

The Global City: Whose Social Construct is it Anyway?

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Debates on "the global city" have begun to take on a recognizable, if not formulaic, character-- poised somewhere on a conceptual and epistemological borderland where positivism, structuralism, and essentialism meet. The effort by James W. White to position himself within this borderland, while lively and engaging, fails to move beyond the prevailing parameters of these debates. In considering White's effort to distinguish his approach to "global city" formation and its consequences from the prevailing view articulated most fully by John Friedmann (1986, 1995) and Saskia Sassen (1991), I will try to show (a) how similar these approaches are to each other at a meta-theoretical level and (b) how their shared tendency to focus the debate around positivist taxonomies, urban hierarchies constructed on the basis of these taxonomies, and empirical efforts to "map" (or in White's case even to formally "model") the "real" causes and consequences of "global cities" leads to both sides in this debate overlooking the fact that the world cities debate takes place within a wider public discourse on "globalization," which is itself a political project of powerful social forces -- not something to be measured by the scientific tools of objective social scientists.

A close reading of White's paper underlines the extent to which his approach is convergent with, rather than contradictory to the position taken by Sassen and other global cities researchers. Whether the wine in the global cities bottle is old or new, the very way that White frames the debate constitutes an effort to define the "global city" as an objective reality, an "out there," a "thing" operating outside the social construction of meaning. Whether old or new, both sides in this dualistic debate are arguing about which set of material conditions are attributes of "global cities" and which cities possess these attributes. The debate generates alternative positivist taxonomies said to be occurring entirely outside our processes of meaning making.

Viewed in this light, the "objective" attributes taken by White as signs of economic globalization and global city status are virtually identical to those identified by Sassen(1991) and Friedmann (1986, 1995). Only the interrelationship of these attributes within an a positivistic causal framework is debated by White. These include five roughly "nested" economic attributes: 1) internationalization of the world economy , accompanied by increased economic transgression of national borders; (2) heightened capital mobility, the deployment of which is concentrated in a handful of "global cities;" (3) the shift from manufacturing to business and financial (or "producer") services in major "core country" cities; (4) accordingly, the concentration within key "global" or "world" cities of global "command and control" functions coordinated by the growing "producer" service sectors found there; and, finally, (5) the hierarchical organization of these cities into a global "system of cities" whose purpose is, in White's words, "the accumulation, control, and deployment of international capital."

White's main quarrel with the global cities perspective seems to be that because the model is unicausal (economically determinist) but multiconsequential, in mapping the causes and consequences of particular cities in the urban hierarchy, the global cities approach may get cause and effect wrong (e.g., "politics matters," at least in Paris and Tokyo) or may not lead to the consequences anticipated in the model (e.g., economic dualism; market control of urban life). In White's view, the "causal linkages" in the global cities model are made to cohere by a strange amalgam of Marxist, neo-classical, and modernization theory assumptions mixed with a strong dose of Anglo-American ethno-centrism. His narrative underlines other "causal" factors in the globalization of cities (e.g., "the state" in Paris and Tokyo) and challenge the reductionism of the "dual city" component of the global city hypothesis, again stressing the role of the state and other "domestic" factors in mediating internal social (in)equality in global cities.

In making his case against Anglo-American ethnocentrism, White sometimes essentializes Japanese and French culture --e.g. his assertion that "Japan is still a society of cohesive communities," conveniently overlooks growing evidence of cracks in that cohesion ranging from destructive cults to mystifying mass murders. His view of the French state is expressed in decidedly functionalist terms--e.g., : "(I)n France the state constantly reiterates--and demonstrates--that it has an interest in ensuring social solidarity and interregional equity... ." His contrasting , ahistorical, depiction of the South Bronx as an Anglo-American exemplar of the convergence of globalization and social dualism overlooks recent changes in the social fabric of the Bronx ushered in by the immigrant entrepreneurs that most people take as a sign of globalization. These moves , equating

social polarization and economic globalization with Anglo-American world cities and excluding other political cultures from the equation, allows him to conclude that politics and culture drive whatever urban globalization is found in Paris and Tokyo and that global cities researchers suffer from Anglo-American ethnocentrism.

Several of his other "culturally specific" arguments serve only to muddy up these main arguments. We find that while the state is responsible for the globalization of Paris, that nineteenth century "capital of capital," isn't really all that global after all. Indeed, he concludes that Paris is "really" more a cultural center of Europe than a business center of global capitalism. Moreover, it has been "kept down" by a French political culture of anti-Parisianism. Likewise, implicitly acknowledging the appropriateness of the economic taxonomy of world cities that he intends to quarrel with, White concludes that Tokyo might be considered a "global city" because it has a built environment of "pell-mell" globalization. Yet it also has low levels of direct foreign investment, few foreign migrants, and lacks both global financial command and control functions and a cosmopolitan culture. On this basis White concludes that Tokyo is not a global city at all!

Thus we are left wondering what this debate was all about. If the model he is critiquing is too economic - be it Marxist, neo-classical, or modernization theory in thrust -- isn't his concession to the model a central concession to the "economism" he criticizes in others, despite his frequent protestations that "politics" and "the state" matter in world city formation. In White's model politics and the state seem to matter only by withholding their leading urban centers from entering fully into the global economy. The latter, in turn, goes about "its" business of channeling global capital flows to more politically friendly cities and states. White thus concludes rhetorically that "states can allow or disallow a city to globalize or dualize."

In effect, White accepts the premise that what it means to be a global city is to possess the internal attributes identified in the Sassen and Freidmann models that give free reign to the forces of global capital. This is so, despite his decidedly functionalist claim that "another" cause of globalization may be the state because "states have will of their own, and can challenge, usurp, collude with, and create markets." This functionalist assumption is followed by a claim that it is possible to develop positivist taxonomies for characterizing cities as more or less global and by a wistful call for perhaps the most scientific fetish still around - formal causal modeling --viz.: "There is, unfortunately, no alternate theory at this point, which does specify all the causalities and optional paths at work."

My own position on this debate on globalization and global cities, presented below, is framed within the wider epistemological and ontological debate on social constructionism and the critique of ideology. Because of limited space the argument is made somewhat schematically. (For a more extensive analysis see Smith, 1994, 1995; Guarnizo and Smith, 1998.) Hopefully, despite its brevity, the case is made with sufficient clarity to move the "global cities" debate to a different level of analysis.

First, the "global city" is best thought of as a social construct not a place or "object" consisting of essential properties that can be readily measured outside the process of meaning-making. Debates about the "essence" of world cities are reminiscent of earlier debates over the "essence of place"(see Massey, 1994 :111). In both debates certain internal features of this or that "place" constitute its essential status. In the case of global cities that status is the "possession" of a cumulative number of economic attributes that add up to its "global" status positioned within a stratified world hierarchy of cities.

A more fruitful starting point for socially constructing and analyzing the role of cities in the epoch of "globalization" (more on this below) would be to focus on the articulations of global and local, socio-cultural as well as political-economic relations operating outside as well as within the borders and boundaries of today's urban centers, linking people, places, and processes to each other transnationally in disjointed rather than hierarchical patterns of interaction (see, for example, Appadurai, 1990).

Viewed in this light, all cities, rather than a handful of producer service centers, become part of the comparative analysis of : a) the "localization" of global economic, socio-cultural, and political flows; b) the globalization of local socio-economic, political and cultural forces; and (c) the networks of social action connecting these flows and forces in transnational social space. Understanding these emergent transnational networks, as human creations, as sites of multicentered, if not decentered, agency, in all of their overlapping messiness, is a project in which studying mediated differences in the patterns of intersection of global and local flows at particular geographical points, in particular political jurisdictions, become more important than measuring the economic commonalities of hierarchically organized financial centers viewed as constructions of a single agent --multinational capital. Starting from this epistemological approach there is no solid object known as the "global city" appropriate for grounding urban research, only an endless interplay of differently articulated transnational networks and practices best deciphered by studying the agency of the local, regional, national, and transnational actors that shape and sustain these transnational networks and their attendant practices

and outcomes. The "new urban politics" uncovered by making this move is a disjointed terrain of global media flows, transnational migrant networks, state-centered actors that oppose and side with global actors, local, national, and transnational social movements, local and global growth and anti-growth machines, multilocational entrepreneurs, and multilateral political institutions, all colluding and colliding with each other, ad infinitum. The urban future following from this scenario is far less predictable but far more interesting than the grand narrative of global capital swallowing local political elites that inevitably seems to follow from the global cities model. Rather than viewing "global cities" as central expressions of the global accumulation of capital, all cities can then be viewed in the fullness of their particular linkages with the world(s) outside their boundaries. Their "urban" specificity, in short, becomes a matter of discerning "the particularity of the social interactions which intersect at that location, and of what people make of them, in their interpretations and in their lives (Massey, 1994:117)."

This brings us to the second part of my argument. The global cities literature needs to be situated historically as one part of a far larger academic and public discourse on the meaning of "globalization." Recent work by McMichael (1996), Drainville (1998), and others (e.g., Mander and Goldsmith, 1996) persuasively argues that "globalization," like its binary "local diversity," needs to be understood as an historical construct rather than an objective economic process operating behind our backs. Whose historical construct is it anyway? According to McMichael (1996) the grand narrative of economic globalization has been advanced most forcefully not by academics but by an emergent international monetarist regime, a set of institutional actors who have instituted, thus far successfully, a political offensive against developmental states and institutions. The globally-oriented institutions spearheading this offensive were established "under the auspices of the 1980's debt crisis," to advance the monetarist agenda of global "efficiency" and "financial credibility," against the nationally-oriented institutions of developing countries. This global political project has, in turn, produced a series of struggles over the meaning of "the local," as cities and other localities, via their political, economic, and cultural actors and institutions, seek either to find a niche within the new globalist public philosophy or to resist pressures to "globalize," i.e., to practice fiscal austerity and conform to monetarist principles and policies.

The origins of the ideology of globalism are historically specific. They constitute efforts by powerful social forces to replace the developmentalist institutional framework of the 1960s-1980s, premised on modernization theory, with a new mode of economic

integration of cities and states to world market principles. These principles have been posited by their advocates as inevitable byproducts, or ruling logics, of the material condition of globalization "on the ground," rather than, as they are, the social constructs of historically specific social interests - identified variously by McMichael and Drainville as including -- managers of international agencies, state managers that have embraced neo-liberalism, transnational corporate financial institutions, various academic ideologues, and , most especially, "the managers of newly empowered multilateral institutions like the IMF, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization (McMichael, 1996:28)." This neo-liberal regime of "global governance" (see Drainville, 1998) is viewed as an incipient global ruling class whose efforts at global economic management can only be thwarted when globalization itself is recognized as a historically specific project of social actors and agents rather than an inevitable condition of contemporary existence.

Whether or not one entirely agrees with this assessment of the global future, it is surprising that none of the world cities scholars, whose politics would surely oppose global governance on monetarist principles, seems to have given much thought to the question of whether their research agenda and its "objective" findings implicitly provide support for that very project by legitimating the "reality" of global cities as part an parcel of the "objective processes" of economic globalization that they are studying. This question is raised as an ironic observation not as an accusation. It brings us back, in closing, to the initial question posed in the title of this essay: "The Global City: Whose social construct is it anyway?"

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