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– WAYFINDING IN THE LONG SHADOW OF CITY BENCHMARKING: Or How to Manufacture (an Economy of) Comparability in the Global Urban

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Abstract

In response to Acuto et al.*'s invitation to 'take city rankings seriously', I suggest that one strategy for doing so would be to examine what the production and reproduction of these rankings reveals about the ways in which their makers seek to govern cities across the globe. Drawing upon twenty months of ethnographic research of the global urban 'solutions' industry, I offer an immersive critique of what happens when city rankings 'go wild', frequently beyond the intentions of their makers. Often with little choice but to play by the rules of the game of global urban entrepreneurialism, the injunction for urban policy actors to subscribe to dominant logics of city rankings gives rise to—and reinforces—three tendencies of contemporary global urbanism: wayfinding, performativity, and (auto)parody. I conclude by asking what is at stake for critical urban studies and critical urban scholars when we are encouraged to engage proactively and productively with city rankings.*

City benchmarking as global urban entrepreneurialism

Of all the ways in which the emergent sub-discipline of 'global urbanism' has been conceptualized, the revived problematique of *comparison* has been most visible. In this vein, the authors of this intervention—*initially framed as* a collaboration between urban studies scholars and practitioners hailing from a London-based benchmarking intelligence firm—propose 'redress[ing] some of the biases of contemporary global urbanism' (Acuto *et al*., 2021: 2) by initiating a timely debate about city benchmarking. Like recent interventions that have sought to bring Southern theory into the fold, this forum has the potential to highlight different conceptions of the global 'urban', together with the theoretical trappings of the players that speculatively (re)produce these contours of comparability. Such are the norms and forms of 'actually-existing comparison' (Clarke, 2012) which constitute the (almost) de facto rules of the game that is global urban entrepreneurialism.

I agree that critical urban studies needs to be more attentive to benchmarking—but less for reasons of what rankings say about cities and more for what they reveal about the logics, epistemologies, and practices of the global gatekeepers. Acuto *et al*. (2021) appear to be searching for internal rather than external critiques of benchmarking, while also urging (certain) academics to re-examine their own complicity in constructing and circulating rankings. But by centring their analysis of rankings on a technical examination of 'what benchmarks are, what they represent, and who they influence' (*ibid*.: 3)—which, tellingly, recalls Poovey's (1998) historicization of the 'modern fact' as an 'epistemological unit'—the authors risk understating the already-existing roles of politics and manufactured unevenness that continue to powerfully structure the porous worlds of the benchmarking industry.

I bring these political issues to the fore by framing city benchmarking as a global geography of urban entrepreneurialism and competitive anxiety (Harvey, 1989; Peck, 2014).

I thank Michele Acuto and his colleagues for inviting me to participate in this exchange, and I am also grateful to Emily Rosenman and Zac Taylor for their critical reading of this piece. Above all, I want to thank the practitioner-advocates of urban policy across the globe alongside whom I have worked over the past two years: from each of them I have learned about a different world of global urbanism. I gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the UBC Four-Year Fellowship and the Larry Bell Grant in funding the research upon which this response is based.

Rather than an objective, technical assessment of cities, benchmarking is a contrived, disciplining technology of capitalist urbanization, class-centric in both conception and clientele, that seeks to render cities commensurable and comparable in ways that reflect the 'realist epistemology' (Kitchin *et al*., 2015: 9) and profit-oriented motivations of its makers. The actors and institutions that are enrolled in constructing rankings reproduce a hierarchy of what counts as authoritative knowledge for cities and their citizens; they are by no means in complete control of the game, but they certainly possess the capability and clout to define and narrate its normative terms of discourse and practice.

Acuto *et al*. (2021) make the overarching argument that academics should proactively and productively engage with rankings such that they might 'benchmark back' to the benchmarking industry in order to reshape progressively how benchmarking is undertaken. But engagement to what end? And, crucially, engagement on whose terms (and who decides these terms)? The authors seem to be dissatisfied with scholarly criticism that centres on the methodological fallacies of benchmarking. I therefore offer a more immersive critique of what rankings 'do', for in the fashion of critical urban theory, critique should lay bare the ideological structures of power and knowledge that frame the industry, reveal some of the contradictions of that industry, and call into question the logics and assumptions of those in power (Brenner, 2009).

Like most governing technologies, rankings inevitably assume (after)lives of their own (see Shore and Wright, 2011), beyond those intended by their authors, that cast a long shadow over the global urban. This has manifold ramifications for ongoing inter-urban relations of comparison and compliance. To illustrate what benchmarking does in the wild, I offer some insights from my ongoing research on the global urban 'solutions' industry, a fraught terrain that is orthogonal to the benchmarking industry but thrives on the use of rankings to make sense of cities globally in order to manufacture 'problems' and 'solutions' for them. At the time of writing, I have spent twenty months conducting a global ethnography of this industry, moving across industry conferences and working full-time at parastatal urban policy think tanks that have made it their mission to supply (the means to) solutions for urban challenges across the globe.[1] I highlight three tendencies of contemporary global urbanism that arise when city rankings 'go wild', concluding with suggestions for how critical scholars might progressively engage with rankings and their makers.

Benchmarking (in) the global urban 'solutions' industry

– Wayfinding

In the fast-moving world of urban solutions, benchmarking has acquired a curious 'alchemy' (Merry, 2011: 586) of reinventive functionalism. By no means a novelty at this stage of neoliberalization, benchmarking has become so deeply sedimented in the landscape that it is unavoidable in the vernacular and practices of the urban solutions corps, effectively constitutive of the rules of the game to which players *cannot help* but subscribe. The more enlightened practitioners will regularly profess a worldly scepticism of the value of rankings, but then rarely hesitate to fall back on them before their audiences.

Critical urban scholars have argued that rankings appeal to practitioners because they offer a veneer of technocratic objectivity, satiating the need for political expediency (see e.g. Kitchin *et al*., 2015; McCann, 2008). One of the most perplexing questions about rankings concerns their persistence, even expansion, in spite of how their utility is frequently questioned by both insiders and critics. The reiterative, functionalist flurry of activity that sustains the benchmarking industry says something not merely about its many makers, but also about the environment itself. In the absence of any there of

1 Parts of this piece were, in fact, penned in between conversations with my colleagues about what rankings and comparative indices meant to them.

urban knowledge, actors grasp at credible-seeming data amidst near-incessant streams of information as policy rhythms churn ever quicker (Jessop, 2002). The landscape is so congested that choices about rankings usually come down to a combination of pragmatic expediency (what 'works'); affordability amidst shrinking fiscal budgets (the cost of accessing benchmarking databases); what the decision-makers' peers are using (credibility-by-association); and some measure of persuasiveness on the part of benchmark producers themselves. Hence benchmarking has assumed a wayfinding capacity such that the average practitioner has no choice but to leverage benchmarks in order to determine how (their) city stands in relation to others on an increasingly crowded playing field, this being one expression of the 'external coercive power' of inter-urban competition (Harvey, 1989: 10).

– Performativity

In the wild, rankings are reiteratively combined with other indices in the reinventive pursuit of 'novel' comparative technologies, even as the foundational pool of information remains fairly stagnant. The 'typology' is a rising favourite of many urban policy organizations, simultaneously saying more and less than the indices from which it has been assembled to create a proto-comparative tool of sorts. Having participated in several of these ventures during my time at a London-based urban innovation centre, I observed how rankings at different scales, and from different sources, were cobbled together to create 'filters' through which cities across the globe were *made* comparable and commensurable. The result, a 'homegrown' City Typology Tool, was summarily whisked across cities in the US and the African continent by business development managers to carve out new markets for UK urban technology firms and to create new cross-border entrepreneurial political alliances.

Rankings possess a performative capacity to (re)make capitalist dreamworlds (Christophers, 2014); amidst the inescapability of the 'urban age', firms that are now seeking to capitalize on new domains of growth in the urban brandish their own proto-comparative tools by way of proclaiming new market aspirations. Mastercard's Global Destination Cities Index, along with its City Possible business model, constituted a definitive move into the smart cities market; Shell's City Comparison Tool and City Archetypes typology were unveiled at sustainable city conferences to announce its new business model of green urban finance to an audience of investors and city leaders. These proto-comparative tools take on new lives as ideological placeholders for particular credos of market-driven comparability, as the urban is leveraged to govern (new) circuits of financial and political capital.

– (Auto)Parody

What, then, of the utterly benchmarked city? At peak benchmark, certain global cities are *expected* to occupy a particular position in the rankings of popular criteria, such as liveability and innovation, even if they might be far from these ideals in reality (McArthur and Robin, 2019). New rankings have to conform to existing expectations, hence the near mandatory inclusion of the usual suspects, and the authors themselves hint at this self-reinforcing tendency. 'Model' cities that have built their brand upon a veritable palimpsest of rankings, such as Vancouver and Singapore, represent the pinnacle of these parodic tendencies. Reality becomes almost negligible and in that sense, rankings really do exist in a world of their own (making).

Model cities are less interested in rankings for rankings' sake, although they will certainly be happy to bask in the limelight and can afford to appear somewhat blasé about what new rankings on the block mean for them, at least when compared to the 'hoi polloi' of other cities. More crucially, their status affords them agenda-setting powers in multiple domains of global urban governance. Institutions in these cities can convene a small army of domestic suppliers of urban solutions that leverage the brand of their 'origin' city to make particular claims of expertise and to locate new markets abroad.

Model cities prolifically organize city conferences, defining the terms of discourse and making deliberate decisions about who is granted access to exclusive spaces of exchange. Some model cities have even taken it on themselves to bestow prizes and accolades upon those cities they deem to be (almost) their counterparts. Such inter-urban relations strongly reinforce hierarchies of power and cultural imperialism that structure the demand and supply of authoritative urban knowledge.

Global urbanism in whose service?

In closing, I return to the issue of academic authority posed by the authors as they encourage academics to participate in developing more methodologically rigorous benchmarks—which in turn raises questions of accountability and the stakes at play: global urbanism in whose service? The academics that the authors regard as most complicit in benchmarking practices tend to come from benchmarking and business schools or they have been solicited from the school of formerly critical scholars who have capitulated to the siren of pop urbanology. In other cases, the benchmark creators simply draw upon critical scholarship that has since been co-opted by the interests of entrepreneurial urbanism (Leon, 2017).

The enduring value of critique lies in exposing the lay assumptions and ideological power relations that make up the benchmarking industry, but there is now a need, as argued by Acuto *et al*. (2021), to transcend external critiques. In many respects, it would be more interesting to study the benchmark creators themselves, rather than their benchmarks. An ethnography of benchmarking would involve deep immersion in the workplaces of benchmarking firms and in expert meetings to understand their systems of meaning; it could explore how and why particular rankings carry greater legitimacy than others; it should study how rankings are constructed and 'rolled out' in relation to existing metrics; and, above all, it should make clear in whose financial and political service it is being performed. This is one progressive way in which critical scholars might 'benchmark back'—but will the hegemonic benchmarking industry listen?

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