Problematizations: situating contemporary urban thought[1]

Clive Barnett

c.barnett@exeter.ac.uk

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1). Thinking problematically

In fields as diverse as security, information, and health have identified urban processes as key to the generation of challenges and also as key vectors for developing strategies to address these. Across this range of fields, the urban refers to a very broad range of concerns or issues: as a site of sociability problematized in terms of community relations and cohesion; a technological infrastructure, problematized in terms of the circulation of material objects and information; a privileged site of democratic practice, a scale of participation, experimentation, and accountability; a field of innovation and potential economic growth.

This proliferation of urban concern is associated with a marked shift in the intellectual focus for academic research on urban processes. 'The city' is now investigated and theorised by a range of interdisciplinary and often non-academic fields that exceed the conventional homes of urban research. The proliferation of urban concern has generated distinctive styles of urban knowledge, including: discrete literatures on topics such as cities and climate change, 'smart cities', cities and innovation, or 'conflict cities'; specialised practice-oriented concerned with developing design-based, behavioural, or engineering solutions to varied urban challenges; and specialised fields of scientific research on topics such as urban water management or urban life and mental health. It is this diverse field of inquiry that I refer to here as 'contemporary urban thought'.

At the same time as all sorts of new fields take up the urban as their object of inquiry, amongst critical scholars there is a widespread concern to reconfigure the conventions of urban theory. There is a broad agreement that the unprecedented dimensions of contemporary urbanization processes require some sort of paradigm shift in traditions of spatial theory that cut across disciplines of urban studies, human geography, urban and regional planning, and regional science. In particular, there is an argument that the *geographical* reference points around which urban thought has been traditionally shaped need to be re-thought, expanded or even re-located. What is needed, the argument goes, is a 'new geography of theory'.

Across these debates, there is also a shared assumption that the task of theorising 'the urban' falls primarily to a field of academic analysis. In debates on topics of 'planetary urbanization', the 'new urban question', 'comparative urbanism', and 'urban assemblage' and related topics, critical urban theorists continue to seek after either epistemologically coherent or ontologically watertight objects of analysis. This concern is related to a more or less systematic wariness of non-academic fields of urban knowledge production and of fields of urban thinking associated with more 'positivistic' disciplines such as economics, planning and engineering. Such fields are characterized often as the sources of suspect 'urbanology', or as suffering from naïve 'methodological cityism'.

Quite what counts as 'theory' is much less discussed in these debates than the question of where theory should come from? On the one hand, there is a strand of these debates which seeks to interrupt the deductive assumptions of grand theorizing, by elaborating on the importance of case methodologies as a basis of theory building for example, and by considering the challenge of developing robust urban theory in contexts lacking in comprehensive empirical data-sources on the scope and intensity

of urban change. Likewise, in discussions of urban comparativism, there is an acknowledgement of the degree to which theoretical generalizations remains accountable to empirical evidence. On the other hand, there is an argument that 'the urban' is emphatically not an empirical object at all, but a wholly theoretical construct. The resonance of such claims is more or less explicitly backward looking, to a particular model of the task of urban theory as requiring epistemological clarification of the ideological formulations of common sense categorizations.

It is noteworthy how current debates about contemporary urban dynamics are often presented in the vocabulary of 'problematics'. Neil Brenner suggests that discussions of the notion of planetary urbanization are indicative of the emergence of a whole new *problematique*. What should we make of this recourse to the vocabulary of problematics? The force of the concept of problematic lies in the idea of a structuring frame of questions underlying observable statements and propositions. But we should perhaps pause and notice the strong sense in Louis Althusser's original deployment of the idea that problematics were not hidden so much as *absent*, best discerned through an analytics of displacement and condensation. To put it another way, 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 might require more than simply arriving a clearer, more coherent conceptualisation of 'the urban' or 'the city'. In so far as we should take the Althusserian inflection of these discussions seriously at all, they might lead us to suppose that what is really animating the proliferation of contemporary discourses of urban crisis and urban potential is not necessarily anything distinctively *urban* at all.

In drawing attention to the distinct models of 'theory' at work in these debates, I want to open up the question of just how spatial concepts, including but not limited to concepts of the urban or the city, should be approached. The strongly epistemological flavour of arguments about 'planetary urbanization' might appear at odds with a distinctively ontological drift in spatial theorising more generally in recent years, a move that often goes hand in hand with authoritative appeals to etymological excavations of covered over meanings. But the difference is not as significant as often supposed; what critical spatial theory holds in common, across this divide, is a longstanding suspicion of ordinary usage, and a commitment to correcting such usage either by epistemological clarification or ontological trumping. It is here that I want to loop back to the thematics of urban problems, to open up a broader field of thinking of spatial concepts *problematically*, by reference to the shared affinities between Michel Foucault and John Dewey.[2]

2). The urbanization of responsibility

I want so suggest that the proliferation of urban-related discourses in policy, governance, commercial, advocacy and activist fields beyond the academy should be

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[2] Colin Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique: Foucault and the problems of modernity* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press 2013); Paul Rabinow, 'Dewey and Foucault: what's the problem?' *Foucault Studies*, 11 (2011), pp. 11-19; Paul Rabinow, 'How to submit to inquiry: Dewey and Foucault', *The Pluralist* 7:3 (2012), pp. 25-37.

approached first and foremost as varieties of "critical reflection on governmental practice", to borrow a line from Michel Foucault.[3]

The sense in which contemporary urban thought is a set of critical discourses can be gleaned from the observation that the way in which the growth in the size and complexity of cities, the increase in urban populations, and the generalisation of urban living have all become matters of public concern is through a recurrent discourse of responsibility.[4] More precisely, there is a widely shared theme of urban processes as bearing a double responsibility - as causes of myriad contemporary challenges (from global warming to obesity, financial instability to social exclusion) and also providing opportunities to address those challenges. In the first sense, urban processes are identified as causally responsible for generating risks, crisis, and threats: e.g. in arguments about the urban roots of the global financial crisis of 2008; arguments about the relationship between urban living and various health crises such as obesity; and arguments about the environmental impacts of increasing global urban populations. In the second sense, urban-scale institutions, infrastructures, and communities of interest are identified as being empowered to respond creatively to these challenges: e.g. through experimental urbanisms such as transition town movements; city-based climate change initiatives seeking to develop strategies of adaptation or resilience; in design-based solutions to health issues; in arguments for the potential of technologically enhanced 'smart city' solutions to enable more efficient monitoring and management of complex urban interactions.

At its most straightforward, then, there is a range of arguments in which specific *problems* are ascribed to urban causes and urban practices are at the same time configured to enact specific types of *solutions*. The reason to emphasis the degree to which ascriptions of responsibility are key to the way in which cities and urban issues are currently publicly debated is to underscore the degree to which such discussions are not only critical but concerned with opening up particular forms of action.

To give an example of this articulation of the complex responsibilities through which 'the city' is publicly articulated, consider the emergence of a so-called 'the new urban agenda' associated with the campaign to secure a so-called 'urban SDG' in recent global development agendas. Urban issues have acquired heightened visibility during the process of negotiating a post-2015 development agenda, overseen by the UN, to replace the Millennium Development Goals framework. The agreed upon draft of the Urban SDG, set to be approved by the end of 2015, is a commitment to "Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable".

There is no single definition of the city in the urbanSDG process, but we should not dismiss this pluralism as an index of incoherence. There are, in fact, three broad models of 'the city' that can be identified across this field.

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

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[3] Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-1979*, p. 321.
[4] Clive Barnett, 'Changing cities'. In Butcher, M., Clark, N., Smith, J., and Tyszczuk, R. (eds). *Atlas: Geography, Architecture and Change in an Interdependent World.* London, UK: Black Dog Publishing (2012).

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 not only reflects sophisticated scientific and social-scientific understandings of the multi-scalar dynamics of environmental processes, or the dynamics of urbanization of population, but it is also a trace of a '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' is crucial, for it shifts attention from a passive construction of urban spaces as bearers of problems and opportunity, towards an idea of the city as a figure for concerted action.

I want to emphasize that the framing of 'the city' or 'urban processes' in the urbanSDG process extends beyond a straightforward definition of problems and solutions. The process of drafting, debating, and defining the parameters of the urbanSDG is an example of an institutionalised form of *critical* reflection on the possibilities and limits of governing contemporary urban life. For example, the campaign for the urban SDG has been 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 strong argument made in favour of a dedicated urbanSDG is that precisely because urban issues are diverse and touch on a range of issues, then the city needs to be understood as a key driver of global sustainability strategies.[5]

The urban SDG campaign articulates together three distinct claims about contemporary urbanization processes, which may appear to naturally combine together, but which have needed to be linked into a coherent narrative of cause, potential and action: 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, presented as an opportunity that has 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.

The urbanSDG process might be seen as just one more example of what Kevin Morgan has referred to as 'metrophilia'. My point is that rather than suppose that we already know why urban issues have become central to myriad fields of policy and strategy, we might pause and ask a Goffman-esque question: "What is it that is going on here?" And to address this type of question, I to consider in more detail how the

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[5] *Why the world needs an urban sustainable development goal*. Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), Thematic Group on Sustainable Cities (September 2013).

idea of 'problematization', most often associated with Foucault, might be helpful in framing the analysis of the governmental field in which the urbanization of responsibility is being institutionalised.

3). Thinking problematically

Uses of the notion of problematization in recent social science oscillate two aspects of this term.[6] First, there is the idea that a problematization is an object of analysis. This is the prevalent sense in which Foucault used the term, in a series of remarks in lectures, interviews, and published works in the last few years of his life. And it is in this sense that Foucault once claimed that his work was concerned with developing a genealogy of problems, one which investigated "Why a problem and why such a kind of problem, why a certain way of problematizing appears at a given point in time". One can find this first aspect of the notion at work in the burgeoning field of governmentality studies, as well as in canonical actor network theory. In these fields of social theory, problematization is understood as an aspect 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.

There is a second aspect to the notion of problematization in contemporary social science. Here, the idea is that problematization refers to a method of analysis, a procedure to be followed by researchers. The attraction of this second sense of problematization is that it aligns quite easily with the idea that the task of analysis is primarily to open up to question taken-for-granted understandings or settlements. This usage is increasingly common in critical social science.

These two senses of problematization can be found at work in the same fields of inquiry. In urban studies, for example, one can find problematization being used to refer to an object of analysis, for example to the ways in which urban policy issues are formed and transformed[7], and as a methodological tool for critically exposing the contingencies of such constructions.[8]

While the two aspects of the idea of problematization sometimes define distinct fields of analysis, for some commentators the two aspects of problematization are presented as two sides of a single approach. The two senses of problematization, as a verb and noun, easily support a model in which the critical task is presumed to be one of exposing the contingencies of supposedly naturalised formations. Problematization is used to refer, firstly, to the idea that certain problems that appear to be naturally given or objective are actually the effect of historical processes, practices, and strategies. In turn, secondly, the assumption is made that the task of critical analysis is to *problematize* these stable and taken for granted definitions of problems.

There are good reasons to resist this simple interpretation of problematization as the name for a refined form of critical debunking. First, the problematizations that

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[6] See Clive Barnett, 'On problematizations: elaborations on a theme in 'Late Foucault'' (2015).
[7] Allan Cochrane, *Understanding urban policy: A critical approach*. London, Sage (2007).
[8] Margo Huxley, 'Historicizing planning, problematizing participation'. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 37, 1527-41 (2013).

Foucault investigated have a long duration and are dispersed across a number of fields: three of four centuries of ancient discourse about love and truth, two or three centuries of modern medicine, for example. As with other uses of Foucault's ideas, such as the idea that 'governmentality' can provide a conceptual explanation of the production of 'neoliberal subjects', the temptation to think of problematization as a method of critical analysis derives from concertinaing the *long durée* of Foucault's genealogical perspective into a succession of contemporaneous episodes of governing, subjectification, and critique. Related to this, secondly, attempts to develop more formal accounts of problematization as a critical method assume in advance that social relations are reproduced through naturalisation, stabilization, and normalisation. The assumption that social life is ordered through processes of naturalisation or other means of hiding contingency is best thought of as a projection of certain favoured theoretical paradigms.

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 sense in which the notion of problematization seems to suggest that life is lived in a perpetual state of problem-responsiveness is easily elided by the default assumption that 'power' works by putting things beyond question or by establishing various settlements. Second, and related to this, the sense one finds in Foucault that problematizations emerge in some relation to troubled or uncertain situations is often overlooked. In these two related moves, the difference introduced by the idea of problematization is reduced by returning us to a view that prioritizes the demonstration of the constructedness of social orders.

In short, in these two related moves, what disappears is the question of why problematizations should be thought as *problematic* in the first place.

To give a sense of how the notion of problematization might be better understood, in order that it might be helpful in the analysis of contemporary urban thought, it is useful to consider Foucault's own discussion of 'the problem of the town'. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault alludes to the ways in which the spatial configuration of urban spaces was one focus of a sustained problematization of how to regulate criminality and also of a problematization of health and disease. In Foucault's lecture course of 1977-1978, the theme of 'the town' appears as the scene for the emergence of biopolitical thinking about problems of population.

The town is a name for the crystallization of a series of problems: problems of contagion, order, and food supply. For Foucault, 'the problem of the town' in the eighteenth century refers to the emergence of a series of related responses that address problems of circulation by understanding urban practices as both generative of certain issues of governmental control as well as the potential vectors for policies to address those issues. 'The problem of the town' emerges in these discourses of government as a figure for problems of regulating extended networks dependence and vulnerability to which various public agencies of the state and beyond felt compelled to respond.

It should be emphasised that what is affirmed here is the emphasis on approaching modes of governing as *responses* to problems not of their own making. Foucault's own discussion of 'the town' indicates how urban practices can serve as a vector for the problematization of fields of action only contingently related to a core

definition of the city or the urban. We take from this example confirmation of Paul Rabinow's argument that apparatuses worked up as strategic responses to particular problems can be applied to other fields in modular fashion. To put it another way, it suggests that if it is possible to identify a range of problematizations of the urban these days, then this does not necessarily mean that what is at stake is anything classically thought of as 'urban' – it might just as well be understood as so many strategic responses to certain difficulties of action arising in fields only tangentially related to the conventional concerns of specialised urban analysis.

For Foucault, problematization is a term in a broader conceptualisation of how thought, understood as a function of practices of reflection, is historically variable, and in turn how thought in this sense is occasioned by uncertain situations. The emphasis on the historicity of thought in Foucault has no sense without this reference to the situational emergence of problems. What is most distinctive in Foucault's remarks is the strong sense of the situational provocation of problematizations. As he put it, "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".[9]

To clarify the significance of this idea that the emergence of problems is a creative response to situated disruptions of fields of action, it is helpful to read Foucault alongside the work of John Dewey's account of inquiry and problematic situations. There is a close affinity between Foucault's usage of 'thought', which remains rather elusive as a concept, and Dewey's more systematic account of the conditions of *inquiry*. The shared emphasis in both cases is the relation between both thought/inquiry to generative conditions that are characterised by Dewey as 'indeterminate situations', that is, situations that are "disturbed, troubled, ambiguous, confused, full of conflicting tendencies, obscure, etc.".[10] Situations, for Dewey, are the 'existential' contexts out of which inquiry is provoked, and which inquiry in turn seeks to provide responses. In Dewey's account, inquiry is initiated by a 'problematic situation', one in which the normal functioning of organisms in their environment, in their transactions with the environment, become disturbed or doubtful in some way. This doubtfulness, difficulty or unease, does not reside in human subjects: it is the situation that is doubtful, disturbing, confusing.[11]

In Foucault the becoming problematic of a field of practice is certainly presented as an occasion through which things come to matter for people, come to be considered matters of care and concern to them. However, Foucault has recourse to a vocabulary in which routine experiences are presented as 'familiar' or 'silent' prior to being taken up by thought and problematized. We should resist this simple sense that problematization is best thought of in terms of the exposure to questioning of what are ordinarily unproblematic modes of action. Following Dewey, it is best not to suppose that domains of action are fields of mechanically or mutely repetitive behaviour, waiting to be disrupted and unsettled so that they might be made into objects of reflection. We might think of these domains as the sites of habitual modes of action. But habit, here, should be thought of along Deweyian-inspired lines as an embodied,

[9] Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech* (New York, Semiotext(e), 2001), pp. 172-3.
[10] John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry: The Later Works, 1938.* (Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), p. 109.
[11] Ibid, pp. 105-6.

acquired, thought-imbued sensitivity to the negotiation of practical situations.[12] This would lead us to a view in which the problematic qualities of the world do not befall it in the mode of crisis or catastrophe, nor do they arise from a purposeful strategic intervention. They are, rather, a feature of the everyday world as it is lived and experienced and are for that very reason open to further analytical explication.[13] 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, we would think of the work of problematization as a practice through which an uncertain situation is clarified, what is at stake for those affected is determined, and its significance assessed.[14]

Reading Dewey next to Foucault helps us think of the idea of problematization as a broadly dispersed dimension of practices, not so much an interruption of the flow of life but reflexively folded into the on-going flow of action. And in turn, this sense of the ordinariness of problematization helps us see that the concepts of everyday usage – ideas like the city, neighbourhood, and the like - might be acknowledged as engaging with the situations through which issues come into focus as requiring collective attention.

Foucault and Dewey can stand for two related but distinct approaches to the analysis of urban problematizations: one focussing on 'serious speech acts' through which the urban is problematized; the other follows a more Deweyian spirit, supplementing this first approach with a greater attention to the continuum between the ordinariness of problem solving and more formalised fields of problematization. If the first approach distributes the agency of 'urban thought' beyond the limits of the academy, then the second approach makes clear the connection between this expanded field of expert knowledge and the ordinary modes of apprehending the urban that emerge in everyday life.

Reading Foucault and Dewey alongside one another helps to bring into view an approach to the analysis of problematizations that departs somewhat from the standard, received model of doing genealogy of urban problems. This type of analysis can always be recuperated to forms of ideological analysis or functionalist styles of 'governmentality' or 'biopolitical' analysis that lead away from the focus on specifying the emergent situations of action to which problematizations are a dynamic response. The alternative account of problematization outlined here leads to a couple of 'methodological' protocols to guide the analysis of contemporary urban thought. First, it implies that rather than thinking of the contemporary problematization of urban processes as a response to externally generated threat (such as 'climate change') or shock (the fiscal crisis of 2007 onwards), the focus should be upon the ways in which urban processes help to generate problematizations in so far as they come to disrupt, disturb or interrupt existing patterns of problem-formation and

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[12] John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*: *The Middle Works, 1922*. (Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 2008); see also James Ostrow, *Social Sensitivity: A Study of Habit and Experience* (Albany NY, State University of New York Press, 1990).

[13] See Dorothy M. Smith, *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987), pp. 88-100.

[14] John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*: *The Later Works, 1938*. (Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), pp. 108-116.

problem-solving. Second, therefore the fundamental task is to ask what domains of action are unsettled, rendered difficult, so that 'the city' or 'the urban' emerges as a problematic cause or potential solution to pressing contemporary issues. Another way of asking this question is to inquire not into how cities are defined or what 'the urban' is, but rather to inquire into what it is that 'cities' or other figures of the urban are presumed to be able to *do*.[15]

4). "What is it that's going on here?"

I have suggested that Foucault and Dewey might provide resources for analysing the situations to which urban problematizations are a creative response. Following this path allows us to recognise the forms of critical reflection through which urban issues are rendered matters of public concern and routes to forms of concerted action. In elaborating this account of the notion of problematization, I have sought to demonstrate how it challenges the tendency to think of the concepts of urban theory as the special preserve of a cadre of critical intellectuals, secure from the temptations of ideology and with access to the properly theoretical apprehension of spatial concepts. I have suggested that more credence be given to the pragmatic qualities of urban concepts such as 'the city', 'neighbourhood', and so on. The key concepts of spatial disciplines such as urban studies, human geography, and related fields might well be best thought of as being thoroughly 'problematic', not so much in the sense of requiring academic clarification, but in the sense of 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 the ordinary people.

Reading Foucault alongside John Dewey should allow us to focus on clarifying the emergent situations to which problematization, understood as a work of 'thought' or an occasion for 'inquiry', are responses. This emphasis challenges established conventions of 'critical' analysis, not least by clarifying what is at stake in demonstrating the *contingency* of existing practices and relations. More often than not, the demonstration of contingency is supposed to be an act of subversion by virtue of exposing the non-natural quality of practices or identities apparently dependent for their reproduction on a certain appearance of naturalness. Contingency, in short, is offset against the universal or essential. The analysis of problematization I have outlined above thinks of the contingency of problems as requiring deeper clarification of the conditions and situations to which those problems are a response: in short, the concern is not to demonstrate the simple fact of contingency, but rather, to give contingent arrangements some content, that is, to elucidate the significance of problems and responses at stake.

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[15] For elaborations of this style of analysis of problematizations, see Clive Barnett, 'On the Milieu of Security: situating the emergence of new spaces of public action, *Dialogues in Human Geography* (2015, forthcoming; and Clive Barnett and Nick Mahony, 'Marketing practices and the reconfiguration of public action', *Policy and Politics* (2015), forthcoming.