*Introduction*

The recent paper by Scott and Storper (2014), entitled *The Nature of Cities: The Scope and Limits of Urban Theory* is a timely interjection into the urban theory literature, not least because as we are constantly reminded, we are living in an ‘urban century’ (Hall and Pfeiffer, 2013). The field of scholarly urban studies is rapidly proliferating and its infiltration into urban policy is difficult to ignore. Self-styled ‘urbanists’ are having an increasing influence on the actions and processes of urban management, and so the theoretical and ideological landscape of how scholars conceptualize the urban is more important than ever.

In their paper, Scott and Storper (2014: 4) argue that the academic field of urban studies requires a “shared vocabulary” in order to “contribute to the investigation of cities by providing us with pointers that facilitate the crucial task of demarcating the inner logic of urbanization from other social processes”. Their paper ultimately suggests that such a vocabulary should rest on the conceptual cornerstones of agglomeration and clustering (and the resultant ‘urban land nexus’). Such a conceptualization captures much of the prevailing approaches to urban development, and is, on the surface, an appropriate ‘catch all’ proposition for the ways that contemporary cities are developing. However, I would like to argue that while there could indeed be a desire for a ‘general urban theory’, the ‘vocabulary’ offered by Scott and Storper is too instrumental, deterministic and more damagingly perhaps, too *economistic* in that it priorities financial and capitalistic accumulative activities over anything else. They argue that “agglomeration is the basic glue that holds the city together” (page 6), but foreground such agglomerative ontologies with economic contours (for example through Duranton and Puga’s (2004) highly firm-centric taxonomy of ‘sharing, matching and learning’). Moreover, while they concede that the clustering paradigm extends beyond economic measures and is a “quasi-feature of human existence” (page 6), they fail to account for the inherent unequal power structures that clustering is predicated upon, because they resign political contestation away from the city to the ‘very core of social life’ (page 13). In effect, they are arguing for the *depoliticisation* of the concept of the urban. If we are to seek out a generalised urban theory, then it should not be based on agglomeration ontologies that have structural inequalities inbuilt. Brenner and Schmidt (2014: 750) argue that the “entrenched methodological tendency [of a focus on clustering] must be superseded”, and so instead, I argue that urban theory should seek out urban injustices and inequalities and excavate their root causes – and such a theoretical undertaking requires a far broader conceptualisation of cities that sees them not as taxonomies of agglomeration, but of more or less intense coagulations of urbanisation.

The main epistemological issue with Scott and Storper’s (2014) proposed theoretical framework is that it falls foul of the very ideologies it is attempting to rebuke. Specifically, they reject the notion that the urban is an intrinsic part of social life; that “claims that tend to assimilate all forms of social and political action into an urban totality” are “conceptual overreach” (page 13). However, the argumentation developed by Scott and Storper throughout actually collides the urban and ‘social and political life’, rather than extricating them. The ideological construct of ‘the city’, I argue, is a more ossified and concrete instance of the velocities of urbanization (something with which Wachsmuth (2014) has also grappled). All aspects of social, cultural, political and economic life can be characterized as more or less urban, but never non-urban. If we utilize such a theoretical mantra (one that Lefebvre articulates the most boldly) then it becomes clear that we can indeed have an urban theory that captures all the variation, eclecticism and difference that Scott and Storper’s framework only partially encompasses, but also exposes the power inequalities that is does not.

In order to argue this, I want to first point to the inherent contradictions in Scott and Storper’s arguments by teasing out their conflation of urban and what they consider to be non-urban. Then, I want to argue that clustering is too economistic in its ontology and its analytical lens, to be a theory generalizable to all city life. Finally, I offer up some concluding theoretical thoughts.

*The urban and the non-urban?*

In the section ‘Generality and Difference’ (Scott and Storper, 2014: 10), the opening paragraph describes the plethora of different variables that are often used to characterize particular cities. Post-industrial or manufacturing; wealthy or poor; ethnically homogenous or heterogeneous; authoritarian or democratic, global North or global South, “*ad infinitum*”. These vast differences in the characterization of cities is proliferating a “plurality” of theoretical concepts, many of which are outlined throughout the paper (such as the Chicago School, the Ordinary City debate as well as assemblage theory and Actor-Network Theory). Their line of argument is that a “coherent concept of the city” can be obtained if we cut through the “Gordian knot” of empirical and theoretical multiplicity, and rest on a general urban theory that has a two-pronged approach of clustering and the subsequent proliferation of an ‘urban land nexus’. The nature of their proposed framework therefore is based upon an idea that “cities are always embedded in wider systems of social and political relationships at many different scales” (page 10). Such an assertion though is predicated on a rather precipitant assumption; that cities are ontologically distinct from the ‘social and political relationships’ in which they are ‘embedded’. If we conceive of cities as isolated geographic and conceptual entities that are ‘underpinned’ by different scalar, social and political processes then the ‘categorization’ of cities will continue to proliferate as quickly as the ways in which these processes can be assigned to any given city. In other words, viewing cities as being embedded in, rather than a constitution of, social and political relationships (or indeed any other meta-narrative you chose to apply – local, global, cultural, economic, left, right, capitalistic, communist, green, smart, creative *ad infinitum*) will see empirical variation and difference as external to the conceptualization of cities, rather than an inherent part of their characteristics. It also has the effect of creating a ‘non-urban’ realm, and then relegates it to an “empty field” and “an indeterminate outside” (Brenner and Schmidt, 2014: 750). Lefebvre (2003: 4) hypothesized that society is urbanized, and that there is an ‘urban fabric’ of “varying densities, thickness, and activity”. To view cities therefore as the more dense, thick and active instances of this fabric eschews ‘the city’ as a stand alone concept (Wachsmuth, 2014), and indeed epistemologically brings together cities with the very social and political relationships that Scott and Stroper argue are non-urban.

Taking a view of cities as being more or less stable coagulations of the processes of urbanization (which include social, political and cultural activity *as well as* the economic activity of clustering) also gives more agency to those actors whose voices are diminished by the power structures of the economistic development of cities. Cities, particularly those characterized by Western liberal democratic societies have constantly been critiqued for being revanchist and polar, creating extreme amounts of wealth and circulatory capital, but also servile classes, precarious labour and living, and inequalities (see a recent edited collection by Brenner et al. (2012)). If we are to address these problems we need a theoretical inclination of the urban that does not attempt to give ontological primacy to any one suite of processes; even more so, if that suite of processes (i.e. clustering and the urban land nexus) fail to account for instances of exclusion, expulsions and underdevelopment and the masking of power-structures more generally. Scott and Storper are clear in their assertion that such power inequalities (or political contestations) are beyond the domain of the city, and reside ‘below’:

“The basic etiology of political contestation in contemporary society extends far beyond the domain of the city in the strict sense, for it *reaches down into the very core of social life* where the basic mechanisms of injustice, inequality, political oppression and other major causes of inequality and unrest reside”.

(Scott and Storper, 2014: 13, my emphasis)

This delineation between clustering and agglomeration as the prime ontology of cities, and power inequalities as the domain of something else, depoliticises the urban when in reality, it is *precisely* the processes of agglomeration and the urban land nexus themselves, along with the economic inequalities they contain, that create these injustices, inequalities and political oppressions.

Let me offer a concrete example. Scott and Storper (2014) argue that the sub-prime real estate boom that caused the recent global recession was “not principally caused” (page 9) by the processes of urbanization (i.e. it was non-urban), but by the innovations within the financial industries that allowed such mortgage products to be available in the first place. The subsequent crash of the sub-prime mortgage industry was, they argue, “a crisis that was not at the outset fundamentally urban” (page 10). There are number of issues that can be raised by such a reasoning, the most prescient of which being that the very financial innovations of sub-prime mortgages came about through the urban process of clustering that is the very bedrock of their framework. Sassen (2001) points out that Global Cities are predicated upon the agglomeration of advanced producer service firms, and places like Wall Street, Canary Wharf and Marunouchi thrive via the proximity and interaction of firms. Such clustering is said to catalyze creativity and innovation, something that Scott and Storper argue throughout their paper. But sub-prime mortgages are the very products that this creativity and innovation bring about. So given that the very product that they argue caused the real estate crash was formulated through the fundamental urban process of clustering is reason enough that the real estate boom and bust was very much part of an urbanization process.

But in addition, the sub-prime mortgages-inspired crash was predicated upon the centrality of property ownership to urban living. The aspiration of home-ownership-whatever-the-costs fuelled by the neoliberal urban policies of the 1980s is an epistemology of Scott and Stoper’s urban land nexus, which they ague “is molded to a significant degree by the behavior of firms seeking locations for production and households seeking living space” (page 8). ‘Households seeking living space’ in particular is a symptom of the economic and political narratives that genuflects to the ownership of private property (Harvey, 2010). This adds a further dimension of complicity to Scott and Stoper’s urban theory to the development of sub-prime mortgages. Therefore, it could be said that both in terms of the processes clustering and the urban lend nexus, the financial crisis is *very much* an urban phenomena.

However in denying this, Scott and Storper are indulging in instrumentalist reasoning; by bracketing off particular processes as urban and not-urban, they are creating an arbitrary, and worse, apolitical idea of what constitutes a city. And in this case, their idea of the city is innocent of the predatory financial innovations that caused the recent global recession, i.e. sub-prime mortgage products. The chain of events that created an urban crisis (such as the sub-prime real estate crash) cannot be bracketed off or reduced to a specific non-urban realm (financial or otherwise); it is not in other place ‘down in the very core of social life’, because that very core of social life is part and parcel of city life. We must accept that that the processes that initiated the crisis were created by the power-centralising and exploitative processes that are imbued within the concepts of agglomeration and the urban land nexus.

In sum, the framework offered by Scott and Storper (2014: 4, my emphasis), because it attempts to “facilitate the crucial task of demarcating the inner logic of urbanization from other social processes”, is simply renegotiating the contours and boundaries of urban theoretical variation, rather than admonishing them as they suggest. As has been noted by Huyssen (2008: 3), urban space is “always and inevitably social space involving subjectivities and identities differentiated by class and race, gender and age, education and religion”. So by viewing the urbanization process as characterizing social, political, economic and cultural life, only then can we begin to highlight the unequal power relations that are inherent to the clustering process.

*The Dangers of Development*

Another related issue I want to take up with Scott and Storper’s framework is that it is valorizes a developmentalist discourse based around economic geographical processes – namely the insatiable desire for growth. Scott and Stroper (2014: 6) claim “agglomeration, proximity and density… are fundamental and defining features of cities everywhere”. Keen to point out that this is not just from an economic geography perspective, they argue that “agglomeration touches many… dimensions of human life” (*ibid*.). The agglomerative tendencies of cities marks them out from non-urban spaces, in that while cities do interlink and create a world city network (see Taylor, 2004), the internal functioning of cities means that there is a distinguishable iconoclasm that separates it from the surrounding “space economy” (Scott and Storper, 2014: 7). This, they argue is in the same way that a mountain is distinct from the surrounding typography, but also indistinguishable as to where the physical boundaries of that mountain are. Agglomeration therefore is seen as the *ipso facto* defining feature of cities that leads to all other variables and characteristics.

The theoretical inclination of the agglomeration literature however is limited in its account for those instances of under-development, stagnation and decline (see Bathelt and Taylor 2002; Moretti, 2013). Given that it is a concept fundamentally born from an economic geographical perspective, applying it as the core feature of city-ness implies that there is an overt and somewhat unidirectional developmentalist discourse to city life, moreover one that shapes the social space of cities around the desires of capital. There is no escaping that contemporary urban development is characterized by a belief in the wide-ranging benefits of clustering (and the economic benefits it presupposes), but such a discourse is an associative ontology that underplays the more deleterious effects of agglomerative practices (see Vorley et al., 2012). Moreover clustering as a category of analysis does not fully grasp the dynamics of the creation of social space in the city, particularly how it is shaped by the financial demands of capital accumulation. The current problematic trends of city development (notably the increasing securitization and privatisation of space) are a direct spatial consequence of the infiltration of clustering and agglomeration as an urban policy discourse. We do not have to look too far around modern-day cities to see business parks, financial districts, cultural quarters, shopping malls and retail zones, all products of agglomerative policies, with many of them espousing overt privatised, securitised and even militarised spaces. Empirically then, clustering has been used to justify major urban development schemes and policies (such as urban zoning, place-making and city quartering) under the rubric that it engenders economic prosperity, but is changing the way (often negatively) we can access, engage with and interact with urban space.

More than this though, the clustering paradigm does not allow for the exploration of exclusion, exemptions and those people and institutions that are not involved in the clustering process. Given the gargantuan amount of economic geographical literature that has empirically and theoretically scrutinized it, there is little need to revisit the debates about the veracity of the agglomeration and clustering literature here. Suffice to say, the very ontological *dirigiste* of agglomeration theory is about the expansion of a system of exchange and above all, growth. Scott and Stroper (2014: 7) state that;

“In capitalism… the basic dynamic of agglomeration of capital and labor combined with interregional sorting of people, households, capital and firms lead to systems of linked but specialized cities at various scales of resolution, from the national to the global”.

Within the confines of capitalism then, it is clear that agglomeration leads to linkage, combination and the development of networks. But it is important to note that such an ontology is associative and has no epistemology for those not connected or linked. What about those cities ‘off the map’ (Robinson, 2002) or those people within cities that are excluded from the networks that agglomeration creates (Graham and Marvin, 2001)? What about those who are resisting the restrictive spatial outcomes of agglomeration politically (Harvey, 2010)? What about the 99% (Dorling, 2014)? These excluded groups come about through a focus on growth, a logic of capitalistic development that has inequalities and injustices inbuilt. Scott and Stroper’s general urban theory of agglomerative practices, as I have already discussed, is broad enough to go beyond “economic development”, and includes those that effect “society as a whole” (page 6). But such a view of agglomeration as part of a deep-seated human desire belies the economically deterministic and growth-focused reasoning that they subsequently detail, particularly in the discussion of the urban land nexus. If instead we take an approach which does not try to isolate the urban as distinct from other process of human collective action (as argued in the previous section), then the innate agglomerative tendencies of humans that Scott and Storper rightly advocate will actually shed light upon the exploitative nature of a developmentalist clustering processes. Indeed, by aligning to a more Lefebvrian language of an ‘urban fabric’, we can more readily theorize the minutiae of the development discourse, containing as it does deleteriousness, exploitation and decline. As (Merrifield, 2013: x) has articulated;

“”Urban Fabric” is a term I prefer to that of “cities”… The “urban” is a more abstract and more concrete way to figure out the urbanization of the world, because it helps us to think about a process that manifests itself in undergrowth as well as overgrowth, in abandonment as well as overcrowding, in underdevelopment as well as development”.

It is unfortunate therefore that the purely developmentalist tendencies of agglomeration are highlighted by Scott and Storper as being important to a general urban theory. Agglomeration contains instances of contestation, decline, underdevelopment and exploitations, something that cannot be transposed onto a unified general urban theory. Instead if we account for the more visceral and political agglomerative tendencies (i.e. those that we saw in the recent Occupy movements and the Arab Spring), then we can begin to epistemologically account for the deficiencies in Scott and Storper’s general urban theory. It is no accident that such clustering of political and social tendencies was located in the most prominent and intensively urban areas. Zucotti Park, St. Paul’s Cathedral, Taksim Square, Tahir Square, Maidan Square to name but a few – these are all places of intense urbanization and contributed to the formulation of the protests. To say that these are “far beyond the domain of the city” (Scott and Storper, 2014: 13) is to deny how critical the agglomeration of people with shared political views and exclusionary experiences is to the make up of the urban.

In sum, by giving agglomeration the status of conceptual cornerstone for a general urban theory risks determining such a theory upon the underlying problems of economic forces – the exploitation, inequalities and injustices that it espouses. In other words, formulating a general urban theory that has encased within it inherently exploitative tendencies risks depoliticisation or worse, normalizing urban injustices within an overarching urban theory.

*Concluding Thoughts*

Scott and Storper (2014: 12, my emphasis) maintain that there is a need for “a viable urban theory [that] should enable us to distinguish between dynamics of social life that are intrinsically urban from those that are more *properly* seen as lying outside the strict sphere of the urban”. Such a logistical want for a ‘unified’ urban theory however is itself puzzling. What Scott and Storper are advocating is more a *technology* of the urban, rather than a theory (see Berardi, 2012). It is technological as it is gives an *a priori* truth about urban formation, namely that of clustering. If we were to take this at face value, and apply such a technology to cities across the world, from Aachen to Zwolle, then all the injustices, inequalities and deficiencies that such a technology replicates will continue to proliferate. To instrumentalise the city as a two-pronged conceptual typology of “cities as clusters of productive activity and human life that then unfold into dense, internally variegated webs of interacting land uses, locations and allied institutional/political arrangements” (page 10) renders the city as a logical, linear, sequential and more damagingly, exclusively economic technological system. And to suggest that there are aspects of social life that are urban and those that are not is to deny the fact that urbanization has, as Lefebvre (2003: 1) predicted transcended the virtual into the real. If we can view cities, in all their current guises, as differing affective coagulations of urban processes that are constantly shifting, forever in flux and never static, then we can begin to open up all aspects of urban life into a general urban theory, and not limit ourselves in trying to construct a false dichotomy of what is urban and what is not (Brenner and Schmidt, 2014). As Scott and Stroper (2014: 12, original emphasis) suggest, “there *are* systematic regularities in urban life that are susceptible to high levels of theoretical generalization”, but these ‘systematic regularities’ extend beyond an instrumental and technological understanding of the city to a more pervasive, non-teleological and unstructured idea of urbanization that encompasses a far more varied suite of social, political, cultural and economic processes. We can indeed strive for a general urban theory, but to do so we must first realize that the idea of the city is only an articulable faction of a far more tacit, intangible and ethereal ontology of urbanization (Wachsmuth, 2014). The social movements and urban insurrections of recent years have illustrated that urbanization continues to shift, to change its representable characteristics and alter our preconceived perceptions of what a ‘city’ is. Therefore, it would be supercilious to suggest that we can grasp a general, all-encompassing urban theory that pretends to have idealistically identified the notion of a city, as the ground is constantly shifting beneath our feet. We would be better equipped to view the city via the ontology of an urbanization process with varying degrees of (de)intensification. Instead of searching for the limits of urban theory, we should concede that there are in fact no limits at all.

http://newstartmag.co.uk/your-blogs/raising-the-volume-on-poverty-and-inequality-in-cities/

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