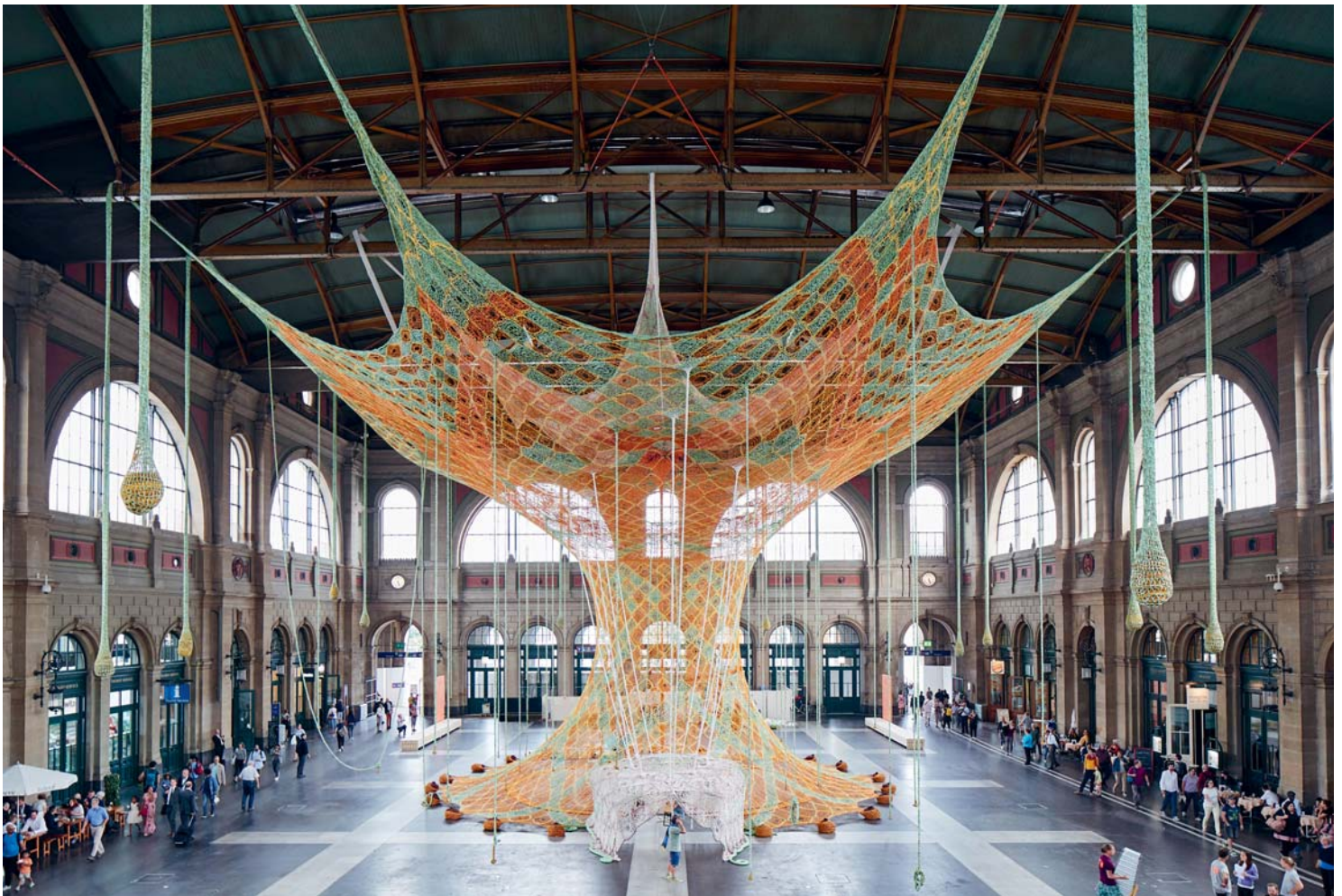


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ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES FOR SCIENCE AND SOCIETY
ÖKOLOGISCHE PERSPEKTIVEN FÜR WISSENSCHAFT UND GESELLSCHAFT



- IMPERIAL MODE OF LIVING AND SUSTAINABILITY
- URBAN TRANSFORMATION ON THE RIGHT TRACK?
- CHALLENGES OF TD PROJECT DESIGN

In Search of a Decolonial Urban Transformation

*We ask whether the WBGU report *Humanity on the Move*, as a major catalyst for urban sustainability science and agency, reproduces ways of thinking that could ultimately contradict the idea of a Great Transformation towards global sustainability. We contest the dominance of Western knowledge on cities and urbanization which shapes much of the report, even while the urban future is largely unfolding in the Global South. We suggest taking theories from the South into account, as they open up our understanding of both urban scholarship and sustainability science in general.*

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The 21st century is undoubtedly urban and it is the century in which human-environment relationships need to be transformed to achieve sustainability. Cities are considered to be nuclei for these transformations, which adds urgency to the urban question. Important impulses on both transformation and the urban have been offered by the German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU). Their flagship reports, such as *World in Transition: A Social Contract for Sustainability* (WBGU 2011) and the more recent *Humanity on the Move: Unlocking the Transformative Power of Cities* (WBGU 2016), have sparked debates about urbanization and transformation (Rink et al. 2015, Bauriedl 2015). Because the WBGU's aim is to synthesize scientific findings and stimulate academic inquiry as well as to push societal debates and political agency, we find it important to examine underlying framings and ideas on the urban.

The WBGU builds on their 2011 report by applying the “Great Transformation”, which they understand as “imminent change in politics, economy and society” (WBGU 2011, p. 81), towards urban sustainability. One underpinning of transformation shall be “to reduce the considerable social and economic inequalities and to prevent the social, political and cultural marginalization and exclusion of – in some cases sizeable – sections of the population in urban societies” (WBGU 2011, p. 3). We find that aim highly relevant, as it includes processes of marginalization and suppression in the scholarly purview on transformation. Against this background

and on the heels of a deep learning process of our own, namely the Trier Summer University *Decolonizing Urbanism*¹, we reflect on the WBGU report *Humanity on the Move*. We draw on the Southern Urbanism school of thought (Robinson 2006, Nair 2013, Peck 2015, Schindler 2017) to ask the question, in how far and by what means the report reproduces colonial, dominantly European perspectives on urbanism. The epistemic foundations underlying the report have profound implications for how we imagine urban futures and how we design urban governance – ever more as the WBGU acknowledges a need for more urban transformation research (WBGU 2016, p. 451). In this still nascent research state, we see an opportunity and necessity for starting a decolonial discourse.²

Thinking Beyond Historicized Colonial Eras and Places for the Great Transformation

While defined in myriad ways, the notion of transformation generally involves a deliberate and fundamental shift in societal practices and thinking to curtail long-term negative consequences of environmental change (O'Brien 2012, p. 673). Transformation researchers from various disciplines have discussed the transfor-

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1 The Trier Summer University *Decolonizing Urbanism: Transformative Perspectives* brought together an interdisciplinary and international group for a week of collective learning. Keynotes are online at <https://www.uni-trier.de/index.php?id=62009> and on YouTube.

2 We acknowledge that the use of categories such as “Global North” and “Global South” again set up simplistic orderings that we critique in our text.

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mation concept's strengths and shortcomings. Brand, for example, has noted that "the strategic usage of the transformation concept does not pay sufficient attention to the structural obstacles to far-reaching transformation processes" (Brand 2016, p. 25). Also the state itself as an actor in transformation cannot be seen as a neutral institution but rather as a social relation that often reproduces existing nature-society relations (Görg et al. 2017). Similarly one should question to what extent many sustainability-related research frameworks actually amount to "reducing unsustainability, while keeping the underlying world order and vision in place" (Escobar 2017, p. 239). Moreover, how is this world order hindering sustainable (urban) transformations?

Globally, the genesis of many sustainability challenges are, as we see it, actually colonial in nature, from natural resource extraction (Gilberthorpe and Rajak 2017) to global environmental issues such as land-use change, biodiversity loss and climate change (Adger et al. 2001), as well as gender discrimination (Oyěwùmí 2011) and racism (Stam and Spence 1983). Colonialism and imperialism have constituted the major global spatial organization scheme for several centuries (King 1989) and resulted in major shifts in human-nature relations, rapid environmental change, and the onset of the Anthropocene (Reo and Parker 2013, Lightfoot et al. 2013). Modern efforts to abate these challenges via environmental management and urban planning can often be traced back to colonial and neocolonial practices (Ha and Schneider 2016, Zwischenraum-Kollektiv 2017). Thus, colonial forces and structures present wide-reaching contemporary obstacles for transformations to sustainability, and a decolonizing perspective could contribute to the debate. Even more since the WBGU's aim (2016, p. 4) is to "highlight the diversity of cities, urban societies and the related plurality of transformation pathways towards sustainability".

While the term "colonial" is still commonly used in a limited, historical sense, postcolonial and decolonial theory researchers situate colonial forces affecting being, knowledge, and power in contemporary times and beyond political colonies (Grosfoguel 2009, Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 2016). Decolonial thinking involves actively delinking from Eurocentric ideas, knowledges and beliefs and embracing and reclaiming languages, social organizations, memories, economies, and land that was subsumed by colonialism (Bhambra 2014, Mignolo 2011, p. 63). While the issue of racial demarcations within urban planning is frequently an important component of the literature on colonial cities, Bonnett (2002, p. 352) states that the larger issue of "the racialized nature of Westernization" remains undiscussed. The WBGU report, so we argue, contributes to a further Westernization of the debate, even while many urban scholars today show the relevancy of colonialism in the production and reproduction of space globally as well as in European metropolises (Ha 2014, p. 43). Both in urban research and activism, there is a growing awareness to situating colonial forces and encounters in European cities such as in Berlin (Graaff and Ha 2015) or Barcelona (Azarmandi and Hernandez 2017). Contemporary urban studies increasingly involve decolonial and anti-racist perspectives, in part due to the dramatic visibility of inequalities during recent urban crises. During the 2014 Flint, Michigan

water crisis, for instance, the world learned of a struggling, postindustrial city with a largely nonwhite population that was poisoned by their own tap water. Such incidents show how urban, socio-ecological conditions are shaped by investments in infrastructure and property – or the lack thereof (Heynen 2016, p. 839). Globally, many urban inequalities persist from historical colonial conditions, and are reproduced by neocolonial donor interventions as, for example, in the case of the water supply in Accra, Ghana. In Accra, the colonial infrastructural layout still shapes intra-urban geographies and inequalities (Bruns and Frick 2014).

Colonialism in Contemporary Urban Scholarship and Planning

From this starting point, we consider the WBGU report on cities and urbanism through five key aspects: the report's use and reach of colonialism, a consideration of race and "other", the complexity of participation, the leitmotif *Eigenart* and the need to incorporate Southern Urbanism into the transformative power of cities.

To begin with, colonialism is treated in the report in a limited sense as a historical phase of development for former colonies (e. g., the report's case cities on Mumbai and São Paulo). While Mumbai explicitly serves as an example of a colonial city, an analysis from a decolonial perspective is largely missing. Colonialism is depicted as an historical event, visible only in the urban form: "The peninsula of Mumbai is characterized by its colonial past. By 1948, more than 16,500 colonial structures and residential streets had been built there [...] and numerous architecturally unique streetscapes and ensembles. Since the onset of liberalization policies in 1991, a new cityscape has come to the fore: large-scale construction projects, office buildings, high-rise estates and expansive shopping malls have begun to supplant the colonial heritage" (WBGU 2016, p. 211). This focus on urban form and architecture decontextualizes and depoliticizes colonialism. The geographic referencing furthermore aligns with a European tendency to attach colonialism to specific localities, even while an assemblage of colonial tactics and processes persist today in the governance of cities worldwide (figure 1).

The report also reproduces a colonial tendency found in many German urban planning reports, namely the calling out of immigrant neighborhoods. In such reports, communities with a high share of immigration are singled out, as Ha and Schneider (2016, p. 51) show through the example of a Hamburg planning report in which immigrant children were used as a social indicator. Somewhat similarly, Turkish and Eastern European immigrants in the Ruhr area are called out in the WBGU report. A subtitle in the section about the Ruhr area reads "cultural difference" and is, in fact, entirely about immigration (WBGU 2016, p. 265). This creates an "other" status for immigrants in comparison with the supposed German norm. More problematically, as explained by Loomba (2015) and Shooman (2014), creating a status of difference (othering) falls in line with neo-racism (racism without race) targeted at Muslim immigrants which believes that "Muslims are *culturally*,

rather than biologically, different from Christians". Thus, "culture can function as an inflexible barrier" (Lomba 2015, p. 123). The oversimplified binary between "host" and "migrant" groups rests on an untested assumption that each ethnic group is characterized by a singular, distinct culture (Tasan-Kok et al. 2013, p. 61). Elsewhere, pilot projects involving the "hyperdiversity" approach have been used as an alternative in which diverse population aspects are viewed more broadly and in ways that relate to many urban planning questions, such as lifestyle needs, leisure activities, and attitudes in open spaces (Tasan-Kok et al. 2013).

Likewise, one must consider for what reason and where the WBGU's "target-group-specific interventions" (WBGU 2016, p. 408) are meant to occur. Central throughout the report are references to participation as an instrument for effective and inclusive urban planning. The WBGU (2016, p. 107) states "participation instruments increase the responsibility and accountability of decision-makers but are dependent on a minimum level of transparency". Yet, as Zavala (2013) rightly asks, how does participation ensure that the interests of historically marginalized peoples are represented, especially when they are "carried out within colonizing spaces, such as universities and public school bureaucracies" (Zavala 2013, p. 60)? Here, the WBGU (2016, p. 239) presents Copenhagen as interesting example because the city set up a "Diversity Board" to create a social space beyond the formal governance system. The design of such spaces affects inclusion and participation in urban life (see Azarmandi and Hernandez 2017), and it is, by the way, an aspect in the debate around real world laboratories (see Schöpke et al. 2018) that has not been examined in-depth.

The term *Eigenart* (character) describes one of the report's three dimensions of the WBGU normative compass for the transformation towards sustainability. The two other dimensions are sustaining natural-life-support systems and inclusion. The WBGU (2016, p. 142) defines *Eigenart* of urban areas as "urbanity as a whole, i.e., the 'face' of a city, which has both evolved historically and been created by everyday urban practices". While the report attempts to utilize *Eigenart* in an inclusionary context, the term warrants rethinking. "Social cohesion" as central component of *Eigenart* for the WBGU (2016, p. 146) is couched in discussions of inclusion, which rings an assimilatory note. The *Eigenart* term is also awkwardly applied to the report's international examples, such as the loss of historical authenticity in the wake of

modern densification in Guangzhou (WBGU 2016, p. 255). Native Studies scholars have examined the complexity of authenticity in a colonial sense (Griffiths 1994). There have been pressures for colonized persons to either remain authentic or "real" in a singular, historicized sense or to manufacture authenticity for contemporary capital gain (Raibmon 2005, p. 11). Urban scholarship should be careful with recommendations in which Western urban development norms are applied to non-Western regions: this may be perceived as Western acculturation (Njoh 2010, p. 376). Rather, urban studies scholarship today finds itself in a conceptual move away from reducing urbanization to a European project that diffused across the world (Sheppard et al. 2015, p. 1950). Some scholars therefore suggest situating urban theory development to better capture geographical contexts and historical legacies (Lawhon et al. 2014), which brings us to the subject of Southern Urbanism.

Learning from the South

As demonstrated through processes of "othering", racialization, and the transplanting of assumed norms and ideas, our lens for seeing and knowing the urban needs refocusing. According to Roy (2009, p. 820), "the urban future already lay elsewhere: in the cities of the global South, in cities such as Shanghai, Cairo, Mumbai, Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro, Dakar, and Johannesburg". Although this implies we cannot ignore ideas and imaginaries from the South or remain ignorant on Southern cities' representations, much of the academic evidence and theory on urbanism is based on Western academic thought (Simon 2016, Ernstson et al. 2013).

As seen in the WBGU report's glossary, many prominent urban concepts and ordering mechanisms warrant revision for the contexts of Southern cities. Analytical concepts such as "gentrification" are unsuited to places with fundamentally different political economies of land and displacement tactics (see Ghertner

FIGURE 1: Different building types in Jamestown, one of the oldest districts in Accra. One could argue that in this picture colonialism is depicted as an historical relict, still visible in the urban form and attached to a specific location. Decolonizing urbanism is, however, an epistemic reconstruction in order to show that there are more forms of understanding the city than Eurocentric ones.





FIGURE 2: A truck with Sachet Water (drinking water in little plastic bags) which is to be sold by street vendors. Sachet water is an example of water supply beyond networked water infrastructure. This drinking water is, however, much more expensive than water from the tap and therefore a result of, and vector for, water inequality.

essential for transformative changes in the urban, but we urgently need to understand these processes better. Another example: urban social movements fighting for the democratization of urban infrastructures to regain control over water, energy and other supply systems can act as game changer. An in-depth examination of these processes and struggles may help to acknowledge the plurality of perspectives on urban realities (Escobar 2016) and to be more reflexive of our own location and blind spots.

2015 for India). One might ask whether this notion of gentrification exists at all in, for instance, Accra. Or are concepts to capture varying processes of displacement still missing in the global urban lexicon?

Southern Urbanism is about rethinking our understanding of cities, with the South at the core and starting point of both empirical analysis and theorization (e. g., Agyeman et al. 2003, Myers 2011, Pieterse 2008, Pieterse and Simone 2013). However, these theories and empirical examples – all of them published and hence accessible – are largely missing in the WBGU report as the reference list shows. Engaging with this body of work could stimulate our own thinking about recent transformation challenges and possible futures. A key transformation aspect is for example the infrastructural challenge. Here, more differentiated understandings suggest taking into account that urban water systems can operate beyond the pipe and thereby flexibly complement the networked infrastructure system (see Alba and Bruns 2016) (figure 2). In Germany's shrinking cities water networks are of increasing concern for urban planners, and a collective process of learning and experimentation on how to design, implement and maintain infrastructures could be most fruitful.

Likewise, through a critical look at the history of urban modernization efforts in Mexico, Jiménez (2011) shows how popular, resident-led improvements to public plazas and other spaces have challenged systems of control and enabled local traditions of selling goods. Such improvements by “popular modernizers” are often seen as a failure of the modern state as an infrastructure provider and regulator of space rather than as a model for local initiative (Jiménez 2011). Recent studies on peri-urban dynamics show the creativity and solidarity of many urban dwellers to sustain access to basic needs. In Accra's rapidly expanding urban fringes, for example, water is sometimes given away for free to neighbors, friends or family (Bartels and Bruns 2016). Hence, solidarity and sharing have momentum in many urban areas and may prove es-

Conclusion

We find ourselves at a critical junction for urban transformation in which our understanding of the world is being challenged at every turn. As discussed, much academic and urban policy work continues to reproduce colonial thinking that is characterized by a certain blindness to uneven urban geographies and inequalities within a city, between cities, and between geographies of knowledge. A truly transformative agenda must be reflexive and incorporate different knowledges about sustainable urban pathways. Future WBGU reports could benefit by directly involving and citing authors, scholars, and activists from diverse backgrounds and disciplines – including decolonial perspectives – as this might enable us to see formerly obscured transformative options.

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