



THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

Published on *Up Close* (<https://upclose.unimelb.edu.au>)

#338: Man about town: Neil Brenner on reframing our cities and their global impact

VOICEOVER

This is Up Close, the research talk show from the University of Melbourne, Australia.

PETER MARES

I'm Peter Mares. Thanks for joining us. It's become commonplace to refer to the 21st century as the Urban Century, based on the widely-repeated fact that more than half the world's population now live in cities. 2008 is usually given as the year in which this landmark transition in human affairs took place. At some point in 2008, one more person moved from the countryside to a nearby city or one more baby was born in a suburb somewhere, tipping the global population balance from rural to urban. This claim is based on statistics provided by the United Nations, yet on closer examination the data appears pretty unreliable, and while the process of urbanisation proceeds apace, the theoretical construct of a neat divide between city and country is pretty arbitrary, and according to today's guest, obscures more than it reveals.

Neil Brenner is Professor of Urban Theory and Director of the Urban Theory Lab at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. He is both a political scientist and a geographer and his most recent book is *Implosions / Explosions: Towards a Theory of Planetary Urbanization*. In it he argues that we need to stop thinking about the city as a collection of buildings and people occupying a defined space and start focusing instead on urbanisation as a historical, global process that extends to every corner of the planet. Professor Brenner joins me in the Up Close studio at the University of Melbourne, where he is delivering a guest lecture in the 2015 Dean's Lecture Series for Melbourne's Sustainable Society Institute. Neil Brenner, welcome to Up Close.

NEIL BRENNER

Thank you so much, Peter. It's a pleasure to be here.

PETER MARES

As a journalist, I have often repeated the line that we are living in the Urban Century and that we can identify 2008 as the year in which more than half the world's population became city dwellers, but you suggest this claim is based on dubious

data.

NEIL BRENNER

Yes. First of all, it's important to put the claim in context. Around the world we're seeing major transformations associated with cities and these transformations of cities related to the economy, society and the environment are viewed as highly relevant to the future of the planet as a whole. The discourse around the urban age in this supposed 50 per cent population threshold is very important because it underscores the importance of urban life to the future of the planet as a whole, and that's something that I'm very sympathetic to. I think that that's something we need to deal with and we need to critically interrogate. But indeed, the question is, is that proposition about a 50 per cent urban population threshold that we've now crossed a plausible proposition, a plausible way to understand the urban character of our planet. Indeed, a lot of my research has recently suggested that it's not, that it's quite misleading.

PETER MARES

What is the problem here? Is there something wrong with the way we measure whether people are in cities or in the countryside?

NEIL BRENNER

Exactly. There is a long history, for about 70 years, of attempts to measure the urban population of the world. But in order to do that, you need a unified criterion for measuring what a city is, for measuring what an urban population is relative to a non-urban population.

PETER MARES

You need a standard unit of measurement, as it were?

NEIL BRENNER

Correct. You need a standard unit of measurement and the simple problem is that no one has come up with that.

PETER MARES

So we don't have a simple system like any collection of more than 100,000 people equals a city or equals urban or something like that?

NEIL BRENNER

Correct. Some sociologists that have tried to measure the world's urban population have tried to use a unified criterion, but it's very difficult because each country's census bureau has different criteria for measuring the population of cities. So the 50 per cent urban threshold, which has been declared by the UN on a world level, is actually based on national census data from every country in the world, and those censuses define the urban in completely different ways from country to country.

PETER MARES

So they're all counting it differently?

NEIL BRENNER

They're all counting it differently. In some countries it's a relatively high threshold, 500,000, 200,000. In some countries it's a very low threshold. Furthermore, in some countries other criteria are added as well, and let me just give one example. In India, in addition to a population threshold there is an employment criterion: 75 per cent male, non-agricultural employment. The idea is that cities will be places where there is a lot of industry and non-cities will be places where there is a lot of agriculture. This is very counterintuitive if you look at a map of population density in the Ganges Plain of India, a very densely-population but predominantly agricultural area, which in the Indian census is classified as rural. If you look the population density data it doesn't make any sense, it looks like an incredibly urbanised area. If you classify it as urban instead of rural the urban population of India escalates quite dramatically. So there are many examples like this from around the world.

PETER MARES

This then suggests another problem here which is that when we say that half the world's populations live in cities now, we're not comparing like with like. We might be comparing a Mumbai slum to a rich suburb here in Melbourne, for example, where people live in mansions and we're saying these are both cities.

NEIL BRENNER

Exactly. This already takes us beyond some of the empirical problems with the Urban Age proposition toward questions of interpretation. The notion of a 50 per cent global urban threshold is premised on the idea that there is a simple distinction between the urban and the rural that we can use to classify the entire world. The examples that you just gave already underscore there are many different conditions of urbanisation that need to be understood on their own terms. If we subsume Mumbai slums and suburbs of Melbourne and other cities around the world?

PETER MARES

Provincial towns that have 50,000 or whatever it might be in New Zealand's countryside or something like that?

NEIL BRENNER

Or a mining town that has a very large population but it's devoted entirely to a single industry. Many different conditions of social life, of economic life, spatial organisation and population density and culture as well. If we subsume all of these different conditions simply under the notion of the city, we have to ask the question, what have we really learned about the world?

PETER MARES

So overall you're arguing here that this much-celebrated transition in human affairs, this year point of 2008 when we suddenly became Homo urbanus, the majority of the world's population living in cities instead of in rural areas, it's actually not telling us very much and perhaps maybe even obscuring more important issues.

NEIL BRENNER

Yes, exactly. So something is clearly going on. I do believe that there is a process of urbanisation that's transforming our planet, but the question is can we capture that simply through the idea of a movement of population from the countryside to the city, that binary countryside/city is very simplistic and very misleading for capturing the diversity of urbanization processes that are happening around the world, as well as, very importantly from my research, what's actually happening in the countryside. The notion that in urban transition is expressed simply through a move from the countryside to the city, all of that implies that the countryside is simply being emptied out and that it is becoming irrelevant to the future of the world.

PETER MARES

Or that it is somehow left unchanged by this maybe? It has a few less people but otherwise it's left unchanged.

NEIL BRENNER

Exactly. A lot of our research involves actually looking at transformations of the countryside, which even though populations in the so-called countryside might be relatively low, there are many fundamental economic functions and environmental transformations that are happening across the broader territories within which cities are embedded that are fundamentally relevant to urbanisation processes. Instead of describing the countryside as 'the rural?', we use a different term. It is becoming an operational landscape. It's a landscape that's being activated and instrumentalised in very important ways in order to support urban growth elsewhere.

One example that is quite relevant to this is resource extraction. We live in a fossil fuel based world and our cities for the moment are fundamentally premised upon the production and circulation and consumption of fossil fuels. Where do the fossil fuels come from? They come from massive holes in the ground, generally located at a great distance from urban centres. For us and the work that we're doing, those zones of resource extraction are fully-urbanised spaces, they're not urbanised spaces in the same way that say downtown Melbourne is, but they're absolutely connected to urbanisation processes.

PETER MARES

I'm going to come back to this idea of operational landscapes in a moment. I just want to remind our listeners that they are listening to Up Close. I'm Peter Mares and my guest is Neil Brenner, Professor of Urban Theory and Director of the Urban Theory Lab at the Harvard Graduate School of Design.

Now, Neil Brenner, before we come to the idea of operational landscapes, this city/rural divide we've been talking about and which you're critiquing, a great deal has been built on this, hasn't it? If we think of a lot of recent writing about the cities, quite celebratory writing about cities - so someone like Edward Glaeser, who wrote a best-selling book called *Triumph of the City* - Edward Glaeser argues cities are good for us. If you look at cities, you'll see that people who live in cities are richer, they're happier, they're healthier than those who don't, and therefore this process is good. Urbanization is good. Are you saying Ed Glaeser is wrong?

NEIL BRENNER

Well, I think we have to differentiate that claim in a much more historically-specific way. We have to look instead of at the city as a generalised condition in which people live and about which we can make broad generalisations like it's good for you or not, we need to look at specific forms of urbanisation. Now, a lot of my work looks at the connection between capitalism and urbanisation, and under capitalism I would argue urbanisation is decidedly a mixed bag. On the one hand, it generates incredible technical and civilisational capacities, capacities to transform nature, capacities to improve the human lot. But at the same time, under capitalism urbanisation generates massive inequalities so better conditions of life for some but extreme exploitation and marginalisation for others, and just as importantly, as we increasingly know in the current period, capitalism externalises the environmental costs of its own production process. In other words, it generates massive environmental destruction without really providing a way to manage those destructive consequences.

PETER MARES

Which brings us back to the big holes in the ground you were talking about before that provide the fossil fuels that drive the city's economy.

NEIL BRENNER

Exactly. So instead of just focusing on the city as a bounded unit about which we can generalise in terms of its benefits for people and so forth, I'm very interested in understanding a much broader set of questions. What supports urban life? What supports the cities that we live in, and how does that change social life as well as environmental conditions. Within that framework it's very difficult to make such a broad generalisation about cities being good or bad for people. I would also add to that there are many different types of cities in the world. So it's a very important question to ask whether particular forms of city-building, particular forms of urbanisation are more or less beneficial to society at large and to particular groups of people.

If you believe in criteria like social justice, equality and also democracy, in other words the idea that cities should be built and transformed by the inhabitants of the city rather than imposed from above either by developers, business owners or state elites, then some very difficult questions emerge about the form of urbanisation that we currently live under in which one might argue people don't have that much control over the conditions that actually govern their everyday lives.

PETER MARES

Indeed even within a city you'll see there are different forms of urbanisation that are more or less beneficial according to where you live. Melbourne, where we are today, is often described as the world's most liveable city and that may be true if you happen to live in the inner area, well served by public transport, close to the beach and so on, but it may be less true if you live in a far-flung suburb where you're highly car-dependent and so on.

NEIL BRENNER

Exactly. One of the paradoxes of capitalist urbanisation is that it produces incredible capacities and potentially very beneficial conditions for certain sectors of the population, but those benefits are not generalised across society as a whole and certainly not across the world as a whole. But they offer us a glimpse into some possibility of a better future for all, which is at the same time being suppressed through the dominant economic and social system that we live in.

PETER MARES

You're not anti-city, in a sense? If we can go back to an economist like Alfred Marshall writing at the turn of the century, between the 19th and 20th century, who realised that cities created something quite fantastic which is known today is agglomeration economics, but the spin-offs of people being brought together in terms of knowledge transfer, innovation, learning, skill development and so on, really quite transformational things that cities can do for people.

NEIL BRENNER

My standpoint of critique is definitely not anti-city and it's definitely not anti-urban. It's about affirming the capacities that are produced by modern urbanisation but at the same time articulating a very strong critique of the destructive consequences, both socially and environmentally, of the form of urbanisation that we now live under in the hope that we can collectively produce a more socially just, a more environmentally sane form of urbanisation for the future. We have to build on the capacities that we've produced but at the same time we have to be strongly critical of those destructive consequences and in some ways the relatively undemocratic form of urbanisation that we collectively live under.

PETER MARES

Is this then a critique of urbanisation or is it a critique of our political and democratic system?

NEIL BRENNER

It's the latter, although even if I say it's a critique of our current economic and political system, many questions emerge that are quite fundamental and that need to be collectively deliberated about regarding what a different form of urbanisation would look like. From my point of view that's certainly not a question that can be decided by any philosopher or any urban theorist such as myself; it has to be produced on the ground in everyday life through struggles in cities around the world, in territories around the world, to produce a different world, a different built environment and a different way of managing, as it were, the unbuilt environment of the earth. That has to be a collective process.

PETER MARES

It's a kind of democratisation or a re-enlivening of democracy beyond the periodic system for elected governments; is that the kind of thing you're meaning?

NEIL BRENNER

Among the many forces that underpin urbanisation, a very important dimension of urbanisation involves people, the inhabitants of the world collectively trying to appropriate the conditions of their own lives, to gain control over the conditions in which they live. So even though we currently live under a form of urbanisation that's dominated by capitalist forces, by developers, by political elites in many ways, at the same time, the inhabitants of cities, of regions, and of territories are constantly trying to intervene to gain control over the world in which they live through collective processes. That's a very important shaping force underpinning urbanisation.

From my point of view the task is to create institutions that more actively enable people to gain influence over not just the built environments that they live in, but the processes through which future cities, future built environments are produced. This is a very important distinction for me. On the one hand there's a task of gaining more democratic access to the built environments that we now have, to the cities that we now have, but at the same time there's a question of who has control over the capacity to build the cities of the future? Is that capacity controlled by private developers? Is it controlled by political elites? Who controls that? And a fundamental challenge I believe for the future of urban life on the planet is to democratise that capacity, to empower people, the inhabitants of cities and of the world, to collectively exercise some sort of influence over what that future built environment will be.

PETER MARES

Is there a problem here though in that democracy as we know it operates within systems of nation states and what you're talking about really is an idea of global justice and global democracy. So for example if the people of Melbourne had more control over shaping their own urban environment, one of their responses might be to say we want fewer people to come here. Australia, as I'm sure you're aware, has been doing its best to stop asylum seekers coming into the country. There's a similar debate in the US around undocumented migrants coming from Mexico. So couldn't the result of this people taking control of their own urban environment actually be less just in the terms that it wouldn't involve people protecting the privilege that they already have in the developed cities of the rich countries.

NEIL BRENNER

There are many, many political and ideological challenges associated with the vision that I've just articulated. On the one hand, we have national states that continue to be the most important political actors in the world; on the other hand, indeed we see new political movements by cities around the world to create networks of collaboration and knowledge-sharing and policy development among cities that more or less bypass nation states. A famous example of this would be the C40 Network created by Michael Bloomberg and others to promote new forms of policy development around climate change specifically associated with cities. These are very, very important developments and there is a serious tension between exclusionary practices on the national scale and the examples that you give at the local scale on the one side, and more cosmopolitan and social justice oriented visions. It seems to me that's part of the struggle that we have to participate in.

PETER MARES

Because again, even at the local level, the residents of a rich suburb in Melbourne will do their best to put a lid on planning controls that might enable, for example, public housing to be built down the street from them.

NEIL BRENNER

There's no simple solution to that but I believe that any viable form of social justice has to be not only local, not only regional, not only national, but global. Any reasonable form of environmental sustainability, the same thing. Environmental sustainability, whatever we might mean by that, at a local scale is not going to be that sustainable. A sustainable city that consumes fossil fuels produced elsewhere that generate massive emissions through their transportation to the city is not a very sustainable city. Questions of urban sustainability are increasingly on the agenda and indeed they should be, but for me the question is not only about sustainable cities but sustainable urbanisation, which takes us right back out to the global scale.

PETER MARES

Neil Brenner, you're here in Melbourne to give a guest lecture but you've brought with you an exhibition, which is called Operational Landscapes, and you've already used that term in our conversation. If people go to see this exhibition, and we'll put a link to some images on the Up Close website, but if they went to see this exhibition of operational landscapes what are they going to see?

NEIL BRENNER

This exhibition is a very experimental exercise in mapping, or we might say counter-mapping, by myself and my colleagues in the Urban Theory Lab at the Graduate School of Design. It will be somewhat surprising for anyone who associates the city and the urban with skyscrapers and densely-populated landscapes because even though it's an exhibition which is absolutely about urbanisation, the territories that are being investigated and represented are extremely remote places on the planet. For example, the Pacific Ocean, the Arctic, the Sahara Desert, Siberia, the Gobi Desert, the Himalayas, even the atmosphere are under investigation. These zones are normally not thought of as having any connection to urbanisation, but we argue that they've become increasingly operationalised, they've become increasingly integrated within a worldwide urban fabric. And so we've tried to map the ways in which these supposedly remote places have become quite functional to worldwide urbanisation processes in a whole range of ways.

PETER MARES

Is this an extension of the idea of the hinterland? I guess we're all familiar with the idea that a city has a hinterland. In Melbourne the mountains around the city and the forests are very important for the water catchments; that's the hinterland of the city supplying the water to the city, but what you're suggesting is we need to expand that idea of hinterland much further.

NEIL BRENNER

Absolutely. It's very much connected to the question of the hinterland in the sense

that these zones, these extreme territories or remote places, have become part of, as it were, a global hinterland, not simply supplying a single city or several cities in the region or close to the region with, for example, raw materials or fuels, but rather they supply the cities of the entire world, or significant zones of the world, with important resources. There is increasingly a global hinterland, zones around the world, for example, of resource extraction, of minerals extraction which have become supply regions for the worldwide urbanisation process, the worldwide process of city growth.

PETER MARES

So that's why in your view urbanisation extends to every corner of the planet, even indeed to the atmosphere.

NEIL BRENNER

Exactly. We call it extended urbanisation, in other words a kind of dialectic, a tight connection and contradictory connection between the formation of agglomerations, big population centres, big dense built environments on the one hand, and on the other hand, just as dynamically, the transformation of much broader landscapes and territories in order to support the resource needs of big urban centres.

PETER MARES

So how does this critique and this idea of urbanisation as a global process, how does it differ from any other critique of globalisation for example, which is a common bit of terminology, or what Marxists might have called imperialism, the capital reaching out to extract resources here and to get labour forces there and so on. Why is this a theory of urbanisation rather than a theory of economics?

NEIL BRENNER

Great question. So on the one hand there is absolutely an element of both social and ecological imperialism in this form of urbanisation insofar as surpluses are extracted from the periphery and transferred to and consumed within the big population centres.

PETER MARES

The wealth is being transferred from what we might call the countryside or the hinterland into the cities, which are the wealthy places.

NEIL BRENNER

It should be added that in many of these peripheries in the so-called global hinterland or the countryside, there are also very significant forms of population displacement insofar as territories, land are enclosed and people's access to that land for their own social reproduction, for their own subsistence, is limited, which also contributes to the rural to urban migration that's so often emphasised in the Urban Age discourse.

PETER MARES

So we can think of traditional tribal people in Laos displaced for a major dam to provide hydroelectricity for example, people in the Philippines displaced by mining

operations, all those sorts of examples.

NEIL BRENNER

Absolutely, and land grabbing in parts of Africa related to large-scale agricultural production which displaces local people from access to the land for their own farming needs in order to create large agro-business systems. So a lot of dispossession and a lot of population displacement occurs. But at the same time, I would insist that this is an urbanisation process, precisely because it's not simply an abstract flow of economic relations. It's deeply embedded within built infrastructures, buildings, roads, canals, pipelines, holes in the ground and so forth. So this is what urbanisation is all about. It's about what the French theorist Henri Lefebvre called the *production of space*. In order to create this supposedly globalised economic system with such massive capacities to circulate raw materials and information and people around the globe, we have to create a relatively fixed infrastructure in order to support all of that flow, and for me that's what urbanisation is all about. It's about building a landscape that supports the production and circulation of capital.

PETER MARES

What you're saying then is that these global economic processes also have spatial consequences, as it were, that they shape the landscapes in which we live, they create structures, they mould the world. This is what global urbanisation is all about.

NEIL BRENNER

Exactly. Globalisation is not simply about flow and circulation and mobility. It's fundamentally about urbanisation, about creating infrastructures that are relatively fixed on the landscape and organised across the territory that facilitate and support that flow. Building those infrastructures involves very large-scale and very long-term investments. But under capitalism, because the economy is constantly being transformed, because new technologies are constantly being developed, sometimes these large-scale fixed infrastructures of urbanisation have to be creatively destroyed. You have to reinvent them in order to create a new infrastructure for another wave of growth.

Many of the crises that we've seen during the entire history of capitalism, from the late nineteenth century all the way up to the present, precisely involves struggles to reorganise built environments, not only at the city scale but at much larger scales of logistics infrastructure, resource extraction infrastructure and so forth, in order to create a new spatial framework for industrial and capitalist development.

PETER MARES

This is Up Close. I'm Peter Mares and I'm discussing the global process of urbanisation with urban theorist Professor Neil Brenner, Director of the Urban Theory Lab at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. So if we take your critique, if we take your approach of seeing urbanisation not through the lens of cities as places that are a collection of buildings and people, but urbanisation as a process that therefore also reaches into the Arctic, reaches into the Amazon, reaches into the Gobi Desert as you say, and makes these operational landscapes, where does it take us? Where

does that take us in terms of policy, in terms of action?

NEIL BRENNER

First of all, it leads to a very different perspective on the urban character of this planet than the standard invocation of 50 per cent of the world's population living within cities. That may or may not be the case; as we've discussed, there are many different ways to evaluate where the world's populations is living. But the urbanised character of the planet is expressed as much through the movement of people to big population centres as it is through the operationalisation, the functionalisation of significant zones of our planet in order to support urban life.

So I do believe that we live in an urban world and in an urbanised planet, but in order to understand the way in which that's the case we oftentimes have to look far beyond the city limits in order to see the ways in which landscapes, environments, territories are being transformed to support the current form of urbanisation. That opens up a much broader perspective on urban questions, on urban policy and urban planning than the mainstream perspectives that simply draw a line around the city, a circle around the city, and ask us to focus on the way that people live and consume within cities themselves. We need to look upstream from the city.

PETER MARES

So we're going to be less focused, if you like, on I suppose questions of urban design, creating pedestrian precincts or public spaces that people can use, reducing the impact of traffic on residential amenity. These are the things we tend to think about when we think about cities. We think about creating a more socially inclusive city, a city that's safe for old people, a city that's safe for young people, a city that's accessible for people with a disability, a city that's green, a city that's environmentally sustainable. Are you saying that's the wrong focus?

NEIL BRENNER

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that these questions about how we live and consume within the city don't matter. They matter a lot and indeed, we need architects, urban designers, planners, policymakers, to think very carefully about those questions of consumption. It's not about dismissing those concerns but about adding a much broader horizon for thinking about planning, design and policy. We need to redesign the infrastructures that circulate raw materials and people and other resources to the cities. We need to redesign the systems of resource extraction that generate the fuel that power the places where we live.

So these much broader questions about energy supply, food supply, logistics, are as central issues for planners, designers and architects as the ones that are more traditionally focused upon within the built environment of cities. Now, there are trends within the design disciplines to start to grapple with these issues. Many of my colleagues in landscape architecture are increasingly adopting a much larger-scale lens and precisely thinking about the redesign of large-scale infrastructures as central concerns of the discipline, and I see this as a very productive development, which we need to broaden and deepen and extend. It's a very important part of my

own teaching in an architecture and design school at the GSD.

PETER MARES

And so, there might be some overlap in areas like for example the idea of urban food production, which we see in many cities around the world as growing movement, people growing food in various urban environments, that that would then take the pressure off perhaps the hinterland to be the supply base for the urban centre?

NEIL BRENNER

Exactly. The idea of creating more localised systems of production and consumption is very productive and has a lot of potential. It may not be the solution but it's certainly worth exploring a more localised hinterland rather than the de-localised hinterland that we see under globalisation.

PETER MARES

Energy production would be another example of that, so locally-generated solar or wind power, those sorts of things?

NEIL BRENNER

Exactly. This has a lot of potential also in terms of the environmental footprint of our activities. If you have a more localised hinterland it may undermine or limit some of the carbon emissions or other kinds of environmental impacts of our activities, but it may not be the full solution. We live in a densely interdependent world and I don't think that de-globalisation is necessarily the solution either. So cutting back on interdependence, it may generate as many problems as it solves. I don't think there's a simple spatial solution to the problems that ail us but we can't even pose those questions if we simply draw a circle around the city and define that as the terrain of action. We need a much broader lens for thinking about these questions, not only of consumption but also of production and exchange and circulation.

PETER MARES

Does it mean that we need to declare certain areas of the planet off-limits and say we have to stop the city reaching into the Antarctic for example, or into certain other areas. We have to somehow put a barrier around them, stop them becoming urbanised in the sense that you describe urbanisation?

NEIL BRENNER

Well, in some ways it may be too late for that proposition, or for that agenda, because I would argue anyway that almost every part of the entire planet has been impacted by human beings and by capitalist industrialisation, so it may no longer be possible or productive to think of any zone of the world, whether the upper atmosphere or remote places with very limited populations from parts of the Amazon to Patagonia and so forth as untouched by human impact. The question for me is what type of human impact, how do we want to manage and collectively organise the way in which we're already impacting every part of the world. That doesn't mean I would reject the idea of declaring certain zones off-limits for development. Those are very important political questions that have to be dealt with in particular contexts, but

the framework of thinking of parts of the world as pristine and untouched may no longer be a particularly viable way of thinking about the conditions in which we live.

PETER MARES

You're not saying we should stop urbanisation but you're saying we need to decide what kind of urbanisation we want, or take control, if you like, democratise the process of urbanisation?

NEIL BRENNER

Exactly. We've already urbanised the world. We've fully urbanised the world, from the atmosphere to the oceans, to the underground, to the deserts, to the Himalayan Mountains. It doesn't mean every point of the world is urbanised in the same way. For me, urbanisation is deeply uneven, it's deeply variegated, has many different expressions in the built environment, in social life and in the natural environment. So it's a deeply uneven process but we've fully urbanised the world in this differential uneven way. So the question indeed is not stopping urbanisation and promoting something else, it's precisely about the form of urbanisation, what are its social expressions and consequences, how is it politically managed, and what are its environmental impacts for our own world and for future generations, both of humans and non-humans, on this planet.

PETER MARES

Neil Brenner, you work at the Urban Theory Lab, and the emphasis is on theory. It does seem that you put a big focus on urban theory. Does that mean that empiricism is less important, that data doesn't matter?

NEIL BRENNER

Data is fundamental; concrete research is fundamental. The point of setting up an urban theory lab was not to ignore concrete research but to set up a research agenda in which the focus is on the development of new theoretical frameworks for understanding the world in which we live. We always presuppose theory in everything that we do. By that I mean that we're always presupposing broader interpretations of who we are, what we're doing, where we're doing it and why we are doing it.

For me, theory is precisely about clarifying those underlying interpretations around which we organise life, whether in our own everyday lives or in the realm of professional practice. The idea behind a theory lab and the idea behind a lot of the work that we're doing is to critically interrogate the theoretical or interpretive frameworks that are conventionally used in relation to urban questions. And the fundamental premise from which we start our work is that the dominant frameworks for understanding and indeed for influencing urban life really need to be reinvented in order to enable us more adequately to understand and to influence urban processes around the world.

PETER MARES

So we operate on a whole set of assumptions and we need to make those

assumptions explicit rather than implicit and we need to challenge them and perhaps offer some alternative approaches?

NEIL BRENNER

Exactly. The notion of the urban/rural divide, the notion of the city as a particular type of settlement that is different from all other settlement types, those are assumptions in the field of urban theory and planning that we inherit from the nineteenth century, and there are reasons why those assumptions organised thought and action in relation to cities during that particular historical moment.

The question for me is: are those assumptions viable? Are those assumptions fruitful and productive for informing thinking, research and action in relation to an urbanising planet? Our work suggests that they've really become quite obsolete. We're devoting therefore quite a lot of energy to reinventing the conceptual framework through which we think about and try to influence urban processes. The critique of the Urban Age that we've been developing, this 50 per cent population threshold, is precisely connected to the search for a new conceptual framework for understanding urban questions.

PETER MARES

And it seems there's a big emphasis on mapping, on the way actually visualise the world.

NEIL BRENNER

Exactly. This is very important to our method. In the standard narrative of the Urban Age we see a fairly simple map of the world. It's pretty easy to create. You look at where all the large population centres are, you draw circles or lines around them, sometimes you connect them by lines to show that cities are connected to each other, but the rest of the world is basically empty. There are many different versions of that map. Sometimes they are produced using satellite data which is increasingly sophisticated today but which still generates these maps of cities as being connected to each other, relatively bounded within their territories and the rest of the planet, most of the planet, completely empty.

PETER MARES

Even though satellite images of the planet at night which show where the clusters of lights are.

NEIL BRENNER

Exactly. The night-time lights map is a fascinating representation of our world and there are many insights that we can derive from it. That map is actually used in order to produce data and other maps on many, many other issues. So it's a very important source of information about conditions on the ground, but at the same time there are major blind spots within those maps. The map of the night-time lights suggests that much of the world is basically empty. Our work is articulated as a strong counterpoint to that assumption.

We try to show that precisely the spots on that map, such as the Amazon or the Pacific Ocean or Siberia or the Himalayas that look completely empty are actually quite full with many different types of activities related to intensified land use, new forms of connectivity, so infrastructures, of transportation and communications and major environmental transformations. It's actually quite misleading and even dangerous to represent those spaces as empty because that produces the illusion that cities are basically self-sufficient and surviving based on their own activities when in fact they're tightly dependent upon vast global hinterlands that enable them to grow and to exist in the form in which they do.

PETER MARES

Neil Brenner, thank you for joining us on Up Close.

NEIL BRENNER

Thank you so much, Peter. It's been a pleasure.

PETER MARES

Neil Brenner is Professor of Urban Theory and Director of the Urban Theory Lab at the Harvard Graduate School of Design and the editor of *Implosions / Explosions: Towards a Theory of Planetary Urbanization*. You'll find details of that book and other useful links on the Up Close website along with a full transcript of this podcast and of every other edition of the program. Up Close is a production of the University of Melbourne Australia, created by Kelvin Param and Eric van Bommel. This episode was recorded on 18 March 2015 and produced by Eric van Bommel with audio engineering by Gavin Nebauer. I'm Peter Mares. Thanks for listening. I hope you can join us again soon.

VOICEOVER

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