— FOR OR AGAINST 'THE BUSINESS OF BENCHMARKING'?

JAMES MERRICKS WHITE AND ROB KITCHIN

Abstract

This short response does two things. First, it argues that urban benchmarks have specific and structural limits not identified in the principal essay in this intervention, which curtail the kinds of constructive and critical work such benchmarks might be expected to perform. ISO 37120 is discussed as an example. Second, it proposes a pluralistic approach to engagement and offers six suggestions for how academics might take urban benchmarks and their makers seriously without becoming fully embedded in their business. These are: ethnography, discourse analysis, self-reflexive critique, critical urban benchmarking, alternative publication channels and scholarly debate.

In their essay, 'Taking city rankings seriously', Acuto *et al*. (2021) argue that critical urban scholars must do more to investigate, but also improve, city indices, rankings, reports and measures. The authors identify three gaps in the critical literature on the topic: a lack of empirically informed research; ignorance of the role that some academics already play in the production of benchmarks; and a failure to consider benchmarks a site of constructive intervention. Drawing on empirical data, they imply that two recent trends in urban benchmarking—towards softer measures and the inclusion of qualitative, expert opinion—present opportunities for critical scholars to intervene in existing initiatives. Such involvement, they argue, could produce more nuanced forms of benchmarking, fight naïve positivism, and educate both government policymakers and the public in regard to data literacy. Ultimately, such efforts could also improve processes of global urbanism and reassert the importance of expertise in the urban age.

As two researchers who have made calls for forms of engagement other than critique, we are sympathetic to several aspects of the authors' argument. Yes, city rankings play an important role in the economy, and yes, it is important to take them seriously. However, we feel that the essay plays down many of the specific and structural limits to urban benchmarking and, more problematically, constructs a binary, an all-or-nothing approach to engagement, in which scholars must either be for or against the practice of benchmarking.

To highlight some of the problems of city benchmarks, we consider one whose development was backed by UN-Habitat, the World Bank, the World Economic Forum, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the governments of Canada and Japan (Bhada and Hoornweg, 2009), and which is published by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO). ISO 37120:2014 is an international standard of 100 indicators grouped across 17 themes concerning city characteristics, services, infrastructure and wellbeing, designed to produce comparable, verifiable, transparent and trustworthy global urban data for sustainable city services and quality of life. It was developed in consultation with city representatives by academics at the University of Toronto. The indicators are transparent, the methodologies are not difficult to obtain, and indicator data for the cities that are certified by the World Council on City Data are available to anyone with an internet connection. These data

were voluntarily submitted by cities, have been verified by third-party auditors, and they have not been aggregated into a single measure or rank.

On the surface, this standard appears to be doing everything right. Indeed, the cities that have achieved certification have been positive about the experience. In practice, however, there are significant limits to the comparability of the data underpinning these indicators (White, 2021). While it is purported that indicators are measured and calculated in the same way, in reality there are differences (Kitchin *et al*., 2015). Historical peculiarities in the legal definition of cities cannot be accommodated by a single, universal definition: cities often spill out beyond their official borders or are bound in polycentric development. These issues cause ecological fallacies when direct comparisons are made. Similarly, the scalar effects of administrative geographies can mask differences within and between cities (what Openshaw [1984] refers to as the modifiable areal unit problem). Moreover, because ISO 37120 places no population limit on city size, data from towns and megacities are drawn together into a single database. In fact, there are vast disparities between cities that have implemented ISO 37120. Aalter in Belgium probably should not be compared with Shanghai in China, not only because of their very different population sizes, but because they occupy very different positions and roles in the global, as well as their domestic, urban hierarchies. It would be more appropriate to judge them with respect to how they are performing against their own policies and targets, not benchmarked against each other. All told, these issues rule out uncritical comparison even for what appear to be similar cities. To make an informed benchmark, therefore, it is not enough simply to have open data and open methodologies. One also needs thick metadata, by which we mean data about the provenance, collation, calculation, verification and context of indicators (Kitchin and McArdle, 2017). Indices, ranks and other city benchmarking initiatives invite easy comparison, but only because they successfully obscure this information.

Before discussing some of the other ways that critical scholars might seek to respond to urban benchmarking, it is important to say something in defence of different sorts of scholarship and different sorts of engagement. Habermas (1987) identifies three broad approaches to academic work: empirical-analytical, historical-hermeneutic, and critical. The first strives to build a body of consistent and objective knowledge by modelling and theorizing supposedly unbiased and accurate data. The second questions whether these things are possible and explores different interpretations of data, knowledge, and their construction. The third begins from an assumption that all data and knowledge are contested, and that research should be guided by human ethics as much as by scientific values. In arguing for critical, engaged scholars to become more involved in urban benchmarking, the authors of the principal essay in this intervention risk folding critical scholarship into the post-positivist (i.e. empirical-analytical) tradition. Without asserting that these are essential, stable or discrete categorizations, we nevertheless maintain that they are not and should not be treated as the same thing. While some critical scholars might seek to ameliorate and reconfigure city indicator and benchmarking initiatives, either through critique at a distance or engagement with stakeholders, the ethics and politics of critical research will often be irreconcilable with those held and practised by such projects. For many critical scholars, city benchmarking is to be opposed rather than embraced, not only for the epistemological issues inherent in the construction of benchmarks, but because of their ideological underpinnings and work. City benchmarking is undoubtedly a tool of global capitalism that helps drive an entrepreneurial cities agenda and promotes intercity competition. It is a key method in New Public Management and the governmentality of neoliberalism, promoting public sector and urban management reform through measurement and output controls. These are fundamental issues that no amount of insider work will be able to fully resolve.

The kind of pluralism that we would champion is not one of holism, in which every contribution comes together to form a whole, nor even one of integration, in

which every contribution is worked through every other. That way lies a post-politics that obscures rather than includes difference (Swyngedouw, 2009). Instead, what we want to encourage is a form of scholarly pluralism in which different ethics and practices of knowing exist alongside one another in an agonistic relationship (Mouffe, 1999). Conceptualizing pluralism in this manner gives up on the ambition of representing all cities in a narrowly technical manner, but opens the way for many different, even irreconcilable forms of engagement.

At least four methodological dispositions to meaningful encounters with urban benchmark producers do not involve becoming embedded in their business. The first is detailed empirical examination that proceeds by carefully tracing, mapping and disclosing the relationships and practices that produce, circulate and implement benchmarking initiatives. Such an ethnographic approach does not need to operate from within, but it does require access to different stages of benchmarking work through documents, interviews or observation. This research can be critical in tone and still accomplish the objectives championed by Acuto *et al*. (2021). The second disposition focuses less on data practices themselves than on the historical trajectories and discourses that allow for and sustain them. This approach tries to understand benchmarking through its assumptions and logics, and may not stand in explicit opposition to them. If the context of urban benchmarking is understood well enough, it becomes possible to make strategic interventions and alliances to strengthen minor voices and positions (White, 2019). Third, there is nothing to prevent scholarship from participating in the production of benchmarks while remaining cognisant and critical of their limits, weaknesses and failures (Kitchin *et al*., 2016), seeking to intervene directly in order to confront, communicate and tackle issues regarding epistemology, openness, trust, literacy, uses and ethics (Kitchin and McArdle, 2017). Such self-reflexive involvement should be transparent, with all parties being made aware that peer-reviewed social scientific publications serve a different function to the construction and promotion of benchmarks. Finally, there is an opportunity for urban scholars to produce indicators, ranks and benchmarking tools that are themselves critical. While this might be done in conjunction with key stakeholders, as was ISO 37120, it could also be carried out in a participatory manner, involving groups that are marginalized by the usual corporate-led benchmarking initiatives (a methodology championed by Harding [2015] as a form of strong objectivity). Critical GIS approaches (O'Sullivan, 2006; Thatcher *et al*., 2016) provide an exemplar of the epistemological challenges and work that such an endeavour would entail.

There are at least two other, more tactical ways that urban scholars might intervene in benchmarking. They might publish critical research in more accessible and varied media. Awareness of the limits of benchmarking could be increased by discussing them in newspaper op eds, trade magazines, policy documents, public lectures, classroom environments, and so on. The same is true for more general skills such as data literacy and critical thinking. Another way to intervene might be by engaging with other urban scholars already involved in benchmarking. As the authors point out, academics have long produced city indices, ranks, reports and measures. These individuals can be found in our departments and at conferences, and can be confronted in public and academic forums. Friendly discussions and heated debates on the value of these initiatives no doubt already take place behind the scenes, and these avenues of engagement should not be discounted.

Urban benchmarking is a topic worthy of critical attention. This does not have to mean becoming involved in benchmark production, however. There are significant scientific problems with these technologies and their epistemology. Even if these could be overcome—which even in a best-case scenario like ISO 37120 is not certain—questions remain about the range of uses to which they could be put, given that they are constrained by political and economic forces well beyond the control of the benchmark makers and municipal governments. In arguing for an expanded conceptualization of agonistic academic plurality, we have sought to reveal other ways of encountering urban indicators

and benchmarking, without altogether foreclosing the possibility that some good might come from them.

James Merricks White, Environmental Sociology Section, School of Humanities, Education and Social Sciences, Örebro University, Fakultetsgatan 1, 702 81 Örebro, Sweden, james.white@oru.se

Rob Kitchin, Department of Geography and Maynooth University Social Sciences Institute, National University of Ireland Maynooth, Maynooth, Co. Kildare, Ireland, rob.kitchin@mu.ie

References

Acuto, M., D. Pejic and J. Briggs (2021) Taking city rankings seriously: engaging with benchmarking practices in global urbanism. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 45.2, 363–77.

Bhada, P. and D. Hoornweg (2009) The global city indicators program: a more credible voice for cities. The World Bank, Washington, DC [WWW document]. URL https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/10244/491660BRI0City10Box338943B01PUBLIC1.pdf (accessed 25 March 2020).

Habermas, J. (1987) *Knowledge and human interests*. Polity Press, Cambridge and London.

Harding, S. (2015) Objectivity and diversity: another logic of scientific research. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, and London.

Kitchin, R., T. Lauriault and G. McArdle (2015) Knowing and governing cities through urban indicators, city benchmarking and real-time dashboards. *Regional Studies, Regional Science* 2.1, 6–28.

Kitchin, R., S. Maalsen and G. McArdle (2016) The praxis and politics of building urban dashboards. *Geoforum* 77 (December), 93–101.

Kitchin, R. and G. McArdle (2017) Urban data and city dashboards: six key issues. In R. Kitchin, G. McArdle and T. Lauriault (eds.), *Data and the city,* Routledge, London.

Mouffe, C. (1999) Deliberative democracy or agonistic pluralism? *Social Research* 66.3, 745–58.

O'Sullivan, D. (2006) Geographical information science: critical GIS. *Progress in Human Geography* 30.6, 783–91.

Openshaw, S. (1984) *The modifiable areal unit problem*. Geo Books, Norwich.

Swyngedouw, E. (2009) The antinomies of the postpolitical city: in search of a democratic politics of environmental production. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 33.3, 601–20.

Thatcher, J., L. Bergmann, B. Ricker, R. Rose-Redwood, D. O'Sullivan, T.J. Barnes, L.R. Barnesmoore, L. Beltz Imaoka, R. Burns, J. Cinnamon, C.M. Dalton, C. Davis, S. Dunn, F. Harvey, J-K. Jung, E. Kersten, L. Knigge, N. Lally, W. Lin, D. Mahmoudi, M. Martin, W. Payne, A. Sheikh, T. Shelton, E. Sheppard, C.W. Strother, A. Tarr, M.W. Wilson and J.C. Young (2016) Revisiting critical GIS. *Environment and Planning A:* Economy and Space 48.5, 815–24.

White, J.M. (2019) Politicising smart city standards. In C. Coletta, L. Evans, L. Heaphy and R. Kitchin (eds.), *Creating smart cities,* Routledge, Abingdon and New York, NY.

White, J.M. (2021) Standardising the city as an object of comparison: the promise, limits and perceived benefits of ISO 37120. *Telematics and Informatics* 57 (March), Article 101572.