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RESPONSE TO PORTUGALI: SEEING THE FOREST FOR THE TREES

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In: Dialogues in Urban Research

ABSTRACT: This commentary provides several critiques to Portugali's admirably ambitious paper on the utility of applying Bohm's scientific approach to unify the current disarray in urban studies. The critiques focus on incommensurability between science and social science, conceptual over-reach, and the value of diversity versus unity.

I extend my gratitude to the editors of the journal for allowing me to review this remarkably ambitious piece of work by Professor Portugali. At a time when urban studies seems 'small' in its ambitions (DeVerteuil, 2023), or stymied by internal fragmentation, it is refreshing to see an unabashed attempt to unify the field, to make it more than its constituent parts. Portugali provides a wide-ranging review of two overarching frameworks in urban studies that rarely speak to each other: urban science (following a quantitative-analytical approach) alongside a more qualitative, hermeneutical approach using structuralist-Marxist-humanistic (SMH) and more recently postmodern-poststructuralist-deconstruction (PPD) modes of thinking. These CTC (complexity theories of cities) and SMH-PPD streams of thought rarely communicate, but Portugali sees common ground between them for a general theory of cities and urbanism. In turn, he argues that this would improve our understandings of cities at a time of great challenges, based in a shared set of vocabularies that could bring some order to an unruly urban studies.

The creation of a common ground between the scientific and the social science approaches is possible, according to Portugali, by using philosopher and quantum physicist David Bohm. He proposed a series of interleaving orders – implicate, explicate and generative – that are found in all theories of reality. There is no chaos or disorder, only deeper orders. Portugali translates Bohm's unifying approach from physics to an urban studies audience steeped in social science:

reality is conceptualized in terms of a play between two layers: in structuralism-Marxism, between the deep social structure and its spatial expression and representation in the material and social structure of the city. In the humanistic-phenomenological approach, between the city as an experiential place and its abstraction as urban space. According to Bohm, these are the implicate orders that unfold into explicate orders that then enfold back to the implicate (page 15).

But with regards to CTC, Bohm is also useful in terms of finding deep-seated order among the chaos, connecting to insights shared by the urbanists Jane Jacobs and Christopher Alexander. Further, his use of fractals encapsulates the repetitive, scale-free and self-organizing nature of urbanization.

But anything so ambitious and synthesizing is bound to raise issues around incommensurability, over-reach, and the value of diversity versus unity. These issues revealed themselves when I stepped back from the details of the paper – which are appropriately intricate - to see the forest for the trees. A high-altitude (yet still charitable) reading thereby focuses less on the exacting details of 'how', and more on the big picture of 'why'.

First, Portugali sidesteps the many pitfalls of applying highly scientific modes of thought to human affairs – and what could be more human than cities, arguably the most complex things ever created? Two examples guide my critique here. First, there were concerns among social scientists about how the Chicago School one-hundred years ago applied evolutionary biology and 'social' physics to matters of segregation and inter-ethnic relations (Sibley, 1995). Second, and far more recently, there are critiques of importing an

ecological model of resilience into social sciences (DeVerteuil et al, 2021, 2022; DeVerteuil 2022). With respect to both examples, the social world is far less predictable than the natural or physical one, with many unforeseen and non-quantifiables that elude scrutiny and disrupt the quest for certainty and any attempt at *a priori* pre-determination.

Second, and expanding on this idea that not everything is knowable, the paper may suffer from conceptual over-reach and subsequently conceptual rubber-stamping. There is no way to completely rid ourselves of chaos and the obscure that defy a total sense of order, however it might be packaged. A pragmatic understanding is useful here to clarify this critique. Pragmatism is (re)emerging as a viable tool to think not only about urban concepts but also social problems (Barnett & Bridge, 2017; Wills, 2023). Pragmatism involves “thinking problematically about the city...requir[ing] inquiry into just what sorts of difficulties and possible actions are being named through the deployment of urban-sounding terms” (Barnett & Bridge, 2017: 1188). In this respect, Portugali concedes that current understandings of the city are too fragmented to be up to the grand challenges that face us, which could be considered ‘problematic’ in pragmatic terms. But a pragmatic approach would not seek to unify. Rather, it would reject any pretence to certitude that a vanguardist approach (Wills, 2023), using David Bohm and Portugali’s own assertions, purportedly guarantee. It would instead embrace the unknowable, the various limits to knowledge, the value of emplaced knowledge, and of certainly not knowing the answers in advance. Although only tangentially pragmatic, Bodden (2023: 12) argues for a greater modesty in the academic pursuit of certainty, that debates are always and only temporarily settled “time-and-again” and never “once-and-for-all”. If one searches for order it will be found, especially where the light is the strongest, but uncertainty is far more treacherous. For instance, parts of cities develop at asynchronous speeds – some move backwards, or forwards, or stagnate – in ways so complex that they elude quantification. I am all for conceptual abstraction and striving to see the whole, but with the proviso that totality is elusive, that as students of the city we know a lot but do not always know best. As such, a pragmatic critique informs the sense that there is no way to obtain a total vision of the city, that it is perhaps better to understand it from a more modest and even fragmented (but not completely and only fragmented) perspective. Adding to this is the sense that cities are not just a (surface) reflection of society, but also exist independently from it.

Finally and stepping back even more, do we really need to unify urban studies, presumably to rescue it? What work does it do, what value does it bring? Should the recent diversity and heterogeneity of urban studies – from the post-colonial to the post-structural and even the pragmatic – be seen as a strength rather than a weakness? The assumption that urban complexity can and should be fully understood is not as self-evident as it might have been in the 1970s and 1980s, when a political economy approach presided (DeVerteuil, 2023). Portugali also assumes that CTC practitioners are actually open to (more) theory, rather than just more data. Given their longstanding atheoretical bent, this must be justified in greater detail. Otherwise, how would a ‘common theoretical foundation’ work if one side is not interested, and the other is decidedly undecided around the value of universalizing the urban across the globe?

I for one am more in favor of a mid-level approach to urban studies. I recognize that the city is both related to but also independent of capitalism and the state. The city became, in Peck's (2015: 168) words, a "conjunctural alloy" of large-scale processes and structures, "more than the sum of already identified wider processes" (Robinson et al, 2022: 1717). I also recognize that mid-level concepts neither totalize nor exist as one-offs. Rather, they try to capture something in between the extreme and the everyday, between fixity and flow, between the cosmopolitan and the parochial, the totality and the parts, and in conversation with an emerging 21st century city. This relational (and implicitly comparative) approach is embedded within a tumultuous urban studies, and seeks what Walker (2015: 189) called the "mid-altitudes where the theoretical view is often the clearest", or even new vantages points through what Katz (1996) articulated as 'minor theory', of non-dominant perspectives (see also Jazeel, 2019).

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