

URBAN WORLDS

Positively Radical

ELVIN WYLY

Abstract

Recent anxieties about the viability of critical and radical perspectives in urban research are part of our inheritance from the late 1960s and the backlash against a hegemony that connected positivist epistemology to quantitative methodologies and conservative, state-centric politics. In this article, I suggest that this memory relies on a caricature of positivist urbanism that creates a dangerous illusion of a tidy past when the cause was clear and it was easy to distinguish allies from adversaries. The linkages between epistemology, methodology and politics were unstable and contingent in positivism's heyday of the 1960s, and indeed at the birth of positivism itself. The contingent and contextual nexus of epistemology, method and politics offers abundant opportunities for new kinds of hybrids in radical, rigorous and relevant urban research.

Introduction

'It is on the revolutionary school alone that we can expect that the positive polity can experience a predominant influence, because this is the only one that is always open to a new action on behalf of progress.'

August Comte (translated by Martineau, 1853;
cited in Wernick, 2001: 10)

'Today, of course, there are no positivists. The positivist era is over, and everyone is a postpositivist. Yet, is it that easy?'

Robert Scharff (2007: 515)

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In recent years, a profound sense of anxiety has swept through critical urban studies. Among those who care about cities and who are committed to radical change towards a better world, there is a long tradition of believing that ‘everything is always going to hell’, as Judd (2005) puts it: there are so many injustices, such pervasive inequality, so many urban crises. But if urban scholars have always been inclined to step into the role of end-times prophet (*ibid.*), there seems to be a new concern that urban theory — with all of its pluralistic and post-everything freedoms — is going to hell too. Some of the basic categories of contemporary urban research — like city-regions — stand accused of an inherent bias towards regressive, neoliberal political projects (Harding, 2007). Storper (2001: 157) writes of ‘the poverty of radical theory today’, as the ‘false promises’ of a totalizing Marxism give way to a ‘mirage’ of the cultural turn; ‘contemporary academic radicalism’, he suggests, has misinterpreted the shifts in identity politics in liberal democracies as a decisive turn away from modernism; ‘it then constructs a utopia — that of culturalism — which is epistemologically and morally relativistic yet in some ways politically illiberal and depoliticizing’. For Lake (2005: 268), the ‘uncertainty of purpose’ of contemporary urban theory is ‘deeply destabilizing’, and urbanists now ‘face the yawning abyss of interpretive epistemologies without clearly specified nor widely accepted methodological signposts’.

Contemporary anxiety in critical urbanism is exacerbated by the cross-currents of time, place, generation and politics that have shaped critical urban thought in profound ways since the 1960s. The shared reference point for nearly all contemporary critical debate begins with the urban legacy of positivism. As Dear (2005: 250) puts it: ‘A simplified comparative urban epistemology for the past half-century’ begins with ‘a *scientific/quantitative approach*, which emerged in the 1960s, focused on the industrial city, with a positivist, Chicago-inspired modernism as its foundation’ (emphasis in the original). The dominance of ‘positivist science with its propensity for quantitative modeling and analysis, belief in state-directed futures and in the existence of a single “public interest”’ (Baeten, 2001: 57) provided the foundation for an elite, exclusive and oppressive regime of urban theory, policy and planning. This hegemony of positivist urbanism has seen much contestation ever since the early 1970s (Smith, 1971; Berry, 1972; Harvey, 1972; 1973; Johnston, 1986; Gregory, 2000; Hall, 2002; Wolch, 2003; Fainstein, 2005; Lake, 2005; Fotheringham, 2006).

Today, contemporary discussions of the history and present status of critical urban studies document a wonderful radical pluralism of post, anti and nonpositivist movements committed to a diverse, cosmopolitan metropolis of emancipatory knowledge and action (Livingstone, 1993; Baeten, 2001; Fainstein, 2005; Harding, 2005; Vigar *et al.*, 2005).¹ Unfortunately and ironically, however, the ‘common use of “postpositivist”’ to define and demarcate a critical urbanism that is becoming ‘the status quo’ in some fields (Leitner and Sheppard, 2003: 57) seems to have worsened anxieties of purpose. The ‘new position of intellectual strength’ of postpositivism has been ‘undermined by factionalism’ as well as an exclusion of certain tools and methods ‘on questionable philosophical and political grounds’ (*ibid.*: 57).

The ‘quantitative and positivist realms’ of urban research are clearest when connected to cities, theories and politics of the past. Preparing an introduction for a symposium to be published in *Urban Geography*, Mountz and Prytherch (2005: 244) sat down with a stack of back issues and reflected on the state of the field: ‘we found reading the journal a bit like moving to New York and, eschewing vibrant neighborhoods and thronged streets, deciding to live and work on the 25th floor of an aging, late modernist, downtown high-rise’. Venturing out of the high-rise and exploring the vibrant neighborhoods and

1 There is no consensus on which term is best, primarily because of unease with the teleological notions of linear progress embedded in the post; *post* positivism ‘is viewed as constituting a *fundamentally* progressive break with our Platonic past... not only has it followed positivism in freeing itself from the older traditions of theology and metaphysics, it has now “got rid” of positivism as well’ (Scharff, 2007: 521).

thronged streets, however, is often confusing and disappointing. Sometimes it is clear that the ‘former radicals’ (Slater, 2008) from the neighborhoods have grown from ‘young and angry’ into ‘wealthy patrons’ (Milicevic, 2001: 773). But it is not always clear that the postpositivist critical movements from the neighborhoods are *always and inherently* progressive. Storper (2001: 159) laments that:

most of the contemporary work on constructing new bases for social theory is not being carried out by self-described radicals . . . For those of us who come from the Left, the bitter irony of our day is that self-described conservatives in some cases, and liberals (. . . in the continental sense) are probably now, on average, as effective at critical social science as are self-described radicals.

In this article, I suggest that the legacy of positivism in critical urbanism has been misunderstood. I have often misunderstood this legacy myself and in this article I can only offer the perspective of one who did not witness the 1960s (at least not as an adult). But I *have* witnessed and lived the aftermath. I suggest that many of today’s anxieties are the inheritance of a distinctive conjuncture of political epistemology that coalesced for a brief but influential period in the middle of the twentieth century. In the Anglo-American world of scholarly activity that has become the *de facto* global standard for ‘creatively destructive’ knowledge production (Aalbers, 2004), the 1960s were unique. The era was dominated by a rapid, enthusiastic embrace of positivism in urban studies at precisely the moment when positivism was (1) most closely intertwined with the deployment of nation-state power; (2) discredited and discarded by philosophers themselves; and (3) unsuited to an immediate interpretation of the unpredictable revolutionary insurrections that broke out in the streets of hundreds of cities across the world. At first, a new generation of young scholars found inspiration in Marxism to challenge the new orthodoxy of positivist urbanism. Ever since, each new generation of radical urbanists has defined their project, in part, through opposition, constituting a diverse plurality of binary otherings. Each has built a new emancipatory movement to challenge the dominant regime of positivist urbanism that is said to have endured for at least half a century. These trends in urban research reflect a much broader movement across the social sciences and humanities that continues a struggle against the ‘positivist “haunting”’, a challenge to ‘positivism’s paradoxical power as a zombie-like refusal to stay buried’ (Steinmetz, 2005a: 3, 37). This ongoing history, I suggest, perpetuates an incomplete and disempowering caricature of a historically contingent alignment of philosophy, methodology, politics and practice. The organized nexus regarding the orthodoxy of the 1960s — positivist epistemology, organized calculative methodologies, conservative state-centric politics — was unstable from the start. It was never essential nor immutable. Indeed, positivism itself was internally unstable and contradictory from the very beginning.

The argument proceeds in five steps. First, I review the standard definition of positivism. Second, I describe the hegemony of positivist urban research remembered from the 1960s. Third, I explore the instabilities and contradictions in the links between politics and method in the 1960s and 1970s, including significant contingencies that shaped the establishment of RC21 and IJURR. Fourth, I reconsider the institutionalized memories of positivism itself: August Comte is rarely read and usually misunderstood. Finally, I describe the contemporary hybrids now flourishing in a vibrant critical urbanism, including critical forms of strategic positivism.

Positivism

We must begin with careful, clear definitions. The word ‘positivism’ is used widely as a genealogical term, while ‘positivist’ often serves either as a shorthand adjective (to describe a particular mode of inquiry) or as an epithet pronoun (‘You stupid positivist!’). All of these uses typically carry the same set of connotations, particularly among radical

urbanists. Yet the word has at least three distinct meanings (Riley, 2007). Positivism denotes a broad commitment to Enlightenment reason and a project of societal evolution, development and progress. It can also refer more narrowly to the literatures, traditions and debates inaugurated by the French philosopher August Comte (1798–1857) and flowering in the work of the members of the Vienna Circle in the 1920s and 1930s. And it can also summarize a particular assemblage of organized principles, technologies and practices that became common in many kinds of research during the twentieth century (and that remains pervasive today). Sometimes this latter meaning is identified separately as methodological positivism (Steinmetz, 2005a). The prevailing tendency, however, is to distill the Enlightenment, philosophical and practice-oriented meanings into a generalized, composite definition. This distillation is not unproblematic — and we will consider the implications later — but it is deeply influential. The composite definition identifies six interrelated points (Lacey, 1996; Steinmetz, 2005a; 2005c; Burris, 2007; Riley, 2007; Barnes, 2009b).

First, observation is crucial. Observation — the direct accessibility or experience of phenomena through one or more of the five human senses — provides the sole reliable path to meaningful knowledge. Observation must be performed according to strict criteria of precision, neutrality and objectivity. When such conditions are met, observation yields the kind of knowledge that can be universally shared, understood and trusted by virtue of its faithful representation of reality — untainted by the infinite individual biases of morality, values and opinions. Positivist observation yields, in a word, *facts*.

Second, positivism emphasizes the use of clearly specified procedures and standards of verification or falsification in order to discriminate between true and false statements. Verification and falsification constitute different frameworks, and mark a break between Comte's classical positivism and the twentieth-century schism of critical rationalism and logical positivism. Both paths, however, are protocols founded on the principle of replication. The replication principle requires deep suspicion of assertions that have not been, or cannot be, replicated by others. Separate, independent investigators working to observe phenomena must ascertain facts that can be shared and compared in ways that prove or disprove various claims. The soft, impure ores of speculations, hunches and assertions go into the blast furnace of replication, where they are forged into the pure, strong alloys of hypotheses, theories and laws.

Third, causality is conceptualized in conjunctural terms — as the repeated co-incidence of observable events: 'if A, then B'. The specific formulation of tests for causality varies somewhat across different domains of knowledge: with some phenomena, it is possible to test $A \rightarrow B$ through experimentation; in other areas, conjuncture must be inferred via temporal or spatial proximity. The basic logic, however, remains the same: *causality* involves relations among events that can be observed, compared and evaluated. This feature of positivism was a backlash against centuries of philosophical struggles that assigned profound, almost mystical properties to the internal, unobservable essences of phenomena as 'causes' or 'causal powers'.

Fourth, positivism is characterized by a deep suspicion of phenomena that cannot be observed. Exceptions are sometimes made for axioms of logic or mathematics. In the main, however, 'Positivists have always tried to limit enquiry and belief to what can be firmly established . . . primarily what we learn immediately from the senses' (Lacey, 1996: 262).

Fifth, knowledge and inquiry are premised on (and reveal) a unity among all the separate sciences. The physical and natural sciences are, fundamentally, no different from the social sciences and humanities. Separate domains of inquiry form 'a natural sequence resting on mathematics and developing, both in order of logic and historically, through the physical and biological sciences' to political and social sciences and the humanities (*ibid.*: 261).

Sixth, positivism rejects metaphysics. Knowledge claims about the unobservable, nonphysical realm of spirits, sentiments and essences are regarded as misleading and inferior to statements about observable relations among measurable phenomena.

Positivist City Hall

The practices of positivism seem to have achieved a formal institutional hegemony in the social sciences in the two decades after the second world war — at precisely the moment when the philosophical edifice itself was crumbling. Positivist practice quickly became pervasive and influential in urban studies and city and regional planning — but the backlash was also remarkably swift (see Harvey, 1969; 1972; 1973; Berry, 1972; Hall, 2002: 359–63; *cf.* Smith, 1971; Berry, 2002). A decisive turning point came with the protests and uprisings in cities around the world in 1968, which encouraged a wide-ranging reassessment of urban theory, policy and practice that led to considerable turbulence for an entire generation (Watts, 2001). This was a complex period, shaped by alternating currents of domination, resistance and shifting alliances that varied widely across national and regional contexts. Today, however, these contingent histories are remembered (and distilled into written histories) in ways that slip all too easily into oversimplification. With the receding events of the past, it is exceedingly difficult to maintain complexity and contingency, while building a concise collective memory that makes sense. Histories that *make sense* almost always imply some kind of ontological essence or necessity. A careful reading of alternative histories and contemporary accounts does indeed highlight the contradictions, ruptures and exceptional moments of that era (Berry, 1972; Harvey, 1972; Gregory, 1986; Johnston, 1986; Livingstone, 1993; Hall, 2002; Fainstein, 2005). Yet, it has become increasingly common to draw a clear, sharp-edged image that highlights vivid contrasts in the skyline of a messy, contradictory city of positivism: if the street-level views of cities in 1968 were obscured by crowds and tear gas, today's retrospectives show a crystal-clear illusion seen from the vantage point of a positivist urbanism that could not comprehend its own demise — that 25th floor of Mountz and Prytherch's (2005: 244) 'aging, late modernist, downtown high-rise'. Clear, focused retrospectives have become more common. Many are quite eloquent. One of the best appears in a review of city planning representations in Newcastle upon Tyne, analyzing the mismatch between conventional theory and the intricacies of multicultural urban change (Vigar *et al.*, 2005: 1395):

Such transformations challenge the modernist principles at the heart of urban planning that tend to favour acting in a definable singular 'public interest,' with rational 'coherence' and urban public order imposed on the city 'from above' through the expert powers of the usually White, middle-class, middle-aged and heterosexual men who, invariably, were the planning 'experts' [Holston, 1998]. Such traditions of modern city planning tended to favour

rationality, comprehensiveness, planning hierarchy, positivist science with its propensity for quantitative modeling and analysis, belief in state-directed futures and in the existence of a single 'public interest' that can be identified by planners and is gender and race neutral [Baeten, 2001: 57].

I do not believe that this example is an unfair characterization (or a nonrepresentative sample) of scores of radical urbanists' views of a positivist urbanism that dominated our past — and that continues to guide orthodox theory, practice and policy. The view is vivid and horrifying. We can see something central, powerful and arrogant — what might be called Positivist City Hall. Its machine politics operate through a distinctive enforced patronage system of modernism, rationality, expertise, race, class, age, gender, sexuality, hierarchy, epistemology, methodology, state authority and (false assertions of) neutrality and objectivity. The machine is built on a powerful triumvirate of (1) *epistemological* pretensions of objectivity, rationality, universality and incontrovertible certainty; (2) *methodological* worship of mathematical logic and quantitative sophistication; and (3) *political* acquiescence to or support for conservative, hierarchical forms of power and coercion. All radical urbanists agree that this positivist city machine must be destroyed, even if they cannot agree on exactly what should replace it. Indeed, it may not be too much of an exaggeration to suggest that much of what defines the identity of radical urbanism itself is a shared spirit of resistance to this hegemony, and a search for something better.

Let me be absolutely clear: I offer no defense of the positivist establishment *as it is described in these accounts*. The enterprise portrayed in today's accepted histories is dangerous and evil indeed, given its epistemological imperialism and its fatal alliances with conservative repression. Anything resembling this portrayal unites radical urbanists in opposition, and as an opening tactical move, this is often a very good thing.

As a long-term strategy, however, the move is risky. The tactic that Leitner and Sheppard (2003: 517) describe as 'othering the mainstream' weakens critical knowledge production in several ways. It discourages productive alliances with scholars who are generally but not perfectly aligned with each nonpositivist critique on every axis of knowledge, method and politics (Kwan, 2004). It alienates potential allies among those who might be called 'everyday positivists' — analysts who see themselves as scientists using time-tested protocols of scientific method, but who are uneasy or even antipathetic towards the conservative politics of the institutions that often co-opt positivism. Well-intentioned but hostile attacks on everyday positivists can drive potential allies away, sending them into the arms of those hardcore reactionaries who really do embody and enforce the conservative–quantitative–positivist alignment. The move also risks catastrophic misinterpretation in the public realm, where practicing positivists almost never use the word 'positivism'. Public discourse is instead based on distinctions between good and bad science, and simple words with clear connotations: accuracy, precision, validity, reliability. Such words infuriate many nonpositivists by virtue of their wide currency in public discourse; respect must be given to Audre Lourde's conviction that: 'The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house' (quoted in Philo, 2009: 699).

The subaltern's tools, however, are not always suited to clear, easily understood explanations of what counts as a legitimate truth claim. The right has proven its sophistication in co-opting the identity politics and anti-foundationalist sensibilities of nonpositivism. All of the left's commitments to the individual freedoms of peoples marginalized by oppressions of race/ethnicity, gender and sexuality have been hijacked into a neoliberal hegemony of unlimited freedoms of identity and 'choice' — for *consumers, investors and entrepreneurs* (Smith, 2000). At the same time, the political right has redirected the enormous critical achievements of postpositivism towards new targets: right-wing operatives have clearly understood the postpositivist critique of metaphysical realism and all the pretensions of objective, neutral, disinterested observation and discovery of an external world. If science is made, conservatives understand, then it can be made up: what began on the left as a sensitivity to the social construction of knowledge became, on the right, a coordinated program of creating well-financed lies. Bruno Latour reads about the creative co-optation of a discourse on scientific uncertainty by US Republicans working to stall action on global warming. Latour (2004: 227) is heartbroken:

Have things changed so fast? . . . While we spent years trying to detect the real prejudices hidden behind the appearance of objective statements, do we now have to reveal the real objective and incontrovertible facts hidden behind the *illusion* of prejudice? . . . dangerous extremists are using the . . . argument of social construction to destroy hard-won evidence that could save our lives. Was I wrong to participate in the invention of the field known as science studies? Is it enough to say that we did not really mean what we said? Why does it burn my tongue to say that global warming is a fact whether you like it or not?

Careless and widespread use of 'positivist' as an epithet disempowers critical scholars faced with a resurgent right that has learned the fine art of social construction (and de[con]struction). The p-word also alienates those organizers and activists working for radical urban change who have decided, for a variety of reasons, that that they *will* try to use the master's tools to dismantle the master's house (Ellwood, 2006). Progressives working to challenge entrenched inequalities, for example, must use the instruments of the state — like large-sample, randomly-sampled census data collected according to

positivist protocols — if they are to have any chance of proving systemic discrimination to the standards of evidence required by a court of law. Unfortunately, conservatives have learned that widespread, popular disenchantment with science (and ignorance of scientific methods) now makes it possible to deconstruct the reality of inequality as a matter of concern by destroying the instruments used to measure it. Canada's conservative government recently eliminated the mandatory long-form census, at the same time announcing a comprehensive review of affirmative action employment regulations; if the census decision stands, it will soon be impossible to obtain extensive, reliable measures of the inequalities that conservative post-positivist metaphysical ideology assures us do not exist.

Finally, careless use of the 'positivist' label ignores the very partial, situated and contingent relations between contemporary methodological positivism and the centuries-long philosophical heritage of positivism. Positivism has a radical (if somewhat confused) political history, and it has radical possibilities today.

This final argument rests on two specific claims. The first is that we need to rethink our simplified history of '1968 and all that' (Watts, 2001). The second is that we have to rethink the legacy of Comte himself.

Unbundled urbanism

For nearly half a century, theoretical debates among what the historian Peter Novick (1991: 703) calls the 'epistemological left' have assumed a general correspondence between radical theoretical knowledge production and the historical/political left (Storper, 2001; Watts, 2001). This correspondence has become a first principle of radical urbanism today, which is constituted partly by the personal memories of radical scholars who lived through the revolutionary years of the late 1960s, and partly by the oral and written histories that are read, interpreted and performed by subsequent generations. My own ontological subjectivities (Steinmetz, 2005b: 299) were constructed in relation to the post-1968 revolutionary challenges to a positivist urban hegemony: I was born too late to have been there myself. Considering several currents in the literature, however, and listening carefully to some of the stories told by teachers who are older and younger than I, has convinced me that we need to re-evaluate our collective memories of this crucial period.

To begin with, the unholy trinity of positivist epistemology, quantitative methodology and conservative politics was unstable and contingent even in its heyday. The fusion of mathematical and statistical practice with the epistemology of logical positivism was historically specific (Gregory, 1986: 359–60; Johnston, 1986: 49–50). Commitments to the half-dozen strictures of the standard, composite definition of positivism were partial, contested, selective and sometimes contradictory (Barnes, 2009b). Many of the most memorable government interventions of that era came about not because of an organized, stable positivist hegemony (as suggested by Mirowski, 2005; Steinmetz, 2007) but because of its frantic responses to insurgent others — the flowering social movements of people who came out into the streets to demand recognition, representation and real material change (Watts, 2001; Lake, 2005). Whether these movements achieved their goals, or were simply co-opted and neutralized by age and affluence, are matters for separate consideration. What matters for our analysis is that these movements inspired many urban sociologists, planners, political scientists and geographers who were committed to radical social justice as the *ends*, with scientific rigor as the *means*. Some of the people who worked hardest on the infrastructure that is now called 'positivist' never even used the word; Richard Morrill (1993: 443), for instance, reflected that he 'never met a positivist'.

On the one hand, some of the most regressive and repressive urbanism emerged not from quantitative-positivist research, but from explicitly qualitative, ethnographic-interpretive work on the culture of poverty (Lewis, 1959; Banfield, 1968). On the other

hand, many of those involved in mapping, measuring and modeling the parameters of urban inequality and injustice had unshakable commitments to social justice and radical urban change — continuing the dissident heritage of the Vienna Circle itself (Sheppard, 2001; Mirowski, 2005). Much of the critical urban spatial analysis of the 1960s honors a spirit of careful and strategically objective observation that can be traced back to Friedrich Engels' rich, powerful descriptions of the neighborhoods of Manchester in *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*. So-called positivists 'were not infrequently of an actively leftist orientation' (Livingstone, 1993: 325) and many were involved in 'an embryonic "revolution of social responsibility"' that was nothing short of radical (Smith, 1971: 153; see also Judd, 2005; Lake, 2005; Barnes, 2009a). Only a few years after positivist urbanism had achieved its purported hegemony, 'the positivism of the neoclassical-functional branch . . . [was] pilloried' (Johnston, 1977: 121) for its reliance on individual choice to interpret statistical associations in urban inequality (see also Sayer, 1979). The dangerous alignment of epistemology, methodology and politics became a site of struggle as soon as, and wherever, it became apparent. The speed of the backlash was remarkable: only 4 years elapsed between the Old Testament of the scientific method (Harvey, 1969, 'Harvey Mark I') and the Gospel of *Social Justice and the City* (Harvey, 1973, or 'Harvey Mark II', in turn quickly dubbed 'Harvey Marx II' as recalled by Barnes, 2009a). Smith (1971) also reflects on an astonishing contrast between the tone of a conference in 1967 and the same gathering 4 years later. Some of the radical alternatives to positivist urbanism rejected quantification, but some were based explicitly on mathematical and statistical analyses of institutional power relations (Bunge, 1973; Batty, 1974). Some questioned the relevance and meaning of the kinds of data, analytical tests and logics of causality that had become popular in positivist urban analysis and planning; but most radicals situated these challenges by arguing for better ways of understanding the *realities* of inequality, injustice and the protests that spread around the world, especially after the watershed year of 1968. The first wave of radical urbanism relied on one positivist axiom (metaphysical realism) to challenge the failures of conventional analysis to meet the *other* standards of positivist science (e.g. careful observation untainted by the ideological biases of 'status quo' or 'bourgeois' politics).

Social, personal and demographic circumstances also matter. Over time, our written and oral histories have created a caricature that mistakes contingency for essence (Sheppard, 2001; Burris, 2007; Barnes, 2009a). Consider David M. Smith's (1971: 154) account of attending two meetings of the Association of American Geographers (AAG):

The writer's first AAG was the 1967 meeting in St. Louis, where there was no formal expression of the kinds of social concerns [associated with radical geography]. Here the *avant-garde* of the profession seemed to be the urban whiz-kids from the leading mid-western schools, deftly demonstrating the latest number-crunching techniques. In Boston [in 1971] some of these same people could be seen, four years longer in tooth, hair, and sideburns, saying that really we know very little about the way the urban system works and about how to alleviate the dreadful social problems of the cities. It was almost as though numerical dexterity had been replaced by confessions of ignorance as the cardinal professional virtue. There were sessions . . . which gave the clear impression that more than a decade of elaborating central place theory, running regression models, factor-analyzing census data, and the like, has done little to help us improve the quality of life for real people in real cities or real economically declining regions.

Smith's account suggests that a cohort of influential revolutionaries learned the lessons of Harvey's (1973) Kuhnian history of the quantitative positivist revolution all too well. Knowing that every radical movement's triumphant transcendence to the status of normal science makes it the target for the next generation of young insurgents, many of the once-revolutionary positivist quantifiers were inspired by Marxism to become their own insurgents. They took sledgehammers to the edifice they had just completed. The aging Young Turks hoped to stay young, and they knew that 'what

we now call the new . . . may well have become “old hat”’ (Smith, 1971: 157). Indeed, only a few years later, radical urbanists had to choose, once again, between adding to the foundations they had built, or starting over again with the next wave of new epistemologies, new methods, new political priorities. The years pass and new alternatives are built, promising new possibilities. But the fundamental choice — constructive incrementalism versus revolutionary creative destruction — never gets any easier.

The Case of RC21 and IJURR

These choices looked different from the vantage points of separate disciplinary circumstances (Livingstone, 1993; Judd, 2005; Steinmetz, 2005a), and they also appeared distinct in various national contexts. The International Sociological Association (ISA) Committee on Urban and Rural Sociology, for example, was led ‘with an iron hand’, and the end of the 1960s brought ‘an internal struggle for institutional recognition of radical urban sociologists’ (Milicevic, 2001: 768). Yet the iron hand was not the orthodox ‘from above’ heterosexual male planning ‘expert’ favoring ‘positivist science with its propensity for quantitative modeling and analysis’ (cf. Vigar *et al.*, 2005: 1395). Orthodox hegemony, in this context, was embodied in Ruth Glass, the brilliant qualitative Marxist urbanist who ‘would not accept the transformation of her “baby” [the committee]’, who ‘never liked Manuel Castells’, who ‘was very selective with her British friends’ (all quotes from Enzo Mingione, cited in Milicevic, 2001: 769). The cohort of radicals working to build what became known as the New Urban Sociology (NUS) eventually succeeded, and, in the Spring of 1971, the ISA established a provisional Research Committee on the Sociology of Urban and Regional Development (RC21). The *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* (IJURR) came several years later, in 1977.

The history of the radical movement to create RC21 and IJURR highlights several notable ironies. Part of the demand for a new committee relied on the ‘unifying conception’ of the ‘spatial aspects of social phenomena’ (*ibid.*: 768) and the scholar who would later become the first RC21 president called for a critical perspective on ‘the role and function of planning in the development of regions’ that appealed directly to rationalist assumptions: ‘The notion “comprehensive planning” means that all aspects of planning — economic, physical, and social — will be considered’ (1971 letter by Ziolkowsky, cited in Milicevic, 2001: 768). Ziolkowsky was the leader of half of an uneasy alliance between Western radicals committed to variations of Marxist theory and practice, and Eastern European ‘technocratic’ planners, whose critical stance was defined in opposition to the official Marxist doctrine in the countries where socialism actually existed. The West/East alliance was uneasy from the start, and part of the Western radical critique of the technocratic Eastern European allies raised the issue of objectivity — ‘I had the feeling these guys were technocrats’, who regarded the role of sociologists as:

being a part of a process of the state management of the city. And we were criticizing that, we were saying that urban sociology has to stand aside, outside of that, and look at the city without being committed to those planning, operational, state objectives (Edmund Preteceille, quoted in Milicevic, 2001: 769).

The West/East alliance survived just long enough to achieve the institutionalization of RC21. Soon thereafter, the committee was ‘invaded by the Western radical or critical scholars’, who completed a final ‘takeover’ in 1974 that ‘totally marginalized’ the Eastern European technocrats (Enzo Mingione, quoted in Milicevic, 2001: 769).

This small sample of remembrances from the nascent years of RC21 and IJURR are reminiscent of Watts’ (2001: 160) retrospective on the many different ‘1968’ conjunctures in cities around the world: ‘The fact that the jury on 1968 is still out 30 or so years on must surely turn to some degree on the enormous complexity, perhaps the

incomprehensible diversity, of what was a global insurrection'. Historical truth is chimerical, however, and the effect of the passage of time is itself deeply contextual and contingent. From the vantage point of today's influential nonpositivisms, positivism remains at the city center on the 25th floor of that late-modernist high-rise: othering the mainstream serves the oppositional constitution of all. Regardless of all the profound differences amongst the radical urbanisms of Marxism, phenomenology, feminism, postcolonialism and poststructuralism, they all find common cause in the shared recognition that none of them can be described as positivist. As Barnes (2009b: 559) sums it up in the closing lines of his dictionary entry for positivism in human geography, after all the critiques of positivism and all the proliferation of postpositivist alternatives: 'Geography had grown up'.

Unfortunately, growing up usually means growing old. Milicevic's (2001) history of RC21 and IJURR is a gripping narrative, with several vivid quotes from prominent urban sociologists reflecting on the turbulent urgency of their youth in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Harvey Molotch recalls (*ibid.*: 763): 'It got physically dangerous, I got threatening phone calls. That makes you feel you are radical, if people threaten your life'. Chris Paris remembers: 'I saw the Vietnam War as a wicked war, colonial oppression. And I sided with the Viet Cong. I wished them well in their struggle . . . I was involved in anti-war protests . . . We were desperate for a sit-in'. But the urgency and energy of youth cannot last forever. Four decades on:

institutions that were founded on a critique and negation . . . not only gained hegemony within the ISA, but also created a respected academic journal and a charity . . . Although the representatives of the approach did not necessarily change all of their views, the positions from which those views were presented have changed ('young and angry' vs. 'wealthy patrons') . . . even though the radical sociologists tried to retain their spirit of radicalism, they also became a part of the 'sociological establishment' (*ibid.*: 773).

The implications of accounts like this must be handled with care. Valuable as it is, Milicevic's (2001) contribution need not be understood as definitive, undisputed nor universal. Recognition for a 'respected journal' in a field (and an academy) that has itself been under siege in an increasingly conservative age is no betrayal of radical principles. Certainly, some have abandoned radical analysis as well as radical action. Eric Clark (2005: 257), for instance, documents a 'remarkable turnaround in radical political sensibilities' in research on urban social restructuring and gentrification. Dan Hammel and Tom Slater (see Slater, 2008: 219) even offer a new demographic acronym, 'frumps,' to identify *formerly radical upwardly mobile professors* — a powerful group who built their reputations in the post-1968 radical paradigm shift and who now pursue research that is more acceptable to conservative state institutions and funding agencies. Such compromises should not be confused with the tactical adjustments made by 'young and angry' radicals who maintain their commitments — and their passions — as they grow up and grow old. There is a legitimate, critical role for what Don Mitchell (2008) labels the 'desk-bound radical', and we all know the names of principled, nonviolent yet militant theorists who are ever more strongly committed to radical change with each passing birthday (consider the integrity of Susan Fainstein, Cindi Katz, Eric Sheppard, David Harvey, Neil Smith, Bob Lake, Peter Marcuse [see Slater, 2009], and, before her tragic death, Julie Graham). Any epistemology, any methodology, can be co-opted and drafted into service for violence, destruction and injustice; conversely, all methodologies and epistemologies can be mobilized for radical projects of social justice (Plummer and Sheppard, 2001; Sheppard, 2001; Lake, 2002; Wolch, 2003; Klinkenberg, 2007). In recounting part of this history, my purpose has been limited and specific. I wish to emphasize that the revolutionary global insurrections of 1968 were contingent, contextual and situated — and so was the positivist hegemony they sought to challenge. It could have worked out very differently. In different times and places, it has.

Comte in the city

Burris (2007: 97) wryly observes that: ‘One would look in vain for a positivist manifesto signed by a prominent list of sociologists’, and even the book regarded as the Old Testament of positivist spatial analysis — Harvey’s (1969) *Explanation in Geography* — rarely mentions the word (Barnes, 2009b). Nobody begins scholarly articles with citations to Comte. Radical community activists draw inspiration from Gramsci or Lefebvre or Foucault or Debord or Alinsky, *not* from the boy who was christened Isadore Auguste Marie Francois Xavier Comte, and who was called ‘the philosopher’ by the time he was 17 (Harrison, 1896). Comte is so obscure he does not even merit a single mention among the ‘190 or so’ thinkers in Critchley’s (2008) irreverent *Book of Dead Philosophers*.

A crucial question, therefore, is whether the construction I have labeled Positivist City Hall was ever anything more than a ‘phantom’ (Burris, 2007: 93; *cf.* Steinmetz, 2005a; 2005b; 2007). This question is not easy to answer, because manifestos from previous generations are often used as surrogates for what today’s positivists refuse to say. In an otherwise brilliant analysis of standpoint epistemologies in new social movements, for example, Harding (2005) has to turn to a pair of 1967 encyclopedia-of-philosophy entries to quote explicit positivist claims. Ironically, the intensity of the ‘positivism’ debates of the 1970s fostered deliberate and active disappearance and forgetting: when Andrew Sayer (1992) built what may very well be the most valuable and influential reconciliation of epistemology and methodology — a framework designed partly to address the specific failures of urban positivist research (Sayer, 1979) — he generally avoided the word ‘positivism’. The term had simply become too polarizing, too weighted with histories, too blinded by a ‘*Clash-of-the-Titans* mentality’ (Mountz and Prytherch, 2005: 245; Clark, 2009). ‘Positivism’ appears just three times in Sayer’s index (Sayer, 1992). Moreover, when contemporary positivists (assuming such a simple objectified categorical identity can be achieved) do take nonpositivist critique seriously² in an attempt to reform scientific practice, the result is labeled ‘crypto-positivism’ (Steinmetz, 2005b: 276). Those positivists who are willing to listen carefully and engage with nonpositivist critique are presumed guilty of unapologetic hegemony: ‘if there is a kind of modesty . . . it is the kind of modesty characteristic of those whose preeminent power affords them the ability to re-evaluate, revise, and “reconcile alternatives” . . . The diffuseness of the theoretical identity . . . [is] best read as a mark of hegemony’ (Hauptmann, 2005: 227). Even the flowering new social movements themselves, and their allied postpositivist theoretical traditions, cannot escape the phantom: ‘insofar as they take an oppositional stance to positivist tenets, they replicate binaries central to positivism’s power’ (Harding, 2005: 363).

If mid-century positivism was only spectral, then, it seems the ghost continues to haunt many. The distinctions between the three separate meanings of positivism — as progress, as philosophical heritage, as everyday practice — have been blurred. Our histories tell us that methodological *practice* (the scientific method, the search for general regularities, the stance of objectivity and fact/value neutrality) was built on the *philosophical* foundations of logical positivism and the *ontological* faith in Enlightenment reason, rationality and cumulative progress. Once learned, this history is

- 2 It may very well be true that few positivists are willing to listen. My argument here is *not* that most conventional social-science urbanists are completely innocent regarding the problems diagnosed by nonpositivists. My claims are much more limited: (1) there is nothing fundamental or essential about the role of positivism in these problems; (2) there may not be very many ‘radical positivists’ out there, but their work does have a place in radical urbanism, and it is possible to envision and build a larger movement of strategic positivism. Given all the undesirable connotations of the p-word, I hesitate to name anyone other than myself under this banner, and I make no claims whatsoever regarding the quality or radical contribution of my own work. But the potential is there among a new generation who might not call themselves positivist but who would also not feel the need to trumpet instinctively an oppositionally-constructed postpositivism.

codified as a strong framework that guides the interpretation of the mundane or highly specific problems that pervade the everyday practices of inquiry labeled as positivism. Impenetrable mathematical formulas are often presented to impress, or to obscure the flaws of ridiculous underlying assumptions; research is often compromised by the subtle or open influence of increasingly short-sighted, conservative funding institutions; many analysts reflexively dismiss high-quality qualitative and ethnographic work as ‘anecdotal’ or ‘unscientific’; many so-called scientists stubbornly refuse to acknowledge phenomena (like colonialism, White privilege, patriarchy) that are paradoxically too big, too powerful and *too real* to be easily observable through the standard practices used in mainstream research.

Each of these problems is serious and demands a forceful and targeted response. Unfortunately, the historical view of Positivist City Hall encourages nonpositivists to move quickly from the specific to the general and the genealogical: specific failures involving methods, money, repressive politics or simply arrogance are understood as much more than that. They signify ‘positivism’, and, once this label is applied, it conjures up all of the foundational critiques of modernity, metaphysical realism, and the ontological struggles over the possibilities of objective, value-free knowledge claims. Once the p-word is uttered, there is no need to disentangle the particular mix of explicit and implicit biases of politics, method, funding, or anything else: it is all *positivist*, and we all know what that means. The p-word triggers and justifies ‘guilt by association, whereby signs of any one of these symptoms is taken as grounds for confirming the larger malady’ and sometimes this move slips into ‘“explanation by association,” wherein the thing (positivism) explained is allowed to shift among different meanings’ (Burris, 2007: 98). These lessons have been learned so well that it is not uncommon to attend conferences where critical scholars begin their presentations ‘by apologising to their audience for presenting some quantitative data in table form as part of their paper’ (Sheppard, 2001: 536).

It is time to reconsider the retrospective view of a mid-century positivist hegemony in urban and regional research. This view is clearest in Hooper’s (1992: 50) magisterial survey of the ‘modern Western philosophical and political tradition that inferiorized, subordinated, and marginalized women from its inception’ and that perpetuates a ‘silencing’ that ‘continues in planning today, keeping feminist thought of all centuries and geographies in the margins, footnotes to the dominant tradition’. One of the sites of institutional silencing comes with the publication of Harvey Perloff’s (1957) *Education for Planning: City, State, and Regional* — ‘a seminal work in attempts to legitimate and define planning as a rational and scientific discipline based in the social sciences . . . This . . . is planning’s scientific method, Perloff its [Francis] Bacon’ (Hooper, 1992: 55–6). Perloff’s public-choice framework is premised on deference to ‘expert planners’, employing ‘objective standards’, using ‘knowledge/science/reason’; ‘the authority/knower/planner, possessed of immaculate objectivity, is to conquer, shape and control urban environments, guiding society toward its “vision of the future,” its “established targets”’ (*ibid.*: 56). The vision of the past, however, has a single ‘established target’ — Comte:

Though not explicitly named, the planning process as described by Perloff is firmly rooted in the nineteenth-century positivist philosophy of August Comte, a philosophy in which scientific objectivity, with its detached intellect investigating various passive objects, prevails over nature and provides the key to social transformation . . . For Comte, knowledge and politics are separated, with power playing no role in social (re)organization: higher science, as performed by intellects, is to establish the facts by which the lower, lesser rest of society will live . . . scientific knowledge and objectivity come to function as a power construct that establishes distance and authority between knower and known . . . Comte’s science, with its characterization of being . . . above the fray, together with the power to assert what is ‘objective’ perform as an instrument of domination, a modern mode of power that, in the West, has always served the interest of capital and men . . . all of the [nineteenth] century’s radical theoretical possibilities were narrated out in service of the Comtean professional planning

model . . . The White City . . . serves as the perfect originary metaphor for the modernist planning project that Perloff, out of Comte, produced: it is an erasing of color, of conflict, of difference, with heroic allusions to Renaissance Europe and its central positioning of man (*ibid.*: 56–7, emphasis added).

This is the intellectual historical foundation of the construction I have labeled Positivist City Hall. In the decades since 1968, many critical urbanists have worked hard to expose this foundation as a first step towards building something better. Nonpositivist radical urbanism has achieved a great deal, and I do not wish to undermine the project — its achievements are certain, real and useful (Johnston, 1977; Sayer, 1979; 1992; Hooper, 1992; Baeten, 2001; Harvey, 2001; Fainstein, 2005; Judd, 2005; Lake, 2005; Mountz and Prytherch, 2005; Barnes, 2009a). I do not want to take a sledgehammer to any of the partially completed foundations built by radical nonpositivists: I want to help build them up and connect them. Radical urbanists can build on previous achievements if we revise our historical view of Positivist City Hall. To the degree that conservative twentieth-century urbanists did appeal to Comte in building a repressive, hegemonic project, they had absolutely no idea who they were messing with.

Good Comte, bad Comte

Twentieth-century currents in critical rationalism, logical positivism and its contemporary others are invariably traced back to Comte's monstrous *Course in Positive Philosophy*, published in six volumes between 1830 and 1842. Today, most concise summaries of positivism or Comte tend to conflate the *Course* with Descartes' 'View from Nowhere' — the detached, objective gaze of the supremely confident expert observer. Such a summary necessarily misses the nuances (and contradictions) in Comte's thought. Postpositivist critique, moreover, has its own vulnerabilities. The philosopher Robert Scharff (1995; 2007) suggests that histories of 'positivism after Comte' cannot be understood properly without an appreciation of 'Comte after positivism'. 'It is perfectly possible to oppose the View from Nowhere', Scharff writes (2007: 509), 'and even to criticize others for failing to understand its impossibility, and still do so . . . as if from Nowhere'. This is *weak postpositivism* (*ibid.*; Harding, 2005) and it relies on a historical amnesia of the *context* and the *place* in which Comte tried to think of whether it might be possible to devise a 'Plan of the Scientific Operations Necessary for Reorganizing Society'. This was his first major philosophical work, a 191-page pamphlet written in his early twenties (Comte, 1822).

In a Europe devastated by war and destabilized by the violent clashes of power/knowledge between Christianity and the proliferation of all the subversive innovations that were coming to be known as science, Comte looked through the apparent chaos and saw historical progress and development. Comte believed that 'each branch of our knowledge . . . necessarily passes through three different theoretical stages: the theological or fictive, the metaphysical or abstract, and the scientific or positive' (Ferré, 1988: Vol. 1: 1). In the theological stage, humans explain events and phenomena as the result of actions by supernatural gods; 'the facts observed are explained . . . by means of invented facts' (Comte, 1822: 29). In the metaphysical stage, the search for explanations turns inward, with events explained in terms of the internal nature of abstract entities — the causal essence of what philosophers had always discussed in terms of the natures of 'things in themselves'. For Comte (*ibid.*: 29), science in the metaphysical stage has 'a mongrel nature', with a heavy reliance on 'personified abstractions'. Finally, in the scientific or positive stage, 'the mind stops looking for causes of phenomena' by speculating on the presumed internal essences of things, and begins to study the observed relations among phenomena as a means of understanding 'laws governing them; likewise, absolute notions are replaced by relative ones' (Bourdeau, 2008).

Comte used the word 'positive' in order 'to convey six features of things: being real, useful, certain, precise, organic, relative' (Lacey, 1996: 261). The 'positive method' offers no guarantee for absolute, uncontested knowledge, but provides for science that

comes closer and closer to the truth without ever quite reaching it: ‘Method is presented as superior to doctrine: scientific doctrines change (that is what “progress” means) but the value of science lies in its methods’ (Bourdeau, 2008). The positive method takes different forms in separate domains of knowledge — for instance, visual observation in astronomy, experimentation in physics, comparison in biology. All of the sciences, however, can be understood and classified in an evolutionary hierarchy: more complex sciences deal with more complex phenomena, and the more complex something is, the more ways it can change or be changed. For Comte, the most complex science of all was just becoming possible in his day — the science of society, which he labeled ‘social physics’, or ‘sociology’.

So far, so good. This portrait bears a striking resemblance to the standard textbook memories of positivism. Yet the picture changes once we realize that the work for which Comte is best remembered was something of a distraction. The *Course* was a side project Comte undertook after ‘a train of continuous thought lasting for eighty hours’ convinced him that ‘a complete systemization of positive philosophy’ was ‘a necessary preliminary’ to his larger, more radical project (Comte, 1851a: 310). That broader project eventually appeared as the four-volume *System of Positive Polity* between 1851 and 1854. Comte had clearly outlined the vision in his (1822) ‘Plan of the Scientific Operations Necessary for Reorganizing Society’. But the detour to the *Course* took longer than expected, thanks to an excruciatingly perfectionist and obtuse writing style, tempestuous relations with France’s academic hierarchies, and a crisis that Comte would describe in a way that foreshadowed the best euphemisms of twenty-first century public relations — his ‘serious cerebral disturbance’ (*ibid.*: 310). After completing the *Course* and then falling in love with Clotilde de Vaux in 1844, however, Comte was finally able to pursue what he later called his ‘second career’. This was a *return* to the plan laid out in 1822, and a commitment to the advancement of science, knowledge and politics shaped by the ‘continuous dominance of the heart’ (Wernick, 2001; Bourdeau, 2008).

Even a broken heart could dominate: Clotilde died at age 31 in 1846, and Comte never got over the loss.

The *Course* examined each of the main sciences twice — once on their own terms, and then again in terms of their role for the historical development of knowledge and civilization. The reason for this was that the history of the other sciences served as an introduction to the most complex and advanced science of them all — sociology — and once the positive method was applied to society itself, it was possible and necessary to shift away from a strict, unyielding objectivity towards a new kind of subjectivity (Wernick, 2001). This reorientation was only possible for those who had invested the time to understand the history of science and the centuries of advances that made the positive method possible. Such careful study of the history and one’s position in relation to contemporaries and ancestors (which today we might call reflexivity) would reveal the flaws of theological and metaphysical knowledge, while rescuing the ultimate moral and ethical aims of religion in a reconciliation of imagination tempered by scientific observation.³ Thus was born a ‘complete positivism’ in which the history and philosophy of science laid the basis for a political philosophy and a revolutionary reorganization of social relations. This reorganization was an ambitious and utopian ‘effort to reconstruct subjectivity in light of the scientific transformation of knowledge’ that ‘aimed to root out not only supernaturalism but also any absolutely fixed truth’ (*ibid.*: 8). Central to this effort was the idea that the positive method applied to society would provide the basis for a political movement that would gradually build a solidarity among all individuals and all peoples. Once the fights over the realities decreed by the church were transcended by positive science, political and scientific inquiry could work towards a consensus on matters of ethics and morality. Official church religious doctrine would give way to a new

3 In the *Course*, Comte’s hierarchy of the sciences included mathematics, astronomy, physics, chemistry, physiology (biology) and social physics (sociology). In the *System*, Comte added a seventh science: ethics.

kind of spirituality and learning among all people: ‘positive morality will tend more and more to exhibit the happiness of the individual as depending on the complete expansion of benevolent acts and sympathetic emotions towards the whole of our race — and even beyond our race, by a gradual extension to all sentient beings below us, in proportion to their animal rank and their social utility’ (Comte, 1842: 302). Comte seemed to be dreaming of nothing less than a grand reconciliation and synthesis of thought, emotion and action. For the first line of the first page of the first volume of the *System*, Comte wrote: ‘We tire of thinking and even of acting; we never tire of loving’.

Comte called this project ‘*la religion de l’Humanité*’. This was no metaphor, no casual rhetorical flourish. Comte really meant it. He launched a formal organization with the title in 1849, and laid out detailed plans for a Positivist Church, a Catechism of Positive Religion with sacraments for major stages of the life course, and a Positivist Calendar built around remembrances of the dead (with special reverence for great figures from the history of science and human progress). There were also plans for what Comte called ‘revolutionary schools’.

All of this came as quite a shock. The *Course* had made Comte famous as an anti-church scientific subversive, and Comte’s English translator wrote a lengthy preface that responded to the hostile climate of ‘theological intolerance’ that made him such a prominent and polarizing figure: ‘The theological world cannot but hate a book which treats of metaphysical belief as a transient state of mind’ (Martineau, 1896: 24). With the appearance of the *System* volumes, Comte’s remarkable achievement was a sudden, simultaneous alienation of both his allies and his adversaries. The ‘religious project was a complete, even preposterous, failure. It was, like Comte himself, an easy-to-satirize victim of its own rigidities, archaisms and inflated ambitions’ (Wernick, 2001: 5). Years later, subsequent generations of philosophers would follow John Stuart Mill’s lead, distinguishing a ‘good Comte’ who wrote the *Course*, from a ‘bad Comte’, whose heartbreak and mental instability after Clotilde’s death led to the *System*. For a time, however, the confused reactions to Comte’s apparent shift simply realigned loyalties and hostilities, without diminishing his influence. Many of his followers sustained a movement that was active around the world in the late nineteenth century, from India to England, the US, Mexico and Brazil (leaving a lasting trace on the nation’s flag with the motto *Ordem e Progress* — Order and Progress).

In later years, the taken-for-granted legacy of Comte’s apparently confusing and contradictory turn would shift dramatically. It was quickly forgotten that Comte himself had announced in 1822 a radical political program as *the very motivation* for building positivism. Memories would recede even further after the widespread influence of several misinterpretations of Comte by Mill (Scharff, 1995), after the philosophical crisis of all notions of rationality and progress in the catastrophic violence of the ‘War to End All Wars’ and after the emergence of distinct new strains of logical positivism. Bad Comte would be almost completely forgotten. Good Comte would be remembered as the ancestor of the Vienna Circle. In the second half of the twentieth century, the flourishing innovations of postpositivisms would redefine him as ‘bad’ for deeply ironic reasons. Today, Comte is mostly forgotten — except for those times when his name provides a convenient classical reference to explain the nineteenth-century roots of an evil hegemony of objective Science with a capital S, with its detached, View-from-Nowhere technocratic visions of a deterministic social physics.

Bad Comte — in the old forgotten meaning of that phrase — reminds us that the positivist project was unstable, contingent, contested and contradictory from its origins. Comte certainly believed in science, but he placed the positive method *in servitude* to a deeply radical political project marked by a cultish reverence for the history of human progress and a faith in a future-oriented program of emancipation, justice, equality and morality. Bad Comte was not a very good radical. At first he supported the revolution of 1848, and, for a time, ‘the positivists placed their hopes on an alliance with women and proletarians’ (Bourdeau, 2008). But his desire for order could not be reconciled with the violent disorganization of popular insurrections, eventually leading him to seek alliances

elsewhere. He advocated the separation of church and state, but only for pragmatic reasons (human spirituality is universal and worldwide, whereas the state requires organization within more restricted geographical limits). He regarded the emancipation of women as key to a revolutionary reorganization of society, but for essentialist (almost metaphysical) reasons. He rejected the idea of collective ownership of property in favor of a top-down, enlightened moral stewardship by the Positivist Priesthood.

Yet even if parts of Comte's philosophy and political program look strange or contradictory through contemporary eyes, there can be no doubt about its latent radicalism and insurgent aspirations. Comte elevated scientists to an exalted status, but this elitism was premised on adherence to method as opposed to the unquestionable 'divine right' of king or church. Comte admonished scientists, moreover, that 'it is among the working classes' rather than the bourgeoisie 'that the new philosophers will find their most energetic allies' (Comte, 1851b: 348). Positivist scientists and the working classes:

resemble each other in generosity of feeling, in wise unconcern for material prospects, and in indifference to worldly grandeur . . . When the sympathies that unite them upon these essential points have had time to show themselves, it will be felt that the philosopher is, under certain aspects, a member of the working class fully trained, while the working man is in many respects a philosopher without the training. Both too will look with similar feelings upon the intermediate or capitalist class (*ibid.*: 348).

None of this should be misinterpreted as a defense of — or even an elementary analysis of the philosophies of — Good Comte or Bad Comte. My point is narrow and specific: the forgotten history of Bad Comte and the Positivist Church should remind us of the contingencies of hegemonic projects — especially those we know through what has been passed down across history. Recall that standard, composite definition of positivism recounted in the pages above: what does it look like now, after we have met Bad Comte? All of the elements still matter, sort of — observation, verification/falsification, conjunctural causality, the suspicion of the unobservable and metaphysical, and the unity of different sciences. Yet everything acquires new meaning in light of Comte's history of scientific inquiry, his challenge to church orthodoxy and the divine right of kings, and his attempt to build a new kind of human subjectivity to reconcile scientific reason with ethics, morality and love. 'Positivism' once had very different meanings from what we recognize today. And just as there were more than a few radicals in the middle of the supposedly conservative positivist 1960s, the original positivist himself had more than a few radical ideas. Wernick (2001: 9) goes so far as to suggest that Comte's legacy 'holds a special interest for those trying to think through what it means . . . to be of (or on) the left'; Comte is part of 'the ideological preformation of modern socialism' and rethinking his work 'can become part of a renewed effort to clarify, and soberly rethink, what most deeply defines a progressive, emancipatory, or — to use the maligned word — communist commitment'.

Radical urbanism today

'Everything has been said before, but since nobody listens we have to keep going back and beginning all over again.'

Andre Gide (1869–1951),
quoted in Maas (2009: 178).

There is no shortage of valuable, thoughtful recommendations on what radical urbanists should do (Storper, 2001; Lake, 2002; 2005; Wolch, 2003; Clark, 2005; Fainstein, 2005; Mitchell, 2008; Slater, 2008; 2009). Moreover, there is nothing fundamentally novel in

my suggestion that the nexus of epistemology, methodology and ideology is contextual, contingent and open to contestation (Harvey, 1973; Sayer, 1979; 1992). Yet these insights have been forgotten today, as the more radicalized quarters of academia confront a much more conservative climate in the broader society. For those of us old enough to remember, today's right-wing times make us nostalgic for the solidarity and the rebellious, radical possibilities glimpsed briefly in the 1960s. For those of us too young to remember, the memory is of course a learned, vicarious experience. Paradoxically, however, textbook accounts of our histories make the vicarious memory a deeply troubling one. Our textbooks document a rich, sophisticated array of postpositivist theoretical achievements that seem to have advanced perfectly in tandem with the rightward lurch to neoliberal privilege, unrestrained inequality and imperialist violence. If we have learned so much from all the postpositivisms, then why is the world still going to hell? Positivism was tainted by its enrollment into the twentieth-century military-industrial complex and its role as the operating system for bureaucratic state-socialism, as well as bureaucratic Western capitalism. But now we know that there was never any guarantee that the enemy of our enemy was a friend: post-industrial, post-Fordist, post-Cold War and postpositivist sensibilities have not delivered us from the evils of militarism, inequality, racism and all the other manifestations of urban injustice.

As we consider the prospects for critical urban studies, then, I hope to minimize the risks of an arrogant assertion of *what we should do*. It seems more worthwhile simply to describe *what is actually being done*, and to consider the analytical and strategic possibilities that are so often overlooked because of our history of epistemological guilt. Twentieth-century positivism has been discredited in its claims to a monopoly on truth. Like modernism, positivism has lost its all-encompassing aura of authority, universality and totality. Yet one of the reasons positivism refuses to die is that its *appeal* remains universal, even if its unquestioned authority does not. While few of us are willing to identify ourselves as philosophically committed positivists, this does not mean we refrain from appeals to positivism. In fact, all of us use positivism on a regular basis — whenever we use observable evidence to describe recent trends in urban inequality, whenever we question the representative reliability of a political poll, whenever we react to political movements seeking to base policy on theology rather than scientific expertise. Do you want *your* school district to base the biology and geology curricula on creationism and the Ten Commandments?

As a grand, systematized and universal ontology, positivism is dead. Yet there is no undisputed, singular successor — at least not among thoughtful progressives and radicals inspired by alternative traditions and projects. Postpositivist critique, moreover, cannot become the new universal hegemony: the collapse of singular, timeless, placeless truth does not imply the universal impossibility of objective, real truths in particular contexts of time, place and human understanding.⁴ As a more modest and situated framework that allows us to distinguish truth-claims on particular subjects in specific contexts, therefore, positivism is vital. 'We try to tell the truth', Peter Gould (1999: 226) reminds us, and if the idea of:

'the truth' may leave us slightly embarrassed today and draw forth the knowing smile of condescension at such distressing naivete . . . then dare to think the reverse: let us hire teachers who are good at telling lies, whose training has been a fine honing in the art of dissimulation and the creative generation of false data.

Critical urban researchers do seek truths, even as we have been chastened by the tainted history of grand assertions of One Right Way to find The Truth. Achieving

4 Recall Latour's horror (expressed in 2004) over the right-wing exploitation of climate-science 'uncertainty'; 5 years hence, 'many scientists thought the battle over the reality of human-driven climate change was finally behind them' (Revkin and Broder, 2009), but then conspiracy-theory skeptics worldwide had a field day with thousands of confidential and candid e-mail messages stolen from a climate research institute at the University of East Anglia.

epistemological or ontological consensus may well be impossible. But this does not preclude a recognition of the radical work that needs to be done, right now, with our necessarily limited, partial and situated knowledges (Harding, 2005). The everyday practice of critical urban researchers, therefore, is increasingly informed by a sensibility that is variously described as critical pragmatism, tempered naturalism, or 'a proceduralist revolution' of 'dialogue and transparency and true attentiveness to different voices' (Storper, 2001: 173; see also Castells, 2006; Burris, 2007). Indeed, I would go so far as to suggest that in the realms of thought and action most important to IJURR readers, the long hoped-for transition from 'canonical' to 'hybrid' approaches (Kwan, 2004) is taking place now. There is a modest yet principled, rigorous and urgent commitment:

to use books, method, and observation to actually do research that [can] be trusted. Trusted by at least some in the scholarly community, and trusted by enough of us to tell people our sense of what [is] making their lives one way or another (Castells, 2006: 220).

Radical, recombinant strains of positivism can be, and are, part of today's pluralist worlds of critical urbanism.⁵ Avoiding the temptations of an irrevocable assertion of universal truth, today's strategic, radical positivism can offer situated and partial contributions to the negotiated, contested processes of defining and achieving social justice in urban society. A Comte chastened by history offers valuable analytical and strategic possibilities: all radical movements inspired by nonpositivism confront situations from time to time that demand appeals to the possibility of generalization, the importance of impartial, rigorous observation and measurement, and the integrity of methods that can be replicated by others. Contemporary politics also requires major investment to defend the value of reason, rationality and scientific protocols against assaults from conservative totalitarian doctrines that can only be described as theological. The 'invented facts' of Catholicism in Comte's historical point of view, for example, have their counterparts in the peculiar religious political economy of twenty-first century America, where only four in ten adults 'believe' in evolution (Gallup, 2009), only four in ten believe Barack Obama was born in the US (CNN, 2010) and almost one-fifth believe Obama is a Muslim (Pew Research Center, 2010). The fundamentalist particularities of America's 'evangelical-capitalist resonance machine' (Connolly, 2005) may be unique, but there can be little doubt that the transnational worship of the God of the Free Market, with its pre-packaged answers to every question (where 'the market' is always the answer), looks an awful lot like the 'Catholico-feudal system' that Comte worked against.

Radical positivism offers two moments — one a tactical, defensive move to 'roll back' the orthodox hegemony of theological neoliberalism, the other a strategic, innovative 'roll-out' of emancipatory radical alternatives (*cf.* Peck and Tickell, 2002).

Roll-back radical positivism is best exemplified in Sheppard's (2001) notion of 'insurgent quantitative practices' and the wide-ranging work of scholars associated with the UK-based Radical Statistics Group (2008). This effort involves challenges to the fusion of conservative political ideology and positivist epistemologies or methodologies — by engaging with the adversary on his own terrain, and by disentangling scientific methods from their corrupted conservative context. Roll-back challenges emphasize accountability: much of the conservative policy infrastructure fails to meet its own stated criteria of orthodox scientism and often relies heavily on precisely those metaphysical creations that Comte would describe as 'invented facts' or 'personified abstractions'.

5 Again, given the connotations of the p-word, I apologize in advance to everyone whose work is cited in the paragraphs below: in this case, citation risks slander to those who might object to the implication that their work contributes to a project labeled as 'positivist'. The goal is to draw a sample of the kinds of excellent radical work, from a variety of epistemological positions, that can nurture and inspire a hybrid, radicalized positivism.

Radical interventions challenge orthodox methodologies when they fail to meet their own professed standards of proof, or when they leave no room for valuable, rigorous qualitative and interpretive methods. Such interventions also challenge compromised funding dependencies, conflicts of interest and biased, ideological assertions of what counts as policy 'relevance'. Roll-back radical positivism also revives and extends the traditions of critical mapping and measurement that flourished in the 1960s. Sometimes we want to deconstruct the presumed realities of socially constructed maps, but at other times we desperately need the science, art and authority of *constructive* cartography to sketch out 'maps of grievance' (Featherstone, 2003) of the new urban realities built by repressive, conservative operatives. Watts' (2001) history of 1968 includes a map of a dynamic if short-lived world urban system of insurrections. Sidaway (2008) maps the networks of 'black sites' and renditions used by US intelligence and security agencies in the years after September 11th. Conservative ideologues routinely abuse the tropes of objectivity and neutrality in positivist methods to conceal metaphysical and theological appeals to orthodox doctrines (e.g. government welfare encourages 'dependency' among poor people; market discipline and market pricing always ensure maximum macroeconomic efficiency; taxes should always be cut; government functions should always be privatized wherever possible). But the same methodologies can support rigorous, radical analyses of the realities acknowledged and theorized by nonpositivist projects — like the project to expose the injustices of predatory capitalism and accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 1974; Gotham, 2006; Aalbers, 2008); methodological positivism is at the heart of efforts to translate nonpositivist insights into progressive reform agendas (Relman, 2003; 2010; City of Cleveland, 2008; Mayor and City Council of Baltimore, 2008). Similar radical possibilities are clear in the hybrid methodologies and epistemologies used to analyze urban communities marginalized by 'underclass' policy (Crump, 2002; Grengs, 2007; Sessoms and Wolch, 2008), and the efforts to refine feminist perspectives on urban structure (Markusen, 1980; Hayden, 1981) in order to create inclusive spaces of representation (McLafferty, 2002; Schuurman and Pratt, 2002; Ellwood, 2006; Gilbert and Masucci, 2006).

Roll-out radical positivism presents the challenge of a strategic, long march through the institutions of today's conservative, theocratic politics of privilege (Watts, 2001). Roll-out radicalism is devoted to the creation of new and emancipatory alternatives. In his 'first career', Comte reacted to the dangers of theology and arbitrary metaphysical individualism by insisting that the imagination must be subordinate to observation; it is time for positive science to recognize the partial and situated reversal of this principle that Comte himself attempted in his 'second career' (Comte, 1851b: Vol. 1, chapter 6; Scharff, 1995; 2007; Wernick, 2001). Such a reversal liberates imagination and puts contemporary methodological positivism into new relationships with pluralist nonpositivist counterworlds (Steinmetz, 2005a: 26). There is no necessary, fundamental contradiction between the imaginative possibilities of nonpositivist critical theory and the basic scientific principles of integrity, rigor and accountability — so long as these concepts are defined in ways that acknowledge the troubled history of one strain of positivism in the years when it was co-opted and abused.

Such acknowledgment can open the door to a progressive partnership. Nonpositivist logic can take the lead in the imaginative theorization of new urban worlds, while positivist practice guides the investments required to make the concepts and meanings built by nonpositivism observable in ways that permit testing and validation to adjudicate alternative explanations, interpretations, predictions and implications. One example might be Imbroscio's (2004) reconstruction of the narrow, conventional forms of urban accounting and fiscal policy, to create a public 'community balance sheet' that measures the broader social economy of urban economic development. Another example comes from Harvey's (2000) nonpositivist theorization of the living-wage movement, which is strengthened by the critical empirics of wage-rate calculations (Pollin, 2005), intra-urban cartographies of potential class alliances (Arvidson, 2000), and analyses of the legal

viability and urban system of mobilization for the passage of local ordinances (Martin, 2001; Dalmat, 2005–06).

Not every phenomenon can be ‘translated’ in this way, but many can. The overall project is compatible with and complementary to the metaphors of hybridity in Poon’s (2003) notion of ‘methodological legislation’, Hannah’s (2001) proposal for a framework and practice of ‘statistical citizenship’ and the ‘Post-Autistic Economics’ movement (Fullbrook, 2003). Instead of the rather unimaginative claim to perfect, objective observation of the real world, a chastened, modest and progressive positivism works in partnership with nonpositivist projects to imagine and observe new urban worlds that *could be made real*. In place of the disempowering routine of so much contemporary theoretical critique — showing that a particular theory/method/practice is socially constructed rather than ontologically ‘real’ or ‘natural’ — a roll-out radical positivism takes this insight as the *beginning* and not the *end* of social inquiry, and works together with radical nonpositivists to make better urban worlds possible and real.

Elvin Wyly (ewyly@geog.ubc.ca), Department of Geography, University of British Columbia, 1984 West Mall, Vancouver, British Columbia V6T1Z2, Canada.

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Résumé

Les récentes inquiétudes sur la viabilité des angles critiques et radicaux de la recherche urbaine s'inscrivent dans notre héritage de la fin des années 1960 et dans la protestation contre une hégémonie qui associait l'épistémologie positiviste aux méthodologies quantitatives et aux politiques conservatrices centrées sur l'État. Ce souvenir s'appuie sur une caricature de l'urbanisme positiviste qui génère une dangereuse illusion d'un passé bien agencé, où la cause était claire et où il était facile de distinguer les alliés des adversaires. Les liens entre épistémologie, méthodologie et politique étaient instables et aléatoires au moment de l'apogée du positivisme dans les années 1960 et, bien sûr, au début du positivisme même. La relation aléatoire et contextuelle de l'épistémologie, de la méthode et de la politique offre une multitude d'opportunités pour de nouveaux types hybrides dans le cadre d'une recherche urbaine radicale, rigoureuse et pertinente.