What is urban about critical urban theory?

Ananya Roy

To cite this article: Ananya Roy (2015): What is urban about critical urban theory?, Urban Geography, DOI: 10.1080/02723638.2015.1105485

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2015.1105485

Published online: 02 Dec 2015.
What is urban about critical urban theory?

Ananya Roy

Institute on Inequality and Democracy, Luskin School of Public Affairs, University of California, Los Angeles, CA, USA

ABSTRACT
This essay takes as its provocation a question posed by the feminist philosopher Nancy Fraser: "What’s Critical about Critical Theory?" In urban studies, this question has been usefully reframed by Neil Brenner to consider what is critical about critical urban theory. This essay discusses how the "urban" is currently being conceptualized in various worlds of urban studies and what this might mean for the urban question of the current historical conjuncture. Launched from places on the map that are forms of urban government but that have distinctive agrarian histories and rural presents, the essay foregrounds the undecidability of the urban, be it geographies of urbanization or urban politics. What is at stake is a critical urban theory attentive to historical difference as a fundamental constituting process of global political economy and deconstruction as a methodology of generalization and theorization.

Beyond the familiar

For several years now, the Government of India has sought to implement an ambitious policy paradigm: inclusive growth. Remaking its existing welfare programs and launching new ones, the effort to include the poor is busily underway. In 2015, I spent a few months tracing the life of a particular anti-poverty program in India. From the ministries of Delhi, imposing in their rituals of centralization and standardization, I made my way to the municipalities that ring the Kolkata metropolitan region. Beyond the zone of familiarity, beyond the city, beyond what I had once called the rural–urban interface (Roy, 2003), was an urban India I barely knew. Along one-lane roads that claimed to be highways, trucks precariously piled with onions and potatoes barreled alongside ubiquitous but snail-speed bicycles. Tractors lumbered to paddy fields while incessantly honking cars tried to claim a right of way, as if the tolls they had paid to enter these highways were an entitlement of sorts. These highways, if we are to call them that, did not lead to municipalities. To get to them, one had to turn onto even narrower roads, pitch-dark at night, roads that snaked through ponds lush with greenery, bustling markets spilling out onto that sliver of asphalt, a montage of village huts and pucca houses, and tiny stores offering services from hairdressing to xeroxing. Often, the road would pass a railway station and then one would know one had arrived.
At the urban. At the municipality. At the administrative unit designated in 1992 by India’s 74th Constitutional Amendment as an “urban local body.”

It is thus that I arrived one morning at Dankuni, a new municipality that had been constituted a few years ago out of three and a half panchayats (the administrative unit in India for villages). The Dankuni municipality, like other urban local bodies in India, has been “empowered” by the 74th Amendment to undertake various functions ranging from town planning to the provision of water and sanitation infrastructure to urban forestry to slum improvement to the keeping of “vital statistics, including registration of births and deaths.” Alongside the bustle of these vital statistics—the long lines of men and women waiting to register a birth or death or obtain a trade license—is the work of planning, conducted by municipal-level urban planners and engineers. This is the first location from which I want to pose the question: what is urban about critical urban theory? A newly painted teal-colored building houses the offices of the Dankuni municipality, depicted here with my interlocutors—the urban planner, the engineer, and the assistant engineer (Figure 1). It is from this location that I launched my research tours of the slums of Dankuni, the familiar tangle of improvised shelter and upgraded houses rendered unfamiliar outside the grid of urban agglomeration and human density. Here fields stretched to the horizons, houses could conceivably stretch their elbows, and infrastructure could be laid through empty swaths of land. In what way were they slums? Did the arrival of the governmental category “slum” mark the ineluctably urban character of these places? Was the arrival of the slum the arrival of the urban in these zones beyond the familiar city?

But newness does not help us analyze these social topographies. In Bhatpara, north of Dankuni, as I pored over the plans, maps, and documents of the municipality, I confronted an extraordinary piece of historical geography: much of the land use of the municipality was designated as slum (Figure 2). This pixelated map displayed on the screen of the municipal engineer’s computer is the second location from which I want to pose the question: what is urban about critical urban theory? Marked in blue, slum boundaries dominate the map, leaving us to wonder what, in Bhatpara, is not a slum. But this is not a manifestation of the apocalyptic story of a planet of slums as Davis (2006) would have us consider; there is no inexorable hand of global neoliberalism invisible behind this GIS map. These are old slums, necessary companions to the coolie lines of the jute and paper mills once built by the British in this valuable agro-industrial hinterland of the empire. I grew up, I am told, in one such paper mill where my father served as the director of a British managing agency house. Needless to say, I do not remember the slums.

I was in Dankuni and Bhatpara and many other such municipalities this year, because I was studying a program launched a few years ago by the Government of India to regularize and upgrade all slums in the country. The program signaled a dramatic shift in the relationship between government and slum, a relationship that until recently had been framed as that between sovereign and encroacher. With the new program, the relationship was recast as state and beneficiary. Inscribed on the walls of slum houses in Dankuni are the signs of different iterations of these programs of the government, each preceded by a comprehensive survey that numbers and marks homes of the beneficiaries. In the offices of Bhatpara municipality are the DPRs—the detailed project reports that must be sanctioned by the Delhi bureaucracy—with lists,
photographs, thumbprints, and signatures of slum-dwellers recast as beneficiaries. Walking the slums with local politicians and municipal officials, I was repeatedly asked to photograph potential beneficiaries and their slum houses that were to be upgraded. My photographs could not do justice to such anticipation and aspiration. All I could do was take notice. And sometimes, without prodding from the local councilor or municipal engineer, a beneficiary would emerge from an upgraded house to complain about the shoddy work. “Photograph this,” she would insist. “Photograph the water leaks. Photograph the cracks in the wall. Photograph the tilt in the foundations.” And sometimes, without warning, our car would be gheraoed—surrounded—by young men in the slum, rolling up their shirt sleeves and hitching up their lungis, upset that the promise of cleaning up the village pond, now a municipal pond, had not been met. “We will beat you up,” they would shout. “We will not release

Figure 1. Dankuni Municipality, photo by author.
“Don’t you say that the pond would become a swimming pool?” a young man shouted as the municipal engineer and urban planner pretended not to hear. My ethnographic notes could not do justice to this demand for improvement. All I could do was take notice. These lists of state-designated and self-styled beneficiaries are the third location from which I want to pose the question: what is urban about critical urban theory? To understand this location, we need not only the photo-gallery of beneficiaries but also the traces of many generations of programs of government, some ghostly, some belonging to an urgently anticipated present. Here then is the third location recast: the fossil of an old DFID-funded program, Kolkata Urban Services for the Poor (KUSP), along with the recent stamp of the ruling political party in West Bengal, the TMC, as it prepared for the 2015 municipal elections (Figure 3).

It is from these three locations, beyond zones of the familiar, that I want to arrive at three analytical points about the urban. First, in contrast to conceptual frameworks that emphasize the urbanization of everything, I insist on paying attention to the “constitutive outside” of the urban and to the always incomplete processes of becoming urban. Note that I rely on Chantal Mouffe (2000) for the idea of “constitutive outside.” I am particularly interested in the “rural” as a constitutive outside of the urban. By no means is the rural the only or even a privileged constitutive outside. But given my ongoing research in India, the rural is foremost on my mind. Analytically and empirically, this means understanding the entanglement of the agrarian and urban questions. Methodologically, this means understanding feminist and post-structuralist practices of deconstruction. Second, I foreground the urban as a historical geography, indeed as a historical category. In contrast to arguments, often drawn from Lefebvre, that we live in the age of an urban revolution, I
suggest that we pinpoint the conjunctures at which the urban is made and unmade, often in a highly uneven fashion across national and global territories. In particular, I am interested in unearthing how old mercantile and industrial histories can be traced in contemporary urban transformations, such that seemingly new and novel formations are in fact long-standing inscriptions. Third, I argue that the urban and rural are governmental categories. Whether or not they are faithful depictions of actually existing socio-spatial processes is one set of analytical considerations. But an equally important analytical task is to understand why these categories matter and how they are deployed in the repetitious work of government. Another way of framing this is to ask if there is a distinctive “politics of the governed”—Chatterjee’s (2004) felicitous phrase—that is at stake in the urban. Indeed, recent debates in urban studies suggest that this is the case, be it assertions of the right to the city or insurgent citizenship by city-dwellers. But in municipalities like Dankuni, Hooghly-Chinsurah, and Bhatpara, beyond the familiar zones of street politics and rights-based movements, I return to the category of beneficiary. It is through the collection of beneficiaries, the recipients of those functions designated to urban local bodies by the 74th Constitutional Amendment of India, that the urban comes to have meaning as a governmental category. Rural as a similar governmental category is not the antonym of urban; it is its necessary supplement, marking populations where the government of poverty is different, where the relationship between state and beneficiary is of a different socio-spatial character.

**Today’s urban question**

My question, What is Urban about Critical Urban Theory?, is inspired by the essay written by the feminist philosopher, Nancy Fraser (1985), “What’s Critical about
Critical theory?” A critical reflection on Habermas’ theory of communicative action, that essay emphasizes the “straightforwardly political character” of critical theory (Fraser, 1985, p. 97). In urban studies, Neil Brenner (2009) has asked, “What is critical urban theory?” For him, critical urban theory is not only a critique of existing social relations but also a search for emancipatory alternatives. Such a critique and search, Brenner notes, are always historically specific. With this in mind, he calls for a critical urban theory appropriate for the early twenty-first century, a historical moment that he argues is characterized by “nothing less than an urbanization of the world” (Brenner, 2009, p. 200, emphasis in the original). In other words, for Brenner, now, critical theory is necessarily critical urban theory. But if this is indeed the case, what is urban about critical urban theory?

The effort to conceptualize the urban is of course an integral part of the practice—and existential crisis—of urban studies. Let me return to my three analytical points—the constitutive outside of the urban, the urban as an uneven historical geography, and the urban as a governmental category—to explore what might be the contours of today’s urban question. I start with the conceptual framework of planetary urbanization.

In a series of writings, Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid, as well as Andy Merrifield, have made the case for the urbanization of the world. Brenner and Schmid (2014, p. 751) argue:

Today, urbanization is a process that affects the whole territory of the world and not only isolated parts of it. The urban represents an increasingly worldwide, if unevenly woven, fabric in which the sociocultural and political-economic relations of capitalism are enmeshed. This situation of planetary urbanization means that even sociospatial arrangements and infrastructural networks that lie well beyond traditional city cores, metropolitan regions, urban peripheries and peri-urban zones have become integral parts of a worldwide urban condition.

I use planetary urbanization as a starting point, because I think it is an immensely useful framework in many regards. Analytically, it underscores the importance of thinking about the urban rather than about the city, in Merrifield’s words (2014, p. x), as a “fabric” that “stretches to envelop everywhere.” Also, it is a framework that emphasizes, as Brenner argues (personal correspondence), “uneven spatial development and territorial polarization.” Planetary urbanization, he emphasizes, is not “an urbanization-as-homogenization argument or a simple spreading of a single ‘form,’ the urban, across the territory or the world.” Instead, “it’s an unevenly woven, constantly imploding and exploding, fabric of social relations, struggles, experiences, strategies.”

I am interested in how this unevenness is produced and reshaped and in the politics thus engendered. And I am arguing that the urban—as an analytical category or even as a problématique—is not sufficient to get us there. In particular, I want to focus on a point made by Brenner and Schmid (2014, p. 750) about the relationship between the rural and the urban: “There is, in short, no longer any outside to the urban world; the non-urban has been largely internalized within an uneven yet planetary process of urbanization.” They continue, “the urban/rural binarism is an increasingly obfuscatory basis for deciphering the morphologies, contours and dynamics of sociospatial restructuring under early twenty-first century capitalism.” Thinking from the locations I have
introduced, I want to argue that the rural is much more than the nonurban, that it is in fact a “constitutive outside.” It is not the only or even the privileged constitutive outside but it is a vitally important one. This means that even if we are to concede the urbanization of everything, everywhere, we have to analytically and empirically explain the processes through which the urban is made, lived, and contested—as a circuit of capital accumulation, as a governmental category, as a historical conjuncture. I believe Brenner and Schmid are in agreement with this. Perhaps it is only our empirical pathways that are different. I want to consider why the pathway that lies through small towns in the global South, places like Dankuni and Bhatpara, might matter and how it is here that the necessarily incomplete and uneven process of being urban is laid bare.

What is at stake in different deconstructions of the urban—which is how I see this piece of critical urban theory—is what Brenner and Schmid describe as the “morphologies, contours and dynamics of sociospatial restructuring under early twenty-first century capitalism.” Take, e.g., the work of Sharad Chari (2004) on the town of Tiruppur in South India, a global node for the export of cotton-knitted garments. Chari’s careful ethnographic and archival research demonstrates how the prosperity of this industrial town has its roots in an agrarian capitalism. Drawing on various lines of scholarship, Chari (2004, p. 769) describes this as the “thickening of the countryside.” Chari terms this analysis “provincializing capital,” which is appropriate both as a reminder of the provincial nature of global urbanization as well as a reminder of Dipesh Chakrabarty’s (2000) reminder to provincialize the universal history of capital. I will return to this point later in the essay. But Chari also raises a key point about the relationship between the agrarian past and the urban-industrial present. He notes the making of tightly connected money and land markets, not in the early twenty-first century but in fact in the early twentieth century, by which time, as he notes, “the commercialization of land was … well underway” (Chari, 2004, p. 765). I do not have the time here to detail my findings from my research in India. Suffice it to say that it is fundamentally about what I call the urban land question. My interest is in how a post-colonial government initiates urban land reforms in a process that both mirrors and veers away from agrarian land reforms and, in doing so, seeks to convert complex informal regimes of inhabitation, occupation, and tenancy into property—cadastral property, of course—but most crucially, property that is legible to the state and its projects of urban development. In this conceptualization, I depart from current debates about dispossession and displacement. Take, e.g., the recent work of Saskia Sassen (2014) on expulsions. Borrowing generously from Harvey, although without much acknowledgment or citation, Sassen (2014, p. 8) argues that we are in “a new phase of advanced capitalism … one with reinvented mechanisms for primitive accumulation.” A key part of this new phase is a “global market for land,” which is produced by transforming “sovereign national territory into a far more elementary condition—land for usufruct” (Sassen, 2014, p. 82). This story of territory becoming “merely land” is compelling and I do not want to deny the “logics of expulsion” (Sassen, 2014, p. 1) that are at work here. But what I am studying in India is a simultaneous effort to convert informal regimes of urban inhabitation into secure tenure, all under the watchful eye of the state. This process is a key way in which the urban is being reconstituted as a governmental category with populations that must be governed. Put bluntly, I will
argue, in forthcoming work, that today's urban question is a land question, but that this land question very much encompasses regulations, registers, and rights that are not urban and that are not simply making way for the urban. The social relations of production as well as the political identities and struggles evident in such territories cannot be encompassed by the urban. It is this persistence of historical difference that is of concern to me and that I wish to pose as an analytical challenge to current conceptualizations of the urban.

The processes of becoming urban, of making urban, are both old and incomplete. As evident in the case of Tiruppur, agrarian pasts, including the settlement and commercialization of land, are implicated in contemporary urban development. And it is incomplete because, at least in the case of the Kolkata metropolitan region and its surrounding municipalities, the urban land question cannot be fully resolved because of how it is entangled with what were once and still are rural land regimes. The rural, this rural, is not the antonym of urban. It is not not-urban. Needless to say, the rural, like the urban, is not a morphological description but rather an inscription of specific regulations and logics of territory, land, and property. It is only in this rural–urban matrix, at least in this corner of the world, that what we globally conceptualize as urbanization is underway. This is at once today's urban question and today's agrarian question.

I emphasize today's agrarian question, because I am interested in how scholars such as Henry Bernstein (2006) and Philip McMichael (1997) are reinterpreting the agrarian question. In particular, Bernstein (2006) makes note of how the classical agrarian question changes shape and form as it travels to different parts of the world in different eras, including under conditions of state-led developmentalism following decolonization, a historical moment he sees characterized by agrarian land reforms shaped by peasant movements and struggle. The peasant question then is no longer easily broached as we take stock of the highly unequal and uneven nature of these land reforms:

who got land, what land, how much land, and what they were able to do with it, was contested along—and often followed—the contours of existing, typically intricate, structures of inequality in agrarian populations beyond that represented by landed property. (Bernstein, 2006, p. 453)

There are important ways in which such agrarian land reforms are entangled with the constitution of the urban land question in India but that is the subject of another essay. Instead, for the purposes of this essay, I am interested in how Bernstein's reframing of the agrarian question provides a challenge to conceptualizations of politics implicated in critical urban theory.

The urban question, as a project of critical theory, has always been concerned with historical alternatives. In a scarcely known working paper buried in the library at UC Berkeley, Castells (1985) reflects on the shift in his work from the seminal, The Urban Question, to the magisterial The City and the Grassroots. Castells (1985, p. 1) notes that, in the latter, “there is a theory of urban social change as part of a theory of the city.” Castells does not embark on a search for a singular revolutionary subject of this urban social change. Instead, he argues that while this is “purposive collective action,” it “comes from a plurality of sources and not just one” (Castells, 1985, p. 2, 3). Indeed,
such action is not solely concerned with collective consumption, the emphasis of Castells’ early work. Castells (1985, p. 3) asserts that The City and the Grassroots widens the discussion to consider urban social movements that connect “three dimensions . . . collective consumption . . . political self-management . . . and . . . cultural identity.” What Castells gives us, then, as Merrifield (2014, p. xi) notes, is a “new political subject”—urban social movements. Castells (1985, p. 4) argues that these urban social movements have “consciousness as citizen movements and not just a derivation from class or other types of movements.” In putting forward such a formulation, Castells (1985, p. 11) valiantly reflects on theoretical legacies, arguing that for him “Marxist theory is . . . one source of theoretical work among many others,” that it is “blind to some major issues, for instance, feminism and with an inability to understand some key elements like culture, specific political apparatuses etc.” But in rendering class, or at least a Marxian understanding of class, contingent, Castells renders the urban as a necessary, even foundational, element of a theory of social change. And here once again we return to the question: what is urban about critical urban theory? One way of answering that question would be to say that what is urban about critical urban theory is the urban as a new political subject.

In fact, urban studies today is overflowing with arguments about urban citizens, residents, occupants, movements, and experiences as the new political subject. I will not stage an overview of this literature, because it is both substantial and well known. In particular, I am interested in the relationship between the “complete urbanization society”—Merrifield’s (2014, p. 2) borrowing of Lefebvre’s idea—and a new political subject that is ineluctably urban. Here is how Merrifield (2014, p. 69) phrases this relationship: “The new urban question is about creating . . . a movement that can loosen the neo-Haussmannite grip on our society . . . an urban political movement [not social] that struggles for generalized democracy . . . ” Who can resist being inspired? Who can resist, on the path of ethnography, searching for such movements? Perhaps less so in Castells and Merrifield, but quite definitely in Warren Magnusson (2011, p. 34), the urban becomes a political ontology, “a particular way of being political.”

But in Dankuni and Bhatpara, I could not gather together the claims pressed by newly urban beneficiaries as a struggle for generalized democracy. There, in the old slums adjoining the coolie lines of jute mills and paper mills, on land settled by the East India Trading Company, I could find neither a neo-Haussmannite grip, what Sassen would call new logics of expulsions, nor an urban political movement to resist such predations. It is not my intention to use a single empirical case to challenge a conceptual framework and to mark an exception. Instead, I want to share the deep ambiguities and ambivalences that attend the urban, always accompanied by the not-urban. That mix of constitutionally empowered urban local bodies geared up for the cycles of municipal elections and project sanctions with intimate transactions of rural patronage and governance requires our attention. For such a political terrain may very well be the grassroots of the complete urbanization society. And, if this is the case, then I must strongly disagree with Magnusson (2011, p. 5) when he notes that “the fundamental question is of the city, not the state.” The urban, I am arguing, is a particular way of being governmental—my rephrasing of Magnusson’s line. The urban, as I encountered it beyond the zones of the familiar city in India, is a state designation, an administrative category that creates distinctive governed populations, including
self-styled beneficiaries for housing programs and land reforms. That designation is often contested. As Mukhopadhyay (2013) notes, “there is a reticence in becoming urban” in some instances, with panchayats protesting and resisting reclassification as municipal corporations for reasons that range from systems of taxation and regulation to forms of local power. I therefore suggest that we take up the question of whether the urban is a particular way of being political as precisely this, a question, rather than an ontological truth.

In response to my insistence that the urban be considered a governmental category, Neil Brenner (personal correspondence) poses a provocative and essential question: “can the urban therefore be reduced to a governmental category?” He calls for attention to the “range of socio-material practices, investments and infrastructures that constitute the geographies of urbanization,” noting that “governmental/state spatial strategies mediate and animate these, but they are not simply the products of governmental constructions.” I am in broad agreement, but the puzzle which I have sought to highlight in this essay complicates the relationship between statecraft and socio-spatiality.

The places whose stories I am trying to tell cannot be understood as geographies of urbanization. Nor can the politics of space present in these locations be read as urban in the ways in which critical urban theory would lead us to believe. They are urban because statecraft has decided that they are so. Yet, such municipalities are more than simply a formal administrative designation. I have also emphasized that they mark a distinctive form of government, the urban as government. They are examples of urban government without geographies of urbanization or without urban politics. With this in mind, in the final section of the essay, I will argue that such places allow us to think about the urban as an incomplete and contingent process as well as an undecidable category. Perhaps such contingency and undecidability is especially visible in India, where both the administrative designation of urban and forms of urban government are fluid and contested. If rural market towns or agro-industrial hinterlands have been designated as municipalities, then a related category is that of “census towns,” a fast-growing designation in India. Meeting Indian census definitions of the urban (size, density, structure of nonfarm employment), these are governed by rural administration, notably gram panchayats. But as Guin and Das (2015, p. 68) note, in some parts of India, including West Bengal, “because of the huge increase of agricultural labourers (in 2011), many new census towns might be reclassified as villages for the next census in 2021.” This is not simply the case of arbitrary classifications and reclassifications. Instead, this is a glimpse of complex forms of rural–urban differentiation that exceed our analysis of urban political economy and its patterns of accumulation and dispossession.

“From the standpoint of an absence”

As I have already noted, I draw my inspiration from the essay, “What’s Critical about Critical Theory?” by Nancy Fraser. In that essay, in addition to asserting the political character of critical theory—its search for historical alternatives—Fraser (1985, p. 99) employs a distinctive methodology to critique Habermas’ theory of communicative action. She reads the work “from the standpoint of an absence.” I have tried to keep
this methodology in mind as I consider the not-urban/rural/agrarian as a necessary supplement to the urbanization of everything. What is at stake here is not only how we conceptualize the urban in critical urban theory but also how we conceptualize and undertake critical theory. This brings me then to a lively set of ongoing debates in urban studies about the very nature of theory.

In a forthcoming essay in the *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, Linda Peake (in press) makes note of the “precarious presence” of women in urban studies. She emphasizes the implications of such precarity: “Women who fall away from or are not allowed for within concepts of urban reality also fall away from conceptualizations of political possibilities, abandoned to the requirements of capital accumulation.” I want to draw attention to the methodology at work here, one akin to Fraser’s reading from the standpoint of an absence. Peake calls into question conceptualizations of the urban as a generalized planetary condition, one without an outside. Following Chantal Mouffe, she insists that there is a constitutive outside, something that exceeds the urban. I am reminded of the important interventions by Vinay Gidwani (2008, p. xix) in *Capital, Interrupted*. He seeks to “register capital’s ‘para-sitic’ existence: how it draws its force by attempting to divert or attach itself to other kinds of energy or logic—cultural, political, nonhuman—whose contributions, like those of history’s subalterns, are erased from conventional accounts.” Gidwani (2008, p. 198, 297), by relying on the “vantage points of agrarian studies and postcolonial studies,” reconceptualizes capitalism “as a geographically uneven social formation where heterogeneous value-creating practices (‘labors’) are sutured together in lesser or greater degrees of repair (but where the wounds of that suture are never completely effaced).” This, I think, is a profoundly useful analysis to carry over to our efforts to conceptualize the urban and its possible “ontological multiplicity” and “radical contingency,” phrases I am borrowing from Gidwani’s work on capital. It is this multiplicity that is evident in forms of urban government that are distinctive formations of rural land regimes, livelihood, and patronage politics. This multiplicity is evident in Indian “census towns,” which are often rapidly urbanizing places managed by a rural administrative unit. It is this contingency that is apparent in the ways in which villages in India resist the urban designation or how the political economy of “census towns” sometimes reverts to being rural.

What is at stake is not only what is urban about critical urban theory but also from where on the map we produce the body of authoritative knowledge that we are willing to acknowledge as theory. In his recent essay in *Regional Studies*, Jamie Peck (2015) acknowledges that a new moment is underfoot in urban studies. He notes the “opening up of new spaces in and for urban theory, and new ways of thinking about urban theory” (Peck, 2015, p. 162). But Peck charges such “post-millennial reinvention” as prone to “difference-finding and deconstructive manoeuvres” rather than being “projects of urban-theoretical renewal.” Peck seems ambivalent about what he interprets as the “embrace of particularism and polycentrism.” He concludes: “Uniqueness and particularity are back (again) and finding exceptions to—as well as taking exception to—general urban-theoretical rules have become significant currents in the literature.”

In a forthcoming essay in the *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* titled “Who is Afraid of Postcolonial Theory?”, I make the case for difference-finding and deconstruction (Roy, in press). In doing so, I argue that laments about the erosion
of coherent urban theory (often couched as a confrontation between political economy and post-colonial theory) misread historical difference as empirical variation. To find difference is not to sidestep general processes for particularities. It is to theorize historical difference as a fundamental constituent of global urban transformation. Such a theoretical approach, as Spivak (2014) has noted, “required reading” that we must undertake. To analyze the sheer extent of slum lands in Bhatpara today, to do that “rethink” of the categories of urban and the urban political that Merrifield calls for in the context of the complete urbanization society, I must turn to the challenge that Dipesh Chakrabarty (1989) presents to Marxist working-class history and European modernity. It was a challenge from those very same jute mills of Bengal. To think via historical difference is not to avoid generalization but it is to insist that general processes (in this case, a rural–urban matrix of property and power) are not necessarily universal, that the jute mills of colonial and post-colonial Bengal might yield a different working-class politics, a different urban transformation, a different way of being political.

To pay attention to historical difference is to participate in the work of what, following Kate Derickson (2009), we can designate as “non-totalizing” theory. As in my forthcoming work (Roy, in press), I want to draw a distinction between generalization and totalization. Drawing on feminist and post-capitalist critiques of political economy, Derickson (2009, p. 11) foregrounds frameworks that understand the “social world as overdetermined” and thus requiring multiple forms of epistemic authority for its analysis. It is important to note that what critiques of critical urban theory teach us—be they feminist or post-colonial or post-structuralist or post-capitalist—is that the overdetermined social world cannot be read with transparency. Its historical alternatives cannot be charted with certainty. There is instead an undecidability. I make this point because I think the efforts to defend a critical urban theory from onslaughts of difference-finding and deconstructive maneuvers misread the purpose and practice of deconstruction. Chantal Mouffe reminds us that deconstruction is not about dialectical negation but rather about undecidability. It is worth quoting Mouffe at length on this point, as I have done in earlier work (Roy, 2013):

This is what is involved in the Derridean notion of the “constitutive outside”: not a content which would be asserted/negated by another content which would just be its dialectical opposite—which would be the case if we were simply saying that there is no “us” without a “them”—but a content which, by showing the radical undecidability of the tension of its constitution, makes its very positivity a function of the symbol of something exceeding it: the possibility/impossibility of positivity as such. In this case, antagonism is irreducible to a simple process of dialectical reversal: the “them” is not the constitutive opposite of a concrete “us,” but the symbol of what makes any “us” impossible. (Mouffe, 2000, p. 12–13)

I am arguing that such a methodology is usefully applied to the urban and in particular to what gets marked in critical urban theory as the not-urban. In fact, in relation to concepts of the urban, Peake (in press) interprets such undecidability as “something exceeding it.” For those made anxious by deconstruction, it might be worth remembering that Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, 2001, p. xii, xi) use the term “structural undecidability”—“undecidables permeate the field which had previously been governed by structural determination.” This, for Laclau and Mouffe (1985/2001, p. 3), is the very
basis of hegemony as a “field of contingent articulations.” Methodologically, they describe this as “operating deconstructively within Marxist categories.”

I conclude then with the invitation to read the urban from the standpoint of absence, absence not as negation or even antonym but as the undecidable. I conclude too with the provocation that theory, including a theory of the urban, can be made from the teal-colored building at the edge of the world that is the Dankuni municipality, a panchayat office repurposed for urban government. But in a gesture befitting the task of provincializing the urban, I note that the dedication plaque for the panchayat building references a fin de siècle poet, Jibanananda Das and his writings on “rupasi bangla,” or beautiful Bengal, envisioned as rural and verdant. But Das is also the first urban poet of Bengal, with a set of starkly neo-urban poems that are now etched into the region’s self-imagination of urban modernity. The plaque can thus be read as a serendipitous anticipation and premonition of the urban yet to come but its rurality cannot be effaced or erased (Figure 4). The sign of a constitutionally demarcated urban local body, it is the undecidability of the urban.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank Robert Lake and Deborah Martin for the invitation to give the Urban Geography plenary talk at the 2015 annual conference of the Association of American Geographers. I am grateful to Kate Derickson and Linda Peake for their roles as discussants. This essay has benefited from generous and thoughtful comments by Neil Brenner as well as from Gillian Hart’s longstanding engagement with the agrarian question. Most of all, I am indebted to the urban planners and engineers who introduced me to, and guided me through, the municipalities of Bhatpara, Dankuni, and Hooghly-Chinsurah in West Bengal, India.
Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References


