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Whole-world urbanism: thinking cities beyond North and South

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Abstract. This paper develops a critique and proposes an alternative to the dominant North–South frame in urban theory. It shows that many cities – ranging from Kyiv to Beijing, from Istanbul to Tehran and from Bangkok to Taipei – are not adequately captured through Northern capitalocentric theories or Southern postcolonial critiques. The paper proposes situating cities in a transversal matrix of power relations beyond the vertical North/South dualism, drawing on Russian-American philosopher Svetlana Boym's notion of the off-modern to add a lateral move. Mobilising Édouard Glissant's notion of the "whole-world", the paper calls this approach "whole-world urbanism". Whole-world urbanism allows recasting conceptual frames in urban studies through a triple move: opening urban thought to more-than-English knowledges, more-than-capitalist economies and more-than-European power relations. In this vein, whole-world urbanism not only creates a place to speak from for previously inaudible cities but also traces the outlines of a required shift in conceptual debates for urban studies more broadly.

1 Introduction: "We don't belong anywhere"

Anna walked up to me after my lecture, and I could sense that she had plucked up all her courage when she said:

> We talk about global urban theories all the time in our courses. We read literature about how we should or should not theorise from the North or from the South. But I feel like I can never say anything. I am from Kyiv; and we don't belong anywhere.

Kyiv – and many other cities – is indeed difficult to place in categories of urban theory, such as those of North and South, and of global capitalism and postcolonialism (Brenner and Schmid, 2015; Parnell and Robinson, 2012; Roy, 2016; Storper and Scott, 2016). Kyiv is in Europe, with a predominantly white population, has never experienced formal European colonialism and is the capital of a nominally capitalist economy. Does that make it part of the urban North? Hardly. Because Kyiv also happens to be relatively poor, located in frequently orientalised Eastern Europe (Ferenčuhová, 2016; Todorova, 1997), retains a significant part of the economy shaped by state socialism (Trubina, 2024) and, since 2022, has been defending itself against a war of aggression from a colonial power: Russia (Bouzarovski et al., 2023; Oksamytna, 2023). But this, as Anna observed, also does not make it a Southern city.

Kyiv is just one of a multitude of cities sitting between dominant approaches to urban theory in the world. These cities are shaped by colonial and imperial relationships that go beyond European empires and by diverse, more-than-capitalist economies – cities such as Dubai and Belgrade, Istanbul and Tehran, Astana and Beijing, Moscow and Taipei, and myriad smaller cities in the world. These cities are often neither particularly rich and powerful, nor poor or subaltern. They are not the centres of (former) European empires, nor are or were they direct subjects of European coloniality, instead being shaped by more-than-European imperial forces. They may be invested in capitalist accumulation but have a significant presence of other forms of economic coordination.

As a result, many cities slip between the categorisations of North and South. Many are also only partially theorised through global capitalism and postcolonialism, arguably the two dominant approaches in global urban theory today.

These cities, entangled in more-than-European imperial relationships and with diverse, more-than-capitalist economies, often find themselves off the map of global urban theorising – overlooked and invisible in theory, yet very much present in the world (Müller and Trubina, 2020; Nugraha et al., 2023; Sayın et al., 2020; Shin, 2021). Little wonder then that Anna could not speak: she did not feel that, from Kyiv, she had a vocabulary to speak with in the dominant categories of framing the global urban world.

Rather than lamenting these cities' marginalisation, however, this paper conceptualises this position to push urban theorising beyond categories of North/South and the theoretical mainstays of global capitalism and postcolonialism. It seeks to advance calls for transversal urbanism (first Amin and Graham, 1997; more recently, Moreno-Tabarez et al., 2023; Myers, 2020; Palat Narayanan, 2025) by taking the dualism of North and South as "interim moves" (see also Lawhon et al., 2020; Robinson, 2014:61) that require further conceptual work.

Performing a triple jump, this paper first demonstrates how large swathes of cities are not adequately captured through current theoretical frames, impoverishing urban theorising. Second, the paper harnesses the notion of the off-modern as a lateral position to dominant hierarchies by Russian-American theorist Svetlana Boym (2017) to show how urban theorising needs to incorporate not just vertical elements of coloniality but also horizontal elements of imperial difference. To work through the implications of such a transversal framework for scholarly practice, it then draws on Francophone Caribbean thinker Édouard Glissant (1997b) to develop the notion of a "whole-world urbanism", abandoning categories of North, South and East. Third, to bring this whole-world urbanism into being implies looking beyond Anglophone repertoires of theory and thinking beyond capitalism and European coloniality. Only through these moves can we open to an abundance of urban worlds and, eventually, to a greater diversity of urban thought.

2 Capitalocentrism and the theorisation of Northern cities

The analysis of cities as key engines and products of capital accumulation is at the heart of a significant part of urban theorising (Castells, 1977; Harvey, 1973). This perspective, often broadly termed "political economy", has received a renewed push through the "planetary urbanisation" hypothesis according to which remote resource peripheries are being integrated into capitalist urbanisation (Brenner and Schmid, 2015). This political economic view of cities is so much part of the canon that summarising all but the basic tenets will be sufficient (for a short overview, see Storper and Scott, 2016): as spatial agglomeration of economic activities raises productivity, market forces seeking to maximise profit will drive urbanisation. Agglomeration in particular allows specialisation through the division of labour, and therefore new economic activities emerge, driving the further growth of capital. Industrialisation leads to further productivity growth and spatial concentration, and colonialism appropriates cheap slave labour and raw materials to fuel Northern urban growth (Baptist, 2016; Beckert, 2014; du Bois, 1935). Agglomeration forces are accelerated by entrepreneurial urban governance prioritising economic growth over social needs and leading to land-based class struggles. Increasing globalisation of trade and, later, of capital flows and the opening of borders and national markets, leads to the global concentration of specialisation in some cities, emerging as command-and-control centres in the world economy (Friedmann, 1986; Sassen, 2001; Taylor and Derudder, 2015).

Taken together, the previous paragraph is a rough-and-ready description of the role of cities in capitalism and the emergence of wealthy Northern cities as economically dominant in the world of cities. Yet, its primary concern with the workings of capitalism and market forces, what one could call *capitalocentrism*, has largely precluded it from engaging with cities that are outside, on the margins or are recent entrants to the global capitalist system.

Consequently, Friedmann's (1986) important formulation of a network of cities in the world economy shows an empty space in the map where the Soviet Union and China were supposed to be (Friedmann, 1986:74). A footnote reads: "also eliminated from consideration were all centrally planned economies which are integrated into the Soviet block and are not part of the capitalist world system" (Friedmann, 1986:72). This capitalocentric reading of cities in the world economy ignores that there was a very vibrant network of cities in the *socialist* economy that went unremarked (Bocharnikova and Harris, 2018; Mark et al., 2020; Zubovich, 2024). Furthermore, it posits capitalist cities of the North as the implicit norm against which urbanisation and urban theorising is judged. This capitalocentrism exoticises cities in less-than-capitalist economies as "special cases" (Ferenčuhová and Gentile, 2016) that were not considered to be fully fledged cities and not to harbour interesting theoretical insights. Even after the collapse of state socialism, cities located in formerly socialist countries continued to be seen as struggling with socialist legacies and in a catch-up transition towards Western capitalism. In a significant part of the urban studies literature, these cities are portrayed as passive objects shaped by external political and economic changes (Ferenčuhová, 2016:520).

As a result, the many less-than-capitalist cities in the former Second and Third World were considered of limited relevance to the more important undertaking of theorising (unmarked) capitalist cities. They could either be explained through Western concepts or be dismissed as anomalies that theoretical frameworks did not have to reckon with. In any case, they were out of place in capitalocentric urban theorising and among cities of the Global North.

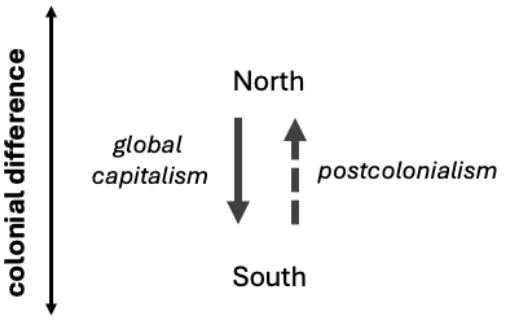


Figure 1. Major framings of global urbanism in current debates and the vertical relation of power.

3 The Southern turn and the hemispheric fallacy

From the 2000s, a growing body of research has critiqued the centrality of Northern cities in urban theory and has argued to see all cities, no matter their function in the global capitalist economy or their location on the world map, as "ordinary cities" and as equally suitable for producing urban theory (Robinson, 2006). The call has been to "provincialize global urbanism" (Sheppard et al., 2013), to challenge the universalism of Western urban theory and to shift the – theoretical and empirical – gaze to cities beyond a few metropoles in rich countries.

Among different possible vocabularies and imaginaries of decentring, much (although not all, see e.g. Robinson, 2022) urban studies scholarship has congealed around one in particular: a turn towards the Global South through the framework of postcolonialism. Writes Roy (2009:820): "[T]he centre of theory-making must move to the Global South". It is no understatement to say that there has been a Southern and postcolonial turn (Lawhon and Truelove, 2020; Roy, 2020:19) in urban theory, with a swathe of handbooks (Bhan et al., 2017; Miraftab and Kudva, 2014; Parnell and Oldfield, 2014), monographs (Lawhon, 2020; Myers, 2020; Simone, 2018) and influential articles (Lawhon and Truelove, 2020; Nagendra et al., 2018; Parnell and Robinson, 2012) advocating a deeper engagement with postcolonial theory, "Southern urban practice" (Bhan, 2019) or a "Southern urbanism" (Lawhon and Le Roux, 2019; Parida and Agrawal, 2022; Schindler, 2017). The framing of cities and urbanisation through global capitalism from the North is joined, or perhaps even contested, by a reframing of cities and urbanisation through postcolonialism from the South. This results in a vertical relation of power, as in the schema in Fig. 1.

This turn towards the Global South is most welcome for the shift in the geographies of theory it can produce. But it runs the risk of assuming that the South covers everything outside the North; or, in other words, of thinking that theorising from the Global South is the only way, or a privileged way, of theorising from outside the North. I call this assumption the "hemispheric fallacy": that North plus South equals the world. The origin of this fallacy is understandable, as it relies on the geometric imagination of two halves of a sphere which, put together, result in the whole sphere. Popular representations of the Global North and the Global South indeed show them as dividing the world in two parts that, put together, result in a whole sphere. That is the case for the now-iconic cover of the Brandt report of 1980, "North–South: a programme for survival", which introduced the division of North and South into common parlance. In the hemispheric fallacy, "Southern urbanism" added to "Northern urbanism" quickly slips into "global urbanism", without too much attention to the silences of this slippage. But the resulting hemispheric fallacy has left cities that do not neatly fit into this binary invisible as tertium quid, belonging neither to the North nor to the South.

Over time, such a topographical understanding of the South as place has become supplemented by a second understanding of the South as relation. In this perspective, the South represents a relation of domination that can occur anywhere in the world. "Southern" refers to "those, *everywhere*, whose livelihoods have been made precarious by geohistorical processes of colonialism and globalizing capitalism" (Sheppard et al., 2013:898, my emphasis). This relational view has come with a shift towards writing "the Souths" in the plural (Roy, 2020:931; Zaragocin, 2024) – abandoning the idea of one South as an identifiable place on the map. There are Souths in the North, such as in the large communities of vulnerable and marginalised urban dwellers, and Norths in the South: pockets of privileged urban elites. Such a relational notion of the South could, in theory, be more open to cities outside former European colonies, as it does not presuppose a particular geographical location. In practice, however, South as relation continues to be framed through notions of European colonialism and global capitalism, as in the Sheppard et al. (2013) quote above, leaving unattended the many cities which have not been primarily shaped by these two forces, profound as their impact may have been.

This absence of significant parts of the urban world from the turn towards the South has not gone unnoticed. As a result, Shin et al. (2016:456) "problematise the existing common practices of grouping all regions other than Western European and North American ones into the Global South", rendering East and South-East Asia invisible. In a similar vein, Sayın et al. (2020) demonstrate how Istanbul sits uncomfortably between the dualism of North and South, being a former imperial centre and sharing many characteristics typically attributed to either Northern or Southern cities. Finally, a number of authors have made the case that the cities of the post-socialist world, from Warsaw to Vladivostok, are also missing from the radar screen of Southern urbanism and have become mere footnotes in the peripheries of urban knowledge (e.g. Bach and Murawski, 2020; Ferenčuhová, 2016; Gentile, 2018; Tuvikene, 2016).

"North plus South" is therefore not equal to the whole of the urban world. Although theorising from the South may have changed the normative valuations of the dualism of North/South, emancipating the South from the role of the exotic urban Other, it has not tackled the dualism, and its silences, per se. Those cities that are precariously perched beyond capitalism and the North/South division remain in the Off. We therefore need to address the blind spots of the hemispheric dualism of North and South.

4 Beyond European coloniality: thinking with the off-modern

The work of late cultural theorist and artist Svetlana Boym can serve as a starting point for charting ways of disrupting the North/South dualism. In her books *Architecture of the Off-Modern* (Boym, 2008) and *The Off-Modern* (Boym, 2017), Boym analyses modes of existence that she considers to be "off-modern": the simultaneous "belonging to the critical project of modernity and its edgy excess" (Boym, 2017:3). It is a way of thinking at the same time with modernity, acknowledging its formative role and beyond it. Much of Boym's work draws on observations in the former Second World, the socialist bloc, which she considers "Off" in the sense of belonging neither to Western capitalist modernity nor to the dominated territories of the former European colonies, offering a third-way intellectual history of modernity. The off-modern for Boym is not something negative or on the margins, "but a delimitation of a broad space for a new choreography of future possibilities. Off-modern isn't antimodern; sometimes it is closer to the critical and experimental spirit of modernity" (Boym, 2017:3–4).

This wrestling with modernity as a theoretical category speaks directly to global urbanism. After all, the modern/non-modern dialectic was, and in some ways continues to be, a key vector of positioning large swathes of cities off the map of urban studies, as supposedly pre-modern and incommensurable (Robinson, 2006). Yet, instead of calling for undoing modernity, the "off-modern" introduces a third category – a tertium quid – that can spark a lateral move in urban theory, as it situates itself outside but in relation to the dualism of North and South, modern and pre-modern.

Boym draws on Russian-Soviet literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky, who proposes alternatives to the master-slave dialectic inscribed in the North/South relation. He used the metaphor of the knight from chess (who moves straight and then sideways, see Fig. 2) to distinguish this lateral, off-modern move from that of "honest pawns [South] and dutiful kings [North]" (Shklovsky, 2005:3–4).

The off-modern therefore allows prying open the dialectic of modernity and development, of North and South, that has characterised urban studies (Robinson, 2006). It does so not by arguing from the oppositional perspective of excluded or marginalised cities, as is often claimed for the Global South, but from the perspective of cities that have found themselves in a lateral position to the vertical power relation sketched in Fig. 1, pursuing a related but parallel modernity. The off-modern is encapsulated in socialist modernity, for example. While featuring many hallmarks of modernity – instrumental rationality, mass production, the belief in progress through science and technology, the violence of modernisation as a process – socialist modernity did not share Western modernity's foundation in liberal individualism, private property and capital accumulation, thus producing very different urban processes and materialisations (Bach and Murawski, 2020). That parallel modernity makes the off-modern intentionally provocative, pushing the boundaries of urban theorising – "edgy, not marginal", as Boym (2017:26) characterises it. The lateral move of the knight is not the move of a coward but the "tortured road of the brave" (Shklovsky, 2005:4).

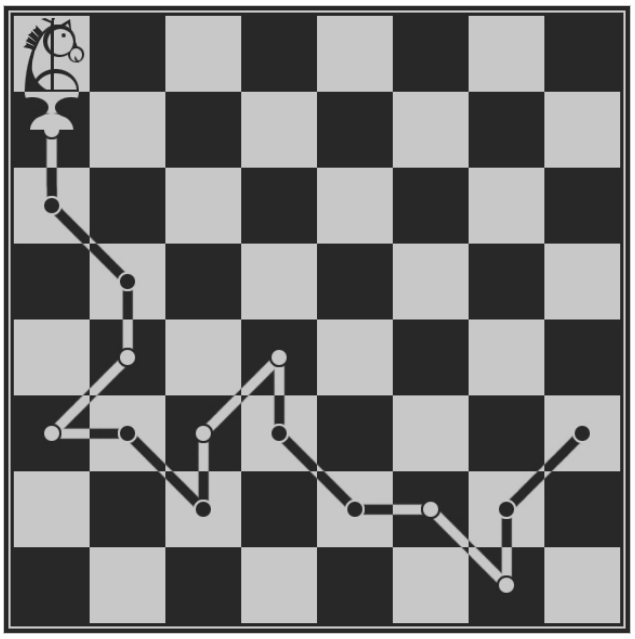


Figure 2. The lateral move of the knight in chess as a metaphor for the off-modern (Shklovsky, 2005:3).

Boym's lateral thinking through the Off allows rethinking the experience of modernity and coloniality that has been so foundational to global and Southern urbanism (e.g. Myers, 2020; Robinson, 2006; Roy, 2016). Critiques of coloniality and modernity, pertinent as they are for many cities around the world, need to be reconsidered and reconfigured when encountering cities that have remained outside or at the margins of European colonialism.

Take Tashkent, for example – the capital of Uzbekistan. One would assume that it should feature firmly in the urban South: it is marginal in the global economy and has a significant proportion of the population making a precarious living. More than that, it has always been a secondary city

under the rule of different non-European empires – the Mongols from 1219, then different Khanates and then the Russian Empire from 1865 (and later the Soviet Union), with significant racial discrimination by the colonisers (Meuser, 2016; Sahadeo, 1999). And yet, Tashkent, and Central Asia more broadly, is hardly ever included in notions of the South (Kuzhabekova, 2020; Trubina, 2018). Nevertheless, despite being a prime example of architectural modernism, since the rebuilding after the consequential earthquake in 1966 (Meuser, 2016), Tashkent is never addressed as a Northern, modern city.

Cities such as Dubai and Belgrade, Istanbul and Tehran, Tashkent and Beijing, Moscow and Taipei – and myriad smaller, non-capital cities – are outside or at the margins of European coloniality and Western modernity, and therefore outside of the vertical relation of power in Fig. 1. But they have been influenced by forms of more-than-European imperial and colonial power, and by other modernities. These cities often remain invisible in metropolitan urban theory, as they do not conform to Eurocentric expectations of Western modernity (Bach and Murawski, 2020). Crucially, they are also invisible in postcolonial urban theory, because they are outside, or on the margins of, the European colonial matrix: neither European coloniser nor colonised: "I am from Ukraine and we don't belong anywhere". This is where Boym's off-modern becomes important for retrieving cities that do not neatly map on pre-established categories.

Next to the Eurocentrism of classic urban theory, there is therefore something that could be called "inverse Eurocentrism" in postcolonial theory: postcolonial theory may well invert the Eurocentric gaze but does not extend its field of vision. It seeks to undo domination, but it leaves the vertical relation intact. The less-than-European empires, colonies and dependencies do not fit the equation. Or, as Laura Doyle (2014:162) puts it: "we continue to make the oddly Eurocentric assumption that western European imperialism accounts for all recent imperialism" (see also Chen, 2010).

It is, of course, fair to object that postcolonial theory never had the ambition to theorise beyond European coloniality. After all, its foundational moments are rooted in the experience and violence of European colonialism (e.g. Fanon, 1952; Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988). Others may argue that what counts is the power of European coloniality, much more global in reach and scope (Maldonado-Torres, 2007), extending well beyond the former European colonies. Although the global influence of European coloniality is without doubt, subsuming the manifold non-European or more-than-European relations of domination under European coloniality risks overwriting the diversity of such relations (Atanasoski and Vora, 2018). Not attending to the specificities of non-European forms of power and knowledge would leave cities in more-than-European empires and their former and current colonies and dependencies both theoretically and empirically marginal in the push towards a more encompassing view of cities.

This analysis makes us attentive to the inherent limits of the postcolonial frame for advancing more global urban studies. The argument that "a post-colonial urban studies would draw its inspiration from *all* cities" (Robinson, 2006:2, my emphasis), which is at the heart of viewing all cities as "ordinary cities", needs to be nuanced: postcolonial theory travels differently to different cities. Although it resonates with cities shaped by European coloniality, it is less able to capture cities shaped by, say, Soviet, Ottoman or Chinese imperialism and its attendant forms of coloniality. How, for example, do we theorise fraught Soviet coloniality when the Soviet Union viewed itself as precisely an anti-colonial force in relation to the capitalist world (Tlostanova, 2019)?

Working towards "a deeper engagement with postcolonial theory" (Lawhon and Truelove, 2020:16) to alleviate the parochialism of urban theory may help to redress epistemic inequalities for Southern cities; but it does not help theorising with and through cities that have experienced European coloniality and Western modernity *alongside* other, sometimes more transformative, forms of colonial or imperial power and other, non-Western modernities. To do this, we need to both hold on to the postcolonial sensitivity and, more importantly, find a conceptual means of thinking with the Off and moving beyond the dualistic, vertical relations of European coloniality.

To rethink coloniality in a way that accounts for cities in Boym's Off, it is helpful to distinguish between the notions of colonial difference (Mignolo, 2012; Quijano, 1992) and imperial difference (Gerasimov et al., 2005; Tlostanova, 2011). Colonial difference refers to the relation between modern European empires and their former colonies, to European coloniality, as sketched in Fig. 1. It is a vertical relation whose problematisation and undoing are a core endeavour of Southern urbanism.

Yet, to account for more-than-European cities and empires, we need to complement this vertical relation with Boym's lateral move, as in Fig. 3, which opens the dimension of imperial difference. Imperial difference is the difference between empires, in particular between modern European empires and those empires coded as less than modern, such as the Russian, Ottoman and other more-than-European empires. These second-rate empires need to be conceptualised as both colonisers and colonised, "simultaneously the agent of colonisation [vis-à-vis their own colonies] and the object of colonial discourse [vis-à-vis modern European empires]" (Gerasimov et al., 2005:34). Doing so accounts for these empires' ambiguous role in power relationships and avoids an all-too-easy appropriation of postcolonial or decolonial critique in the service of Russian expansionism or Chinese imperialism (Elterish et al., 2026).

What is then required is a move from vertical thinking, dominant in urban studies up to now, to transversal thinking through both colonial *and* imperial difference. Embracing this web of transversal relations underscores the need for topological thinking that abandons topographical categories.

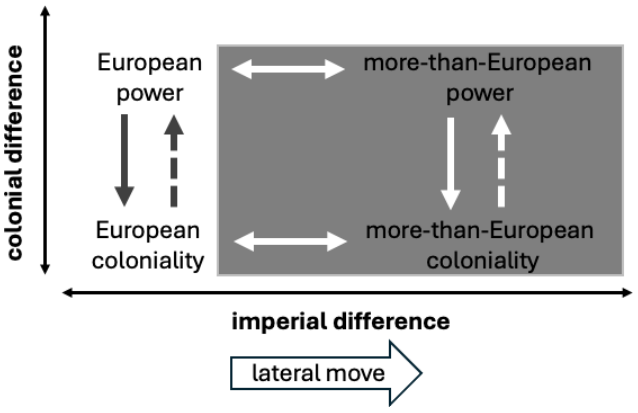


Figure 3. Transversal relations of power: embracing the lateral move of imperial difference towards more-than-European relations of power.

In this vein, it aligns with work advocating to think and study cities in relations (e.g. Robinson, 2022; Söderström, 2014). But the lateral move goes one step further by addressing a crucial condition of possibility for thinking cities in relation: it shows how these relations have not just a horizontal dimension but always also a vertical one. This recognition is essential if Kyiv, and all other "overlooked cities" (Nugraha et al., 2023) hitherto in the lateral Off, are to have a place to speak from and be spoken about. Consequently, relations are important; but it is equally important to recognise the fundamentally patterned nature of relations and the different positions of cities within this web of relations if we want to study *all* cities in relation. This lateral move is not just of theoretical importance: opening to cities in transversal relations also points to different sources of knowledge beyond the Anglophone canon, different forms of economic coordination beyond global capitalism and different configurations of power relations beyond European coloniality – as we will see now.

5 Whole-world urbanism

An immediate consequence of thinking cities both vertically and horizontally is the need for new conceptualisations. Whereas the vertical relationship of colonial difference is key to postcolonial theory, the horizontal one of imperial difference – the lateral one, in Boym's terms – is not much theorised. Here, the work of French-Caribbean writer and philosopher Édouard Glissant can be helpful for providing concrete ways of thinking and practising Svetlana Boym's notion of the Off. Glissant's writings, the most important of which date from the 1990s and 2000s (in particular, Glissant, 1997a, b, 2009, 2020), have only recently been taken up in urban studies (Moreno-Tabarez et al., 2023; Myers, 2020). Glissant's interest for urban studies lies in the way in which his thought perches between universalism and particularism, drawing on conceptual repertoires from postcolonialism and more-than-human thinking. His work displays a keen awareness of the inequalities and structures of dominance resulting from European colonialism. At the same time, however, his thinking pursues a relentless horizontal relationality, akin to assemblage thinking (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987), of mixing together peoples, languages and culture in what Glissant calls creolisation. This bringing together of vertical relations of domination and horizontal relations of difference makes his thought particularly useful in thinking the transversal matrix derived from Boym's thinking and proposed in Fig. 3.

Glissant's thought bears a strong spatial imprint. His central concept of the archipelago provides a geographical imaginary for rethinking a world of cities. A collection of islands in geographical terminology, the notion of the archipelago echoes Glissant's upbringing in the Antilles (Glissant, 1997b:25), both rooted in place and reaching far out into the world: "diversities in expanse, which nevertheless bring together shores and marry horizons"[1] (1997b:31). For Glissant, "the entire world is becoming an archipelago" (Glissant, 1997b:193–194).

Glissant's thought and life are deeply steeped in the experience of European colonialism and its violence and aftermath in the Caribbean. Yet, in his notion of the archipelago, he seeks to go beyond dualisms such as coloniser/colonised and North/South, while still reckoning with the force of colonial violence. The archipelago becomes an in-between figure, a *tertium quid* between the continent and the island: it floats between the contiguity of the continent and the isolation of the single island. For Glissant, the archipelago symbolises multiplicity in unity, and difference in connectedness: a "space that preserves boundaries and openness, where contact does not imply fusion, which enables one to feel the place and the world simultaneously" (Rosemberg, 2016:8).

Let us imagine, with Glissant, cities in the world as an urban archipelago, which takes us some way towards thinking with Boym's Off and beyond North and South. If Glissant's islands become our cities, we need to see all of them as both connected and different. The urban archipelago is composed of global flows and circulations, including those economic links and exchanges that have commonly made up the notion of the global city (Friedmann, 1986). But more than that, it is "the accelerated and massive bringing into contact of peoples, languages, cultures, races, conceptions of the world and cosmogonies", as Patrick Chamoiseau expands on Glissant's notion of creolisation (Chamoiseau, 2013:18). And yet, this urban archipelago is not pure flow, as Glissant insists on the rootedness in place, on the bounded islands of the archipelago: "Place. It is indispensable, for it cannot be replaced nor ever entirely exhausted".[2] (Glissant, 1997b:59).

[1] "… [C]es sortes de diversités dans l'étendue, qui pourtant rallient des rives et marient des horizons".

[2] "Le Lieu. Il est incontournable, pour ce qu'on ne peut le remplacer, ni d'ailleurs en faire le tour".

This interplay of world and place holds *all* cities of the urban archipelago in delicate suspension between particularity and connection, echoing Robinson's topological imagination when she writes that urban studies needs to "attend to coexisting and possibly incommensurable differences brought together in localities" (Robinson, 2022:193–194).

Importantly for urban studies, Glissant's notion of the archipelago also contains a visionary, utopian component of a world yet to come, which he calls whole-world (*tout-monde*): a "world to be created but which is already here, and of which we do not yet have a knowledge that could be called obvious" (Glissant, 2010:63). Glissant's political commitment as a critical philosopher is encapsulated in this whole-world and the effort to bring our present world closer to it. The linguistic constitution of the whole-world, the mixing of languages, is of particular importance to Glissant, not least due to his sensitivity as a multi-lingual writer. "This whole-world, we learn, has a language"[3], Glissant (1997b:19, my translation) writes, underscoring the fact that any world-making can never be independent of the medium of its signification. As a Francophone writer from a colonised island, Glissant was acutely aware both of the affordances and the constraints of using the coloniser's language for reimagining the world as whole-world – a critical awareness that asks for interrogating the limits of English and Anglophone concepts for rethinking urban theory (Zhao, 2020).

Glissant's notion of the urban archipelago allows sketching the contours of a whole-world urbanism that transcends categories of North, South and East. The term "world" is not just a careless synonym for "globe". In the effort of working towards a new urban grammar (Amin and Lancione, 2022), Glissant's world creates new imaginaries. In contrast to the notion of cities as hierarchical nodes, so present in notions of the globe and global capitalism, world reflects a "desire to stay close to the grounds of urban life" (Amin and Lancione, 2022:3). Where the globe is about centres and peripheries, about categorisations such as North, South and East, the world is about unexpected emergence and lateral links, such as those contained in Boym's notion of the Off.

In this sense, whole-world urbanism is a thought in relations that, while acknowledging difference, does not privilege one particular type of difference as a vantage point, be it capitalist, colonial or otherwise. Whole-world urbanism thinks in multiple circulations – economic as well as cultural, political and linguistic – while recognising place-based particularity as something that can never be completely subsumed in relations. This allows bringing in cities that sit uncomfortably between the categories of rich and poor, coloniser and colonised, centre and periphery. It allows thinking London and Mumbai in the same frame with Moscow and Tashkent, acknowledging both difference and connectedness, as illustrated in Fig. 4. This matrix puts London in a vertical colonial difference with Mumbai *and* in a horizontal imperial difference with Moscow, Moscow in horizontal imperial difference with London *and* in vertical colonial difference with Tashkent, and Tashkent in vertical colonial difference with Moscow *and* horizontal imperial difference with Mumbai. This matrix reveals that cities can be in multiple relations of domination (as for Tashkent), whereas others (such as Moscow) can be both dominated and dominating. This transversal thinking positions cities in more than one way, obviating topographical notions of North, South and indeed East.

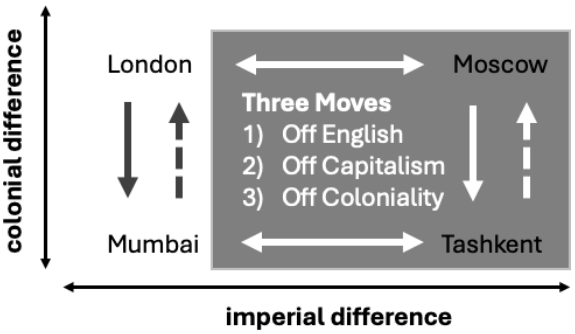


Figure 4. Whole-world urbanism: a matrix of transversal (vertical and horizontal relations) requiring three theoretical moves.

If one wanted to rethink urban studies through the lens of whole-world urbanism, this would entail, as a primary enabling condition, becoming aware of the limits of the concepts and languages used to describe the urban. Moving towards whole-world urbanism requires extending the available conceptual repertoire, within English and beyond English as a language, towards thinking horizontal relations and difference, as shown in Fig. 4. This new language would then allow a diversification of the vertical vocabularies of domination and resistance, moving away from the theoretical primacy of global capitalism and postcolonialism as "conceptual architectures that leave little room for empirical heterogeneity" (Ong, 2011:3; see also Peck, 2015:160). This shift would afford a greater attentiveness to the multiple forms of circulation that Glissant evokes and their role in constituting urban archipelagos, sharpening an awareness of forms of coordination that exceed capitalist relations. Symmetrically, whole-world urbanism would, finally, require supplementing European coloniality as a structuring vertical relation and thinking through horizontal imperial difference. Decentring English, decentring capitalism, decentring European coloniality – these are the three moves of whole-world urbanism to which I shall now turn.

6 Thinking with the Off: three moves

As the preceding sections have established, moving towards whole-world urbanism is not simply a matter of empirical completeness of adding a missing piece to the mosaic of

[3] "Ce tout-monde, nous l'apprenons, a un langage".

cities in the world. Crucially, whole-world urbanism shifts the theoretical terms of engagement. It shifts how we think of cities not just in vertical relations but also in horizontal relations. I use the verb "think" here as a humbler cousin of the verb "theorise". Theorising has been criticised as a prerogative of, often Western, academics (Jazeel, 2019). Thinking, by contrast, is an activity that unfolds through being in the world. More importantly, thinking originates in concrete urban worlds, which resonates with Glissant's interest in the "thorough, thick experience of the world" (see also Myers, 2020; Wing, 1998:1). "The more lifeworlds we have," writes Bhan (2022:81), "the richer, the deeper, are the ideas that can then travel across geographies to enrich our understanding of all cities".

If the previous sections have developed a theoretical critique, along with the lateral move and whole-world urbanism as conceptual responses, this last section attempts to offer alternative paths forward. Three successive moves of rethinking cities take us closer towards whole-world urbanism. These moves are lateral moves, as in Shklovsky's chess analogy in Fig. 2. This means they are related to dominant urban debates on global capitalism and postcolonialism but move beyond them. The first move, thinking "Off English" starts from the need to expand linguistic horizons beyond English, towards a mixing of languages, as Glissant suggests. This move is important to shake up the hegemony of English in writing and thinking about the city, and open up to new, lateral bodies of knowledge that have not been representable in the dominant discourse – the very condition for the next two moves. The second move asks us to think "Off capitalism": to challenge the dominance of capitalism as the explicit or implicit reference point for urban theorising. The last move requires thinking "Off (European) coloniality". This move opens to the various more-than-European forms of power and dominance that are often occluded in the preoccupation with European colonialism and its aftermath. Together, these three moves take us some way towards the idea of whole-world urbanism of transversal relations.

6.1 Off English

Contemporary knowledge production in global urbanism has relied to a large degree on circuits of Anglophone scholarship (Governa and Iacovone, 2025; Müller et al., 2025). English (and other imperial languages but to a much lesser degree) has become the language of choice to produce universal knowledge with global authority (Jazeel, 2019), often perpetuating intellectual colonisation (Thiong'o, 1986). With far-reaching consequences, as Aamir Mufti (2005:480) observes, "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". Even for postcolonial studies, with its critical, emancipatory impetus, Gayatri Spivak notes that "colonial discourse and postcolonial studies have not been good with languages" (Spivak et al., 2006:829).

In cities with multiple more-than-European histories and languages, however, monoglot knowledge production does not travel far. If we are to develop a new "vocabulary of the urban" (Schmid et al., 2018), it decidedly needs to reach beyond English. "Off English" is therefore a first crucial move that enables urban research to listen to thinking going on in many other languages in the urban archipelagos in a (multi-lingual) conversation where often the peripheries and margins hold some of the most promising ideas (Houssay-Holzschuch, 2020) and can help "world" urban research in the sense of opening it up to the world (Amilhat Szary et al., 2026). The urban whole-world, then, "has a language" (Glissant, 1997b:19, my translation).

Working "Off English" means thinking from a context of displacement, "consciously working in a vocabulary in which one is not at home" (Katz, 1996:490). Increasing critique has drawn attention to the inadequacy of English-language concepts to capture global urban lifeworlds. Originating from Anglophone cities, the application of concepts such as gentrification (Kubeš and Kovács, 2020; Ley and Teo, 2014; Lui, 2017; Maloutas, 2018), neoliberalism (Kinossian, 2022; Wu, 2022) and suburb (Wu, 2022; Zhao, 2020) has been taken to task for homogenising and universalising Western urban experiences rather than allowing one to see divergences and heterogeneities.

Moving "Off English" takes seriously the rich thought going on in other languages and knowledge architectures, and engaging in the difficult task of connecting it without appropriating it (Halvorsen, 2018). This can happen through the contextualised borrowing of concepts from other languages, as Yimin Zhao (2020) suggests for the Chinese term *jiehebu* instead of the English "suburb". Pluralising knowledges will also mean revising gatekeeping structures in publishing and bringing in more authors and editors from more-than-Anglophone contexts (Müller et al., 2025). Last, and perhaps most basic, it means reading, engaging with and citing authors who write from elsewhere in other languages. The game here has changed quickly with the rapid increase in quality of machine-based translation. This reading and citing are crucial, as it not only makes bodies of knowledge from other urban archipelagos visible but also opens up new avenues for thinking of dominant orthodoxies in current urban thought, for example, through thinking "off capitalism".

6.2 Off capitalism (as we know it)

Capitalism, in particular in its neoliberal varieties, has been a key analytical frame of urban studies for decades. Yet, whole-world urbanism encourages us to think "off capitalism" in at least two ways: by recognising a much more diverse role of the state in capitalism and by foregrounding various types of socialisms. Urban studies has largely been concerned with the acceleration of the circulation and ac-

cumulation of capital with and through urbanisation, reaching into the farthest hinterlands (Brenner and Schmid, 2015). More recent debates have theorised the role of the developmental or entrepreneurial state in some East Asian countries that orchestrates capitalist urbanisation (e.g. Wu, 2024).

But, although there has been critique of the dominance of neoliberalism as a theoretical frame (Leitner et al., 2007; Parnell and Robinson, 2012), there has been little engagement with forms of urban development, where market-driven private capital accumulation is not a primary goal and where the market is not a driving force. The burgeoning literature on authoritarian urbanism investigates the various ways in which different levels of the state intervene in urbanisation through illiberal means: coercion, repression, intimidation, economic co-optation, control of information and concentration of power. This literature is inspired by a variety of cities that are in a lateral position to the dominant North/South paradigm, ranging from China and Russia to Türkiye and the Gulf region (e.g. Can and Fanton Ribeiro da Silva, 2024; Kinossian and Morgan, 2023; Molotch and Ponzini, 2019; Trivin, 2026). Authoritarian urbanism may often use capital and the market where they help to further state goals; as a result, hybrids between authoritarianism and capitalism are not uncommon. Yet, authoritarian urbanism places much less importance on market forces but demonstrates how economic growth becomes subservient to maintaining state power, or elite and clan influence (Molotch and Ponzini, 2019), therefore cautioning against narratives that put the market front and centre.

At the same time, whole-world urbanism also allows directing attention towards other-than-capitalist practices, therefore dislocating a capitalocentric reading of cities in the world. The collapse of state socialism is often invoked when justifying capitalocentric theoretical frameworks (Brenner and Schmid, 2015:172), but scholars of (post)socialist cities have shown the ways in which many diverse, often still-socialist practices exist in nominally capitalist cities. This is the case in food provisioning (Sovová et al., 2025), culture (Murawski, 2019), housing (Fehérváry, 2013; Mihaylov, 2025) and urban infrastructure (Collier, 2011; Tuvikene et al., 2020). Tuvikene et al. (2020), for example, demonstrate how questions of social justice and equity are central to infrastructures in former socialist cities and ponder how the past of these cities can inform present-day infrastructure planning and use. Yet, in a capitalocentric reading of urban studies, research foregrounding the ways in which variants of socialism interlace with or transform capitalist practices runs the risk of being ignored or sidelined (Jehlička, 2021; Kočková and Ferenčuhová, 2026), as it is not straightforward to decipher in a framework that is more attuned to neoliberal commodification and the encroachment of the market.

6.3 Off (European) coloniality

Finally, whole-world urbanism encourages us to think "Off coloniality" in the sense of still thinking with but at the same time beyond European colonial relations. This is an important imperative, not least because it helps to avoid overestimating the reach and power of European coloniality and attributing to it the role of a dominant master signifier (Táíwò, 2022). Decentring European coloniality can happen by becoming attuned to configurations of both horizontal power relations between empires and vertical power relations within (different) empires, as in Fig. 3.

A particularly productive lateral conversation has long been waiting to happen around different forms of bondage and their role in the growth and (infra)structure of cities. The study of the relation of slavery and urbanisation remains strongly focused on the United States and the British Empire, although serfdom in the Russian Empire, for example – which extended to more than 40 million people in 1860 – shared many of the same characteristics, while also exhibiting some key differences (Kolchin, 1987). Critically, the legacies of serfdom, abolished in 1861, shaped and still significantly shape urbanisation and economic development in the former Russian Empire today (Buggle and Nafziger, 2021), opening points of convergence and difference with debates on the relation of slavery and urbanisation in North Atlantic cities (Roy et al., 2020).

Thinking Off European coloniality brings cities into focus that are not easily mapped onto European colonial relationships. Take the example of Istanbul. Istanbul was one of the world's most important imperial capitals for almost 1600 years, first as Constantinople for the Eastern Roman Empire from 330 to 1453, then as Istanbul for the Ottoman Empire (one of the longest-lasting empires in history) from 1453 to 1922. For a long time, it was one of the most racially and culturally diverse cities in the world and Europe's largest city. At a strategic crossroads for trade and military domination between Europe, Asia and Africa, its influence reached far across Eurasia (Frankopan, 2016; Kafescioglu, 2009). One would think this would predestine it for inclusion among the ranks of Northern cities. But despite its imperial pedigree, Istanbul is never addressed in global urban theory alongside Northern metropolises such as London, Paris or Los Angeles (Sayın et al., 2020). Yet, neither is it included in the Global South, despite its high presence of informality and its low GDP per capita – precisely because of its imperial history. This, as Sayın et al. (2020) note, places it in between theoretical perspectives: related to postcolonialism in the relevance of considerations of power and domination but beyond it in its ambiguous role as both former imperial centre (of the Ottoman empire) and periphery of Europe.

If urban research were to think with the likes of Istanbul, and with the many other cities that are shot through with multiple forms of dominance beyond European colonialism, it would pluralise its understanding of vectors of power and

more lateral circulations (Hedinger and Heé, 2018). Thinking through Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria, would reveal multiple metropoles, depending on the phenomenon in question: political relationships may be closest with Brussels, the seat of the EU administration; cultural affinities may be highest with Moscow, which shares the Slavic language and Cyrillic alphabet, and was the main reference point during the Soviet Union; economic ties are closest with many German cities, which are a main destination for out-migration; and Istanbul is the closest large city and former imperial metropolis, with intense trade relationships, strong infrastructural ties and a shared position on the Balkan route for migrants. Sofia, and with it the Balkans and other inter-imperial zones such as the Maghreb, Central Asia, the Middle East and Southeast Asia, would then not be considered peripheries of the global urban world, as they are often now, but as home to key cities at the crossroads of multiple empires (Doyle, 2014:163; Sidaway, 2022). Researching these crossroads requires competencies, not least linguistic ones, that go beyond English and thus reinforce the need to move "Off English" as mentioned above; this requires getting attuned to forms of economic coordination that exceed or reconfigure global capitalism, reinforcing the need to think "Off capitalism".

7 Conclusion: thinking with . . . the world

What are the concepts and lifeworlds through which cities should be understood? The answer to that question has evolved over the past 3 decades. With the turn towards the South and towards postcolonialism, new cities and epistemologies have started to emerge. And yet, this turn has been partial, bringing some cities to the fore, while leaving out those in a lateral position to the North/South dualism.

This paper has not only shown *that* we need to think beyond North and South but also *how* to do so. If our theories get better by confronting them with diversity, as they should, we cannot afford to ignore cities entangled in more-than-European imperial relationships and with diverse more-than-capitalist economies, such as those in East and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Eastern Europe and Eurasia. Many of these cities experience rapid demographic and economic growth, making them home to a sizeable part of the world's urban population that needs to be accounted for, conceptually and empirically.

As a result, whole-world urbanism seeks to chart an urban space that relies less on dualistic structures of North and South, capitalism and European coloniality. Through a lateral move, the theoretical foundations developed in this article build towards a transversal urbanism that holds on to the dynamics of global capitalism and coloniality but opens to multiple economies and horizontal imperial difference. Consequently, whole-world urbanism contributes as much to the empirical inclusion of multiple urban realities in the world, as it does to the emergence of non-dualistic ways of thinking the urban world.

But whole-world urbanism is not merely an exercise in ever-greater inclusivity and in finding appropriate theories for different urban realities. Thinking beyond English, with more-than-capitalist economies and more-than-European colonialities, matters for cities anywhere. In times where the search of alternatives to a logic of ceaseless growth and rampant commodification is urgent, urban thought cannot ignore diverse experiences with affordable housing, equal access to infrastructures, self-governance, public transport, free childcare and universal healthcare. In a similar vein, as authoritarian practices are becoming more and more common across Western countries, authoritarian urbanism is no longer a phenomenon confined to a supposedly exotic East. Finally, in face of expansionist, imperial geopolitics of major more-than-European empires, such as Russia and China, thinking with more-than-European relations of dominance in urban politics is more than a theoretical exercise.

Moving urban thought towards whole-world urbanism requires many steps, but two are urgent next ones: a critical mass of scholars and an emancipatory practice of citation. To avoid "decolonisation without decolonising" (Moosavi, 2020:334), we need to have more scholars working from lateral cities in key publishing spaces to generate the vibrant debates that will move the field forward. Second, we need a practice of reading and citing that gives due credit to scholarship, often not in English or in less prestigious outlets, that is produced with and from lateral cities (see Ahmed, 2017).

With this dual move, Kyiv – and with it all those cities beyond North and South – need to, and will, change place in urban thought: from Anna's "nowhere", at the beginning of this paper to a much more connected "somewhere" in the urban archipelago. That journey will, perhaps, resemble the "tortured road of the brave" (Shklovsky, 2005:4). But, like with so many streets in the tangle of cities, once you walk down it, that obscure, somewhat frightening alley might just take you to a place from which you have never seen the city before.

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