WHO IS AFRAID OF POSTCOLONIAL THEORY?

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Abstract

Recent assertions of urban theory have dismissed the value of postcolonial critique in urban studies. This essay draws on postcolonial theory to demonstrate key flaws in such theoretical formulations. In doing so, it returns to the puzzle of how and why studying urbanism in the global South might matter for the reconceptualization of critical urban theory. Instead of a universal grammar of cityness, modified by (exotic) empirical variation, the essay foregrounds forms of theorization that are attentive to historical difference as a fundamental constituent of global urbanization. What is at stake, the essay concludes, is a culture of theory, one that in its Eurocentrism tends to foreclose multiple concepts of the urban and alternative understandings of political economy. A concern with the relationship between place, knowledge, and power – a key insight of postcolonial critique – might make possible new practices of theory in urban studies.

Keywords: postcolonial theory, urban theory, Eurocentrism, global South
Interlude

In 1996, as a doctoral candidate in City and Regional Planning at the University of California, Berkeley, I embarked on research to understand and analyze the city in which I had spent my childhood and which had shaped my persistent interest in urbanism, well before I knew that such a discipline existed: Calcutta. Trained in the canon of urban theory, I immersed myself in fieldwork. But something was amiss. Already in preparing my dissertation prospectus, I had struggled to reconcile the theoretical theorems of my discipline with the empirical processes I glimpsed in India. I had struggled too to find examples of urban studies research on Calcutta, those that would act as precedent and guide for my research. Writing the prospectus, I had felt I was stepping into a yawning gap. In the city, once home, now field of research, I felt this gap immensely widen. I was faced with a vast city seemingly without a map, without recorded history. I had been so disturbed by all of this during the process of preparing my prospectus that I had delayed my fieldwork, spending a year after my oral qualifying examination teaching courses in urban sociology at Mills College, a liberal-arts college where I had earned an undergraduate degree. Those courses, once taught by a superb sociologist, Theodore Thomas, had drawn me into urban studies. And it is those courses that set me on the journey of discovering and deciphering Marxist urban theory, ultimately taking me to Berkeley to study with a pantheon of distinguished theorists.

Above all, each week, in those seminars at Mills College, I, new immigrant to America, an identity I did not acknowledge until many years later, would be asked by Thomas to explain how my beloved city of Calcutta related to the theories we were studying. If I watched the scene today, I would perhaps cynically comment on the neo-Orientalism of such an invitation. But Thomas himself came from a remote corner of Canada and he, I later realized, was trying to reconcile the canon, for which
he was one gate-keeper, with the strange urbanity of the Canadian interior. Calcutta was no more exotic than the plains of Alberta; we were both trying to make theory from the margins. In returning to Mills College to teach those courses, in the interlude between qualifying examination and fieldwork, I had hoped that I would find an answer to Thomas’s question: what is the relationship between Calcutta and urban Theory? After all, the theory I learned at Mills College, and then at Berkeley, was inevitably capitalized.

But I arrived in Calcutta for my dissertation fieldwork without an answer to Thomas’s question and instead with a sense of profound disjuncture. I described the disjuncture to myself by turning to the allegories of *The Little Prince*. What “grown-ups” thought was the drawing of a hat, was for me the picture of a boa constrictor digesting an elephant (de Saint-Exupéry 1943). But I lacked the vocabulary to tell the story of the boa constrictor and the elephant. All I had were drawings of hats.

It is through ethnography that I forged my own relationship between Calcutta and urban theory. In particular, feminist ethnography, learned in the graduate seminars of UC Berkeley, allowed me to see and name social relations of urban poverty. And Bengali historiography, ineluctably shaped by the legacy of subaltern studies, and nurtured at the famed Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, where I held an affiliation, gave me the social categories for interpreting urbanism. The maps and the histories were all there; I had not initially seen them because I was trying to read them using the conventional dualisms of urban analysis: city and countryside; formal sector and informal sector; state and civil society; household and firm. Ethnography generated the necessity not only to immerse myself in the “local” literatures that were unrecognized by the “world literature” that is urban theory but also to dramatically reshape the social and spatial categories in which I had been trained.
Such a process is necessarily incomplete. The struggle continues. But I start with this rather personal story because while I have made a case for paying attention to the “geographies of theory” (Roy 2009), such geographies are also necessarily biographies. Those biographies indicate the “politics of location,” a term I borrow from feminist poet Adrienne Rich (1984) within which we are centered or marginalized. To speak is to speak from a place on the map, which as Rich reminds us, is also a place in history. And yet Theory is so often characterized by its disembodied voice and unmarked location. To embody urban theory, to mark its location, to trace its biography, is a crucial step in acknowledging and analyzing what Mufti (2005: 475) describes as the culture of theory: “the habitus that regulates “theory” as a discrete set of practices” in fields of academic knowledge. We must ask whether our dominant theory cultures are adequate in explaining the places on the map that are seemingly marginal and different, from Calcutta to the plains of Canada.

But there is more to ask. Can places like Calcutta generate urban theory? This is a different question than asking, Can urban theory explain Calcutta? In her endorsement of my first book, City Requiem, Calcutta: Gender and the Politics of Poverty, the inimitable Janet Abu-Lughod wrote: “…this volume breaks new ground. I hope that it will become a model for comparable studies in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia.” It was a line that surprised me, for this was never my ambition for the book. But as a towering figure in urban studies, pioneering the comparative method, and undertaking Southern theory and transnational analysis, well before these frameworks became fashionable, Abu-Lughod was not going to have it any other way. The monograph of a single city was for her necessarily a model; the idiosyncratic case study was the basis of new theory. She knew that this had always been the case in urban theory, except those cities never went by the name, Calcutta, or Cairo. For these reasons, this brief essay is dedicated to Janet Abu-Lughod.
In the essay, I present three interrelated arguments. First, I argue that my call for “new geographies of theory” (Roy 2009) has been misread as an argument about the empirical uniqueness of cities in the global South and thus as a mandate for adding empirical variation to existing urban theory. Second, I analyze this misreading and examine what is at stake in the definition and defense of an urban theory that must dismiss, as do Scott and Storper (2014), “a plurality of different concepts of the urban.” I draw parallels between this effort and that of Chibber (2013) in defending Marxism against what he perceives to be the threat of postcolonial theory. Finally, I explore why the insistence on a universal history of capital (Chibber’s project), or on a “general concept of the urban,” applicable across historical eras and world geographies (Scott and Storper’s project), impedes a robust understanding of the present history of global capitalism and its urban futures.

Universal Grammars

“Social theory has always sought to legitimize itself by stressing its capacity to construct universal grammars.”

Mbembe, 2001: 9

In his recent book, Postcolonial Theory and The Specter of Capital, Chibber writes against postcolonial theory, specifically a strand of subaltern studies, to assert the universal relevance of the European experience of history:

If there does not exist a fundamental divergence between East and West…then we are permitted to consider the possibility that the theories emerging from the European experience might well be up to the task of capturing the basic structure of Eastern development in the modern
epoch. Instead of being entirely different forms of society, the West and the non-West would, according to this perspective, turn out to be variants of the same species (Chibber 2013: 23).

I do not have the opportunity in this essay to fully engage with Chibber’s arguments. However, two aspects of his analysis are of considerable relevance to ongoing debates in urban studies: that historical difference can be understood as “variations of the same basic form,” and that theory is a matter of getting the empirical story right, in this case of the “European experience” and “Eastern development.”

Chibber (2013: 213) states that the core problem of his book is “how the history of the non-West has been affected by the incursion of capitalism.” He assumes that this is the core problem that also animates postcolonial theory, specifically the strand of subaltern studies (the work of Guha, Chatterjee, and Chakrabarty), of which he is a critic. Thus, in solving this problem, notably by showing that the non-West is a “variant of the same universal history,” he gives us “good reason to embrace theories that viewed West and East as part of the same basic story” (Chibber 2013: 128, emphasis in the original). In short, Marxist thought has no need for the interventions of postcolonial theory.

But what if postcolonial theory was animated by a different problem? In his response to Chibber, Chatterjee (2013: 69) thus notes that “the historical problem confronted by Subaltern Studies is not intrinsically a difference between west and east.” Instead, the task was “intended as a critique of liberal historiography and the liberal ideology it represented.” Rather than a “historical sociology of bourgeois revolutions of Europe as Chibber understands it to be” (Chatterjee 2013: 69), subaltern studies demonstrated that liberal historiography claimed this history of Europe as universal. Through such a claim, liberal historiography crafted what, following Edward Said (1978), can be understood as “imaginative geographies.” What
was at work was not just a construction of the Orient, but indeed a self-construction of the West, or what Gregory (2004: 4) poetically describes as “the stories the West most often tells itself about itself.” Chibber (2013: 127) comes close to realizing this when he ponders whether in *Provincializing Europe* Chakrabarty (2000) intends “to describe Europe as it really was.” Chibber concludes (2013: 127, emphasis in the original): “Seemingly, then, his argument is about an abstraction, an *idea* of Europe – not the actual entity.” Indeed it is. What Chibber misses is that postcolonial theory has long demonstrated how the actual entity of Europe cannot be wrenched apart from the *idea* of Europe. It is this productive capacity of Orientalism that Said foregrounded in his path-breaking analysis of knowledge and power, that Orientalism produced the effects it names. Gregory (2004: 18, emphasis in the original) describes the process thus: “Its categories, codes and conventions shape the practices of those who draw upon it, actively constituting its object (most obviously, “the Orient”) in such a way that this structure is as much a *repertoire* as it is an archive.” It is the repertoire, rather than the archive, that is of interest to me as I consider how Chibber’s misreading of postcolonial theory echoes misreadings in urban theory.

In their recent article, “The Nature of Cities,” Scott and Storper seek to (re)assert a universal theory of cities. Writing against what they label the “new particularism,” they express concern that this “cacophony” impedes a “general concept of the urban” (Scott and Storper 2014: 11, 3). In particular, they read the call to generate theory in the context of the global South as a cataloging of “empirical particularities” (Scott and Storper 2014: 11). Admitting “enormous variations in the empirical make-up of cities,” they nonetheless insist on a “coherent concept of the city as an object of theoretical inquiry” (Scott and Storper 2014: 10). More significant is the content of such a coherent concept: “throughout the course of history, urbanization has been fundamentally engendered by a complex interaction between economic development, divisions of labor, agglomeration, specialization, and external
commerce” (Scott and Storper 2014: 6). As a nod to a world in which quite a bit of urbanization is unfolding in the global South, they argue:

We are, of course, entirely open to the idea that examination of the cities of the global South might necessitate a radical reformulation of urban theory, but the reformulation will come not solely from the fact that these cities exhibit *prima facie* empirical differences from those of the global North (or indeed from one another). Rather, it will come from whatever new and hitherto unsuspected insights that the study of urbanization in the global South may provide about the logic and inner workings of urban agglomeration processes and associated dynamics of the urban land nexus as we currently understand these matters (Scott and Storper 2014: 12).

Scott and Storper’s misreading of the last decade or more of urban theory, and in particular of poststructuralist and postcolonial interventions, is striking similar to Chibber’s misreading of subaltern studies. There are at least three points of similarity: the misreading of historical difference as empirical variation; an analytical confusion between globalization and universalization and between generalization and universalization; and the valorization of Eurocentrism.

In both Chibber and Scott and Storper, there is an insistence that the global South or non-West or East must be understood as “variations of the same basic form” – Chibber’s (2013: 13) phrase. Historical difference, i.e. difference constituted through the long histories of colonialism and imperialism, is misread as empirical variation. Such a misreading pivots on confusion between the global and the universal. While urbanization may indeed take a global form, while capitalism is undeniably global, the universality of such processes is another matter. As Chakrabarty (2000: 70-71, emphasis in the original) argues: “No historic form of capital, however global in its reach, can ever be a universal…any historically available form of capital is a provisional compromise made up of History 1 modified by
somebody’s History 2…[the] globalization of capital is not the same as capital’s universalization.” Interestingly, this passage is quoted in Chibber (2013: 217).

The distinction is an important one for urban studies as well. In a Lefebvrian sense, we can argue that urbanism is today a worldwide process. However, that does not necessarily mean that such urban transformations can be understood as the universalization of a singular and basic urban form. We do not need to rely on postcolonial theory to recognize this distinction. Quite a bit of the new intellectual energy within urban political economy is concerned with how to analyze the “world-as-city” (Madden 2012: 10). And while there is important debate about the conceptual vocabulary of such a task, for example, the disparity in meaning between globalization and mondialisation (Elden 2014), the distinction with universalization is maintained. Brenner and Schmid (2014: 750, 751) thus provide a useful reminder that the “urban is not a universal form but a historical process,” one that “affects the whole territory of the world.”

But the conflation in Chibber, as well as in Scott and Storper, is not only between globalization and universalization, but also between generalization and universalization. To consider this point, let us return to Scott and Storper’s “radical reformulation of urban theory” through a study of urbanization in the global South. I have already quoted this passage at length. It is worth considering the terms of such a radical reformulation. Just as Chibber (2013: 213) makes a case for a “modification” of “theories generated by the European experience,” Scott and Storper anticipate that cities of the global South will provide “insights” into processes of agglomeration and the urban land nexus. In other words, the foundational and fundamental categories of urbanization, those that constitute their “coherent concept of the city” remain intact. Historical difference, recast as empirical variation, modifies but does not transform
these categories. Here once again there is confusion between generalization and universalization. Scott and Storper undertake a general theory of urbanization which is simultaneously a claim about the universal characteristics of a basic form they identify as the city. Abu-Lughod’s vision gives us a quite different mode of generalization, notably how generalizable models of analysis can emanate from the (ethnographic) study of a single (idiosyncratic) city. Such forms of generalization deploy analysis of the constitutive nature of historical difference rather than claims of the universalization of a basic form, modified only through “different varieties.” Most important, these methods rely on relational understandings of the world. Thus, Mbembe (2001: 9) crafts the relationship between “generality” and “singularity” by conceptualizing the “historicity” of Africa as necessarily globalized, “embedded in times and rhythms heavily conditioned by European domination.” To do so, he argues, “presupposes a critical delving into Western history and the theories that claim to interpret it,” a point I explain more fully in the next section of this essay.

**For Whom is the City a Coherent Concept?**

“We see now the enormity of the problem: the non-Western text is available to us only within this immense library—“in English,” … that is, in translation, assigned its place as Oriental text-object within the architecture of the Western library.”

Mufti, 2005: 480

Postcolonial theory reminds us that something important is at stake in universalization. It is the claim of universalization, a key trope of liberal historiography. Chibber, in seeking to defend a universal history of capital, loses sight of how and why subaltern studies, as an intellectual project, was launched to challenge liberal
historiography. In relation to urban studies, we can ask: if a universal concept of the city is to be asserted, for example in Scott and Storper’s (2014: 6) definition of urbanization as the “complex interaction between economic development, divisions of labor, agglomeration, specialization, and external commerce,” then what are the implications of such a claim? As I have already suggested in this essay, such claims of universalization, of a Theory that misreads historical difference as empirical variation, are part and parcel of a theory culture that reproduces Eurocentrism.

There is a specific way in which I want to broach the issue of Eurocentrism and its relevance for theory, method, and pedagogy in urban studies. Following Mufti (2005: 473), I see Eurocentrism to be “an epistemological problem.” What Mufti means by this is the sheer impossibility of narrating the non-West by bypassing the West. He (2005: 474) thus concludes that “we are all Eurocentric in this sense,” always telling the history of the non-West in reference to the master narrative that is Europe. This, of course, is what Chakrabarty refers to as the idea of Europe. For me, postcolonial theory is a way of inhabiting, rather than discarding, the epistemological problem that is Eurocentrism. Postcolonial theory then is a way not so much of interpreting and narrating the postcolony as it is a method for interpreting and narrating the West, or rather “the stories the West most often tells itself about itself,” Gregory’s (2004: 4) felicitious phrase. In the realm of urban studies, I am keenly interested in the analytical and political effects of such self-constructions. “All cities can be understood in terms of a theoretical framework that combines two main processes, namely, the dynamics of agglomeration/polarization, and the unfolding of an associated nexus of locations, land uses and human interactions,” state Scott and Storper (2014: 1). Why does it matter to understand this “coherent concept of a city” as a story that the West tells itself about itself? If read as liberal historiography, what (and whose) teleology of progress, modernization, and economy does it claim?
At stake in Scott and Storper’s claim of universalization is a particular, and I would argue, quite limited, conceptualization of urbanism. Such a conceptualization is inevitably parochial, seeking to generalize the experience of a handful of EuroAmerican cities as a universally occurring urban form. As Bunnell and Maringanti (2010: 418) note, “ostensibly ‘global’ research is paradoxically parochial in failing to extend beyond world-city financial-enclave spaces.” But equally important, such a conceptualization is limited in its explanation of these original/originary cities. For one thing, there is a crude economism at work here, by which I mean the ways in which the urban economy is taken for granted as a foundational and bounded reality rather than in the Polanyian sense of a historical process through which markets are constructed and organized. For example, as a theorist of urban informality with a keen interest in the making of property and propertied citizenship, I am intrigued by their depiction of the urban land nexus:

The urban land nexus... emerges as the extensive expression of agglomeration, and is molded to significant degree by the behavior of firms seeking locations for production and households seeking living space. These forms of behavior today are typically structured by market mechanisms generating land prices that arbitrate uses and that sustain distinctive patterns of spatial allocation...In addition, a third space can be detected, namely, the circulation space of the city as represented by the infrastructures and arterial connections that facilitate intra-urban flows of goods, people, and information (Scott and Storper 2014: 8).

Households, firms, market mechanisms, agglomeration, circulation. This is the universal grammar of urbanism that failed me during my dissertation fieldwork in Calcutta. This assured and confident grammar could tell me very little about what I was to study and later conceptualize as urban informality, the territorialized flexibility of the state enabled through fractal geographies of informalized land use and control.
(Roy 2003). Where does this spatial arbitrage, so common in so many cities of the world, sit in the neat and coherent model of the urban land-nexus that Scott and Storper insist on guarding?

The ever-growing field of urban studies abounds with concepts that defy the narrow bounds of economism. Many of these bring into view “other” economies, such as the work of Gidwani and Reddy (2011: 1625) on waste as the “political other of capitalist ‘value’.” Others demonstrate the transections of securitization and militarization through which capital accumulation proceeds in cities. Take for example, the recent work of Sidaway et al (2014) on security and space in Phnom Penh and the long-standing work of Yiftachel (2009) on the spatial logic of ethnocracy. These conceptual frameworks matter not simply because they bring into view the non-Western city but rather because they give us different theories of the urban, theories attuned to historical difference.

But also at work in Scott and Storper’s essentialist definition of the “nature of cities” is what I would term, for lack of a better phrase, spatial fundamentalism, reminiscent of the Chicago school. In making the case for a stable and coherent concept of the urban, Scott and Storper give us a theory of the city as ecological form, a theory that evacuates the social relations that generate such form. Is this not an instance of what Castells (1979), in launching the project of urban political economy several decades ago, critiqued as urban ideology?

We do not have to travel to the global South to consider the limitations of such a spatial ontology. Los Angeles is sufficient. Although there may not be agreement on what is the LA school of urban theory and who speaks on its behalf, I am in agreement with Dear (2002: 14) that its key legacy was imploding the “modernist view of the city as unified whole” on which the Chicago school relied. This implosion took place while I was in graduate school and it mattered tremendously for my generation
of urbanists. It made visible what we were already experiencing as researchers: that the ontology of the city could not be understood as a spatial or social whole. In a lament, Chibber (2013: 19) notes that postcolonial theory often works with the concept of the “fragment” – “those elements of social life that cannot easily be assimilated into dominant discourse or structures.” My interest in certain genres of the LA school is that they provide a methodology of urban fragments. Such fragments are not anomalies in a theory of basic form, but instead each is a mode of generalization.

I call out spatial fundamentalism because it provokes what I consider to be a pressing question: for whom is the city a coherent concept? Whose urban experience is stable and coherent? Who is able to see the city as a unified whole? By contrast, for whom is the city a geography of shards and fragments? Whose urban experience is necessarily negotiated at spatial scales that implode the city? Here it is instructive to consider Dear’s ongoing work with the concept of the border. At once cultural existence and militarized nationalism, the border, specifically the US-Mexico border, Dear (2005: 249) argues, must be understood as an “all-pervasive bi-national phenomenon” with “demonstrable historical roots.” Dear uses the term “articulation” to suggest how multiple temporalities and spatialities are conjoined to form a “single world city.” What does it mean to think about contemporary urbanism via articulation rather than agglomeration? As Yiftachel (2009: 254) notes, articulation, as a key concept in Gramscian thought, signifies “the process through which class position and cultural forms are combined in the making of collective identities, during the ongoing struggles and negotiations over power and resources.”

Let me reframe my question: for whom is the city a border?

**Relationality**
“There is a price that has to be paid for this shift to the ethnographic, the practical, the everyday and the local... It is undoubtedly true that the weaving of a local historical narrative with detailed ethnographic description of local practices requires immersion in a seemingly bottomless pool of names, places and events that are unlikely to be familiar to readers outside the immediate geographical region...But then, we should remember that if history students all over the world could read about daily life in a single village in the French province of Languedoc in the 14th century or about the mental world of a solitary Italian miller in the 16th century, then in principle there is no reason why they should not do the same with a book about subaltern life in a village or small town in south Asia.”

Chatterjee, 2012: 49

I ask: who is afraid of postcolonial theory? because I am interested in the anxiety generated by postcolonial thought, and how this anxiety requires a defense of universal history and universal form to be mobilized against arguments about historical difference. Also mobilized is a set of claims about conceptual coherence, usually in contrast to narratives that are seen to be fragmentary, particularistic, and idiosyncratic.

My commitment to postcolonial theory is straightforward: it allows me to undertake a political economy attentive to historical difference as a fundamental and constitutive force in the making of global urbanization. I rely on postcolonial theory to think relationally about cities. As Jacobs (2012: 412) notes, there is a long trajectory of thought concerned with thinking space relationally. Jacobs (2012: 419) herself encourages relational thinking “that does not simply add in to urban geography different cities, but also enables urban geography to see difference in repetition.” It is with such relationality in mind that I have worked with the concept of “worlding” to understand the urban experiments unfolding in the vast swath of territory imagined as Asia (Roy and Ong 2011). Ong and I have thus traced the forms of inter-referenced urbanism through which the Asian “world-class city” is imagined,
developed, and repeated. It is postcolonial theory that enables me to understand the racialized regimes of labor and capital through which such transnational urbanism is constituted and represented.

But I also rely on postcolonial theory because it engenders another type of relational thinking, that of the relationship between place, knowledge, and power. In this essay and other writings, I have designated that relationship as Theory – inevitably capitalized. This is what Chibber gets wrong – he thinks that postcolonial thought is about getting the empirical story right. In its most fundamental intervention, postcolonial thought teaches us that no story – of capitalism or otherwise – can be told, heard, translated, or recorded – without taking into consideration what Spivak (1999: 270), following Said, terms “the problem of ‘the permission to narrate’.” When postcolonial theorists locate the permission to narrate in Eurocentrism, they do not mean Europe in its variegated complexity; they mean the idea of Europe. In urban studies, when some of us make note of the EuroAmerican origins of Theory, we are placing the permission to narrate on a map. We are also arguing that, when unmarked and disembodied, when claiming to speak about, and for, all cities, such narratives efface the historical difference through which that particular place on the map has been produced. And in this context, when some of us call for a Southern theory, we do not intend to add in “different varieties” of cities; instead we seek to craft a new relationality of theory. The South, as Comaroff and Comaroff (2012: 47, emphasis in the original) have noted, is a “relation, not a thing in and of itself.” Sparke (2007: 117) thus notes that “The Global South is everywhere, but it is also always somewhere, and that somewhere, located at the intersection of entangled political geographies of dispossession and repossession, has to be mapped with persistent geographical responsibility.” At the risk of repetition, let me once again state that what is at stake in “new geographies of theory” is not the empirical
diversity of Southern cities but instead the stories the West most often tells itself about itself.

I rely on postcolonial theory because as argued elegantly by Chakrabarty (2012: 2), it is a part “of a cultural and critical process by which a postimperial West adjusted itself to a long process of decolonization that perhaps is not over yet.” It is also postcolonial theory that enrolls me in the critique of new formations of hegemony, including those that travel under the sign of “Asia” and claim an “Asian century” as the time of new capitalisms and new urbanisms.

The title of my essay deliberately echoes the 1962 play, “Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf?” The echo is concerned not with the play, despite its characters drawn from the professoriate, but rather with the symbol named by, but not referenced by, the play: Virginia Woolf. Woolf’s essay, “A Room of One’s Own,” is after all, as Spivak (2012: 202) notes, an analysis of the terms on which one can “enter writing.” I was compelled to write this essay not to defend any of my own theoretical claims. Being dismissed as cacophonous does not bother me as much as it perhaps should. I write this essay because one of my first tasks as Assistant Professor at the University of California, Berkeley, was to conceptualize and establish our Urban Studies major. My call for “new geographies of theory” (Roy 2009) emanated quite directly from the work of imagining a pedagogy of urban studies that could take into account not only a new world of cities but also a new world of theory. I write this essay to keep open that space of pedagogy, the equivalent of a room of one’s own. In her critique of Chibber’s book, Spivak (2014: 185) notes that he ignores the “range, roots, and ramifications of postcolonial studies.” So is it the case with Scott and Storper’s engagement with urban studies. I am bothered by this reliance on caricature, not because authentic or faithful representation is necessarily possible, but because such caricature dramatically limits what Spivak (2014: 188) calls “required reading.”
The last decade or more in urban studies has been a time of extraordinary expansion of our lists of required reading. To efface these lists seems an unfortunate gesture of closure and enclosure in this shared field of inquiry.

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