Editorial: Relational approaches to urban sustainability governance

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Editorial on the Research Topic
Relational approaches to urban sustainability governance

Questions of sustainability continue to play a major role in urban development and governance discussions and debates. As the locus of most of humanity's production, consumption (reproduction), and mobility practices, cities cannot be anything other than major contributors to our inter-connected social, economic, and environmental crises. Yet, it does not necessarily follow that because cities are a major part of the sustainability problem, they are also the primary locus of sustainability solutions (Angelo and Wachsmuth, 2020).

Urban sustainability policy has long had a localist focus, proceeding from a city-centric localist ontology (MacLeod and Jones, 2011; Angelo and Wachsmuth, 2015) that often leads to attempts to achieve "sustainability in one place" (Miller and Mössner, 2020). These policies, while well-intentioned and indeed effective in some regards, can nonetheless produce unintended consequences such as eco-gentrification, socio-spatial polarization, and more and longer commuting. At the heart of the problem is the tendency to treat cities (or neighborhoods) as entities unto themselves, while the spatial constitution of the processes that shape cities—and their sustainability challenges—is multi-faceted and diverse, often reaching far beyond municipal boundaries and far "above" municipal government (Dierwechter, 2019).

Rather than understanding cities as discrete places or territories in charge of their own destinies, urban scholars increasingly look to understand cities relationally—as nodes of interaction in multiple fields of spatially articulating processes. If one moves away from the notion of cities as discrete entities to cities as relationally produced, one also has to rethink urban governance. The concept of urban governance cannot be limited to the territorially bounded politics and policies of city councils or neighborhood associations. Rather, urban governance has multiple scales, territories, networks, and places, articulating in complex ways, with profound consequences for greener development strategies. The implications of this broader relational conceptualization for urban sustainability governance is our focus in this Research Topic.

Since the sustainability turn of the 1990s, city-centric localist ontologies have underpinned green governance regimes' political and policy efforts to forge urban sustainability in one place. Such efforts have typically focused on rearranging key "traits," such as homogeneous, segregated, discontinuous, and low-density residential land uses, which appear "in" space as free-floating objects because they are, in part, immobile and

FIGURE 1
Governing "urban" traits as relational processes.
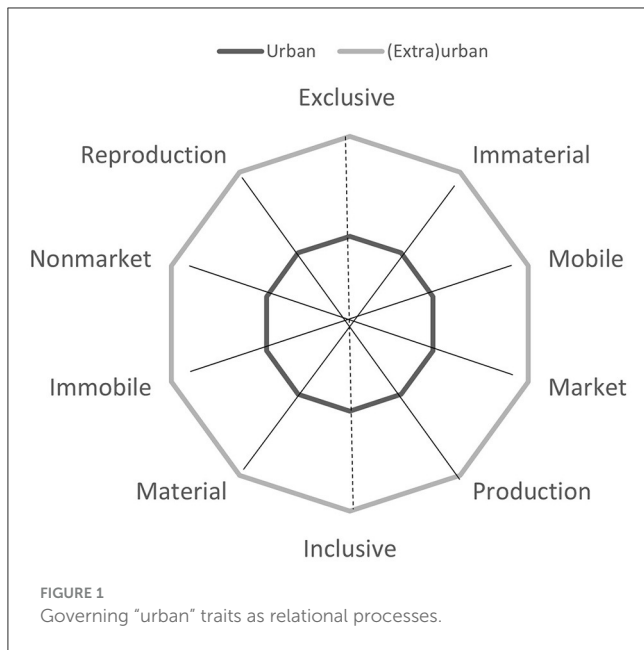
material "things." Progressive efforts at social inclusion are thus rendered spatial efforts to move local "things" around, e.g., into mixed-use, transit-oriented developments through territorialized local planning tools like targeted up-zoning or, in some recent cases in North America, the elimination of single-family zones altogether (Manville et al., 2020). A great deal of research on "urban" sustainability (compact cities, smart growth, new urbanism, complete streets, etc.) is about the theoretical promise of how immobile and material things "in" legally, electorally, and administratively bounded cities *can* over time help to occasion more social and economic inclusion in place. This is understandable. City-centric research follows city-centric practice targeting the "the malleable areal" (Miller and Ponto, 2016), much of which is worthy of detailed attention: e.g., the use of superblocks "in" Barcelona that facilitate walking; a nascent car-free zone "in" Berlin the size of Manhattan; a carbon-neutral neighborhood "in" Freiburg; a net-zero building "in" Sydney. These things are still more exception than norm—and the exceptional attracts attention.

As suggested by Figure 1, however, relational approaches to urban sustainability governance instead imagine urban things (typically mapped as sedentary, bounded traits inside stable nodes) as networked and multi-scalar dynamic *relationships* that dialectically connect urban and extraurban places, including adjacent suburbs, regional economies, bioregional ecosystems, and national and global flows of policies, rules, ideas, and commodities.

Harvey (1996) argues that we must shift our urban ontology from "cities" *stricto sensu* to wider urbanization processes— a perspective dominant in Lefebvrean-inspired research. This approach connects the mobile with the immobile (Miller and Ponto, 2016); the material with the immaterial; and, not least, processes of inclusion with relationships of exclusion—all requiring us to jump scales and trace how specific flows become momentarily fixed in urban places. The contradictory nature of *emplaced relationships* is critical. More generally, Beauregard (2018) argues that cities today—as in the past—are inherently contradictory

spaces: concomitant processes of inclusion and exclusion play out, for instance, through the often co-constitutive production of sustainability and unsustainability—or even more appropriately for us here, the co-constitutive production of sustainability *through* unsustainability. Including some people in one (green) place may mean excluding others in less green places, for example through "smart segregation" (Dierwechter, 2017); reimaging cities through green forms of reproduction (e.g., affordable housing, pocket sparks, ICT grids) may mean banishing spaces of production to distant others both within home regions and well-beyond them. Greening the "urban", in other words, means rethinking how we govern cities through multiple scales, territories, networks, and places, wherein "the spaces of urban politics" (Ward et al., 2018) foreground a nuanced green geography of sustainable societies.

Political efforts to govern "urban" sustainability increasingly recognize the challenges of relational politics and interconnections among places. New practices of "city-regionalism," as Andy Jonas, Sami Moisio and others have repeatedly pointed out, link together urban, suburban, exurban, and rural zones into wider territorial governance coalitions around managing problems of production, reproduction, and circulation (Jonas, 2012; Moisio and Jonas, 2018). In some cases, as Benner and Pastor (2012) have shown in the US context, such practices can forge new "epistemic communities" that emphasize the political and economic importance of regionally sustainable "just growth", rather than merely more growth. New, emerging forms of inter-city regionalism that are also international frequently foreground wider sustainability benefits. Examples in Europe abound, particularly around coordinated high-speed rail investments and plans. Efforts to create a "Cascadia Innovation Corridor" connecting British Columbia, Washington, and Oregon offer a prominent North American example (see https://www.cascadianow.org/). The explosion of transnational municipal policy networks focused on climate mitigation and adaption is yet another example of how the "urban" politics of greener cities jumps scales, forging new relationships among urban, national, and international institutions but also a new "sideways geopolitics" among cities discomfited with national carbon inaction (Dierwechter, 2019).

Author contributions

Funding

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

The author(s) declared that they were an editorial board member of Frontiers, at the time of submission. This had no impact on the peer review process and the final decision.

Publisher's note

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