World Cities, Culture and Informality: A Challenge to the Practice of Boundary-Setting

Ulrike Chouguley
City University London

Abstract

The world cities discourse can be credited with broadening the analytical boundaries of the globalisation debate to include a greater set of actors and practices in the global economy. However, academic debate and policy thinking about world cities are also guilty of applying an (economic) reductionist framework, as exemplified by their foremost use of quantitative methodologies. This has resulted in the omission of many important elements of city life from the analysis. While this problem is not exclusive to culture, it has significant implications for the study of cultural practices in the context of world cities; even more so when they do not fit into formal structures. This paper challenges this reductionist practice. It argues that in order to better understand world cities today, a broader set of issues – and methodologies to interrogate them – needs to be considered.

Keywords: World cities, informal culture, boundaries

Introduction

According to Walter Benjamin (1999: 836) 'a boundary is a line that separates'. Boundaries can 'create divisions and be a source of separation, fragmentation, disconnection and misunderstanding' (Wenger, 2000: 233). Considering this, it seems surprising that such great enthusiasm for drawing and reinforcing boundaries can be found among both scholars and policy-makers engaged in the global city discourse. When considering that the very notion of the global city is based on the concept of interconnectedness, it becomes paradoxical.

Yet, academic debate and policy thinking about world cities is largely built around an (economic) reductionist framework that excludes many important elements of the world city. Such as culture or informality: the very things that our research is interested in.

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This paper challenges the narrow concept of world cities that is commonly applied in the world cities discourse. This will be done by interrogating conceptualisations of informal cultural practices within the context of world cities, and the issues that such an interrogation raises given the above discussed reductionist analytical framework. The paper argues that, in order to better understand world cities today, a broader set of issues needs to be included in the analysis. More than this, a richer set of methodologies needs to be considered and developed to interrogate them. As will become apparent, this paper links two closely intertwined strands of arguments: on the one hand, the conceptualisations of informal culture in the context of world cities and, on the other hand, the way these ideas have been organised and structured in information capturing tools. Such information-capturing devices are more than mere reporting tools. Rather, they themselves influence and structure the academic and policy thinking and debate. Thus, one aim of this paper is to highlight the role of such structuring devices and the extent to which they are helpful (or not) in furthering the understanding of, and policy-making for, informal cultural practices.

The paper will begin by setting out some of the key strands of arguments of the global city debate and the methodologies used to interrogate them. It will then analyse the findings from a secondary data analysis that sought to apply this approach and test its replicability in the field of culture. This is followed by a discussion of the challenges that emerged from this analysis. In the next section, the paper introduces a number of alternative theoretical concepts that provide a much richer framework for discussing issues of informal culture in the world cities concept. This discussion is then concluded with a call for developing a broader set of methodological tools that could support these theoretical debates.

The world cities discourse

In the last couple of decades, the global city has become an object of study in its own right. This 'world cities discourse' is premised on the idea that urban centres across the world have been affected by the profound changes of the global economy since the 1970s and 1980s. The primary focus of the literature has been on the increased global interconnectivity and economic integration, due in part to the rise of new information technologies (Friedmann, 1986; Knox, 1995; Castells, 2009). The transnational corporation (TNC) has emerged as the new predominant organisational structure of companies, while complex, specialist services (the so-called advanced producer services, such as legal, finance or accounting) are outsourced (Dicken, 2011; Sassen, 2001; Knox, 1995). These advanced producer services have also become the major new economic growth sectors (Sassen, 2001). All of these developments have greatly impacted on the city economy, as well as broader urbanisation processes. According to Sassen (2001), cities have become the new 'command and control centres' of the world, while at the same time having to deal with the challenges

of increasing economic and social polarisation.

This new focus on the city has been useful with regards to broadening the analytical boundaries of the globalisation debate to include a much broader set of actors and practices that are important in the global economy. While much of the globalisation debate prior to this has focused on the transnational corporation as its subject of analysis, the world city lens has enabled scholars to consider other issues important in the city. For instance, authors like Castells (1989; 2009; 2010) and Sassen (1996; 2001) have drawn attention to the fact that the changes in the global economy have gone hand-in-hand with an increased urban polarisation, which has resulted in rising social and economic inequalities (including a significant growth of the informal economy).

On the other hand, the world cities discourse is guilty of exclusionary practices itself, driven by its strong focus on data and measurements. Friedmann's famous 'World City Hypothesis' (1986) laid the foundations for this. He argued that, as a result of global economic integration, cities are not only connected within a global system, but they can also be hierarchically ordered according to their function in this system. Proving and testing this hypothesis has been at the centre of the debate about world cities ever since, as clearly exemplified by the proliferation of quantitative city rankings. While some attempts have been made to broaden out the data (e.g. Keeling's (1995) exploration of air travel connections), the central case about global city networks is built around economic and financial data. Some authors justify this in conceptual terms. For instance, Beaverstock et al (2000) state that only certain functions can be considered as "world city functions" and these are all economic – and not, for instance, a city's role as holiday destination or retirement centre. Other authors are more reluctant to make such exclusions on theoretical terms, but rather build the case around methodological issues. For instance, Taylor et al (2002: 232) acknowledge that while 'at the global scale […] economic power predominates', there is other power, for instance the cultural power of religious centres like Jerusalem, Mecca or Rome. However, this is excluded from the analysis due to 'pragmatic' reasons (Taylor et al, 2002). Thus, the focus of the world cities discourse is on things that are (supposedly) easily measurable. Other issues are considered to be too difficult to collect data on and are excluded on that basis, even if that results in the omission of important elements of life in cities – such as culture.

Towards a global cultural city index?

In an attempt to examine this assumption, we interrogated the feasibility of broadening the data by constructing a cultural world city index. In order to do so, secondary data on nine 'cultural global city networks' was collated and analysed. The nine data sets, each representing a 'global city network' covered a range of cultural domains, including cultural heritage, art, film and fashion. It also considered networks at different stages of the cultural value chain, including networks with a primary focus on production, exhibition/distribution or consumption. These data sets did not provide a comprehensive coverage of the cultural sector but were sufficient to interrogate the approach. Figure 1 below presents the nine data sets and the main information analysed in each.

Using a similar methodology to other established city rankings such as the Globalization and World Cities index (produced by a group of scholars at Loughborough University), the location data was then ranked and scored, before producing a composite score and aggregate ranking.

The exercise showed that it might be possible to construct a city ranking based on cultural indicators and that some valuable insights may be gained from it, but much more work would be required to improve the existing data sets. For instance, it became apparent that the original film festival data set that was used displayed a significant bias towards cities of the global north, with cities from the southern hemisphere being consistently underrepresented in the data.

Data set	Description of collected information
Cultural heritage	Location of 347 national lead organisations of the 4 of the 5 main international, professional networks in the cultural heritage sector; representing museums (ICOM), heritage sites ((ICOMOS), libraries (IFLA) and publishing (IPA)
Archives	Location of 1,200+ members (individuals and organisations) of the 5th main international professional network in the cultural heritage sector, the ICA
Film Festivals	Location of 1,700+ film festivals
Art Fairs	Location of 166 international art fairs
Exhibition attendances	Cities hosting the greatest number of top 10 exhibitions (in terms of attendance and across different genres)
CowParade public art	Location of 86 host cities
Auction sales	Location of top 50 auction houses (by sales)
Private art collectors	Location of 200 biggest private art collectors
Luxury fashion stores	Location of 3,700+ stores of top 10 luxury fashion brands

Figure 1: Global cultural networks data sets (2015)

However, more importantly, the exercise demonstrated that an approach that is inherently driven by economic considerations of value and by a need for solely quantitative data is greatly flawed and of limited meaning when it comes to culture. Firstly, within an aggregate tool such as this, it is impossible to account for the great diversity between, and particularities of, each cultural sub-sector. Secondly, the cultural data that can be measured (and that too, with flaws) does not necessarily indicate cultural power. The film festival data set provides once again a good example. While it captured the quantity of film festivals hosted by each city, it had little to say about the cultural 'value' of each of these festivals. Few would argue that Cannes is one of the most important film festival cities in the world; however, given the data sets focus on quantity, the city did

not show up anywhere near the top of the ranking. Thirdly, the very idea of a hierarchical classification is questioned by the fact that, in culture, there is a value to diversity per se: a city that might be considered a 'regional' hub of culture is no more or less valuable than a city that is deemed an 'international' centre of culture – it is simply different. Finally, and notwithstanding the above arguments, while such an index may generate some new insights about certain aspects of culture, it excludes much other cultural activity, perhaps most notably informal cultural practices.

It is worth noting that this is not an issue exclusive to culture. Indeed, a closer interrogation of many global city rankings reveals that, even in supposedly easily measurable fields like finance, there is a strong bias in the data towards formal connections, while informal flows (such 'invisible' trades) remain unreported and excluded from these datasets. Similarly, while there is a wealth of statistics to analyse and illustrate the flows of migrants across the world (e.g. Abel and Sander, 2014), these once again focus primarily on formal migration flows. However, as anyone having followed the predominant news issue of the summer of 2015 would concede (and as the work of scholars such as Sassen (2001) and Castells (2009) implicitly acknowledges), illegal and unreported migration flows are the much more important issues affecting today's global world and cities. It thus becomes clear that by restricting the scholarly debate to primarily one type of methodology, a whole range of issues that affect the global city are being ignored. Notwithstanding this, the complexities and particularities showcased by the cultural sector only increase the need for a different or, at least, a complementary way of interrogating culture in, and articulating its value to, cities more holistically.

Stretching the boundaries of the debate

As the analysis and the discussion above show, the strong emphasis on measurement and quantitative data in the world cities debate leads to an undue focus on formal elements while the 'unmeasurable' informal is ignored. Similarly, policy-makers are struggling to engage with informal (and in particular informal cultural), practices (Shaw, 2005; Colomb, 2012; Groth and Corjin, 2005; Vivant, 2010; Andres and Gresillon, 2013; Gornostaeva and Campbell, 2012). This is in no small part due to the way that they are framed by normative views. Yet, informal practices are an important part of global cities. This becomes clear when interrogating cities through a more socio-political lens, as has been done by many scholars working on contemporary issues of migration (Beck, 2006; Vertovec, 1999; Smith, 2001; Portes et al., 1999; Allen et al, 1999). Cities, then, become sites of informal, cultural brokerage, as they interlink different flows of ideas and meaning with other places in the world (Hannerz, 1996; Smith, 2001). The requirement in policy-making and academic debate to define boundaries, limits and establish categories becomes problematic considering the mobility and quick evolution of contemporary city life and of many cultural practices. The very definition of boundaries and categories leads to excluding much of cultural and social life, and to making it invisible. If we want to better understand world cities in general, and informal culture, its practices and meaning in particular, we need to extend the horizon

of the debate both conceptually and methodologically.

Conclusions

This paper has shown that while the world cities literature can be credited for extending the analytical boundaries of the globalisation debate to include a wider range of actors, it is also guilty of exclusionary practices itself. The foremost methodological concern of the world cities debate with quantitative data and city rankings excludes many important elements of life in the global city today. Instead, there is a reductionist focus on economic and financial information. The findings from an extensive secondary data analysis from the cultural sector demonstrated that, even within the boundaries of a quantitative assessment, further work can be done to extend the world cities debate to other domains. However, the data exercise also showed that by confining the interrogation to quantitative methodologies results in only partial understanding of some cultural practices in world cities, as well as the complete omission of others. Informal practices, in particular, are left out from such an interrogation. This issue is particularly important to the cultural sector. However, the examples of informal financial trades and migration flows highlight that it is not a problem exclusive to culture. Theoretical work around migration, which often focuses on socio-political issues, provides a new conceptual opening to exploring world cities and global practices. However, in order to better understand informal culture, its practices, meanings and cultural value, new methodological approaches will need to be taken, too. Future research will need to draw more on explorative, qualitative methods (as for instance used in many anthropological studies) in order to gain new insights.

Finally, it is worth returning to the problem of boundaries. This paper has challenged the practice of boundary-setting that is so common in academic debate and policy thinking about world cities. This is because these boundaries function as limitations and restrictions to a holistic understanding of world cities. However, as Wenger (2000) points out, boundaries do not need to be such. Instead, they can be more productive and fluid. They may become important learning systems that connect different communities of practice: 'areas of unusual learning, places where perspectives meet and new possibilities arise' (Wenger, 2000:233-4). Thus, rather than advocating for an exclusive turn to alternative conceptual and methodological analysis of world cities, this paper argues for opening up new possibilities and a better, more holistic understanding of world cities precisely by stretching boundaries, or by making them more porous and fluid, so that knowledge of different sectors (from finance to culture) and different methodologies can come together to create new insights and learning.

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Biography

Ulrike is a second-year PhD student at City University London. Her research focuses on questions around the role of culture within urban development. She is also interested in debates about the impact and value of culture. These interests are combined in her doctoral research project which explores the role and value of informal culture in world cities. Ulrike previously worked for a cultural policy research consultancy for 5+years, as well as a range of arts organisations. She holds a MA (distinction) in European Cultural Policy and Management from the University of Warwick.