

ESSAY

Global Cities: A New Hierarchy and Critical Assessment of the Post-Colonial Legacy

Ciudades Globales: Una Nueva Jerarquía y una Evaluación Crítica del Legado Postcolonial

David Garnier Méndez ¹

How to cite:

Garnier Méndez, D. (2025). Global Cities: A New Hierarchy and Critical Assessment of the Post-Colonial Legacy. *Derecho en Sociedad*, 19(1), PP. 214-222. Doi: 10.63058/des.v19i1.317

Submission received: 3 January 2025. **Accepted:** 5 February 2025.

¹ David Garnier Méndez es Máster en Relaciones Internacionales por la Universidad Pompeu Fabra, la Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona y la Universidad de Barcelona. Cuenta con una licenciatura con énfasis en Estudios de Paz por la Universidad Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific; realizó sus estudios de pregrado en Relaciones Internacionales en la misma universidad; tiene más de 6 años de experiencia docente en el ámbito universitario, actualmente se desempeña como profesor asociado en la Escuela de Relaciones Internacionales de la Universidad Latinoamericana de Ciencia y Tecnología; ha publicado recientemente dos artículos en la revista Rhombus; es asesor del prestigioso programa de investigación Delfin para los años 2024 y 2025; ha sido reconocido por su labor docente en los años 2023 y 2024 en San José, Costa Rica; a lo largo de su trayectoria académica, ha sido beneficiario de diversas becas, entre las que destacan la Beca de la Universidad Ritsumeikan de Asia Pacífico (2019-2021), la Beca de honor Monbukagakusho (2017-2019), la Beca JASSO (2017-2018) y la Beca Rupee (2015-2017). ORCID: 0009-0003-8532-0088. Correo electrónico: davidgarniermendez@outlook.com

Abstract

With the increasing human migration to cities, the relevance of global cities at the international level is becoming more evident. Nonetheless, a concrete definition of what is needed for a city to become global has not been formulated. The existing system that identifies cities as global is highly embedded in the colonial past and perpetuates a hierarchical system born from the colonial legacy. Therefore, this research paper intersects the significant factors that indexes utilize to evaluate a city in terms of its global output and highlights the relevant connection of the factors to the colonial legacy of yore. The social normative conditioning of the citizenry inhabiting these urban centers and the discrepancy in city resiliency byproduct of a disparity in resource availability. Furthermore, the inequality in resource allocation has created a perpetuation in the inability to become resilient to modern transnational problems and transboundary issues, fostering the disparity between emerging cities and global cities. Finally, this paper seeks to aid in the post-colonial discourse of the international relations discipline and calls for a conjoint interdisciplinary approach to emancipate the classification of cities from the contemporary colonial hierarchical system.

Keywords: global cities, post-colonialism, urbanization, hierarchical systems, international relations, Marxism, normative behavior, city resiliency.

Resumen

Con el aumento de la migración humana a las ciudades, la relevancia de las ciudades globales a nivel internacional se hace más evidente. No obstante, no se ha formulado una definición concreta de lo que se necesita para que una ciudad se convierta en global. El sistema existente que identifica a las ciudades como globales está altamente arraigado en el pasado colonial y perpetúa un sistema jerárquico nacido del legado colonial. Por lo tanto, este trabajo de investigación cruza los factores significativos que los índices utilizan para evaluar una ciudad en términos de su producción global y destaca la conexión relevante de los factores con el legado colonial de antaño. El condicionamiento normativo social de la ciudadanía que habita estos centros urbanos y la discrepancia en la resiliencia de las ciudades como subproducto de una disparidad en la disponibilidad de recursos. Además, la desigualdad en la asignación de recursos ha creado una perpetuación en la incapacidad de ser resiliente a los problemas transnacionales modernos y los problemas transfronterizos, fomentando la disparidad entre las ciudades emergentes y las ciudades globales. Finalmente, este artículo busca ayudar en el discurso poscolonial de la disciplina de las relaciones internacionales y hace un llamado a un enfoque interdisciplinario conjunto para emancipar la clasificación de las ciudades del sistema jerárquico colonial contemporáneo.

Palabras clave: ciudades globales, post-colonialismo, urbanización, sistemas jerárquicos, relaciones internacionales, marxismo, comportamiento normativo, resiliencia urbana.

Introduction

What do the cities of Xi'an during the Han Dynasty in ancient China, Athens during ancient Greece, and Rome during the Roman Empire have in common? Despite differing in time and space, these major cities of old were crucial cornerstones for trade and communication on a global scale during their respective eras. They became staples of foreign relations and served as hubs of information and networking. In the past century, cities like London, Tokyo, and New York have taken on similar roles, becoming new crown jewels for human interaction and information. Today, they are regarded as 'global cities.'

The term 'global city' has had many attempts to be defined. The most relevant definition for the term has come to be understood as "an image of an urban place that is contemporary, international, multicultural, 'wired,' cosmopolitan, polarizing and having geographically boundless power" (Boschken, 2008, p.3). These hubs of global power have been developing since the rise of nation-states. Nonetheless, their importance has spiked, particularly during the past 20 years due to globalization. These emerging epicenters for human networking in migratory, economic, social, and political dimensions have expanded beyond conventional borders and delimitations. An estimated projection has evaluated that these centers of human interaction will become a permanent settlement for more than "68 % of the worldwide population by 2050" (United Nations: Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2018).

Consequently, this projection creates the desire for any city to be regarded as 'global.' However, the road towards achieving the status of 'global' has not been smooth and without complications; similarly, to the langsyne cities of the past, the membership to the club of 'global cities' has a lot of restrictions and requirements. The Global-Northern metropolises have ostracized and defined the characterization of what is required for a city to become 'global,' and as a consequence, other cities that do not fit the model have been relegated to the status of developing or aspiring cities. The repercussion of such action has created a new hierarchical structure in the international order. Therefore, what factors are needed for a city to become global? Hence, this paper will analyze the factors and indicators required for a city to become 'global' to evaluate the impact of the hierarchical structure on aspiring global cities.

Global Cities a reflection of Traditional Multilateralism and the resilience of post-colonial theory

Global Cities, like traditional multilateralism, have been shaped by figures of authority and power commonly found within the Global North. Similar to the dominant powers in multilateralism (e.g., nation-states with nuclear weapons), Global-Northern metropolises have influenced and narrowed the factors that define a city as "global" under a Foucauldian panoptic view. Consequently, emerging cities primarily located in the Global South have automatically fallen into a hierarchical system where the agents of power (Global-North metropolises) are at the top, dictating the requirements

to join the club of 'global cities.' Lake (2003) elaborates on this similarity between the hierarchical system within global cities and multilateralism by arguing that units of power define international structures. As long as significant powers flourish within the system, the structure will be defined and shaped according to them (Lake, 2003, p.306). In other words, as long as the major powers at the pinnacle of the system continue to gain power, the system is unlikely to change; hence, the current 'global cities' (e.g., London, New York, Tokyo) establish the conditions required to become a 'global city.'

The existence of the hierarchical system presents a problem that is often criticized, especially by proponents of post-colonial theories. These scholars focus on the intersections of empire, race/ethnicity, gender, and class (among other factors) in the workings of global power that reproduce a hierarchical international relations (IR) system (Nair, 2018, p.1). Therefore, the factors necessary for a city to become 'global' must be examined to evaluate how the prevalence of oppression operates within this system. However, the factors that define a 'global city' are not consistent within the available data and literature. Consequently, the Global Power City Index (GPCI) and Global Cities Outlook (GCO) represent the most reliable data sources for establishing a pattern or identifying factors.

Prevalence of Colonial Heritage at the 'global'

The GPCI and GCO measure the 'global' status of cities differently; however, both indexes agree that the necessary attribute for a city to become global relies on the ability to harvest power in terms of economic, political, and social areas. The GPCI (2021) identifies global cities as harvesting hubs of "magnetism," or their ample power to attract people, capital, and enterprises from around the world." (Mori Foundation, 2021, p.1). Similarly, the GCO (2021) identifies global cities as centers that create "conditions for their future status as global hubs. These are measured across four dimensions: personal well-being, economics, innovation, and governance" (Nasar et al. 1, 2021, p.4).

Both indexes utilize different indicators for determining the level of 'global' for cities; nonetheless, three central components seem to be shared among both data sources: economy, welfare, and governability. The economic dimension evaluates wealth in terms of investment and material aspects. Within these dimensions, the leading cities in terms of the economy between both indexes are predominantly Global-Northern metropolises such as London, New York, and Tokyo. This accentuates the predominant supremacy of developed nations' economies over developing economies.

The assessment of the economic nexus within the indexes does not consider aspects such as the global history of development. This concept is related to the historical antecedent of developed nations in terms of the industrialization gained during the exploitation of the colonial period by developed nations. In other words, these cities have profited from the inherited post-colonial

legacy in the form of being hubs of production. As a byproduct of the colonial institutionalization during the colonial era, developing cities have been forced to compete against developed cities with unstable economies and a severe lack of opportunities.

Moreover, Acemoğlu & Robinson (2017) explain that these institutions left from the colonial period are the prime causes for the modern inconveniences that developing nations economies face today, which as a consequence “strip the vast mass of the population of incentives or opportunities, [which are] associated with poverty. It is also not a coincidence that such African societies are today as unequal as Latin American countries” (Acemoğlu & Robinson, 2017) in comparison to their European and North American counterparts. Hence, there is a significant disparity in terms of the index’s ranking in terms of economic wealth. The indexes reveal cities belonging to colonial metropolises at the top and cities belonging to previous colonies at the bottom of the list.

Welfare and governability, similar to the economic factor, are influenced by the colonial past and are often overlooked when addressing the status of ‘global.’ Racial capitalism and neoliberal urbanization have predominantly impacted cities in the Global South, preventing them from competing on an equal footing with the Global Northern metropolises. Moreover, in terms of welfare, the racial motives intertwined with capitalism have affected post-colonial cities by not “rendering all labor, resources, and markets across the world identical, but by precisely seizing upon colonial divisions, identifying particular regions for production and others for neglect, certain populations for exploitation and still others for disposal” (Danewid, 2020, p.291). Thus, the economic and welfare aspects intertwined with the colonial past have created an uneven playing field for cities, significantly disadvantaging those primarily located in the Global South.

Furthermore, in terms of governability, another crucial factor in the indexes to identify ‘global cities,’ there is a congruent alliance between racial capitalism and neoliberal urbanization. This alliance manifests in strategies for cities to become more ‘global,’ relying on “racialized policies and practices designed to ‘clean up the streets’ through revitalization programs and plans to displace existing inhabitants, who are cast as deviant, criminal, violent, and out of place” (Danewid, 2020, p.291). This, in turn, produces a racial structuring within ‘global cities.’ For instance, London, a leading city in both indexes, has maximized its power output according to the indexes, making it a leading global city.

An increasing problem remains within the city regarding racial structuring. Khan & Elahi (2017) elaborate on this notion by explaining that “although London is indeed a relatively open and global city, this does not mean that black and minority ethnic people experience equal opportunities or outcomes” (Khan & Elahi, 2016, p.5). Therefore, it questions whether the evaluation of the indexes in defining cities as ‘global’ should be replicated and proposed as a standard for all cities to achieve.

These three significant factors that both indexes consider essential for cities to become ‘global’ are remnants of the colonial legacy, and they inadvertently perpetuate the hierarchical system of oppression of yore. The standards from which cities are to become ‘global’ reveal a colonial bias

and explain how the standards of 'global cities' are skewed in favor of the once metropolises of the colonial empires.

Conditioning of the Normative Behavior of City Dwellers

The conditioning of normative behavior under the gaze of prime cities and the global north concerning the citizenry at these global hubs; prevents easy policy diffusion and convergence, creating a new stopping block for the spread and interchange of ideas between 'global cities' and emerging cities. Within the conditioning, the blocks that enable this normative change may be understood as the conformity, obedience, and compliance perceived by the urban dwellers in these metropolises.

Conformity as explained by Colombo & Lisciandra, 2024 can be linked to the geometry of the urban dwell center and what constitutes the good moral behavior of the citizenry. Furthermore, "cities can exemplify conformality by embodying some desired moral, as well as social and political order. In this sense, cities themselves exemplify compliance with normative principles by being designed in a way that reflects such principles " (Colombo & Lisciandra, 2024, p.4). It is therefore that ordered polity within the urban centers may foster an internalization of its inhabitants to adapt and adopt certain norms reinforcing socio-political norms described in a colonial system. Such norms could be considered resource competition and inequality to certain ethnic, social, economic, or political minorities.

Obedience is interpreted as a result of a new form of compliance and conformity within these urban centers. Byung Chul Han (2022, p.10) explains that societal behavior has defaulted into a surveillance system in which everyone is watching over everyone making oddities against conformity or in the understanding of constructivism; the agent primacy on the structure a feeble attempt to change the normative behavior. Furthermore, neoliberal institutional models utilize emotions within the mechanism of psych politics, as a form of capital that makes the individual whole (Chul Han, 2022, p. 48). Therefore, utilizing the psyche as a tool for obedience within societal normative behavior. Additionally, the usage of Big Data has become integral to the unconscious, and as a tool of obedience; the replication of the individual in terms of the self- quantity and self-surveillance is interpreted as an internal all-encompassing understanding. Causing the replication of the normative and moral standard within cities to be acceptable and it transcends into the metaphysical. An example of the latter is the role of social media in permutating what is morally accepted within society, making disobedience highly unfavorable and almost self-harming.

Compliance within the paradigm of normative behavior acceptable within these metropolises is understood therefore as a combination of the conformity and obedience mechanisms enacted within these urban hubs. Compliance at the societal level can be observed in qualitative aspects such as city laws and neighborhood laws. For example, women-only carts in the case of Tokyo or the cultural etiquette expected in places such as Osaka. The quantitative aspects of compliance can

be measured as it is within the aforementioned indexes with a positivist mindset. For example, they assess the quantity of embassies located within a city or the quantity of transnational companies situated in the city. It is the compliance of the system within these global cities that prolongs the inability to change and hence making those cities that do not fit the societal expectation so these metropolises unavailable to be named one. Permutating, therefore, the discourse of colonialism of the 'civilized cities' and the 'uncivilized cities'.

A Marxist Approach to Global Cities

Marx and Engels in their communist manifesto expressed the clash that exists between the 'proletariat' and the 'bourgeoisie'. This clash today is expressed within the gaze of the 'Global North' and 'Global South'. As shown within the data set of the World Bank of Income and Region distribution (2024), in which the high income is located within the 'Global North' meanwhile a discrepancy in terms of GINI per capita remains in the 'Global South'. Correlating this economic discrepancy with global cities, it can be understood in the accessibility to capital and hence the ability to be resilient against transboundary issues.

Most of these global cities have a vast amount of income to mitigate the adverse effects of climate change. Curtis and Acuto (2018) remark on the ability of cities to combat climate change by arguing that "cities have offered the possibility of an emergent political assemblage that can offer forms of governance that can match the scale and complexity of global challenges" (p.3). It is therefore not abnormal to see examples of thriving global cities such as Stockholm with its geothermically heating system or Tokyo's great barrier to mitigate the impact of the rising sea level.

Ribeiro & Gonçalves (2019 as cited in Holling (1973, p.17) explain that this ability of cities to endure transboundary and anthropogenic challenges can be understood as the phenomenon of "resilience [which] determines the persistence of relationships within a system and is a measure of the ability of these systems to absorb changes of state variables, driving variables, and parameters, and persist. In this definition, resilience is the property of the system, and persistence or probability of extinction is the result." Therefore, city resiliency can be understood as the ability of a city to persist and resist change brought by these transnational challenges.

City resiliency is directly correlated to the ability to amass resources. The inability of emerging cities to amass these resources accentuates the inability to evolve and fit the criteria of a global city under the gaze of the aforementioned indexes. Additionally, this discrepancy in resource allocation exacerbates and catalyzes the speed and magnitude in which these transboundary and anthropogenic challenges affect the quotidian of the citizens of these 'emerging cities'. For instance, in the effect of the rise of the sea level, for comparison, Tarawa would be affected disproportionately by this phenomenon than a city like Tokyo; due to the inability of the former to procure the capital to build a great sea barrier. This is further evidenced in the master's dissertation of Garnier (2022) in which as a conclusion it was found that a "second rivaling hypothesis arising from [the] study's

findings is that cities located within the global north have more opportunities to attenuate sea level rise than global south cities. This can be attributed to inequality in economic resources, economic growth, demographics, lack of investment and partners, development and sustainable capabilities, and the deep-rooted societal and economic problems within intra-generations” (p.23).

It is therefore until the breach in terms of resource allocation is solved, the city resiliency that permits these cities to keep contending and host a high number of urban dwellers will exacerbate the distinction between a ‘global city’ and an emerging city’. By solving this discrepancy an easier intercommunication and exchange of ideas could be achieved, bringing variety and innovation to the realm of global cities.

Conclusion

The status of ‘global cities’ correlates with good standings in terms of welfare, economy, and governance at the global level. Nonetheless, this research has demonstrated that these factors are deeply embedded in the colonial past, creating an alienation between the Northern Global cities and the Global Southern ones. Moreover, cities considered ‘global’ set a standard and precedent that aspiring cities must follow to join the fellowship. The emulation of these cities may perpetuate the ongoing colonial legacy that has impacted and affected many lives. Furthermore, the conditioning of global citizenry in terms of normative behavior found within these metropolises, through the application of conformity, obedience, and compliance, creates a new challenge for policy diffusion and convergence. Therefore, it is imperative to emancipate from this colonial heritage and rethink what ‘global cities’ are and what their thriving force should aspire to be.

With the projection of human migration increasing towards urban spaces (cities), the future and current ‘global cities’ must emancipate themselves from the colonial legacy. Furthermore, the discrepancy in resource allocation from a financial and economic dimension must be addressed to foster a break from the delineated division of the ‘Global North’ and the ‘Global South’. Moreover, the idea of a ‘global city’ should not be relevant only to the International Relations discipline. However, it should be prioritized through an interdisciplinary point of view to ensure that these future and current hubs of human networking will become more inclusive, progressive, innovative, and equal. Tucker (2018) elaborates on this by stating that scholars must “set out visions of how the coloniality of IR—the reproduction of colonial patterns of racial domination, hierarchization, and marginalization in the discipline—might be overcome.” (Tucker, 2018, p.215). Therefore, a call for further research through other disciplines’ points of view on the topic of this paper is vital; this is to guarantee an effective and collective solution to the problem found within cities.

References

- Acemoglu, D., & Robinson, J. (2017, January 30). The economic impact of colonialism. VOX, CEPR Policy Portal. Retrieved December 20, 2024, from <https://voxeu.org/article/economic-impact-colonialism>
- Boschken, H. L. (2008). A Multiple-perspectives Construct of the American Global City. *Urban Studies*, 45(1), 3–28. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43198367>
- Chul Han, B. (2022). *Psico-Política* (A. Berges, Trans.; 2 edición). Herder.
- Colombo, M., & Lisciandra, C. (2024). Norms and the City. *Transactions of the Association of European Schools of Planning*, 8(1). <https://doi.org/10.24306/TrAESOP.2024.01.001>
- Curtis, S., & Acuto, M. (2018). The Foreign Policy of Cities. *The RUSI Journal*, 163(6), 8–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2018.1562014>
- Danewid, I. (2020). The fire this time: Grenfell, racial capitalism and the urbanisation of empire. *European Journal of International Relations*, 26(1), 289–313. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066119858388>
- Garnier, D. (2022) City-led Science Diplomacy and Delta Cities: *The Thwart of a Modern Tale of a New Atlantis* [Master's Dissertation]. Institut Barcelona d'Estudis Internacionals
- Khan, O., & Elahi, F. (2016, March). *Ethnic Inequalities in London*. Runnymede. <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/images/London%20Inequality%20report%20v3.pdf>
- Lake, D. A. (2003). The New Sovereignty in International Relations. *International Studies Review*, 5(3), 303–323. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3186572>
- Mori Foundation. (2021). *Global Power City Index 2021*. The Mori Memorial Foundation. Recovered 2021, de <https://mori-m-foundation.or.jp/english/ius2/gpci2/index.shtml>
- Nair, S. (2018, August 6). Introducing Postcolonialism in International Relations Theory. E-International Relations. Retrieved February 1, 2022, from <https://www.e-ir.info/2017/12/08/postcolonialism-in-international-relations-theory/#:%7E:text=Postcolonialism%20examines%20how%20societies%2C%20governments,rul%20e%20are%20now%20long%20gone.>
- Nasar, A., Lohmeyer, R., Mendoza Pena, A., Hales, M., al Habr, A., & Buckstaff, B. (2021). *Global Cities: Divergent prospects and new imperatives in the global recovery*. Kearney.Com. Retrieved December 20, 2024, from <https://www. Kearney.com/global-cities/2021>
- Ribeiro, P. J. G., & Gonçalves, L. a. P. J. (2019). Urban resilience: A conceptual framework. *Sustainable Cities and Society*, 50, 101625. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scs.2019.101625>
- Tucker, K. (2018). Unraveling Coloniality in International Relations: Knowledge, Relationality, and Strategies for Engagement. *International Political Sociology*, 12(3), 215–232. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ips/oly005>
- United Nations: Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (2018, May 16). *68% of the world population projected to live in urban areas by 2050, says UN | UN DESA | United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs*. United Nations. Retrieved December 20, 2024, from <https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/population/2018-revision-of-world-urbanization-prospects.html>
- World Bank (n.d.). The World by Income and Region. Retrieved December 20, 2024 from <https://datatopics.worldbank.org/world-development-indicators/the-world-by-income-and-region.html>