



## Editorial

# Producing and governing inequalities under planetary urbanization: From urban age to urban revolution?



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## ABSTRACT

While urban inequalities have become ubiquitous globally, there is still much debate on how we might conceptualise the forces that produce, reproduce and govern them. As an introduction to this themed issue, the present essay situates its contributions as a critical intervention with the Urban Age thesis. In particular, we focus on the prevalent Urban Age narrative that couples a standardized prescription for economic growth with a risk-management agenda to govern the political expectations, environmental pressures, large-scale migrations, and industrial creative destruction inherent to rapid urban growth. The most prominent alternative to this discourse, the Planetary Urbanization thesis, draws on the Marxist work of Henri Lefebvre, who foresaw the urbanization of the globe and argued that in the future urbanization instead of industrialization would become the driving force of capitalist accumulation. Despite some excellent insights into understandings of the urban as a global process, the Planetary Urbanization literature has yet to dig deep into just how urbanization might drive future accumulation, and even more, how inequalities might be structured and governed in such a world. We argue that the production and governance of urban inequality are intrinsically intertwined with an urbanization-driven capital accumulation. However, such a conjuncture is wrought with contradictions, notably the political limits to rising inequality.

## 1. Introduction

The growth of inequality – largely defined and measured in terms of income - has become virtually ubiquitous across the globe, almost to the point of becoming accepted as natural, as a kind of *doxic common sense*. In the OECD countries, for example, the average income of the richest 10 percent of the population grew to roughly 900 percent of the poorest 10 percent in 2015, up from 700 percent in 1990 (Keeley, 2015). Likewise, after taking population growth into account, developing nations saw income inequality increase by 11 percent on average between 1990 and 2010 (United Nations, 2017).

There remains much debate, however, over how we might understand and theorize the production of inequalities, and even more, how such inequalities might be governed in a world beset by rapid population growth. A prevailing discourse seeking to frame contemporary massive urban transformations has risen to prominence: the Urban Age thesis. Promoted by both private (e.g., World Economic Forum, McKinsey Global Institute) and public international organizations (e.g., UN-HABITAT, World Bank), the Urban Age thesis argues for *smarter* forms of growth that are more closely tied to the efficient *management* of risks (World Economic Forum, 2017; McKinsey Global Institute, 2011; World Bank, 2014; Soederberg, 2016c). This dominant narrative has legitimised a set of policies derived primarily from mature capitalist nations that are argued to be a template for those in the global South, given appropriate tweaking for local context.

The Urban Age thesis has been critiqued for its empirical and theoretical limits that serve, among other things, to homogenize urban space and to isolate the processes of urbanization from the uneven processes of global capitalism. Scholars suspicious of the Urban Age have also emphasized the absence of interrogations into class and power in its analytical constitution, which have impeded our ability to rethink and to challenge old distinctions between rural/urban, global North/global South, slums/non-slums, and so forth (Merrifield, 2014). Critical interventions have served as a vital analytical corrective to the meta-narrative of the Urban Age discourse and its ability to objectify, order, control, and - above all - fragment urban spaces from the global processes of capital accumulation.

The main contemporary competitor to the Urban Age thesis is built around the discourse of Planetary Urbanization (Brenner and Schmid, 2011; Giroud, 2015), which draws on the theory of Henri Lefebvre. Lefebvre (2003) proposed the provocative hypothesis that the world was becoming completely urbanized, and furthermore that urbanization instead of industrialization would become the driver of future capitalist accumulation. However, while much excellent work has been produced by scholars drawing on critical perspectives including the idea of Planetary Urbanization, there remains the questions of precisely how urbanization might drive future accumulation, and even more, how inequalities might be understood, structured (including via class, race and gender) and governed in such a world.

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We argue that (1) the ways urbanization is increasingly driving accumulation, and (2) the ways urban inequalities are being produced and governed, are increasingly two sides of the same coin. It is *precisely through* the production and governance of urban inequalities under finance-led capitalism that urbanization has become the driving force of capital accumulation. We also suggest that the current conjuncture is wrought with contradictions inherent to the system, including the political limits to the levels at which inequality could feasibly rise, and limits to the capacities for governing resulting problems.

We develop our argument in three main parts. First, we discuss and compare the Urban Age and Planetary Urbanization theses. Second, we outline our perspective on how we might understand the production and governance of urban inequalities in the contemporary conjuncture, much of which is directly related to managing risks in housing, migration, environmental degradation, and deviance. In doing so, we draw on [Hardt and Negri's \(2004\)](#) concept of multitude to enrich the idea of Planetary Urbanization through the rising surplus populations, a theoretical move which brings to the fore Lefebvre's original emphasis on urban revolution and its dynamic possibilities. Third, we discuss the essays that make up the rest of this special issue. While all empirically-based, each of these articles bolster this perspective and provide insights into the myriad ways that contemporary urban inequalities are being articulated and governed *in and through* the complex and contested dynamics of global capitalism.

## 2. The urban age and its discontents

Urban spaces have become the key focus of global institutions over the past several years. The rise of the Urban Age thesis in the discourse of international organizations and fora, such as the World Economic Forum (WEF) and the launch of the New Urban Agenda (also known as Habitat III) in 2016 are cases in point. According to this prevailing meta-narrative, the combination of rapid growth and poorly managed cities has led to dangerous and urgent challenges that require immediate attention and action. The necessary response, it is argued, is through the generalisation of global risk management approaches to the urban realm ([World Bank, 2015](#)). Such claims are reinforced with accounts of the global urban condition with projections that, by 2050, two-thirds of the world's population – an estimated 6.3 billion – will live in cities, with 80 percent in less developed countries ([World Economic Forum, 2015: 26](#); [UN Population Fund, or UNFPA, 2013](#)).

The main geographical concern of the WEF is the large cities in the global South, where rapid and unplanned urbanization has potential to drive many risks ([WEF, 2015](#)). The WEF defines risk as an event that not only brings about significant negative impact for several countries and industries over a temporal period of up to 10 years, but is also systemic, e.g., water and food crises, escalating economic and resource nationalization, and severe income disparity ([WEF, 2014](#)). The New Urban Agenda, which was forged by 193 members of the United Nations in Quito in 2016, was an attempt to offer a framework in which the above risks could be circumvented to encourage 'opportunities of urbanization as an engine of sustained and inclusive economic growth' to reach the Sustainable Development Goal 11 by 2030 ([United Nations, 2016: 1](#)). Although far from the only advocates of the Urban Age, the positions taken by WEF and architects of the New Urban Agenda capture this trope's central message: economic growth is *the* key to unlocking vibrant, sustainable and liveable cities for all. And selectively applying neoliberal policies and best practices from the global North, with requisite modifications for local context, is the best way to ensuring such economic growth.

Notably, the WEF has identified urbanization as a critical driver of intense social instability, which its experts believe will be further aggravated by an unprecedented transition from rural to urban areas. A primary occupation of the above Urban Age initiatives has been on risks associated with 'mismatched cities' in the global South. The World Economic Forum has designated social instability (strikes, mass demonstrations and other forms of civil unrest), income inequality and polarization as major trends that will have far-reaching implications for political stability and global business interests. This dominant policy discourse has lent itself to increasingly technocratic remedies based on business models and financial analyses aimed at assessing and mitigating such risks. These strategies seek to identify perceived inequalities and social injustices in ways that reinforce a dominant policy rubric based on market freedoms and the preference for private over public consumption – a central premise of neoliberalism and its austerity revival over the past decade. Indeed, according to the WEF and the New Urban Agenda, financing *needs* to be sourced from public-private collaboration in which the private sector is invited into design, construct and maintain infrastructure of urban spaces ([Soederberg, 2016a](#)).

Even if we bracket for now the obvious insensitivity and ignorance of the Urban Age discourse to the call of the post-colonial literature for the end of colonial forms of world governance, it is amazing just how myopic the promoters of the Urban Age thesis are to the rising problems produced by neoliberal capitalist governance in the global North. The implicit claim being made in this discourse is that the institutions and governance practices developed in the global North have done a much better job at managing risks and steering urban social development in more sustainable (social, political and environmental) ways. However, the trajectories of rising inequality and unemployment in cities of the global North, and key events like the global financial crisis (GFC) and the continuing crisis of unemployment in many affected cities (from the industrial rust-belts of the US, UK and France, to the capital cities of Greece, Spain and Ireland) put to rest the conceit of a better-managed or fairer global North (see [Walks and Simone, 2017](#)).

Indeed, the Urban Age narrative is silent on questions about who benefits and who is disadvantaged from contemporary forms of economic growth, and in turn is conceptually blind to the potential for exacerbating, rather than ameliorating, rising social instability through the implementation of neoliberal economic programs. Critics of Habitat III, for instance, have pointed out the lack of attention to the nature of financing – and power relations therein – involved in achieving these goals. Indeed, many cities across the globe have been struggling with issues of bankruptcy, budget deficits, decaying infrastructure, declining quality of public services and growing levels of urban poverty ([Tabb, 1982](#); [World Bank, 2014](#); 'New Urban Agenda good on 'what' but not on 'how', critics warn,' [Citiscopes](#), 20 September 2016). While large urban areas in many parts of the global South have for years been subject to austerity measures imposed by the International Monetary Fund and other creditors and donors in the wake of the 1982 debt crises, other cities in the global North – especially in the Eurozone and the United States where the 2008 Global Financial Crisis touched land more forcefully – have been subject to increasingly aggressive waves of austerity urbanism ([Peck, 2015](#)).

This is not to say that mainstream organizations have not taken notice of widening inequalities. The UN-HABITAT, as with other policy documents echo this concern by noting that 'never before has humankind faced cascading crises of all types as have been affected by it since [the financial crisis of] 2008' ([UN-HABITAT, 2013: x](#)). The social destruction (soaring unemployment, food shortages and price rises, insecurity, and the like) brought about by these increasingly frequent and prolonged crises has been intensified by the austerity programs governments undertake to signal creditworthiness, so as to attract and retain capital in the form of municipal bonds, foreign direct investment in special export zones, and so forth. In doing so, governments cut expenditures for the weakest in the areas of social welfare, health, education and housing. At the same time, austerity platforms have been associated with the creation of new spaces of dispossession by permitting further expropriation of public infrastructure and land, low-income housing, and so forth ([Lopez-Morales, 2011](#); [Desai and Loftus, 2012](#)). These strategies occur along class, racial, generational and gendered lines ([Wyly et al. 2009](#); [Dymski, 2009](#); [Roberts, 2013](#); [Christophers, 2017](#)).

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