

Global cities are not global cities after all: the surprising big secret of global city research, rankings, and action

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The meaning of the concept of global cities has changed considerably from its modern origins to present day. Initially only some cities used to be described as so. Now the “global city” is linked to a range of new qualifications usually related to good meanings: cosmopolitan, diverse, updated, or modern (MARCUSE, 2006; KING, 2006). Currently many cities are described as global (TAYLOR, 2008). It incorporated several new topics inside this conceptualization: migration influence, cultural exchange, and other social factors (SASSEN, 2001; SAMERS 2002; BRENNER AND KEIL, 2014). Despite this fact, few researchers are focused on this transformation, preferring to do broader literature reviews (ACUTO, 2011) or simply ignoring this issue, using new partial broader definitions.

The current importance of this term for urban policy around the world makes necessary a more detailed review of these semantic changes. During my research I observed the influence of a new set of actors in the global city conceptualization: consulting firms. They are linked sometimes to academia but usually are better connected to media, policy makers, and powerful investors. They partially help to explain the widening of the global city concept. Presently they are the largest disseminators of the global city idea. Scholars are not anymore the main font of information.

The number of sources about global cities found on Google are much larger than the ones found about consolidated topics like “urban planning” or “globalization”. People talks about global cities. Media uses the term very often. Almost every city in the world would like to be one (LONGWORTH, 2015). The global city idea is a fundamental ingredient of the discourse of several city leaders in the world. It does help to justify changes in many of our cities. Sao Paulo Municipality has an international

relations office with the attribution to sell the city as a “global city”. Rio de Janeiro is following the same path: big events, large urban interventions, and city branding.

As a result, this paper has two main goals. The first is to build a better understanding of this evolutionary process. In order to do so, the main authors, books, and definitions are categorized in a matrix in order to build a better comprehension of the actors involved. Global city theory is only one of several parts of the global city idea. Theory and practice are getting farther. Images produced by media agents or available on internet, discourses made by politicians associated to city investors, and rankings linked to readings developed by specialized consulting firms are now as important as the initial theory produced by the authors that coined the term.

Second, this paper discusses deeper the role of these new players in the global city arena: consulting firms. The global city rankings present in reports made mainly by these big consulting companies (AT Kearney’s, JPMorgan Chase, and The Economist Magazine associated to Citigroup) in the last decade are added to this equation. These companies’ publications are currently fundamental for studies about global city concept assimilation and application (LEFF AND PETERSEN; 2015). Only in the late 2000’s, this new set of firms took a leading role in the global city discussions. Neil Brenner edited with Roger Keil the classical Global City Reader (BRENNER AND KEIL, 2006): there is no mention about consulting firms producing rankings or influencing global cities concepts. This needs to be addressed.

The misconceptions about global cities date back almost to the same time of its formulation (FRIEDMAN, 1996; SHORT 1998; KING, 2000; SASSEN, 2001). They are often misunderstood but they are also sometimes intentionally misrepresented or misused. This political economy tension has been a large source of debate among scholars (ACUTO AND STEELE, 2013; SASSEN, 2001; YEOH, 1999). Global city concept needs to be understood inside a new historical moment. The title of the paper is a provocation using a similar title of the seminal paper, maybe the first, to harshly criticize the global city theory (SHORT et. al., 1996). This paper fills this historical gap connecting recent research and theory to present practice.