



Placing splintering urbanism: Introduction

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces a collection of case studies aimed at “Placing Splintering Urbanism”, in reference to the thesis developed by Graham and Marvin [Graham, S., Marvin, S., 2001. *Splintering Urbanism. Networked Infrastructures, Technological Mobilities and the Urban condition*. Routledge, London]. Whilst acknowledging the value of the thesis as an analytical framework in opening the way to innovative understandings of contemporary urban dynamics, the paper argues that, taken together, the articles in this themed issue seriously challenge the “splintering urbanism” thesis theoretically, empirically and methodologically. They question in particular the postulated universality of the “modern infrastructural ideal” and of “unbundling” and “bypass” processes – all of which are key elements in Graham and Marvin’s argument – as well as the assertion that reforms in infrastructure sectors should generally result in more discriminatory, socially regressive patterns of provision of essential services and more splintered urban spaces. Based on these fundamental critiques, the paper concludes that one cannot speak of “splintering urbanism in general” – i.e., as a global trend – in any meaningful analytical way.

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1. Introduction

This themed issue brings together a set of papers which empirically explore the “splintering urbanism” thesis (Graham and Marvin, 2001). Individually and collectively, the papers aim therefore to reflect on the heuristic value as well as on the limits of Graham and Marvin’s argument, both as an analytical framework for researching specific urban contexts and as a wide-ranging thesis for explaining recent urban change. In both respects, the objective is to ‘place’ splintering urbanism – or, as the case may be, to *displace* it should it prove inadequate to properly account for the processes at play.

2. The splintering urbanism thesis

In their influential book *Splintering Urbanism*, Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin argue that “a parallel set of processes are under way within which infrastructure networks are being ‘unbundled’ in

ways that help sustain the fragmentation of the social and material fabric of cities” (Graham and Marvin, 2001, p. 33)¹. The splintering urbanism thesis articulates four main elements.

(1) During approximately a century, until the 1960s, the development and governance of networked systems was embedded in a *modern infrastructural ideal* that supported the notion of monopolistic, integrated and standardised provision of network service (chapter 2). In particular, “a set of practices were developed to ensure the rapid roll-out of standardised infrastructure at equal price across national economic space” (p. 80); and “there are powerful resonances between the (...) modern infrastructural ideal and the colonialist policies shaping the attempted roll-out of infrastructure networks in developing cities” (p. 81). But from the late 1960s, this ideal was progressively undermined by a combination of powerful factors: the urban infrastructure “crisis”; changing political economies of urban infrastructure development and governance; neoliberalism and the withdrawal of the state; economic integration, urban competition and the imperatives of global–local connectivity; the development of infrastructural consumerism; the collapse

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¹ In order to understand the thesis defended by Graham and Martin, and the discussion of that thesis here, it is useful to clarify the meaning of the notions at play: inequalities, segregation, differentiation, discrimination, splintering, secession, polarisation, withdrawal from (or collapse of) solidarity. The concept of urban splintering, in the sense in which we employ it, refers to the disintegration of former socio-economic interdependencies and to tendencies towards the withdrawal from (or collapse of) solidarities. This idea is the opposite of urban integration or cohesion, which emphasises the links of interdependence and solidarity that contribute to the cohesive operation of cities and therefore to the fact that cities are ‘society-making’. The impulses of political and fiscal secession that can be witnessed in Los Angeles, or the increasingly polarised settlement patterns in many urban areas, thus appear as symptoms of this fragmentation or splintering. The notion of splintering differs from that of socio-spatial segregation, which draws more on the idea of a clear spatial expression of economic or social inequalities. Clear segregation is completely compatible with, for example, a high degree of economic integration (see May et al., 1998; Jaglin, 2001). When analyzing the patterns of provision of essential infrastructure services, I shall furthermore distinguish between differentiation – i.e., providing different (groups of) users with different services – and discrimination – by which I shall specifically designate socially regressive forms of differentiation, i.e., forms of differentiation that are potentially or actually detrimental to lower-income or otherwise disadvantaged groups.

of the comprehensive ideal in urban planning; new urban landscapes; and “new structures of feeling” (chapter 3, p. 92 sq.).

(2) Concomitantly, within the context created by the resulting “collapse of the modern infrastructural ideal”, a profound transformation is occurring: “the economic liberalisation of infrastructure and the development of new [primarily information] technologies have made possible an entirely new infrastructural landscape that radically challenges established assumptions that have underpinned the relations between integrated networks and cities” (p. 139). Working together, they allow powerful coalitions of actors to promote the *unbundling* of infrastructures, i.e., the segmentation of integrated infrastructure into different network elements and service packages (p. 141). Unbundling in turn allows for *bypass* strategies, i.e. strategies that seek the connection of “valued” or “powerful” users and places, while at the same time bypassing “non-valued” or “less powerful” users and places (chapter 4).

(3) These bypass strategies contribute to the emergence of so-called *premium networked spaces* (Graham and Marvin, 2001, p. 249, sq.).² In particular, elite or higher-income groups are increasingly living in “secessionary” places/spaces that are “withdrawn from the wider urban fabric” (Graham and Marvin, 2001, p. 268) in various ways (chapter 6, esp. box 6.4, p. 268–71), yet intensively connected to other, remote premium spaces, thus forming archipelagos of “global enclaves” (p. 389). This reinforces the “vicious cycle” of *splintering*, “where attempts at socio-technical secession lead to greater fear of mixing, so increasing pressure for further secession, and so on” (Graham and Marvin, 2001, p. 383). The widening gap between connected and unconnected (or disconnected) places and people is all the more worrisome since the world we live in is, increasingly, a network society (Castells, 1996) in which “the poverty that matters is not so much material poverty but a poverty of connections,” which “limits a person or group’s ability to extend their influence in time and space” (Graham and Marvin, 2001, p. 288). Central to the argument, therefore, is the notion that “the diverse political and regulatory regimes that supported the roll-out of power, transport, communications, street and transport networks towards the rhetorical [sic] goal of standardised ubiquity are, in many cities and states being ‘unbundled’ and ‘splintered’ as a result of a widespread movement towards privatisation and liberalisation.” (p. 382)

(4) Communities and public authorities in cities around the globe confronted with splintering processes and tendencies may develop forms of “resistance” (p. 387 sq.). As a result “a central theme of urban politics and urban social movements in the first decades of the new millennium will therefore centre on the struggle between the ‘global’ forces of attempted, ‘pure’ boundary control and the customisation of premium, commodified network spaces, vs. the imperative of infrastructural, urban and technological democratisation and the need for more egalitarian and democratised practices and principles of development” (p. 405).

In this editorial, I wish to briefly discuss the splintering urbanism thesis in light of the arguments and reflections developed in the case-study based papers forming this themed issue³. I will develop my argument in five points, which respectively address: the limits of the modern infrastructural ideal; the politics of infrastructure reforms; the postulated universality of the notions of unbundling and bypass; the urban “effects” of patterns of service provision; and methodological issues.

3. The deceits of the “modern infrastructural ideal”

The notion of a “modern infrastructural ideal” developed by Graham and Marvin is convincing insofar as it refers to the enduring preference for “bundled” infrastructure and the related disregard of alternative (whether “traditional” or “decentralized”) systems of service provision by the public authorities responsible for this provision. Yet the epochal narrative associated with the modern infrastructural ideal is less convincing. The story goes that, in general, the bundled, monopoly structure of infrastructures sustains (or has sustained) the universal provision of standardised services, consequently reinforcing urban socio-spatial integration. But in-depth analyses of the long-term interactions between network provision and urban dynamics in many cities tell a different story in at least two important respects.

They suggest, first, that although the industrial organisation⁴ of infrastructure sectors certainly matters in the universalisation of basic infrastructure services, it always does so in combination with other factors (see, e.g., Bocquet, Chatzis and Sander, 2008). Three factors seem to be of particular importance here: the will and capacity of government (State or local public authorities) to facilitate, and render solvent, the process of universalisation; public control over land occupation and urban development, as well as housing policies; a small rather than large proportion of households in extreme poverty (Coutard, 2008). In the context of many cities in lower-income countries, for example, these conditions have often not been met. Hence, rather than the “collapse” of the modern infrastructural ideal, several articles in this themed issue point to its absence (Kooy and Bakker, 2008) or to its failure (Botton and de Gouvello, 2008; Fernández-Maldonado, 2008; Zerah, 2008; see also Jaglin, 2005). As Kooy and Bakker (2008) suggest for Jakarta, many cities in lower-income countries are not *splintering*, they are and have long been *splintered* along ethnic or socio-economic lines (see also McFarlane and Rutherford, 2008b, p. 370)⁵.

Second, historical analysis suggests that the relations between universal, homogenous service and urban integration are often ambivalent. In Santiago, for example, the connection of all residential units to the essential networks has, in particular since the 1980s, facilitated and legitimated a strong policy of spatial segregation and functional, social, fiscal and political fragmentation at the local authority level within the urban region as well as processes of urban sprawl, also segregated (Pflieger and Matthieusent, 2008).

In Los Angeles, the “universalisation” of essential services (water, then water and electricity) by a municipally-run entity in the first decades of the twentieth century was primarily designed to serve the interests of the local oligarchy who controlled the municipality and, at the same time, owned the vast tracts of desert land that were open to urbanisation – and the value of which was massively increased – by the provision of those services (MacKillop, 2005). While the control of the water resource and cheap electricity supplies were decisive factors in the political integration of the city of Los Angeles in its current borders^{6,7}, it also favoured (and heavily subsidised) a process of spatial enlargement which, when

⁴ Single vs. several suppliers; public vs. private ownership; competition vs. planned development.

⁵ For lack of space, I will not enter here into the (post)colonial dimension of the debate, in spite of its importance and of the fact that several papers in this themed issue participate in this debate. Two recent themed issues address this dimension from complementary perspectives (McFarlane and Rutherford, 2008a; Legg and McFarlane, 2008).

⁶ Both historically and in the contemporaneous secession debate.

⁷ Note that political integration between previously or otherwise independent constituencies/local governments through (or for) infrastructure development is frequently observed. Strangely enough, Graham and Marvin do not discuss this often positive correlation.

² Economic spaces (e.g., foreign direct investment enclaves or business improvement districts), residential spaces (e.g., gated communities) and “social life spaces” (such as commercial malls and theme parks).

³ In this editorial, I will signal the articles forming part of the themed issue by writing the names of their author(s) in italics.

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