development, home-ownership, and debt-financing of individual real estate investment (Fainstein 2001, Healey et al. 1992, Smith 1996). The result was the intense commodification of urban space at the expense of its use value (Smith and Lefavre 1986), and the capitalist reconfiguration of the collective consumption central to the social reproduction under the Keynesian welfare statism (Castells 1977).

However, following Eric Clark (2005, 258), if “[g]entrification is a process involving a change in the population of land-users that the new users are of a higher socio-economic status than the previous users, together with an associated change in the built environment through a reinvestment in fixed capital,” there is no reason to restrict our comprehension of gentrification only to inner-city locations as singular urban centrality. Andy Merrifield (2014) also suggests to go beyond the centre-periphery binary perspective prevalent in urban studies, arguing that contemporary urbanization produces multiple centralities. This perspective informs the gentrification scholarship that geographical locations cannot be seen as pre-conditions for gentrification to emerge, and that gentrification is to be associated more with

the process and less with the forms that it used to be identified with (for more extended discussions, see Chapter 2 in Lees, Shin, and López-Morales (2016)).

4. Emerging Research Themes in Urban Geography

The previous section examined how geographers have defined “urban” as both a territorially bound entity and a social construct. This section provides an overview of some of the emerging themes that have received attention among urban geographers. In particular, the section includes debates on (1) questioning the concept of city; (2) the relationship between urbanization and industrialization; (3) meaning of urbanization in terms of its impact on the relationship between the urban and the rural.

4.1. Questioning the Concept of the City

When thinking of urban space, it is crucial not to equate it simply with the city, a point that Harvey (1996, 52) also ascertains. Cities are not self-contained: they interact with the hinterland, rural and suburban areas, and beyond. The mode of such interaction nowadays goes beyond the understanding of the twentieth century urban scholarship based on the experiences of the West. Increasingly, critics point out that confining our gaze to the study of cities undermines our ability to grasp what the transformation of a place into urban, that is urbanization, truly entails (for instance, Brenner and Schmid 2015a, Merrifield 2013). As Roger Keil (2013, 9) states, “[m]uch of what goes for ‘urbanization’ today is not what was seen as such in classical terms of urban extension.” Merrifield (2014, 6) also emphasizes how Lefebvre considered it vital “to quit bounding something, to give up on solidity and the security of an absolute and embrace something relative and open, something becoming.”

Urban activities in social and economic domains are not confined to the administrative boundaries of cities (see also Chapter 6). After all, cities are embedded in a myriad of institutional networks and experience flows of people, capital, and goods, all of which extend

beyond cities and regions themselves (see Amin 2004, Dicken et al. 2001). This perspective renders the concept of the city increasingly ineffective to capture actually existing processes of urbanization (Brenner and Schmid 2015a, Lefebvre 2003). In fact, more recent debates advocate perspectives that think of the urban-rural not as a dichotomy but as “ends of a continuum” (Week 2010, 36), rejecting the use of arbitrary (often administrative) boundaries to define a place as urban.³ This means that cities are increasingly becoming less useful as an analytical term.⁴

Moreover, for Lefebvre, there is a need to adopt “urban society” or “urban fabric” as a more appropriate metaphor or terminology than the territorially bound “city” (Lefebvre 1996). In other words, as Merrifield (2013, 911) succinctly puts it, “the term ‘urban society’, or ‘urban fabric’ ... does not narrowly define the built environment of cities, but, says Lefebvre, indicates all manifestations of the dominance of the city over the countryside.” Lefebvre’s emphasis on urban society instead of city is a helpful warning message to the contemporary scholarship that often falls into “methodological cityism,” treating the city as “near-exclusive

³ Robert Beauregard (1990, 212) also points at the importance of “mak[ing] the *city-building process*, rather than the built environment, the central object of planning thought and practice.” Here, despite the title of his commentary, he attempts to dissuade readers from being obsessed with the city itself as a built environment or an object, and pleas for attention to the process of city-building that encompasses all settlement types.

⁴ However, economic geographers may argue otherwise, holding on to the usefulness of the concept of city based on agglomeration economies (see Chapter 6). For instance, Scott and Storper (2015, 6-7) argue that “the basic glue that holds the city together as a complex congeries of human activities, and that underlies—via the endemic common pool resources and social conflicts of urban areas—a highly distinctive form of politics.”

analytical lens for studying contemporary processes of urban social transformation that are not limited to the city” (Angelo and Wachsmuth 2015, 20). This is “an analytical privileging, isolation and perhaps naturalization of the city in studies of urban processes where the non-city may also be significant” (Angelo and Wachsmuth 2015, 20). In this regard, the city may also be understood as “a *representation* of urbanization process that exceed it” (Wachsmuth 2014, 76), which explains the proliferation of various rhetoric of what the city is about and what it should be.

4.2. *Establishing the Relationship between Urbanization and Industrialization*

The rise of the built environment and the subordination of industrialization to urbanization is a second emerging research theme in urban geography. Urbanization entails the process of *becoming urban*, which comes into a collision course with what pre-existed. Urbanization is also more than simple territorial expansion of administrative boundaries of existing cities. As noted earlier, Lefebvre’s anticipation of the coming of an “urban society” and therefore impending “urban revolution” is rooted in his diagnosis of the rise of the secondary circuit of the built environment playing out at a planetary scale (Merrifield 2013, 913). According to Angelo and Wachsmuth (2014, 23), this process of planetary urbanization produces two intriguing outcomes: that urbanity is no longer confined to the city boundary; and that urbanization plays out in multiple geographical scales. The rise of the secondary circuit of the built environment is further aided by global financialization, which helps the securitization of land and landed properties, thus the accumulation of fictitious capital and its transaction across geographies (see Moreno 2014 and Chapter 9).

Interestingly, Neil Smith was rather skeptical of Lefebvre’s proposition that the industrialization subordinates to the process of urbanization, stating that such a “claim has not withstood the test of time, especially in light of the globalization of industrial production and the expansion of East Asia that was well in tow as Lefebvre wrote” (Smith 2002, 447).

However, nowhere does the subordination of industrial production to urbanization seem more appropriate than the fast-developing region of East Asia, where industrial parks or special economic zones have created (often export-oriented) manufacturing facilities as bridgeheads for urbanization and urban-based accumulation through expansive installation of infrastructure and real estate projects (see Shin 2014, 2015, and Wu 2009).

4.3. Elucidating the Relationship between the Urban and the Rural

When a rural place becomes urban, it does not necessarily mean that urban social relations replace rural relations. Regarding this dialectical relationship between the urban and the rural, it is noteworthy to review a recent debate between Brenner and Schmid (2015a) and Richard Walker (2015).

Brenner and Schmid (2015a, 166) propose a number of theses on the urban, including the interpretation of urbanization as “three mutually constitutive moments - concentrated urbanization, extended urbanization and differential urbanization.” In particular, their extended urbanization refers to the process of “ongoing construction and reorganization of relatively fixed and immobile infrastructures (in particular, for transportation and communication) in support of these operations, and consequently, the uneven thickening and stretching of an ‘urban fabric’ (Lefebvre [1970] 2003)” (Brenner and Schmid 2015a, 167).

In response to this, Walker (2015, 186) warns against the danger of “totalizing urbanization,” that is, stretching the concept of the urban to such an extent as “abolishing any clear idea of the countryside in contrast to the city.” Bob Catterall (2013) laments the lack of consideration of the rural dimension as well as the “green dimension” or the nature in planetary urbanization debates. Brenner and Schmid (2015b) retort that “the notion of an urban fabric (and the closely associated distinction between concentrated and extended urbanization) internalizes the city/countryside divide within a singular, unevenly developed

process—urbanization—and explores their co-evolution and mutual transformation within broader spatial divisions of labor” (p.11).

With regard to the above debate, it would suffice here to state that it is important not to fetishize the urban. It is increasingly difficult to clearly discern the urban from the rural. Accordingly, Rigg (1998, 515, cited in Week 2010, 34) succinctly states that “[a]s the relationship between city and countryside becomes ever more entwined, it is becoming ever harder to talk of discrete ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ worlds.” The image of the industrial cities from the nineteenth century is being challenged not only by the post-industrial decline of former cities of the West, but also by the proliferation of industrial production in areas that, in the past, accommodated only agricultural production.

In a historically unprecedented way, the force of urbanization brings the two worlds of the urban and the rural closer—but in ways that reproduce rural relations under hegemonic urbanizing conditions. The infiltration of the urban into the rural does not necessarily mean that the rural is effaced by the advancement of the urban. For instance, rural industrialization characterized early economic growth in mainland China in the 1980s, when reform policies encouraged China’s rural collectives to establish township and village enterprises (Ma and Fan 1994). Despite extensive urbanization during the subsequent reform era, the socialist contract between the state, rural collectives and villagers continues to play a crucial role as villages are urbanized and subsequently redeveloped (Shin 2016, Zhao and Webster 2011). The geographical scale of mainland China and the country’s uneven process of urbanization respond to the legacy of the socialist era and the pressure of capital accumulation at the same time. Thus, the transformation of rural areas, as discussed above, exhibits multiple trajectories (see Sheppard, Leitner, and Maringanti 2013).

It is imperative to explain the socio-spatial manifestation of such multiple trajectories of transforming urban-rural relations (or, in a similar manner, nature-society relations), while

ensuring “to keep a grip on the generality of events, the wider processes lying behind them” (Massey 1984, 9).

5. Conclusions

The diverse nature of how the urban is defined across and within disciplines may seem overwhelming to critics and students of geography and urban studies. As Sayer (1984, 279) remarks, some may assume that “the concept of the urban no longer has a distinctive, coherent real object, only imaginary ones.” Harvey (1996, 58) also states that “it is equally vital that the language in which the urban problematic is embedded be transformed, if only to liberate a whole raft of conceptual possibilities that may otherwise remain hidden.”

Rather than confining to the technical discussions of what the urban means and how it is defined, it would perhaps be important to understand how the concept of the urban is utilized to enhance vested interests (for instance, those of business and political elites) that exploit the mass in a society.

Urbanization is a process that establishes a new relationship between the urban and the non-urban, between the social and nature (Angelo and Wachsmuth 2014). However, it would be erroneous to consider urbanization as a process that turns everything into something urban. While the mounting emphasis on the urban somehow creates an aura of the urban as omnipresent, it is essential to acknowledge “multiple processes at work in our cities,” each one “defin[ing] its own spatio-temporality” (Harvey 1996, 52). In this regard, *non-urban* processes are not to be treated as destined to annihilation by *urban* forces, but as processes destined to persist and exert their presence through mutation.

Urban geographers can learn from the statement of anthropologist Jonathan Bach (2010, 447): “This question of approaching the symbolically ‘rural’ part of cities as something other than a space to be wholly assimilated or physically excised is a key challenge for the rapid urbanization happening around the globe.” It is also equally important to dissect “the

significations of the urban and the rural,” which “make sense in the specific contexts of the lives of the particular people who articulated them” (Sayer 1984, 284, see also Wachsmuth 2014).

Finally, more often than not, the onset of an urban age was seen as the rise of the city as a source of problems (for instance, generation of pollution, overcrowded habitation, and so on; see Davis 2006) as well as solutions to the problems it generated (for example, Katz and Bradley 2013, see also chapters 2,8,14,18,19). However, as Merrifield (2014, 916) emphasizes:

the urban does nothing in itself; its role is that of a dynamic socio-spatial sphere in which the betweenness of people is ever so much more intense, ever so much more immediate and palpable, ever more likely to erupt should that social proximity and diversity, that concentration and simultaneity, elicit human bonding or human breakdown.

What is required is to think of the urban as an amalgamation of multi-scalar processes of production, consumption, and exchange, which crystallize in various guises that include cities, suburban, or peri-urban settlements.

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