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Abstract

Recent debates in urban theory have centred on the problem of whether universal concepts can have applications to particular places. These debates could benefit from more serious attention to how urban thought involves styles of analogical reasoning closer in spirit to casuistry than to explanatory theory. The difficult status of ‘the case’ in urban studies is explored through a consideration of different types of universality in this field, leading to a re-consideration of ideas of experimentalism and wicked problems. Further attention should be given to the multiple styles of reasoning through which urban knowledge is produced and circulated.

Keywords
Cases Casuistry Experimentalism Generality Universality Urban Thought
“It is not fair to expect from a single case more than it can offer.”
Sigmund Freud (1905, 13)

1) The ends of urban theory
The transition to a majority-urban future has been associated with a distinctively new style of urban optimism, a form of ‘metrophilia’ even, one that presents urbanization not so much as a problem, but as harbouring all sorts of opportunities (see Gordon and Buck 2005, Waite and Morgan 2019). The reassertion of the importance of cities and regions in public policy coincides with a series of vigorous debates amongst social scientists about the very status of the spatial objects at the core of urban and regional social science: concepts of the city, of the region, of territory, and of place (see Rickards et al 2016). Interdisciplinary fields of urban studies deal with identifiably distinct spatial objects of analysis, objects that are also internally constituted by their relationships with other phenomena at various spatial scales and of various shapes. And while debates about the objects of urban studies in social science are certainly not new, the defining question of recent debates about the status of urban theory is whether it is possible to produce universal accounts of contemporary urban processes (see Derickson 2015).

Debates about the status of universal concepts in urban theory have perhaps been most evident in arguments around the concept of planetary urbanization. Presented by its proponents as capturing a whole epoch of world history (Brenner 2013, Merrifield 2013), planetary urbanization is an idea criticized by others for excluding a whole range of issues and perspectives from the proper purview of urban inquiry (e.g. Oswin 2018, Peake et al 2018). Arguments about planetary urbanization are one part of broader debates over whether and how it is possible to ‘provincialize’ urban studies by the opening up theoretical discussions to non-western experiences (e.g. Robinson 2002, Roy 2016, Sheppard et al 2013, Sheppard and Leitner 2015, Watson 2009). Discussions of ‘ordinary cities’ (Robinson 2006), comparative urbanism (McFarlane and Robinson, 2012), subaltern urbanism (Roy 2009), and southern urbanism (Parnell and Oldfield, 2014, Pieterse and Simone 2017) all argue that the geographical reference points around which urban theory has been traditionally anchored need to be re-thought, expanded and re-located.

These arguments are not just about where ideas come from. They are about what counts as Theory. In urban studies, broadly conceived, theory can be thought of in terms of explanatory frameworks, or in terms of an analytical device, or as a mode of categorizing phenomena, or as a kind of critical lever to expose hidden patterns and dynamics. Accordingly, positions within debates about provincializing urban studies are characterized by differences of theoretical ambition. Some claim that southern urbanism represents a prefiguration of general global phenomena (Roy 2011). Others argue that what is required is a broader palette from which to draw comparative judgments (Myers, 2014; Robinson, 2011). Others still hold that what is really required is the development of robust explanatory theory or coherent epistemological concepts (e.g. Brenner and Schmid 2015, Peck 2015, Storper and Scott 2016, Walker 2015). But all of these positions share a commitment to challenging established conventions of comparison and generalization in practices of theory building. In so doing, they work over established distinctions between universals and particulars, rules and applications, aggregates and individuals.
In fields of self-consciously critical urban theory (see Jayne and Ward 2016), there is a preference for non-territorial spatial concepts, so that apparently stable objects like locations or neighbourhoods appear, on closer inspection, to be constituted by relationships that extend beyond and stretch across any identifiable boundary separating cities from suburbs, or rural areas, or nation states (e.g., Allen and Cochrane 2014, Brenner and Schmid 2014, Farias and Bender 2010, Swilling 2011). The move beyond bounded concepts of ‘the urban’ or ‘the region’ is also evident in more applied urban research (see Barnett and Parnell 2016). In these fields, the emphasis on the relational constitution of urban processes is indicative of a set of pragmatic commitments to thinking about how the city works and how it can be changed (Barnett 2012).

The pragmatic orientation of urban knowledge helps us see that the recent focus on developing new paradigms in urban theory is not just a response to the transition to a majority urban future. It is also a response to the relocation of intellectual centres of gravity of knowledge about cities away from fields such as human geography, planning studies, and sociology. What we might think of as ‘urban thought’, as distinct from a more narrowly academic field of urban theory, is now generated by a much more diffuse set of academic fields of expertise that span the natural and environmental sciences, engineering and design, arts and humanities, and medical sciences (see Gleeson 2013, Iossifova et al 2018). And, in turn, the proliferation of metrophilia is the effect of a set of overlapping fields seeking to configure specific issues as actionable problems (see Barnett and Bridge 2017).

The starting premise of my argument here is that the key concepts of fields of urban and regional inquiry are thoroughly ‘problematic’ (Barnett 2015a). By this, I mean that urban concepts take on meaning in relation to the pragmatic purchase they have on the on-going tasks of engaged problem-solving, whether this is undertaken by agencies of the state, the world of business and consultancy, or the activities of people and communities in everyday life (see Barnett and Bridge 2017, Cochrane 2007). This way of thinking about urban concepts has two implications for how issues of universality and particularity are approached in urban theory. First, thinking of the concepts of urban inquiry as problematic in this sense leads away from the idea that the purpose to which concepts are adequate is picking out the core essence of a phenomenon. Second, it should lead away from the presumption that Theory is the preserve of critical academic scholarship. Rather than thinking of non-academic fields of urban knowledge as suspect fields of popularising urbanology, or being guilty of naïve ‘methodological cityism’, it should be acknowledged that there are distinctive styles of reasoning in varied fields of policy-facing consultancy, knowledge brokerage, and advocacy (see Barnett and Parnell 2017). Referring to ‘styles of reasoning’ focuses our attention on the ways in which specific practices of inference-making underwrite different ways of asserting and validating truth claims about urban processes (see Hacking 2002).

In order to elaborate on the inherently problematic nature of urban concepts, my argument proposes that reasoning about urban processes often has significant similarities with casuistry. I elaborate on this proposition in the next section, before moving on to a discussion of the relevance of distinguishing between claims of universality and claims of generality in urban theory debates. The discussion then moves onto considering the significance of the rhetoric of ‘experimentation’ in recent
urban analysis, to clarify the way in which casuistic forms of reasoning conform to neither the imperative of universalization or of theoretical generalisation. In following these three steps, I aim to open up space for a genealogical analysis of the concepts of contemporary urban thought.

2). What do cases do in urban studies?

In proposing that urban concepts are problematic, in the sense outlined above, I want to consider the degree to which urban thought can be treated as a form of case-based reasoning, one that depends on drawing inductive analogies between an existing set of exemplars and new situations (see Sunstein 1993). In ethics, law, and theology, casuistry refers to the practice of addressing dilemmas not through the strict application of universal rules to particular cases but through drawing analogies case-by-case (Ginzburg and Biasiori 2018). In one sense, this is a form of reasoning that is familiar in fields of urban policy and urban consultancy. Case-based reasoning is a standard feature of urban analysis in both the academy and in policy circles, in which certain places circulate as exemplars of policies that work (Peck and Theodore 2015). So it is that a place like Medillín, for example, becomes a paradigm case of ‘social urbanism’, used as a model for learning lessons about issues of regeneration, violence, conflict and governance in highly divided societies (see Maclean 2015, Turok 2014).

It may seem that casuistry, understood as a mode of case-to-case analogical reasoning, is ill suited as a label to characterise urban oriented social science. After all, casuistry is classically associated with the task of providing moral guidance. But the term seems appropriate to urban thought precisely because of this normative dimension. Urban thought, in an expanded sense that takes in both academic fields of urban studies and a wide array of new fields of urban inquiry, involves forms of casuistry in two related senses. First, it conforms to that aspect of casuistry that “is classificatory, initially grouping series of cases around paradigm examples, from which rules of thumb or maxims are extracted” (Forrester 1996, 19). And second, urban thought is strongly normative – and not necessarily through the force of universalising theoretical paradigms, but in so far as it often makes use of exemplars to recommend best practices, specific models to emulate, and particular approaches to analysis.

Thinking of urban thought as involving casuistic reasoning throws into new perspective the ways in which issues of case-based reasoning are currently discussed in debates about the relationship between particular examples and universalising urban theories. The conceptual status of ‘the case’ arises primarily in relation to debates about the potentials and purposes of comparative analysis. There are different notions of comparison at work in these debates. It is often assumed that the purpose of comparison is to build generally applicable, if not necessarily universal, theoretical knowledge (e.g. Peck 2015, Peck 2016). The shared reference point across these debates is the spatial imagination in which cities are simultaneously conceptualised as distinct entities, shaped by internal relations of various sorts, as well as being connected to one another through various mutually constitutive relationships. The folding together of ‘the urban’ and its outsides is central to the development of relational forms of comparative analysis (e.g. Hart 2018, Myers 2018, Ward 2010).

In seeking to further reconfigure the “intrinsic comparativism” of urban studies, Robinson (2016, 21) observes that conventional models of comparison require the careful selection of cases to control for undue differences across places. Cases, in
conventional comparative analysis, are thought of as *instances* of some phenomena (see Abbott 2001, 129). They stand either as members of a class of objects or entities (a case of the larger class of global cities, for example); or as exemplars of a particular conceptual frame (an example of neighbourhood effects, or gentrification, for example). In developing a less constrictive approach to comparative analysis, Robinson argues for a minimal definition of comparison as a practice about thinking cities or urban places ‘through elsewhere’, where this might refer to “another case, a wider context, existing theoretical imaginations derived from other contexts, connections to other places” (Robinson 2016, 5). In this alternative way of thinking comparatively, a case takes on its significance by being placed in a broader and ‘more encompassing’ context. The status of the case thereby remains subordinated to the problem of generating concepts that have a relatively high degree of generality. The status of ‘the case’ continues to be contained within a set of philosophical puzzles concerning the relations between the concrete and the abstract, the contingent and the necessary, the particular and universal.

Rather than continuing to think of a case as “an example of a general concept or wider process”, or as a “local context” that adds empirical variety but nothing fundamental to core concepts, and in order to open up the project of urban theorising to more fluid and revisable forms of conceptualisation, the preferred alternative proposed by Robinson is to adopt a different theoretical register. The problem of thinking with cases is consumed by a universalising theoretical manoeuvre of its own, via a shift to an ontological specification of the object of urban case analysis in terms of the Deleuzian concept of singularity (Robinson 2016, 13-14; see also Jazeel 2019). It is a move that sits alongside a broader ontological drift in urban theory, evident for example in the elaboration of ideas of relational spatiality and topological spatiality (see Paasi 2011). And however much their content might assert the value of contingency, fluidity, multiplicity or mutability, ontological arguments always harbour unacknowledged claims of universal authority (see McCumber 2005).

In short, the concern that underwrites a great deal of the discussion of comparative urbanism and of the need to provincialize urban studies – the possibility of developing general theoretical frameworks from the particularities of specific places - threatens to reduce the problem of case analysis to a traditional model of *sampling*. It risks effacing the specificities of logical inference associated with case analysis to a single, authoritative model of statistical inference (Mitchell 1983, 199-200; see also Sayer 1992, 241-251). In fundamental respects, however, the problem of generalising from unique examples is not the problem that defines theory building in urban studies at all. Precisely because ‘urban’ places are constituted by the conjunctures of internal and external relationships, forms of logical inference associated with case analysis might be especially relevant to this field. Acknowledging the differences between modes of inference still leaves aside, it should be said, the question of how the lessons developed from one case can be applied to other places. And herein lies the relevance of thinking further about casuistic reasoning in urban studies. If the validity of a given case lays in the “the cogency of the theoretical reasoning” it contains (Mitchell 1983, 207), then that cogency is in part determined not via a mediating conceptual framework or a form of representative generalisation, but through a process of analogical extension to other cases.
To summarise my argument to this point, the problem of the case in urban analysis should not be subordinated to the question of comparative analysis, however expanded that idea has become. To do so limits the recognition of what case analysis might actually involve. There is more than one way of reasoning with cases (Flyvbjerg 2013, Abbott 2001). My suggestion here is that the status of the case in urban studies might be better approached under the description offered by the idea of clinical reasoning (see Deleuze 1989). It is a mode of reasoning which returns us to the sense of urban concepts arising in close proximity to problematic situations of various sorts. Rather than applying the authoritative insights of critical theory to non-academic fields of urban thought or new fields of academic urban analysis, it might be productive to read recent debates in urban theory in light of the observable use of casuistic forms of reasoning found in more practically-facing strands of urban thought. Not the least reason to do so is because the modes of case-to-case reasoning by analogy already visible in applied fields of urban thought demonstrate that exemplars can be normative without having to be ascribed any status at all as typical, representative, or universally applicable. Recognition that the generation of knowledge about urban processes often involves casuistic reasoning draws attention to the possibility of sharing knowledge across contexts in the absence of fully coherent theoretical frameworks (see Forrester 2007). Taking casuistic modes of reasoning seriously therefore suggests that there is a need to disentangle claims about the spatial and temporal generality of concepts from the assumption that the normative force ascribed to theoretical ideas depends on the legitimacy or otherwise of claims about universality. It is to the issue of the universality of urban theory that the next section turns.

3). What’s the problem with universality in urban theory?
Arguments for provincializing urban theory invoke the idea of universalism as a term of critical approbation in a variety of ways. Sometimes it is argued that theories of urbanization falsely universalise the experience of Europe or North America as a norm to be applied to other geographical contexts. Sometimes, the criticism is that the ubiquity of urbanization is presented as the manifestation of a single dynamic, thereby conflating the global with the universal. And sometimes, the charge of universalism refers to the claim that, for example, theories of planetary urbanization have totalizing ambitions that seek to encompass everything within a single explanatory framework. Across these usages, it is argued that existing paradigms of critical analysis in urban studies are unable to do justice to the multiplicity of contemporary urban processes.

It is helpful to step back and consider what sort of problem universalism is in spatial disciplines like human geography, planning, and urban studies, disciplines in which the drawing of inferences across not just multiple examples but between diverse but interconnected places is an integral element of inquiry. One of the foundational questions in such disciplines is whether and how research undertaken in specific places can be effectively translated into generalisations applicable to other places (see Castree 2005, Jones and Rodgers 2016). As a starting point to addressing this issue, it is useful to draw on the analytical distinction identified by John McCumber’s (2005, 52-54) between two types of universality in theoretical arguments. One type takes the form of claims spatial universality - claims about the nature of some phenomenon or mechanism that hold true everywhere and/or for everyone. Another type takes the forms of claims to temporal universality - claims about the nature of existence that
hold true always, into the future. Urban scholars tend to think that critiques of universalism pertain primarily to the problem of whether certain concepts can be applied everywhere and to everyone. The assumption is that universality is primarily about the spatial scope of the application of a proposition, a type of claim that always entails some openness to tests of validity. The temporal dimension of universal claims more obviously draws into view the question of whether there are \textit{a priori} grounds to presume that certain models, principles or laws are always applicable as norms of interpretation or explanation.

McCumber’s distinction between two types of universality can be further refined into a clearer distinction between two conceptual modes, universality and generality (see Hare 1972, pp. 35-42). Universal propositions can be thought of as those that contain no reference to identifiable named entities other than by description (see also Harvey 1969, 101-104). The distinction between universal and the particular is, in this view, a binary opposition. Strictly speaking, universal claims lack reference to particulars. The universal is defined in opposition to the particular. Following Hare (1972, 39-41), we might think of the general as defined in relation to the specific, and in turn, think of the distinction between generality and specificity as a matter of degree rather than categorical opposition (Hare 1972, 39-41). To put it succinctly, universalization involves a high degree of abstraction from the concrete features of things, whereas generalization involves a wide range of possible application (Geertz 2000, 134-136). It follows that universal statements can have more or less general or specific frames of reference. To return to the example noted above, the concept of singularity is a universal one – it tends to be defined in ways that have little reference to particular situations or examples, but in an ontological register with reference to abstract attributes. It is, however, also an idea presented in arguments about comparative urbanism as having a very wide degree of generality.

Distinguishing between the universality and generality of concepts suggests that the sense in which universalism might operate in urban theory needs to be more precisely specified. It needs to be distinguished from the question of the appropriate scope of generalization of key concepts. To elaborate further on this suggestion, it is worth considering the different types of universality associated with the use of the concepts of agglomeration in contemporary urban thought. Agglomeration is a key concept in urban analysis, associated for example with analysis of the productivity gains associated with clustering of economic activity and the social outcomes associated with neighbourhood effects. It is a concept that is subject to varied usages, all of which turn around claims about the significance of the density and intensity of connections between actors and activities in urban spaces (see McFarlane 2017).

The concept of agglomeration has been made central to arguments that impute a creeping particularism to postcolonial critiques of paradigmatic twentieth-century urban thought. Economic geographers Allan Scott and Michael Storper argue that there is, in fact, a common attribute that can underwrite a coherent theory of the city, and that it is captured by the concept of agglomeration: “cities are everywhere characterized by agglomeration involving the gravitational pull of people, economic activities, and other \textit{relata} into interlocking, high-density, nodal blocks of land use” (Storper and Scott 2016, 5).
The argument about agglomeration as the core concept in urban theory made by Scott and Storper has two aspects. First, there is a claim to generality, referring to what cities everywhere have in common - the dynamics of agglomeration and polarization, and associated clusters of locationally embedded activities. Second, there is a claim that these common features can be captured in an abstract concept of agglomeration. Agglomeration is presented as a minimal condition to the conceptualisation of the urban. In the terms discussed above, the claims in Scott and Storper’s recent accounts of agglomeration are presented primarily in terms of the generality of causal mechanisms. When these authors present agglomeration as nothing less than “a quasi-universal feature of human existence” (Scott and Storper 2015, 6), they are making a claim about necessary conditions that characterize cities everywhere, and which can be described with the help of a universal concept, without necessarily implying an exhaustive definition.

Scott and Storper’s argument is about the range of cases over which an explanatory framework can and should be applied. It is also part of an assertive effort to define the shape of a disciplinary area. In this respect, their argument faces in various directions. It is explicitly addressed to postcolonial and post-Marxist accounts of urban theory, reasserting a long established strand of thinking of the urban in terms of dynamics of clustering, agglomeration, and densification (see Scott 1980). Concepts of agglomeration are also central to criticisms of theories of ‘creative cities’ and the status of the so-called ‘new economic geography’ (e.g. Scott 2006, Storper 2013; see also Garretsen and Martin 2010). But claims about the universal explanatory force of concepts of agglomeration in accounting for urbanization dynamics are also subject to empirical analysis. For example, debates about whether urbanization in southern Africa is caused by or even generative of economic growth, or instead the outcome of natural population growth without any association with economic growth, cut to the very heart of the normative issues underlying claims about the putatively universal dynamics of urbanization (e.g. Fox 2012, 2017; Potts 2015, 2017, Turok 2017, Crankshaw 2018). In these seemingly ‘provincial’ debates about urbanization in southern Africa, the problem with universalism is revealed to lie in the risk of fundamentally misunderstanding causal dynamics, and thereby generating unintended consequences in so far as academic knowledge is embedded in globally circulating policy paradigms of best practice.

It is clear, then, that the relationships between the dynamics of urban agglomeration and economic growth are subject to much discussion within fields of economics, regional science, and economic geography. But alongside debates about the status of the concept of agglomeration in economic theories of urbanization, one can find an even stronger assertion of the universality of agglomeration processes in the so-called ‘new urban science’ (see Alberti 2017). Drawing on analogies with allometric laws of scaling from the biosciences, and conceptualising cities as ‘complex adaptive systems’, the new urban science identifies seven laws of urban scaling (Bettencourt 2013b). These refer to the regularities between city size and variables such as intensity of connections, income and wealth, density, environment sustainability, and agglomeration economies (see Batty 2013a, 2013c). The claim of such work is that a wide range of features of cities (e.g. crime, innovation, energy demand) are quantitatively predictable because of agglomeration or scaling effects (Bettencourt et al 2007).
In economic theories of urbanization a city is understood as a series of social and infrastructural networks co-located in time and space, a concept closely associated with the economies of scale across sectors that follow from agglomeration. By contrast, in the new urban science, the urban is understood merely as a function of population size and density, an understanding stripped of any sense of the layered relationships of land, property, firm structure or other features associated with a thicker geographical imagination. Increasing population size of settlements, so it is argued, facilitates high levels of specialization, interaction, and complexity, leading in turn to higher productivity, income, and growth. In this field claims about universality arise not so much from assertions of the everywhereness of agglomeration, but more precisely from claims about the *uniformity* of recurrent spatial processes associated with ‘laws of scaling’. This is an important difference from the strands of urban-economic thought discussed above, which are concerned with understanding the agglomeration processes as drivers of specialisation, differentiation, and variation.

The new urban science is premised on the availability of masses of data about measureable properties of spatially discrete objects of analysis, which can serve as the basis for “a more scientifically grounded practice of urban planning” (2013a, p. 1). The claim that all cities evolve according to a small number of basic principles, established by relating data on variations in population size to other attributes, is made the basis of the assertion of a unified theory of urban processes:

> “cities supply solutions as well as problems, as they are the world’s centres of creativity, power and wealth. So the need is urgent for an integrated, quantitative, predictive, science-based understanding of the dynamics, growth and organization of cities. To combat the multiple threats facing humanity, a grand unified theory of sustainability with cities and urbanization at its core must be developed” (Bettencourt and West 2010, 912).

Confident claims such as this for the possibility of developing a quantitative and predictive science of urban systems capable of providing solutions are based on the proposition that all settlements are shaped by universal laws of scaling (see West 2017). Different settlements, on this understanding, are scaled versions of one another (Ortman et al 2014). And on these grounds, it is declared that policy initiatives in cities “should be viewed as experiments that, if carefully designed and measured, can help support the creation of an integrated, predicative theory and a new science of performance-based planning” (Bettencourt and West 2010, 913).

In the new urban science, the city is presented as a site of bounded, generalizable experiment. The experimental is, in turn, presented as having not just explanatory but also strongly predictive force, with all sorts of potential practical applications.

This is, it should be said, a very precise vision of urban experimentalism. It rests on the quite distinctive type of universality posited by the new urban science, one in which the same uniform *laws* operate across otherwise highly varied and differentiated contexts. It is a vision that is different from how ideas of experimentalism are invoked, for example, in urban theories associated with postcolonial theory and theories of comparative urbanism. Here, as we have seen, the concern tends to be more with the validity of making generalisations. In this section, I have argued for the importance of distinguishing between types of universality. Doing so allows us to better identify how often arguments in urban theory are really about problems of generalisation, in contrast to the sorts of claims of strong
universality associated with the new data-driven urban science. And given the ubiquity of appeals to experimentalism in contemporary urban thought, across otherwise very different theoretical traditions, it might be worthwhile considering how casuistic forms of reasoning which characterise a great deal of urban analysis might not conform to either the imperative of universalization or of theoretical generalisation. The next section turns to consider this issue, in order to locate the place of casuistic reasoning among a variety of styles of reasoning through which claims to know about cities are articulated.

Is urban theory experimental?
There is, of course, a long-standing tradition of thinking of the city as an experimental site (see Caprotti and Cowley 2017, Evans et al 2016). Across different fields of urban analysis, however, there are very different images of the experimental at work. The experimental is often invoked to assert positivist ideas of identifying “what works” or establishing “proof of concept”. Urban spaces are presented as test-beds and labs and catapults and demonstrators, and as sites for piloting and prototyping. By contrast, the experimental is also invoked to bring to mind images of creativity, edginess, and innovation, of doing things differently in open-ended and unpredictable ways. These distinct visions of urban experimentalism disclose an important difference between two sets of ‘epistemic virtues’ (Gieryn 2006). From one perspective, the city is presented as a laboratory, in the sense of scientists exerting control over bounded objects of analysis. This is the form of experimental reasoning supposed by proponents of unified theories of urbanization based on data-analysis and allometric laws of scaling. It is associated with an undiminished confidence in the ability of science to inform effective problem solving. In a second strand of thought, the city is presented not so much as a laboratory, but rather as a field site for the generation of knowledge claims that emerge from an engagement with the unexpected and uncontrollable elements of urban living, rather than from controlled interventions.

There are, then, two distinct but not necessarily exclusive models of the relationship of knowledge generation to the spaces of the city at work in discussions of urban experimentalism. And the contrast is reflected in disputes about the epistemological status ascribed to ‘the case’ in urban analysis. The distinct epistemic virtues of these visions of the experimental extend to different assumptions about how lessons learnt in one place can and should be applied to other places. The most common assumption is that places serve as experimental cases in so far as they can contribute to the development of theoretical ideas with some degree of general purchase. This assumption subsists even in postcolonial accounts to urban comparativism. What is less often acknowledged are the dynamics through which places can serve as exemplars in forms of case-by-case learning across contexts in the absence of shared theoretical frames. In order to further clarify the relevance of thinking more deeply about the kinds of case-work at stake in urban studies, it is therefore useful to consider some of the limits of supposing that urban theory should be thought of as having an experimental relationship with urban spaces.

The proliferation of concern with urban experimentation is related to the consolidation of new models of interdisciplinarity in which connections between research programmes and fields of expert knowledge are seen as best mediated by clusters of public and private governance scaled as sub-national levels. These are
better suited, so it is claimed, to engage with what are increasingly presented as inherently complex problems of various sorts (Barnett 2018). But the turn to the experimental in urban studies is also indicative of a widespread ambivalence about the scope and purpose of urban expertise. This ambivalence lies at the heart of the discursive ‘urbanization of responsibility’ that underwrites contemporary metrophilia (see Barnett 2012). The city is now routinely presented as the spatial form that can serve as the vector in which claims of expertise can be squared with acknowledgements of uncertainty. Nowhere is this discursive fix more evident than in the revival of interest in the concept of wicked problems, not least as a reference point for the new urban science (see Batty 2013b, 301-303). The concept of wicked problems was originally developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s, using urban issues such as inner city poverty, housing provision, or spatial concentrations of crime to exemplify the challenges for models of rational decision-making which arise from the combination of complexity, pluralism and conflict (Rittel and Webber 1973).

At the core of the original account of wicked problems was the assumption that planning and design involve a distinctive form of reasoning appropriate to situated problems – reason by argumentation. This was contrasted to a more narrowly defined notion of rationality in which expert knowledge is applied to solve problems by bringing them under a universal description. Recalling this feature of the idea of wicked problems speaks directly to the claims made about experimental urbanism discussed above. For Horst Rittel, the key thinker behind the wicked problems idea, “There is no experimentation with wicked problems” (Rittel 1972, 393). Wicked problems are not subject to experimental testing since every solution to a wicked problem is a “one-shot operation”, in so far as there is no opportunity to learn by trial-and-error. Solutions to wicked problems “are not true-or-false, but good-or-bad” (Rittel and Webber 1973, 161-167). This is the guiding sense of the dictum that one cannot experiment with wicked problems.

Placing the universal claims of the new urban science into wider context of the genealogy of the idea of wicked problems indicates the need for a more careful elaboration of forms of reasoning implied in assertions of experimental urbanism (Goodspeed 2015). More precisely, it helps to clarify the relation between reasoning about cases and the limits of universality in urban theory. Rittel (1972, 392) contrasted ‘tame’ problems to planning and design problems, which were characterised as ‘wicked’. Tameness is understood as a feature of specific class of problems, not as something that can be imposed upon problems through the exercise of the right sort of expert competence. In turn, the wickedness of a problem is not merely an epistemological matter deriving from complex interrelations between masses of information. It is an index of conflict, contestation and pluralism (see Webber 1969). For Rittel, crucially, planning is not simply a matter of applying knowledge to solve a problem. It is, rather, a matter of exercising judgment in relation to situated problems (1972, 395). He envisioned design and planning as participatory, deliberative, interdisciplinary endeavours that involve raising questions and arguing about the advantages and disadvantages of alternative courses of action. The idea of wicked problems is, in short, an expression of an agonistic imagination. And this allows us to glean why, in its most famous formulation, the idea of wicked problems was articulated through an elaboration of a range of specifically urban issues: this reflected a recognition of the irreducibly normative dimension of non-
divisible conflicts around spatially emplaced objects of contention (see Barnett 2017, 161-166).

The form of situated judgment involved in addressing wicked problems throws new light on how the status of the case might be approached in urban studies. Rather than continuing to frame the case by reference to the epistemological relation between the universal and the particular, or indeed the general and specific, we might take more notice of ‘clinical’ approaches to case analysis, in the broadest sense of that term (see Geertz 1973, 26-27). For example, Berlant (2007, 663) observes that across various fields of inquiry a case is a “problem-event that has animated some kind of judgment”. The relationship between problems and judgment deserves more attention in seeking to make sense of the purview of the concepts of urban thought. Questions of judgment draw into view the limits of thinking of cases primarily by reference to the difficulty of translating singular events into general frames that can then be deductively applied. Case study reasoning might be better thought of as a version of thinking analogically. Cases, on this understanding, are associated with a certain sort of critical manoeuvre that does not depend on an appeal to either superior epistemology or sophisticated ontology: “what makes something a case, and not a merely gestural instance, illustration, or example, is to query the adequacy of an object to bear the weight of an explanation worthy of attending to or taking a lesson from; the case is actuarial” (Berlant 2007, 666). Cases, on this view, are indexes of problematic situations of some sort.

It is the problematic quality of cases outlined by Berlant that recommends thinking of urban thought as having significant resemblances to “a family of disciplines” identified by John Forrester (2007, 810) as ones which “work with cases”, including “medicine, law, social work, management science, and the sort of psychology in which there are clients or patients”. Crucially, a defining feature of these fields is that they all have “a professional and sometimes a legal obligation to treat their objects as persons” (ibid.). This emphasis brings to mind the concern in Rittel and Webber’s account of wicked problems to tread carefully around problems that have potentially irreversible consequences for the subjects of interventions that cannot be responsibly treated as experiments. Given the form of obligation that defines them, the uses of cases will always retain the trace of a reference to the specific individual: “epistemically, the case will always be nailed down to the level of the individual” (Forrester 2007, 810). This attribute of case-work suggests that there is a distinctive form of reasoning involved, one which involves reasoning with shared examples rather than with general theory (or, perhaps, rather than subordinating what counts as ‘theory’ to the task of producing universalizable statements): “case-based disciplines reason analogically, creating complex networks of similarity and dissimilarity relations, often nested in heterogeneous hierarchies, with no guarantees of self-consistency or of the noncontradictory character of these overlapping categories. These truly are the disciplines that work with shared examples” (Forrester 2007, 812). On the clinical view, being able to draw on a common stock of examples is the condition of learning how to reason from case to case.

The strand of case-based reasoning discussed by both Berlant and Forrester deserves more attention in debates about the futures of urban theory. What they both draw out is not just a standard contrast found in social science accounts of case study methods between two forms of inference, statistical and logical (see Gromm et al 2000). They
both also help to clarify a distinction between forms of generalisation guided by epistemological anxieties, and those guided by imperatives of action and situated judgment. Thinking of cases in a problem-oriented fashion throws recent discussions about ‘new geographies of theory’ in urban studies into a new perspective. Critiques of the universalism of canonical urban theory often remain focussed on a quite conventional view of theory formation, in which the primary task is to broaden the geographical reference points from which cases might be drawn into new frameworks of legitimate generalisation. And, as we have seen, arguments for a more global urban imagination are often supported by appeals to what are, unavoidably, universalising modes of ontological reasoning. Urban studies might well be marked by ‘intrinsic comparativism’, and the shape of comparative analysis has certainly been transformed by the development of relational spatial imaginations. But it remains to be seen whether debates about the status of urban theory have fully recognised the degree to which urban issues necessarily open themselves up to forms of case-based reasoning of the sort conjured by the label of casuistry. What is not evident in the literature on urban comparativism and provincializing urban theory is the sense of cases as inherently problematic, and of the process of application or generalisation as involving case-by-case learning. To reiterate, rather than thinking of theory as something built up through comparing cases, the ‘cogency’ of the theoretical reasoning that is properly internal to a case study is determined by forms of analogical reasoning that are not, strictly speaking, founded on any epistemological justification at all. The determination of the value of a case depends on the availability of a set of exemplars, which also serve as the medium for cultivating the competence of making judgments of similarity and difference (Forrester 2007; Flyvbjerg 2010).

To clarify the significance of the clinical account of case-based reasoning, it is helpful to consider a strand of southern urbanism that is not easily captured in contrasts between political economy and postcolonial perspectives (see also Lawhon and Truelove 2020). Emerging debates in ‘southern’ planning studies explicitly seek to interrupt the deductive assumptions of grand urban theorizing – whatever its geographical reference points. This field explicitly elaborates on the importance of case methodologies as a basis of theory building (e.g. Duminy et al 2014, Watson 2014; see also Campbell 2003). The status of the ‘theoretical’ in this field is closer to a sense of shared vernacular than to the production of generalising theoretical frameworks. It involves working concepts up from emplaced practice rather than from elsewhere (e.g. Bhan 2019, Watson 2008).

If one takes this planning-inflected work as the reference point for doing urban theory, then what might be most distinctive about the emergent paradigm of southern urbanism is the challenge it presents to off-the-shelf models of ‘best practice’ that supposedly can be replicated across places. It is a challenge articulated not so much by producing alternative models or theories, but by innovating practices of urban inquiry for the co-production of knowledge that addresses situated challenges of development and environmental transition (e.g. Patel et al 2016). In this form of urban thought, cities in the Global South are not presented as alternative reference points from which to generate grand theory, but as the sites where the very scope and potential of urban experimentation is being re-thought (e.g. Anderson et al 2013). After all, as a paradigm of analysis, southern urbanism is defined in no small part by the challenge of developing robust concepts and methodologies of urban analysis in
contexts lacking in comprehensive empirical data-sources on the scope and intensity of urban change (e.g. Acuto and Parnell 2016, Pieterse 2012, Pieterse 2014). Urban thought, in this strand of work, is rendered as thoroughly translational, in the sense of moving not just between geographical contexts but between different ways of knowing the city, thereby displacing the hegemony of Theory with the challenge of developing shared modes of inquiry (e.g. Parnell and Pieterse 2015).

5). Styles of reasoning in urban studies
I have argued that more attention should be paid to the ways in which styles of reasoning about urban issues often resemble practices of casuistry. Debates about urban theory remain trapped in an epistemological puzzle of how to generalise from unique instances, thereby confusing the types of inference appropriate to place-based analysis. These debates continue to underplay the degree to which knowing about urban spaces is an inherently analogical practice. Thinking about the status of cases in urban studies therefore requires taking more notice of the ways in which urban thought is shaped by forms of generalisation that are guided by pragmatic concerns.

Arguing that urban thought might be approached as a variety of casuistic reasoning might easily be interpreted as a surrender to particularism or eclecticism, or as a reduction of critical analysis to a ‘what works’ form of instrumentalism. Those sorts of charges only take on meaning from within a paradigm of critical analysis in which Theory is granted the role of providing de-familiarising insight into fundamental causes, a role that it is not capable of performing (see Barnett 2017). Invoking hard and fast rules and robust principles to ward off the dangers of casuistry does not, in the last instance, avoid the forms of analogical reasoning that are at the core of case-based analysis: “if you think that invoking principles will avoid this method of reasoning, a sceptic of the relevance of your principles will soon require you to make explicit the exemplar, the prototype, the analogue onto which the invocation of your principle is grafted” (Forrester 1996, 21).

I have argued here for giving further thought to the relevance of casuistic reasoning as an effective way of characterising the status of the case in urban thought. I make this argument in the hope of opening up an agenda for pursuing a kind of genealogical inquiry into the commitments that shape the varied forms of urban knowledge in the twenty-first century (see Barnett 2015b, Lawton 2020, Oldfield, Selmeczi, and Barnett 2021, Parnell 2016). This would be a form of inquiry that shifted from thinking of urban theory as a set of more or less justifiable representations of urban processes, towards thinking of this field as no less shaped by certain forms of intervention as more obviously applied fields of urban inquiry (cf. Hacking 1983). The recurring contrast between universalism and particularism needs to cede ground to a more systematic analysis of the styles of reasoning that characterise different ways of knowing about cities and urban life. Thinking of urban thought as characterised by distinctive styles of reasoning brings into view a form of inquiry that would have two related foci (see Hacking 2012, 3). First, a focus on the patterns of inference that are used to select, interpret and support evidence about urban processes – a focus on the ways of finding out what is true in urban thought. Second, a focus on the ways of finding out how to change urban processes and practice. This would be a mode of inquiry that would bring into view a more precise object of analysis for critical urban studies: the question of why, when and to whom knowing about the city and urban processes matters.
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