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## **Abstract**

In this short intervention I address the authors proposition to engage with the political economy of city benchmarking and rankings in order to show that critical urban scholarship can “do better than limiting itself to criticism.” I argue such engagement would require a deeper reflexion on the political economy of critical urban scholarship itself and the style of research needed. I also discuss the extent to which this engagement with cities’ comparative imagination as performed through benchmarks, rankings, and indexes runs the risk of overlooking other forms of global comparative endeavours happening outside of international urban solutions forums.

**KEYWORDS: COMPARATIVE URBANISM – BENCHMARKING – KNOWLEDGE POLITICS**

**City benchmarking, globalised urban scholarship and the view from above: reflexions on a few absences.**

In their intervention, Michele Acuto and his colleagues call for a greater engagement with the history, politics, function, and shortfalls of actually existing city benchmarking practices, in order to move beyond already well-established critiques of metric-driven urbanism. In this very welcomed contribution to current debates on urban science, quantification and the corporatization of urban knowledge, the authors invite us to reflect upon the ways in which academics could engage with the political economy of city benchmarking and rankings, in the hope to show that critical urban scholarship can “do better than limiting itself to criticism.” In this short intervention I would like to address this proposition directly, arguing specifically that such engagement – and its modalities - would require a deeper reflexion on the political economy of critical urban scholarship itself and the style of research it would require. I also discuss the extent to which this engagement with cities’ comparative imagination as performed through benchmarks, rankings, and indexes runs the risk to overlook other forms of global comparative endeavours that happen outside of international urban solutions forums.

The authors justify their call for urban scholars to engage with rankings, indexes and benchmarks as those constitute “everyday practitioner parlance in municipalities and the consulting world” and thus shape the global (masculine) urban gaze, that is how cities are seen and talked about in mainstream media, global urban policy arena and proliferating international forums on the future of cities. Promoting alternative usage, and greater awareness of the shortfalls, limitations, methodological and interpretive bias inherent to benchmarking and city rankings, in the authors’ view, demands an intensive engagement with the global circuits of their diffusion. Whilst I agree these are necessary efforts, in which critical urban scholars have a role to play, one needs to interrogate the *style* of scholarship most adequate to fulfil this function and the extent to which it can be transformative. Indeed, in their intervention, the authors offer little critical reflections on these issues. In my view, mobile and well-resourced scholars would be (and are already) the most likely to engage with the travelling producers and consumers of such knowledge products. They are also likely to be based in institutions and cities that constitute key nodes in the global market-place for urban solutions. This raises evident issues for scholars with limited financial or personal capacity, or for scholars whose ease of movement across the globe is restricted for various reasons, to participate in these

circuits to critically and productively engage with the political economy of comparative urban knowledge. However, rather than bluntly refusing to engage with urban benchmarking on the ground that it would constitute a rather exclusive object of study, I suggest it would be useful to explore how to engage with benchmarking/rankings/indexes meaningfully without perpetuating a research style that might prevent many to take part, and end up reproducing the power structures and knowledge diffusion practices that have likely made rankings, benchmarks and global comparisons so popular in the first place within homogenous circles of globally mobile technocrats (be that from the public, private or academic sector).

One way forward would be to explore more deeply the extent to which such knowledge devices actually shape “everyday policy-making,” as the authors contend, and strategies on the ground, if so with what effects, and how they fit within broader local urban knowledge landscapes. This would allow to pay attention not just to the rhetoric appeal of such metrics, for instance as reported in global urban forums or in the media, but to understand whether they indeed contribute to shaping local governments’ and private actors’ urban strategies in different localities and across different sectors (e.g. transport provision, green infrastructures, public space, poverty reduction, housing and so on). As discussed elsewhere (Robin and Acuto, 2019), globally comparable urban knowledge (including indexes and rankings), especially when those are made freely available, can represent valuable sources of information for decision-makers in cities where information is otherwise poor – for instance in rapidly growing small and medium size cities emerging across the so-called ‘Global South.’ The partial visions of the world they offer can also spark debates between local stakeholders around what cities should and could look like (as is the case of Liveability rankings, see McArthur and Robin, 2019). This in my view represents a potentially fruitful and grounded engagement with these particular instances of comparative urbanism from below, as it would provide further, much needed, evidence on the ability of benchmarks, rankings and indexes to actually shape urban trajectories (positively and negatively), and on their effects on different groups and localities within cities, beyond already well-known cases. It would help elucidate where and when this need to ‘be seen from above,’ to become comparable, comes from, by whom it is promoted locally and for what purpose. For instance, as mentioned by the authors, international institutions such as the UN or the World Bank, but also the European Union, as well as global philanthropies and city-networks, have repeatedly called for an ‘urban data revolution’ to make cities and urban processes more knowledgeable and legible – often predicated upon the promises of big data analytics provided by private companies. This of course requires interrogating the geopolitics of urban data – including rankings, benchmarking, and indexes – more critically and in context, to understand the instrumental and political value of becoming comparable (e.g. accessing funding, political networks and so on).

Critically engaging with such devices is not just a matter of unveiling the shortfalls of existing benchmarking methods and their geographical bias, or of criticising the corporatization of urban comparison, but it is also a matter of understanding what forms of legibility and interventions such tools create and perpetuate. As the authors point out, the reductionist aspect of many rankings and benchmarks also requires us to interrogate the possibilities of transformative knowledge practices, albeit within a framework that inevitably puts forward competitive framings of comparison. The extent to which academics will be able to shape such comparative gestures in a more progressive way, for instancing stressing the value of *learning* - rather than competing - through comparison, remains to be seen. This might not easily be achieved within the scope of quantitative metrics and lists, as more qualitative forms of global knowledge production would seem better suited to the development of more nuanced and non-hierarchical comparative urban imaginations. Furthermore, in their call for an engagement with

the producers and consumers of benchmarking, rankings and indexes, the authors mention private and public sectors as key audiences to work with for “broadening the landscape of comparative imagination to better account for those cities and urban experiences still often missing.” However, redressing these imbalances is not just a question of encouraging professional city benchmarkers to adjust faulty methodologies or to add names to the list of cities that are usually featured in global rankings, indexes and benchmarks. It is also, as I just argued, about reframing the will to compare (and to be compared) in more collaborative, and less competitive, terms. In this regard engagement with civil society groups and social movements, such as those acting for housing, social and environmental justice, within and across cities to provide alternative comparative imaginations could help make different forms of urban struggles across the globe visible, for instance producing comparable metrics on evictions and displacements, race and gender based income inequalities, uneven exposure to environmental risks and to create new forms of urban imaginaries within and beyond benchmarks.

To conclude, this intervention hoped to complement the points raised by the authors in highlighting the need to evaluate the scale at which scholarly engagement with benchmarks can be useful, in what ways, for whom, and what capacity it might require from urban scholars themselves. For instance, as the authors suggest, engaging with global circuits of urban knowledge production can help publicising long-standing academic concerns on the limits of such metrics and of the contemporary global urban imagination amongst audiences of travelling mayors, city officials and index, benchmark and rankings producers. More locally, understanding whether and how such tools are used to inform particular interventions, and with what effects, can help elucidate whether benchmarks, rankings, and indexes do matter beyond the global urban solutions circuit, and can open avenues for academics to engage in collaborations to advance more progressive and inclusive knowledge practices. Another site of critical engagement with these devices, both locally and globally, necessitates that academics do not to lose sight of their inherently selective effects and of their capacity to obscure pressing urban issues, and that they actively partake in the production of comparative imaginations and tactics that address those.

McArthur, J., & Robin, E. (2019). Victims of their own (definition of) success: Urban discourse and expert knowledge production in the Liveable City. *Urban Studies*, 56(9), 1711-1728.

Robin, E., & Acuto, M. (2018). Global urban policy and the geopolitics of urban data. *Political Geography*, 66, 76-87.