New York Stock Exchange, February 2012 (Elvin Wyly)

Friedrich Engels, "The Great Towns," and Neil Brenner and Roger Keil, "From Global Cities to Globalized Urbanization."

This pair of readings offers a fascinating entry into discussions of cities and urban life at two pivotal moments, more than a hundred and fifty years apart. First, we see Engels' first-hand account of Manchester as the city was being remade as the world's most dynamic center of production and wealth-generation in the industrial revolution; then Brenner and Roger Keil review "the classic texts of global city theory" to help us understand our highly interconnected contemporary world of "planetary urbanization." Brenner and Keil give us a review of a vast, influential literature in urban studies, sociology, and geography, that highlights the paradox of our age: in an era when technologies enable planetary networks of production, distribution, and travel, cities have actually become *more* important -- "urbanization rates across the world economy are now higher and more rapid than ever before in human history." Engels, by contrast, provides a close-up view of the streets, slums, and alleys of the world's first truly industrial city.

Questions

1. Engels describes the members of the "money aristocracy" who "can take the shortest road through the middle of all the labouring districts to their places of business, without ever seeing that they are in the midst of the grimy misery that lurks to the right and the left." The spatial layout of the slums and commercial avenues, in other words, "suffice to conceal from the eyes of the wealthy men and women of strong stomachs and weak nerves the misery and grime which form the complement of their wealth."

Can you think of any parallels today from any city you know? What kinds of spatial layouts "suffice to conceal" such inequalities today?

2. Engels opens his essay with an account of the "hundreds of thousands" crowding past one another on the streets of London, with a "brutal indifference" and "unfeeling isolation." "...however much one may be aware that this isolation of the individual, this narrow self-seeking is the fundamental principle of our society everywhere, it is nowhere so shamelessly barefaced, so self-conscious as just here in the crowding of the great city." Engels' concerns here should remind us of Tonnies, Durkheim, and Simmel: urbanization seems to be transforming social relations, creating an instrumental, "narrow self-seeking" mindset at a faster and faster pace.

Now think of the "planetary urban networks" of global cities described by Brenner and Keil; what has changed since Engels' day, and what has not?

3. Brenner and Keil describe a rapidly-urbanizing world shaped by "new forms of connectivity -- along with new patterns of disconnection, peripheralization, exclusion, and vulnerability -- among and within urbanizing regions across the globe." Globalization, in other words, brings great wealth and opportunity -- but also more stark inequalities, as well as risks and dangers. (As one example, a small town in Norway suddenly could not afford the electricity required to light its streets at night after the Global Financial Crisis that began in 2008 wiped out the town's assets in a financial instrument pushed by a Wall Street investment bank.)

In any city you know, what have been the new opportunities brought by increased global connectivity? What have been the new risks?

4. For many years, "global city" researchers looked for the best way of ranking the world's most economically powerful cities -- often using such indicators as the number of corporate headquarters or stock-market capitalization. This had the effect of identifying a hierarchy with London, Tokyo, and New York at the top -- and then great disagreement on which cities were "contenders" for the middle-range spots. Brenner and Keil note that this approach "serves to glorify the status of particular cities in worldwide interurban competition." Instead, Brenner and Keil emphasize the "multiple, interlocking interurban networks" that create a wide range of city-to-city relations -- not all of them hierarchical -- in cultural, political, and media domains. They cite the example of diplomatic and Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) cities (Washington, DC, Geneva, Brussels, Nairobi), and worldwide religious centers (Mecca, Rome, Jerusalem).

Can you think of cities that exemplify distinctive types or functions -- cities that might constitute some of those "multiple, interlocking urban networks"?

5. Brenner and Keil write that under conditions of capitalist globalization, "geographical proximities among cities and their inhabitants have increased," while "social distancing inside cities and across networks has often increased dramatically," with "new forms of exclusivity, ghettoization, gated communities and the like." Global connections, in other words, are proliferating at the same time as new forms of spatial configurations that "suffice to conceal" various kinds of inequalities: the way people define and experience "near" and "far" in social and geographical terms seems to be in flux. Can you cite experiences from a city you know that help illustrate this process?