The situations of urban inquiry: thinking problematically about the city

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1). From the urban question to problematizations of the city

Across disciplines such as urban studies, human geography, urban and regional planning, and regional science, there is agreement that existing approaches to theorising require adjustment in light of the unprecedented dimensions of contemporary urbanization. This agreement is evident in a set of overlapping debates about topics such as planetary urbanization (Brenner and Schmid, 2014), ordinary cities (Robinson, 2006), urban assemblages (McFarlane, 2011), comparative urbanism (McFarlane and Robinson, 2012), and southern urbanism (Parnell and Oldfield, 2014). For some commentators, the geographical reference points around which urban thought has been traditionally shaped need to be re-thought, expanded or even re-located (Robinson and Roy 2016). Positions within these debates are characterized by differences of theoretical ambition (see Dickerson, 2015). Some claim that southern urbanism represents a prefiguration of general global phenomenon (Roy, 2009). Others argue that what is required is a broader palette from which to draw comparative judgments (Myers, 2014; Robinson, 2011). And others hold that what is really required is the development of coherent explanatory master-concepts (e.g. Scott and Storper, 2015; Peck, 2015).

Underlying these debates about the geographical sources and scope of urban theory are different understandings of exactly what counts as 'Theory' (see Robinson 2016b). One strand of argument seeks to interrupt the deductive assumptions of grand theorizing. It does so by elaborating on the importance of case methodologies as a basis of theory building (Duminy et al, 2014), and by addressing the challenge of developing robust theory in the absence of comprehensive empirical data-sources on the scope and intensity of urban change (Pieterse, 2011). By contrast, Brenner and Schmid (2014) assert that 'the urban' is not an empirical object at all, but is a theoretical construct. The reference point for such a claim is rather backward looking, alluding to a view of theory as providing epistemological clarification of ideological formulations and common sense categorizations (Castells, 1979).

The strongly epistemological flavour of the arguments presented by Brenner and Schmid might appear at odds with the distinctively ontological drift in recent spatial theorising (e.g. Jones et al, 2007). But the difference is not as significant as often supposed. Critical spatial theorists share a longstanding suspicion of the ordinary

usage of spatial concepts (e.g. Schlottmann, 2008). In turn, there is also a shared commitment to correcting such usage either by epistemological clarification or ontological redescription.

In drawing attention to the models of 'Theory' at work in debates about urban theory, we want to raise the question of what attitude to adopt towards received understandings of the objects of urban thought. We develop an answer to this question that recommends thinking *problematically* about concepts. Our starting point for making this argument is the observation that current debates about contemporary urban dynamics are often presented in the vocabulary of 'problematics' (see Bishop and Phillips 2013; Bishop and Phillips 2014). For example, Brenner (2014, 24) suggests that discussions of the notion of planetary urbanization are indicative of the emergence of "a new *problematique* – a set of interconnected explorations and inquiries around a common set of questions". The implication of this understanding is that an urban problematic is a refraction of changes in definably urban processes.

We should pause here, however, and acknowledge that the original deployment of the idea of a problematic interrupts any simple sense of an expressive relation between a field of objects and the frame in which they are apprehended. Rather, the structuring questions that defined a 'problematique' are actually *absent* from the field that they frame (see Althusser 1969, pp. 66-70). A problematic, in this sense, is best discerned through an analytics of displacement and condensation. Or, to put it another way, the heightened concern with urban issues might be better thought of as a symptom that remains to be diagnosed properly. If there appears to be a pressing urban problematic these days, then grasping quite what is at stake in the emergence of discourses of 'the urban age' or of 'future cities' requires more than simply arriving at clearer, more coherent conceptualisations of 'the urban' or 'the city'. What is required is a form of analysis oriented not by a concern with how to define 'the urban', but rather by an interest in understanding how and why making sense of urban issues becomes salient in the first place: "Problems cannot take the form of an inquiry about the essence of things ('what is matter?', 'what is life?', 'what is X?'); instead they constitute that which makes it important, relevant, critical, to know about X" (Manlinger 2012, p. 21).

It is in light of this understanding of that we seek to develop the case for approaching the concepts of urban inquiry problematically. We do so in order to further elaborate on how a pragmatist imagination can invigorate critical urban studies (see Bridge 2014, and Barnett and Bridge, 2013, Harney *et al* 2016, Lake, forthcoming). In Section 2, we introduce the relevance of Michel Foucault's notion of problematization to the task of thinking problematically about urban issues. In Section 3, we draw Foucault's remarks on problematization into conversation with John Dewey's discussion of the problematic situations out of which inquiry arises. We do so to refine a form of situational analysis of problems, one that takes seriously the vocabularies through which urban processes are articulated as issues requiring concerted attention. In Section 4, we outline the relevance of this sort of analysis through consideration of two fields of contemporary urban inquiry.

2). Approaching urban thought problematically

Calls for the renewal of critical urban theory coincide with a proliferation of urban thought across a wide range of fields of policy, practice and advocacy. Urban processes have been identified as key both to the generation of various challenges, and as vectors for developing forward-looking strategies in fields as diverse as security, information management, environmental management, and public health. Urban thinking associated with more 'positivistic' disciplines such as economics, planning and engineering and the emergent field of 'urban science' has been central to this proliferation of urban concern beyond the traditional boundaries of urban studies (see Barnett, 2012). These fields of are looked upon with great suspicion by self-consciously critical traditions of urban thought. The search for either epistemologically coherent or ontologically watertight objects of analysis in urban theory is related to a systematic wariness of the fields of urban knowledge production that are often most consequential in framing the contemporary resurgence of interest in cities. They are often characterized as the sources of suspect 'urbanology' (e.g. Gleeson, 2013) and of neoliberal fast-policy (Peck, 2012), as well as suffering from naïve 'methodological cityism' (Angelo and Wachsmuth, 2015). In contrast, we seek to avoid the deep-seated suspicion of fields of applied urbanism by paying attention

to what is at stake in the reframing of so many issues as 'urban' in some sense or other.

As suggested above, if we are to think of the proliferation of contemporary debates about cities as sharing a 'problematic', then this actually requires us to leave behind the search for a coherent object of urban analysis. It means instead focussing on what it is that makes knowing about cities and urban processes important in particular conjunctures. To begin this form of analysis, it is worth acknowledging that across a range of fields, 'the city' or 'urban' actually refers to a very broad assortment of concerns, each of which names a cluster of apparent problems and possible solutions. For example, the city sometimes is presented as a site of sociability, facing challenges of sustaining terms of community relations and social cohesion; sometimes 'urban' refers to the idea of an extended technological infrastructure, generating challenges of sustaining the circulation of material objects and information; sometimes the city is imagined as a privileged spatial scale for enhancing democratic participation, experimentation, and accountability; and very often, cities are thought of as potential clusters of entrepreneurial innovation.

The variety of issues that can be and are named 'urban' should not be interpreted as a sign of either conceptual chaos requiring clarification, or ideological subterfuge requiring exposure. To make sense of this variety, we propose instead to follow Howard Becker's (2007, pp. 270-284) interpretation of Italo Calvino's 'method' for building a theory of city life. Calvino's (1997) *Invisible Cities* presents a series of parables of city life ranging from the mundane to the magical. Reading the novel as a social scientist, Becker's suggestion is that in its own way each parable draws into focus something worthy of attention. In his view, what Calvino is undertaking is an inventory of *problems* that urban life is thought to generate or potentially resolve. Following Becker's interpretation leads us to think that thinking problematically about the city requires inquiry into just what sorts of difficulties and possible actions are being named through the deployment of urban-sounding terms.

Examining the formation of problems is, of course, a long-standing concern for social science. This is particularly true in fields concerned with the analysis of the social construction of policy problems (e.g. Loseke, 2011). Examples would include

Turnbull's (2006) account of the inherent 'problematicity' of policy; Hajer's (1995) account of the discursive construction of policy issues; Bacchi's (2009) methodology for investigating 'what's the problem meant to be'; and Forester's (1993, 46) conceptualisation of policy issues as "an historically constituted set of claims". What such approaches all share is a loosely pragmatist understanding in which fields of action are configured through the situated engagement with problems (see Healey, 2009).

It is in the context of these longer-standing constructionist traditions that increasing attention has been paid to Michel Foucault's notion of 'problematization' as a means of understanding processes of problem formation (e.g. Bacchi, 2012). Critical policy analysis often focuses on examining the contingent formation of policy problems, applying methodologies such as 'frame analysis' that can be easily related to forms of critical discourse analysis inflected by Foucault's ideas. The primary emphasis is on analysing the process of framing through which externally messy realities are given order through processes of exclusion and selection. In turn, the critical purchase of such analyses is oriented to uncovering unwarranted exclusions.

We want to resist an interpretation of the notion of problematization in constructionist terms of this sort. An overly constructionist interpretation of problematization as a mode of motivated, strategic action encourages us to overlook what is actually most distinctive about Foucault's use of the idea. We prefer to place the emphasis he places on action as a responsive disposition to difficult situations. Foucault himself insisted that problematizations are not "an arrangement of representations" (Foucault, 1984, 390). This insistence follows from the argument that investigating problematizations involves a double movement "in which one tries to see how the different solutions to a problem have been constructed; but also how these solutions result from a specific form of problematization" (ibid, 389). We elaborate here and in the next section on the distinctively situational understanding of the generation of problems provided by Foucault. It is an understanding that resists any straightforward critical analysis in terms of either exclusion or naturalization.

Foucault's ideas have served as a frame for various styles of critical engagement with the city, often cited as the authoritative source for a dark theory of the power through

which urban processes and urban subjects are strategically managed and regulated. Our own emphasis is on Foucault as a theorist of *action*. To elaborate on the importance of this emphasis, it is worth considering the significance of Foucault's own elaboration of a distinctive way of analysing problems by reference to the historical emergence of understandings of urban issues. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1977) alluded to the ways in which the spatial configuration of urban spaces was one focus of a sustained problematization of how to best regulate criminality, health, and disease. The argument is further elaborated in Foucault's lecture course of 1977-1978 (Foucault, 2008). For Foucault, 'the town' emerges in eighteenth-century discourses of government as a figure for problems of regulating extended networks of dependence and vulnerability to which various public agencies felt compelled to respond. 'The town' becomes an issue at this time due to "the sudden emergence of the problem of the "naturalness" of the human species within an artificial milieu" (ibid, 21-22). In this period, so he argues, 'the town' served as the concrete referent for the general analysis of 'population', as both an object of analysis and a field of intervention. As the site of a series of related technical problems from overcrowding to disease, 'the town' was conceptualised in this problematization as 'the milieu' in which causes and effects circulate. In short, 'the town' is a name for the crystallization of a series of problems: problems of contagion, order, and food supply, (ibid. pp. 63-64). In this period, 'the urban' referred to a strategy of policing and regulating a diverse range of issues of circulation and exchange (ibid, p. 335-337).

Foucault's remarks on 'the problem of the town' are suggestive of a way of thinking of governmental programmes as *responsive problematizations* of emergent processes and events (see Barnett, 2015b; and Anderson and Gordon, 2016). The notion of problematization in Foucault's work throws into question the extent to which the concept of 'governmentality' is best understood as the name for a determinative mode of instrumental power. We might think instead that it directs our attention to the diverse practices through which modes of government are made into objects of critical scrutiny (see Collier, 2011). On this understanding, we are inclined to approach the proliferation of urban-related discourses in fields of policy, governance, commercial, advocacy and activism as varieties of "critical reflection on governmental practice" (Foucault, 2008, p. 321).

The broader lesson we take from Foucault's discussion of 'the town' is that urban practices can serve as a field for the problematization of a whole series of actions that are only loosely related to any core definition of the city. In the case of eighteenth century thought, for example, 'the town' is the name for the problematization of issues of vulnerability, risk and coexistence. The general lesson of this example is a point also made by Paul Rabinow (2003), who suggests that apparatuses worked up as strategic responses to one set of problems can be applied to other fields in modular fashion. It follows that in so far as it is possible to identify what Braun (2014) has called 'urban *dispotifs*', these may not necessarily be peculiarly urban at all, if that is still presumed to refer to a determinative spatial form which can explain their emergence or proliferation. Models of city-level intervention developed to address challenges, for example, of climate change, or regional innovation, or health issues, might be better understood as strategic responses to difficulties in specific fields of action for which certain aspects of urban practice become effective sites for engagement, experimentation and refinement.

In the following section, we delve deeper into the theme of problematization in Foucault's work. Discussion of the notion of problematization appeared in interviews, lectures, and publications only relatively shortly before Foucault's death in 1984. It is a much less rounded or coherent idea than is often presented in secondary commentaries (see Barnett, 2015a). We will argue that Foucault's remarks on this notion can be helpfully supplemented by consideration of John Dewey's more systematic account of the relationship between problematic situations and inquiry. Interest in the theme of problematization has been given impetus by Colin Koopman's (2013) book-length study, which outlines a Dewey-inflected, pragmatist interpretation of Foucault's work; as well as by Paul Rabinow's discussions of the influence of both Dewey and Foucault's ideas on his own work on problematization (Rabinow, 2011, 2012; see also Rabinow and Stavrianakis, 2015). In the following section, we therefore focus on the shared concern in Dewey's work and in Foucault's writing with understanding problems as situational responses to disrupted patterns of action. We use Dewey's thought to elaborate more fully on this understanding, and in so doing we question the model of critical analysis through which the interpretation of Foucault's remarks on problematization is usually authorized. Following this

discussion of the situational emergence of problems, in Section 4 we will illustrate how the pragmatist interpretation of problematization can inform the analysis of the use of spatial concepts such as the city, urbanization, and neighbourhood in contemporary public life.

3). Problems and their situations

In order to further clarify the analytical approach that follows from thinking of the concepts of urban thought problematically, we want to connect aspects of the discussion of problematizations in Foucault's later work with themes in the work of John Dewey on problematic situations and social inquiry. Our intention is not to suggest that Dewey straightforwardly anticipates Foucault's observations, or that there is a direct line of influence between the two thinkers (see Auxier, 2002). We seek rather to develop and apply Rabinow's suggestion that the point of contact between Foucault and Dewey lies in their shared status as "thinkers who made the issues of encumbrances, discordances, and problems into topics of inquiry" (Rabinow, 2002, 136).

It is often argued that any affinity between Foucault's thought and Dewey's philosophical pragmatism is undermined by the difficulty that pragmatism is supposed to have in acknowledging the forms of power relations which most concerned Foucault. But the charge that pragmatism does not engage with questions of power is wrong-headed (see Allen, 2016, Bridge, 2005). More fundamentally, the assumption that Foucault's primary contribution to social theory lies in conceptualising Power obscures the degree to which anything Foucault has to say on this topic derives from a distinctive theory of action: 'power' in his work refers to various practices which aim to modulate the *actions* of subjects (see Patton, 2014).

We hold that both Foucault and Dewey can be interpreted as belonging to a broad movement of thought that gives "primacy to the practical" in its approach to theorizing (see Brandom, 2010, 40). We make this point not least in order to emphasize the degree to which Foucault's own practice of concept-formation has a decidedly pragmatist flavour. Rather than constructing and refining a grand system of concepts, the concepts most associated with Foucault tended to be developed in

relation to the problems associated with specific fields of inquiry (see Garland, 2016). It is the sense of the intimate relation between concepts and problems that we take to be a key area of overlap between Dewey and Foucault. It is, we suggest, a shared concern that has implications for how urban studies approaches the recurring concepts of both its own theoretical paradigms and of the fields of practice with which it is most closely articulated.

Our argument in this section has three aspects. Firstly, we raise the question of whether 'problematization' should be thought of as a type of critical method or as an object of analysis. Second, we identify a shared reference to situations in both Foucault's comments on 'the history of thought' and Dewey's work on 'inquiry'. Third, we affirm Dewey's crucial emphasis on the continuities between everyday modes of problem solving and institutionalised patterns of problem-formation. In section 4, the methodological implications that follow from reading Foucault's remarks on problematization alongside Dewey's account of inquiry and problematic situations are elucidated further.

3.i). Problematization as noun and verb

Uses of Foucault's notion of problematization in social science tend to oscillate between two aspects of this term – its status as both a noun and a verb. First, there is the idea that a problematization is an object of analysis that Foucault identified. It is the name given to the process by which, for example, modes of living or modes of self-care become the target for motivated adjustments and transformations. This is the prevalent sense in which Foucault used the idea (see Rabinow, 2003). In fields of social theory such as governmentality studies and actor network theory, problematization is presented as one element in the process of calculated, strategic interventions through which problems are defined in ways that enrol various partners and shape subsequent pathways of action, decision and inquiry (e.g. Callon, 1986, Dean, 1999, Marres, 2012). In the second sense, though, problematization refers to a method of analysis, a procedure to be followed by researchers. The second sense of problematization aligns quite easily with the idea that the task of critical analysis is primarily to open up to question taken-for-granted understandings or settlements (e.g. Flyvbjerg et al, 2012, 101-105; Lemke, 2012).

Both aspects of the notion of problematization are deployed in urban studies. Here, as elsewhere, it is an idea that has been used as a reference for a critical procedure applied to the analysis of policy discourses (e.g. Huxley, 2013). But it is also used as a reference point for the analysis of the variable objects of urban policy as contingent problematizations of varied social and economic imperatives (e.g. Cochrane, 2007). These two uses of the idea of problematization reflect what Koopman (2013, p. 98) calls the dual-dimensionality of the notion of problematization, understood as both 'an act of critical inquiry' and 'a nominal object of inquiry'.

While the two aspects of the idea of problematization sometimes define distinct types of analysis, they can also easily support a model in which the task of critique is presumed to be one of exposing the historical contingency of supposedly naturalised formations. In this interpretation, problematization is the name used to refer, firstly, to the claim that certain problems that appear to be naturally given or objective are actually the effect of historical processes, practices, and strategies. And, secondly, it is assumed that critical analysis involves exposing these stable and taken for granted definitions of problems.

There are good reasons to resist this interpretation of problematization as the name for a refined form of critical debunking (see also Barnett, 2015a). In the eagerness to make problematization a new name for a fairly standard model of critical exposure, two distinctive features of Foucault's remarks on this theme fall from view. First, the default assumption that 'Power' works by putting things beyond question or by establishing various naturalised settlements obscures the sense that life is lived in a perpetual state of problem-responsiveness, a sense strongly implied by viewing power as a means of modulating action. Second, and related to this, the strong sense that problematizations emerge in some relation to troubled or uncertain situations is often overlooked. In these two related moves, what disappears is the question of why problematizations should be thought as *problematic* in the first place. To fully engage this question, we will draw Foucault's remarks on problematization into constructive engagement with the ideas of John Dewey.

3.ii). Situating problematizations

As we have already suggested, there is nothing particularly distinctive about Foucault's emphasis on problems, which is a feature of a number of fields of social research. But there is in his work a particular understanding of the *emergence* of problems that it worth attending to further. Foucault's elaboration of the notion of problematization is of value in so far as it can inform a situational analysis of the formation of problems, in contrast to a debunking style of critical exposure and revelation. He proposed that problematizations stood in a responsive relationship to uncertain situations: "I think there is a relation between the thing that is problematized and the process of problematization. The problematization is an "answer' to a concrete situation which is real" (Foucault 2001, 172). To appreciate the situational emphasis in Foucault's observations, it is important to note that in his work, 'problematization' is one term in a broader project of 'the history of thought'. 'Thought' is understood as a function of historically variable practices of reflection. In turn, in Foucault's account, thought in this sense is occasioned by uncertain situations. The emphasis on the historicity of thought has no sense without the reference to the situational emergence of problems.

What characterizes Foucault's remarks on the relation between situations, problems and thought is the claim that problematizations are provoked by a concatenation of events through which 'domains of action' become objects of reflection. There are two steps involved: the becoming uncertain or loss of familiarity a domain of action; and this disruption being taken up by thought. 'Thought' is the form of action through which various disruptive forces are made into explicit objects of attention by being problematized: "A certain problematization is always a kind of creation; but a creation in the sense that, given a certain situation, you cannot infer that this kind of problematization will follow" (Foucault 2001, 172-173).

In Foucault's account, then, problematizations are concerned with disruptions to patterns of action, that is, with difficulties, obstacles, and uncertainties that unsettle established patterns of engagement with the world. It is this emphasis on the situational emergence of problems that provides the point of contact between Foucault's notion of problematization and Dewey's account of the logic of social inquiry. There is a strong affinity between Foucault's notion of 'thought' and Dewey's more systematic account of the conditions of 'inquiry'. The shared

emphasis in both cases is the creative relationship between *thought*, in Foucault, or *inquiry* in Dewey, and its generative conditions. We want to further examine this affinity between the two around a sense of the situational provocation of problematizations, in order to draw out the stronger sense of the ordinariness of problematic situations that is provided by Dewey's account of inquiry.

3.iii). Ordinary problems

In Dewey's account of the logic of social inquiry, problems emerge around what he called 'indeterminate situations', that is, situations that are "disturbed, troubled, ambiguous confused, full of conflicting tendencies, obscure, etc." (Dewey, 1986, 109). Situations, for Dewey, are the 'existential' contexts which provoke inquiry and with which inquiry in turn seeks to engage. In Dewey's view, inquiry is initiated by a situation in which the normal functioning of organisms in their transactions with the environment becomes disturbed or doubtful in some way (see Bridge, 2005). The resulting difficulty or unease does not reside in human subjects. It is a feature of the situation, and therefore cannot be addressed by simply adjusting patterns of thought. Successfully responding to this sort of difficulty requires a modification of the situation itself (Dewey, 1986, 109-110). If on the one hand Dewey presents problems as functions of existential conditions that precede inquiry, then on the other hand, inquiry gets under way in the process by which situations are "adjudged to be problematic" in the course of inquiry. This is a movement of explicit reflection that represents a step towards the "institution of a problem" (Dewey, 1986, 492).

The problematic qualities of situations, in Dewey's formulation, therefore have both an *existential* element and a *creative* element that is given by the operation of inquiry. The dual aspect of the existential uncertainty of the indeterminate situation, and the reflexive determination of a problematic situation, is best thought of as referring to two different temporalities of situations. The process of determining problematic situations takes place against the background of what Dewey referred to as 'extensive and enduring' situations (Dewey, 2012, 340). The distinction between extensive and enduring situations on the one hand and, on the other, problematic situations that become the focus of explicit attention is important because it indicates that problem-responsiveness is a feature of everyday life as much as it is a feature of specialised contexts for the framing of responsive activity (see Russill 2008). The distinction

therefore allows us to escape the trap of thinking that problematizations are interruptions or disruptions of *unproblematic* routines. It leads us to think instead in terms of spatially and temporally extensive and enduring situations through which activities are coordinated, and against which discrete elements stand out as aspects of the situation. Dewey uses the idea of the 'togetherness' of existences and events to capture the sense that problematizations always arise in relation to a broader field of on-going problem-responsiveness (Dewey, 2012, 334).

The key insight of Dewey's pragmatist perspective is that "real problems" are not best thought of as problems set by an investigator, but "are problems that the situation in which he [sic] finds himself sets to him" (Dewey, 1991, 564). Inquiry, on this view, is a general condition, not a specialised activity *per se*. It is a view that presumes that "it is the problems that are in the situation that social inquiry is concerned about" (ibid., 565).

Dewey's account of the continuum of forms of modes of inquiry, and the relation between enduring and problematic situations, helps us broaden and revise the emphasis of Foucault's account of problematization. Foucault often has recourse to a vocabulary in which routine experiences are presented as 'familiar' or 'silent' prior to being taken up by thought and problematized. It is a vocabulary that lends itself easily to a standard view of genealogy as a form of critical debunking of taken-for-granted understandings (see Barnett, 2015a). Rather than supposing that domains of action are normally reproduced through mechanically or mutely repetitive behaviour, waiting to be disrupted and unsettled so that they might be made into objects of reflection, we prefer to think of these domains as the sites of habitual modes of action. And in saying this, we suppose that habit is an embodied, acquired, thought-imbued sensitivity to the negotiation of practical situations (Dewey, 2008; see also Ostrow, 1990).

On this view of the relation between problems and habitual action, indebted to Dewey, the problematic qualities of the world do not befall it in events of crisis or catastrophe; nor are they induced by acts of critical de-familiarization; and nor do they necessarily arise from a purposeful strategic intervention, as is assumed in certain strains of Foucault-inflected social theory. They are, rather, an *ordinary*

feature of the world as it is lived and experienced, and are for that very reason open to further analytical explication (see Smith, 1987, pp. 88-100). In saying that the becoming problematic of situations is an 'ordinary' aspect of forms of life, all we mean is that this is an ongoing feature of action, rather than a feature that is reserved for events of catastrophe or emergency (see Das 2007, 7-8). The ordinary, in this sense, does not refer to the idea of a world of settled common sense, unreflective habit, or taken-for-granted obviousnesses. It is, rather, the scene in which the possibility that the world as we know it is not all that it may seem is an ever present condition of action. The constitutive "vulnerability to doubt" of our relations to the world is an integral feature of action, and learning to negotiate it is a pervasive condition of our routines and habits (Cavell 1984, 48). If we follow this line of thinking, we will be led to conceptualize problematizations as occasions when the difficulties inherent in any field of action are intensified or given further amplification, rather than exposed or revealed for the first time. In turn, the work of problematization appears as the process through which an uncertain situation is clarified so that what is at stake for those affected is identified and its significance assessed (see Dewey, 1986, pp. 108-116).

The reason to connect Dewey's account of problematic situations to Foucault's discussion of problematization is therefore to develop a sense of the ordinariness of the relationship between problematizations and situations. The emphasis on problematization as an ordinary dimension of life stands in contrast both to the overly coherent view of problematizations as wholly wilful constructs of strategically aware actors and also in contrast to the melodramatic sense of external shock or crisis. Dewey articulates explicitly something that remains at best only implicit in Foucault's account, namely the continuity between the patterns of inquiry that go on in everyday practices and in more specialised fields of thought. Dewey therefore provides us with a dual sense of the ordinariness of problematization: first, a sense of the continuity between the patterns of inquiry in everyday and more specialised fields; and second, the sense of problem-responsiveness being the defining feature of action all along this continuum.

In drawing Foucault and Dewey together around a shared concern with the situational emergence of problems, we do not mean to imply they have exactly the same thing to

say. Dewey uses a vocabulary of repairing troubled situations, whereas Foucault is oriented towards freeing up and exploring the possibilities opened up by new problematizations (see Rabinow, 2002, 138-9). Foucault's account of problematization is also often assumed to have a reference to more or less 'institutionalised' domains of action, or to what Rabinow and Bennett (2007, 8) characterise as fields of "serious speech acts". But Foucault's concern with 'serious' situations does not exclude a consideration of more everyday modes of problematization. After all, his own most extensive consideration of the topic of problematization focussed on the ways in which people wilfully take aspects of their own selves to be the material of ethical concern, outlining a pragmatic account of the actions through which self-formation is facilitated through variable practices (see Foucault, 1986). When combined with Dewey's more explicitly 'democratic' sense of the scope of inquiry, recalling Foucault's account of the variable dimensions of ethical problematization opens up the application of the concept of problematization to areas of life beyond those fields of strategically coordinated interventions that tend to characterise much of the research inspired by Foucault.

We have drawn Foucault and Dewey together in order to emphasise that the analysis of problematizations requires more than exposing the constructedness of problems. The shared reference in the work of both thinkers to the notion of 'situation' brings into view the *problematic* qualities of problematizations. And reading Dewey alongside Foucault points to an understanding of problematization as a broadly dispersed dimension of practices, not so much an interruption of the flow of life but as reflexively folded into the on-going flow of action. In the next section, we develop this line of thought further by outlining how two examples of contemporary urban practice can be reconceptualised as fields of problematization.

4). Diagnosing the situations of urban inquiry

This section elaborates on how the preceding analysis of the situational emergence of problematizations can orient the analysis of the contemporary proliferation of urban discourses. The sense of the ordinariness of problematization that we have elaborated above helps us see that both lay and expert interpretations of spatial concepts – of ideas the city, place, neighbourhood – engage with the situations through which issues come into focus as requiring sustained attention. The account of

problematization outlined in the previous section leads to a specific methodological protocol that guides the analysis of contemporary urban thought. Our discussion in the preceding section directs attention away from trying to apprehend just what the city or the urban *is*, towards inquiring into what it is that cities and urban processes are presumed to be able to *do*. Leading with this question is one way of better understanding the domains of action which have become unsettled so that 'the city' or 'the urban' emerge as sites for engagement, repair or reconstruction.

To demonstrate how this pragmatist protocol can inform an analysis of urban problematizations, we work through two examples. First, we discuss the problematization of urban processes in contemporary global development policy (4.i); second, we consider the significance of the 'the neighbourhood' as a recurring focal point of urban concern (4.ii). The first example demonstrates the importance of attending to what it is that cities are supposed to be able to do in different fields of problematization; the second example underscores how this pragmatist emphasis derives as much from the trials of everyday situations as it does from the imperatives of strategically powerful actors.

4.i). Doing things with cities

To further elaborate on the way in which urban processes are problematized through 'serious speech acts' coordinated by institutions and organisational fields, we use the example of the current reconfiguration of global development policy around a set of concerns with urban change and growth (see Parnell, 2016, Satterthwaite, 2016). Urban issues have acquired heightened visibility during the process of negotiating a development agenda to replace the Millennium Development Goals framework. The process of developing post-2015 development agendas was initiated in 2010, and given impetus by the UN's Rio+20 summit on Sustainable Development in 2012. The initiation of the post-2015 process mobilized a set of actors around an explicit campaign to have urban issues recognised as core to future development agendas. The key institution in driving this urban agenda is UN-Habitat. In 2010, UN Habitat launched its World Urban Campaign (WUC) with the aim of mobilising expertise towards Habitat III. Habitat III is the bi-decennial conference convened by UN-Habitat, held in Quito in Ecuador in 2016, to generate priorities and programmes for policy in areas of housing, infrastructure development, and land, a process that has

become focussed on developing what is now referred to as a 'New Urban Agenda' in development policy (see UN-Habitat, 2013). The first stage of this process involved a concerted campaign to secure one of the UN's new Sustainable Development Goals, which replace the MDGs, as an urban-focussed goal. The campaign for an 'Urban SDG' culminated in 2015 with the approval of the principle of Goal 11 of the United Nation's new Sustainable Development Goals framework: "Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable." (UN General Assembly, 2014, p.10).

The establishment of the Urban SDG was the outcome of what can be characterised as a global urban thought collective. A fluid alliance of interests and organisations has generated a coherent but flexible discourse through which to assert the need for a cross-sectoral policy focus on cities in future development policy agendas (see Barnett and Parnell, Forthcoming; and Peirce, 2014).

In the campaign that led to the approval of Goal 11, three distinct claims about contemporary urbanization processes that might at first appear to naturally belong together have been actively linked into a coherent narrative of *cause*, *potential* and *action* (see Barnett and Parnell, 2016). The first is an empirically led claim about the ways in which the problems to be addressed by the sustainable development goals are concentrated more and more in urban areas. The second is a more conceptually oriented claim concerning the degree to which the dynamism of cities, as economic and social clusters of activity and innovation, is an opportunity that must be harnessed to achieve the SDGs. And the third is a claim about cities as political entities capable of acting as drivers of the SDG agenda.

To properly grasp the *problematic* meanings of 'the city', 'urbanization', and related ideas in the discourse surrounding the Urban SDG campaign and the New Urban Agenda, it is necessary to appreciate the degree to which cities have long been looked upon negatively in development theories and practice (see Jones and Corbridge, 2014, Fox, 2012). In this field of problematization, the invocation of the common rhetoric about the world's population becoming majoritarian urban is related to a more loaded and contentious claim that as a result of this demographic transition, poverty itself is being urbanized (see Lucci, 2014, pp. 9-10). The process of drafting,

debating, and defining the parameters of the Urban SDG is an example of an institutionalised form of critical reflection on the possibilities and limits of governing contemporary urban life. For example, the campaign was framed against a long-standing tendency to treat urban issues in sectoral terms, distributed across policy areas concerned with, say, transportation, or land markets, or infrastructural development. The strongest argument made in favour of a dedicated Urban SDG was that the city needed to be understood as a key driver of global sustainability strategies precisely because urban issues are diverse and because they touch on a range of issues.

The New Urban Agenda that emerged alongside the campaign for the Urban SDG rests on two related premises: that urbanization is an *inevitable* process; and that current models of urbanization are *unsustainable* (see Parnell, Crankshaw, and Acuto 2016). The assertion about inevitability is framed against a history in development fields of thinking about urban policy primarily as a way of containing or holding back urban growth. It is the articulation together of both premises that has been crucial for making claims about the need for certain sorts of urban-based action. On this understanding, the conditions of urban development across the world "threaten the safety, security and social cohesion of individuals, their neighbourhoods, cities and nations" (UN-Habitat, 2012, p. 11). The critical step, in the context of the longer history of development policy, is the assertion that urbanization needs to be conceptualised as a "positive force to be harnessed in support of social equality, cultural vitality, economic prosperity and economic security" (*ibid*., p. 11).

In short, the campaign for the Urban SDG problematized the city not simply as a source of problems, nor even only as a site of possible solutions. Rather, it framed the city in a discourse of urban opportunity for addressing a range of global problems (see SDSN, 2013). The Urban SDG campaign and The New Urban Agenda that it has helped to promote in development policy more broadly do not therefore depend on simple demographic claims about urban growth, or even on popular discourses of 'the triumph of the city'. Rather, they articulate a nuanced understanding of the "special characteristics" possessed by urban settlements "that make them particularly effective platforms for transformative and sustainable development" (SDSN, 2013, p. 9).

There was no single definition of the city at work during the Urban SDG process. There were in fact three broad models of 'the city' routinely invoked in the field of global urban policy, which continue to inflect the promotion of the New Urban Agenda. First, there is an idea of the urban in terms of the clustering together of proximate activities, whether in terms of arguments about the agglomeration efficiencies that characterise urban economies, or the socio-cultural benefits that follow from the concentration of diverse populations in urban areas. Second, alongside this sense of the city as a space of proximity, there is an understanding of the city as a hub or node in wider networks, including urban-rural relations of migration or trade, as well as environment relationships that extend beyond the scale of any single settlement. This emphasis reflects sophisticated scientific and social-scientific understandings of the multi-scalar dynamics of environmental processes and the dynamics of urbanization of population. It is also, however, a mark of the 'diplomatic' imperative to find a way of asserting the importance of urban issues without seeming to marginalise rural-based issues and constituencies. Finally, there is a strong claim concerning the role of the city as a site for the integration of various processes into a holistic, systematic approach to management, planning, and regulation. This third aspect of the discourse of The New Urban Agenda shifts attention from a passive construction of urban spaces as bearers of problems, towards an idea of the city as a figure for concerted action.

We might characterise these as three distinct spatial imaginations of the urban: as an *agglomeration*, as a *hub*, and as a *scale*. These are not just concepts in a narrow sense. They are figures for ways of understanding what it is that 'cities', under one description or another, can do in driving development agendas forward; they are names for three styles of strategic intervention. In the Urban SDG campaign, these three distinct spatial imaginations of the urban overlap and intersect and contradict with one another without ever adding up to a single, coherent definition of 'the city'. But this is not an index of incoherence or ideological confusion; it is an index of the pragmatic, problematizing orientation of these conceptual debates.

The campaign for an Urban SDG process can be seen as one vector through which the emergence of an apparatus of global urban governmentality is being developed.

For example, the refinement of urban policy in this field has come to focus on a set of debates about defining and implementing city-level systems for monitoring and measuring key indicators of success (see Simon et al 2016). From the problematization perspective we have outlined above, global urban policy can be seen as a form of governing through inquiry. It does not involve the imposition of a single coherent ideology. It unfolds, instead, through a process of experimentation (see Ferguson 2015, 32-33).

The identification of cities as sites for modes of governing through inquiry has been given impetus by the framing of the New Urban Agenda, but also by the integration of urban issues into other global policy agendas around issues such as climate change and energy transitions. Across varied fields of global urban policy-making, concepts of 'the city' or 'urbanization' are deployed to intervene strategically in fields of action. The lack of clear-cut, singular clarity in definitions is as index of the ways in which concepts are deployed to negotiate controversies and build alliances in the process of carving out fields of possible action. In the next section, we want to further elaborate on how the practical disposition of urban concepts links the manoeuvres of strategically powerful actors with the grammars of everyday problem-responsiveness.

4.ii). Neighbourhoods and the salience of issues

We focus in this section on how the practical orientations of both expert and lay problematizations of urban living can be illustrated by the plural deployment of ideas of 'neighbourhood' in debates in the global North. Use of ideas of neighbourhood combines both dimensions of situations we discussed in Section 3: the extensive and enduring situation, and the emergence of specific problematic situations. The idea of neighbourhood plays a 'bridging' role between these two temporalities of problem-responsiveness. Various ideas might lend themselves well to the task of illustrating the continua of practical orientations across different fields of urban inquiry, including ideas of 'community' for example. The idea of 'neighbourhood' is, however, less ideologically fraught or emotionally resonant than 'community'. It is the way in which 'neighbourhood' functions indexically as a spatial referent to a knowable place that makes it an idea particularly attuned to the task of thinking problematically about concepts which we are seeking to elaborate.

The idea of 'neighbourhood' operates as a focal point that resonates along a continuum from expert to everyday problematization. There three analytically distinct fields of practice in which the neighbourhood idea serves as a focal point for addressing problematic situations: in policy; in academic research; and in everyday life. First, in policy circles there is a long tradition of identifying 'problem' neighbourhoods, characterized by multiple forms of deprivation. At the same time, the neighbourhood has long been considered a privileged site of policy and planning interventions. The conceptual and practical focus of the problematization of neighbourhoods is the disputed causal effects of relationships of proximity. On the one hand, there is an assumption that the concentration of poorer residents has a neighbourhood effect through, for example, the prevalence of strong local ties and the absence of weak ties linking to wider employment opportunities (Granovetter, 1973). On the other hand, the formation solutions to such problems have also often been couched in terms of the benefits of proximity, often through area-based policies to improve the social mix of neighbourhoods, for example through Mixed Community initiatives (see Bridge *et al*, 2011). Neighbourhood Partnerships and other related urban policies have sought to raise the collective capacity of neighbourhoods through public investment in particular support services. This is seen as a way of increasing the capacities of poor communities by generating neighbourhood change and social mix, resulting in enhanced middle class 'voice' to demand better services and raise the prospects of the neighbourhood as a whole. An alternative set of initiatives involve moving poorer residents to more affluent neighbourhoods, as in the controversial Moving to Opportunity Programme in the USA (Macarenhas, 2011).

The prevalence of spatially focussed, neighbourhood level policy interventions is related to the second field in which ideas of neighbourhood are problematized in social science research (see Power, 2012). There is a long tradition of academic analysis assessing and debating the significance of independent neighbourhood effects. For example, these have been claimed to operate on childhood achievement and school dropout rates and forms of social exclusion (e.g. Galster 2007; Buck 2001; Overman 2002). However, the saliency of neighbourhood effects has been questioned on the basis of poor evidence for their effects, especially over time (Manley et al, 2011; Cheshire, 2011). More broadly, the idea of neighbourhood effects is looked upon with suspicion by critics who argue that it distracts attention

from deeper structural forces - from labour market dynamics through to the general imperatives of capitalist urban accumulation (e.g. Slater, 2013).

The problematic status of neighbourhood effects has recently been given further attention by the Project on Human Development in Chicago neighbourhoods (PHDCN) led by Robert Sampson. This project involved a comprehensive mixed method investigation of pluralistic ways of life in urban neighbourhoods (see Sampson, 2012). Reviving the 'ecological' spirit of the Chicago School, Sampson considers a whole raft of urban issues, including health, criminality, and unemployment. He argues that the neighbourhood is not just a critical site of social inequality, but is a key mechanism in the reproduction of that inequality. Sampson claims that differences in the 'collective efficacy' of neighbourhoods accounts for the smooth running of some of them and the multiple problems of privations characteristic of others. This sort of analysis is significant not least because it seeks to re-orientate social research away from analysis which privileges individual-level data, towards consideration of collective factors in explanation. The neighbourhood idea is a central figure in his project of developing forms of contextual explanation to counter the hegemony of thematic and variables-based explanation in social science.

Sampson's work seeks to align social science analysis with the situated concerns of people living in neighbourhoods, and it therefore connects to the third field of urban practice in which ideas of neighbourhood provide a focal point for reflection and inquiry. We have already noted that 'the neighbourhood' is sometimes treated sceptically as an artificial or ideological construct covering over more fundamental levels of analysis. But there is a good deal of evidence showing that people do have an intuitive sense of neighbourhood. This is evident in particular in investigations of the varying degree to which people rely on their neighbourhood depending on their stage in the lifecycle and their gender (see Boterman and Bridge, 2015). As an arena for coordinating the challenges of residing, provisioning, child-care, and paid and unpaid work, the neighbourhood is especially sensitive to disruption. The seemingly mundane tribulations of neighbourliness are significant precisely because they are matters that require on-going negotiation for the reproduction of everyday routines. For example, research in cities in the global North on which local issues are publicly articulated as problems shows that a high proportion of these issues relate to

neighbour-related nuisance, especially noise, boundary disputes, and building extensions (e.g. Forrest and Bridge, 2004).

From the perspective of research on lay understandings, the idea neighbourhood emerges from this research as the focus for the negotiation, disruption and repair of what Mills once referred to as the relations between 'personal troubles' and 'public issues' (Mills, 1959). The balance between public and private can be seen in concerns about crime and security in local areas, in disputes over parking, and in discontents over the quality of the immediate environment with which people identify and often also believe helps to identify them. For example, neighbourhood surveys are characterised by the pervasive complaints about dog fouling and car parking (Forrest and Bridge, 2004). Concerns with dog fouling and parking problems are expressions of lived experiences of negotiating the boundaries between autonomy and collective living, enduring patterns of social interaction and experiences of urban density. They are the sorts of issues in which policy and planning decisions are felt as presences in people's everyday lives. In terms of the analytical focus on problematizations developed in Section 3, concerns of this sort - often expressed in a register of neighbourhood quality, neighbourliness, or community life - are articulations of issues ranging from planning to crime, from the cost of living to housing dynamics, and from social mobility to ethnic differentiation.

The recurring figure of the neighbourhood as a focus of people's everyday concerns is indicative of how enduring and extensive situations are coordinated through localised rhythms and routines. Policy, planning and research that focuses on the neighbourhood idea can be thought as examples of explicit strategic problematizations of those enduring and extensive situations. There is certainly no necessary reason that such strategic responses to problematic situations of, for example, educational performance or unemployment should be framed through the spatial lens of the neighbourhood, and as already indicated the history of such problematizations is highly variable. But the frequent recourse to this form of neighbourhood problematization can be better understood if we acknowledge how this idea draws into focus a particular model of effective agency that can be harnessed by strategically oriented interests. Sometimes, neighbourhood is understood as a potential site for drawing on resources of community spirit, or

building up more abstract resources of social capital. For example, very often, policy problematizations of neighbourhood explicitly privilege the agency of middle-class residents, for example in social mix policy, where the middle-class are presented as neighbourhood capacity raisers, able to generate change by expressing 'voice'. In practice, the harnessing of neighbourhood ideas with the presumed agency of middle-class residents generates significant unintended consequences on the dynamics of urban change that help to reproduce the enduring and extensive situations of urban life to which they are presented as a solution.

Recent research in London and Paris on different types of middle-class neighbourhoods - gentrifying, gentrified, suburban, exurban, gated – illustrates the complex dynamics through which neighbourhood ideas serve as reference points for ordinary practices of problem identification and resolution (see Bacqué et al, 2015). Middle-class residents of gentrifying neighbourhoods often express uncertainty about their own practices and symbolic status through normative expressions of what is 'right' for the neighbourhood (see Benson and Jackson, 2013). This is evident, for example, for middle-class gentrifiers who become parents and carers. They find that their neighbourhoods have been problematic for them on account of being surrounded by more socially mixed schools (Boterman and Bridge, 2015). 'School choice' is the recurring problem through which issues of class, status, and residence emerge as public issues. Across the difference between education systems in France and England, one of which privileges locality and the other parental choice, school choice is the object of similar strategies by middle-class residents (Benson, Bridge and Wilson, 2014). Middle-class parents tend to focus on the exclusivity of the peer group for their children, regardless of published performance criteria for the schools, thereby militating against the social mix that their presence is meant in theory to encourage. In the case of English cities, for example, new public management structures and incentives in performance management for schools, alongside parental choice mechanisms, have been introduced with the aim of reducing class inequalities in education. However, when articulated with the forms of class-specific problematizations of middle-class households, these mechanisms work in practice to reduce the effective choice set in urban neighbourhoods for working class parents and exacerbate class inequalities within schools (see Burgess et al, 2011, and Bridge and Wilson, 2015).

In this example, a set of urban issues conceptualised by policy makers and academics as spatial questions of educational segregation and social mix run-up against the meanings and expectations ascribed to neighbourhoods by middle-class actors, for whom the agency ascribed to them in theory is experienced as uncertainty and anxiety over social reproduction and intergenerational mobility (see Benson et al, 2014). The unintended dynamics of the problematizations of 'neighbourhood' amongst relatively privileged middle-class residents demonstrates the importance of appreciating the continuities and contradictions between extended situations and their explicit problematization for strategic purposes.

We have suggested that neighbourhoods are the sites for extended and enduring situations from which more specific, explicitly articulated problematic situations emerge and through which, in turn, efforts to address and resolve these problems are pursued. For residents of different social status, the neighbourhood is often seen as a site of vulnerability impinging on routines. But neighbourhoods also serve as familiar contexts of inquiry to clarify and resolve problems and thereby offer an incipient sense of the potential for control. The neighbourhood idea has a similar status for a range of professional and expert actors, serving as an easily graspable field of inquiry and potential intervention.

In this section, we have emphasised the practical resonances of both the variable meanings of 'the city' in global development policy, and of the more or less intuitive ideas of 'neighbourhood' found amongst policy makers, social scientists, and residents. In both examples, we have suggested that the constitutive messiness of concepts of urban living is an index of the problematizing orientations through which these concepts take on their significance. In both cases, concepts of urban living appear as names that help to bring into focus a set of problems for further elaboration and for potential concerted action.

5). Conclusion

Debates about the future of critical urban theory continue to presume that concepts of urban inquiry remain the special preserve of a cadre of intellectuals, secure from the temptations of ideology and with access to the properly theoretical apprehension of

spatial concepts. In order to contest this view of the vocation of critique, we have elaborated on how the concepts of urban inquiry might be further developed by reference to the idea of problematization. In so doing, we have sought to relocate the dynamics of critical analysis into a more dispersed field of urban inquiry, in which a number of actors make use of urban concepts to inquire into the limits and possibilities of different ways of acting. By placing Foucault's remarks on the idea of problematization alongside the account of problematic situations provided by John Dewey, we have suggested that thinking problematically about the concepts of urban inquiry involves attending more carefully to why it matters to know about urban issues in specific situations. We have suggested, in short, that more credence needs to be given to the pragmatic qualities of urban concepts such as 'the city' or 'neighbourhood'.

We would certainly agree that the key concepts of human geography, urban studies, urban and regional planning and related fields are thoroughly problematic. But this should not be interpreted to mean that they require academic correction. Debates about the status of the concepts of urban inquiry often start off from the presumption that it is necessary to problematize existing understandings, so that seemingly coherent objects like the city or scale or the urban are complicated by being shown to be inherently relational, assembled, or produced. This understanding of problematization as a task of critical de-familiarization goes hand-in-hand with a suspicion of fields of urban practice associated with planning, or administration, or governance, or business, or community life. Our argument started from a presumption that the activity of problematization is a much more widely distributed feature of urban living. It is not a refined academic skill, but a basic feature of engaged action across any number fields of practice. On this view, we might want to be a little more charitable towards the uses of urban concepts found in these other fields. Spatial concepts like the city, place, neighbourhood, and scale are deployed in all sorts of practices. We might therefore best approach them as having a pragmatic purchase on the on-going tasks of engaged problem solving, whether undertaken by agencies of the state, the world of business and consultancy, or through citizen action.

Thinking of the concepts of urban inquiry as problematic, in the sense that we have outlined here, leads away from the idea that the purpose to which concepts are

adequate is picking out the core essence of a phenomenon. It suggests instead that we appreciate the role that concepts play in engaging with things that matter in contexts of conflict, contestation and controversy. Rather than searching for refined conceptualisations of a coherent object of urban analysis, and rather than repeatedly debunking the naivety of taken-for-granted understandings of the city, the challenge of thinking problematically lies in seeking to understand what it is that makes knowing about cities and urban processes important in particular conjunctures. And in helping to identify just what matters in specific fields of urban inquiry, thinking problematically recasts critical analysis as a less singularly academic vocation than is often supposed in current debates about the futures of urban theory. It does so by helping to open up self-consciously critical traditions of urban studies to a broader range of sites and sources for theoretical reflection and insight.

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