Learning from Stoke-on-Trent: Multiple ontologies, ontological alterity and the city

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Abstract
This paper seeks to learn from Stoke-on-Trent by asking questions about the ontologies of cities. It does so by counterposing two accounts of Stoke-on-Trent: one grounded in a critique of neoliberal urban development (or rather post-industrial decline), and the other grounded in the experiences of Spiritualists. Placed side-by-side, Stoke-on-Trent demonstrates that cities accommodate more than one lived reality or mode of existence (ontology). The coexistence of multiple ontologies has been observed elsewhere, as a discussion of the work of Tariq Jazeel and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro shows. The important point, then, is that Stoke-on-Trent highlights the ontological heterogeneity of a city that seems to have only one story to tell: post-industrial decline. This raises further questions: in part, about ontological alterity; in part, about the production of new ontologies; but, significantly, about the politics of coexisting ontologies – which ontologies count, and which do not.

KEYWORDS
city, neoliberalism, ontology, spirituality, Stoke-On-Trent, urban theory

1 | INTRODUCTION: ONTOLOGY AND THE CITY

The purpose of this paper is to show that it is possible to theorise from ‘unfashionable’ places, in this case to learn from Stoke-on-Trent: a collection of six towns in England’s midlands that are assembled together to form a single city, notorious for the decline of its once world-famous pottery industry. Today, Stoke – although Stoke is but one of the six towns – has almost become shorthand for a post-industrial Brexit-voting white working-class city with no future (see Macleod & Jones, 2018; Mahoney & Kearon, 2018). Stoke is somewhere where theories might be applied, but not interesting enough in itself to be able to launch a theoretical observation. Urban theorists have not, by and large, hurried to apply their theories there either: it presents no conceptual puzzles, no possibility for new ideas.

To be able to learn from Stoke-on-Trent, then, there are scant resources. Published just over 20 years ago (2000), Tim Edensor’s edited collection, appropriately titled Reclaiming Stoke-on-Trent contains 12 substantive chapters, each picking up an aspect of life in Stoke-on-Trent, involving various leisure activities (from cinema to sex) in a post-industrial city. At the outset, Edensor observes:
Stoke-on-Trent has been rather neglected by academics, even those working in its midst. More specifically, within the social sciences, despite the upsurge of interest in cities, few have looked at the Potteries but have instead concentrated on more apparently glamorous cities such as Glasgow, Manchester and Sheffield to identify contemporary urban cultural and social changes. (p. 1)

This is no less true now than when Edensor wrote these words. (Although whether Glasgow, Manchester and Sheffield have ever been as glamorous as the glitterball cities, such as Berlin, Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, London and Shanghai, from which to theorise is an open question.) Edensor proceeds by detailing the various social and cultural changes Stoke-on-Trent is undergoing. He discusses changes in policies and lifestyle, especially the relationship between work and leisure. Stoke-on-Trent becomes a witness to the post-industrial landscape, especially the replacement of industrial spaces, practices and temporalities by consumption (such as shopping malls) and leisure (such as festivals and heritage attractions). Yet, as both Jayne (2000) and Rixon (2000) point out in their chapters, it has been hard to shake off Stoke-on-Trent’s image as a place that is lacking: lacking work, lacking culture, lacking a future. Indeed, they point out that even its nickname, The Potteries, refers to what it no longer has. I would like to propose, therefore, that one thing Stoke-on-Trent should not lack is theory. So, in the first section, I will explore Martin Jones’ recent analysis of Stoke-on-Trent in a postscript to his book on Cities and regions in crisis (2019). In this section, I look at how (neoliberal) urban theory produces a particular ontology through which to understand the city (as a crisis). I will argue that this account of the city relies on a ‘global reality’ that in fact marginalises or hides other ‘urban realities’. Rather, I maintain that the city, Stoke-on-Trent, contains multiple lived realities or modes of existence. I am hopeful that it will be readily agreed that cities accommodate multiple realities, which I will describe as the coexistence of multiple ontologies. However, the coexistence of multiple ontologies in cities raises some critical questions for how cities are ontologised in (neoliberal) urban theory: this can be learned from Stoke-on-Trent.

That the city might contain multiple ontologies is a lesson that can be learned from several different sources, from anthropology to development studies to philosophy to science and technology studies. Geographers have been quick to use the idea of multiple ontologies in a variety of contexts (including the dynamic ontology approach in GIS, see Fonseca et al., 2002). To help position this paper, it will help to compare two recent papers. In 2017, Yates et al. sought to use the idea of multiple ontologies to think through the existence of, and conjuncture between, different water ontologies (as they describe them). Then, in 2018, Jackson et al. use multiple ontologies to unpack how freshness is enacted (in their terms) by food businesses and consumers in a variety of food commodity chains. Both papers draw inspiration from Anne-Marie Mol’s paper on ontological politics (1999). Thus, in Jackson et al., there is a strong emphasis on how ontologies are enacted differently and how these enactments produce, what they call, ‘reality effects’ (following Mol). Yet, my argument is closer to Yates et al.’s work, as it emphasises the importance of seeing ontology as being about more than the cultural construction of reality, where reality itself is seen as either an effect of its cultural construction or independent of its cultural construction. More importantly, Yates et al. emphasise the politics of what they call ‘ontological conjunctures’. Significantly, Yates et al. end by arguing for the inclusion of Okanagan knowledge systems into Canadian water governance regimes. This underscores the way that non-Western ontologies can provide prime examples of the existence and significance of multiple ontologies. Similarly, the focus of this paper is on ontological alterity. In this paper, however, I will focus on the coexistence and alterity of Western ontologies – in a Western city, Stoke-on-Trent.

Thus, learning from Stoke-on-Trent, ontological alterity can mean that the city itself disappears or becomes marginal. That is, that the city might be inconsequential to lives lived in the city. Multiple ontologies are, significantly, not simply different ways that the city is constructed as an abstraction or an experience, but about the limits to the city itself as a mode of existence. This leads to the second point: this is political. This point I draw out in an engagement with the work of Tariq Jazeel and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. For me, this is about how experiences are made knowable or unknowable by and through ontologies of the city. About what experiences count and do not count; about who is visible and who is not; about what can be seen and heard – and what cannot. These are ontological cuts through the city. It is not that ontological cuts – ontological violence, even – are avoidable, but that there is a politics to how ontological cuts are made, especially where these cuts produce ontological primacy and privilege particular kinds of theorising over others. This also can be learned from Stoke-on-Trent.

In this paper, I will discuss Spiritualism in Stoke-on-Trent, as an example of a modern Western ontology, in a city where it became especially significant. In particular, I will focus on some highly specific and selective spiritualists’ experiences of Stoke-on-Trent. These experiences are intended to raise broader questions about how the city is ontologised – and, relatedly, how experiences in the city are understood as being of a particular ontology of the city. This is also about how it is possible to learn from Stoke-on-Trent, not as a case study of something else nor as an ideal type nor as an...
example of everywhere, but with the limited goal of acknowledging the limits of universals and abstractions. Perhaps it is worth saying that I mean not to invoke the world of philosophy by using the word ontology; rather, I am using it in the prosaic and ordinary sense of a mode of existence: a regime of living that includes practices and meanings, knowledges and powers, fantasy and affect, life and death, and so on; both tacit and explicit. Importantly, I see modes of existence as carrying implications of alterity, unknowability and difference.3

Drawing on Spiritualism to convey a sense of ontological alterity carries a danger. The danger is that this paper is read as arguing for the greater inclusion of religion – or, more specifically, Spirit – in accounts of the city. However, for me, the problem does not lie in the routine under-estimation of the role of faith, religion and the like, in the composition of urban processes and experiences. Rather, the problem lies in assimilating the category of religion (and the entire lexicon of alterity, difference and diversity) into a single ontology view of the world. On the other side of the coin, there is a danger of presenting singular ontologies as if they are somehow monolithic, thereby misrepresenting them. Noting this, I will focus on one particular single ontology worldview, neoliberal urban theory. So, for me, invoking the alterity of Spirit (as described by Spiritualists) is a device for illustrating the existence of other operative modes of existence in the city. By the end of the paper, I hope it will be clear that I believe other ontologies – other orders of alterity – are also possible. While this argument places limits on neoliberal urban theory, there is no intention to either invalidate or dismiss it; only to provincialise it (following Chakrabarty, 2000).

Thus, religion is shorthand for a challenge to the single ontology view: that is, to neoliberal urban theory, its urban vocabularies, its understanding of urban experiences, and so on, which assume the global reality of the city is a singularity (following Jazeel, 2018, 2019). What does this singularity – this problem – look and feel like? The first observation to make is that neoliberal urban theory is built out of a highly differentiated understanding both of the practices and policies that comprise neoliberalism and of the local outcomes and effects that these neoliberal practices and policies have in different places. This differentiation would seem to be incapable of producing a singular worldview, yet, as Peck and Tickell argued two decades ago that ‘neoliberalism seems to be everywhere’ (2002, p. 380, and reinforced on p. 392). Two moves are central to the idea that neoliberalism is everywhere: first that neoliberalism is processual – an ongoing evolving project continually transforming spaces and places, and especially cities – such that everywhere is involved in some way in this process; second is the conceptual use of an ontology of ever-evolving dichotomies such as universal/particular, global/local, core/periphery, shallow/deep, amongst others. Following from this, while neoliberalism is seen to produce a multi-scalar world (global, international, national, regional, local), the city becomes a critical site because it manifests the most intense neoliberal interventions and anti-neoliberal struggles, notwithstanding such notions as the post-political city. Thus, neoliberal urban theory, in some ways, is not about the city at all; the side-effect is that the city becomes a singularity: a site where the embedded concrete processes of neoliberalism play themselves out, producing an everywhere ghastly neoliberal reality.

To illustrate this, I will start with Martin Jones’ analysis of Stoke-on-Trent, as a way to understand how neoliberal urban theory produces a local and conjunctural analysis of a global reality. My purpose is to neither dismiss nor contest this account, but only to ask what else Stoke-on-Trent might bear witness to if it is more than a case study of the repeated horrors of neoliberalism.

2 | NEOLIBERAL STOKE-ON-TRENT: DÉJÀ VU, ALL OVER AGAIN

Martin Jones argues that crises in modern capitalism are both familiar and repetitive (Jones, 2019: see chapter 1). In 2018, he says, a set of emerging problems in British cities and regions uncannily resemble those experienced in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Neoliberal economic policy was, once again, creating a new new localism (like the new localism of the 1990s: see Brenner & Theodore, 2002a). The state project in both the late 1980s and early 2020s was to generate growth through business-led strategies that were responsive to local contexts through forms of organisational and political decentralisation. The crisis/response of neoliberalism is repetitious, yet also evolving: once again, however, with detrimental outcomes for specific places, such as Stoke-on-Trent.

What is important is that Jones describes particular outcomes of the relationship between the global – neoliberal capitalism – and the local, with its different ways of operationalising neoliberal economic policy. His main case studies are located in Sheffield and Manchester (building on his extensive earlier work5). Conceptually, meanwhile, he draws strongly from the canonic works of neoliberal urban theory (as exemplified, especially, by the work of Neil Brenner, Bob Jessop and Jamie Peck amongst others5). The neoliberal state, Jones argues, constantly seeks to ameliorate failures in the market economy, yet its interventions constantly create and recreate crises that replicate themselves in cities and
regions. This is not to say that neoliberal states act in the same way everywhere. In practice, not only do neoliberal states operationalise an assortment of strategies and policies, these are also applied unevenly, both socially and geographically (following Brenner & Theodore, 2002b).

Neoliberal urban theory follows from the idea that neoliberal states, necessarily, act at multiple scales. To ameliorate the crises baked into the free market system, neoliberal states must act at, and indeed produce, every scale: from the global to the local, from the individual to the social. Thus, neoliberal strategies are enacted in, but also must be engaged with, actually existing crisis. The city becomes a key location, both as a site where crises become intensely manifest but also where acts of resistance are focused (Brenner & Theodore, 2002b; Harvey, 2012). The city, then, demonstrates the socially, geographically and historically contingent interventions of neoliberal states and their outcomes and effects. Therefore, neoliberal critiques have tended to favour concrete analysis of case studies, where the ‘contextual embeddedness of neoliberal restructuring projects’ can be both witnessed and its effects criticised (Brenner & Theodore, 2002b, p. 351).

Castree (2005, p. 542) points out that this approach creates a problem. He asks, if actually existing neoliberalism is always specific, contingent and geographically constituted, how is it possible to talk about neoliberalism in general? The solution is to work from the case study, which may be particular or unique, to the universal, which is paradoxically variegated and evolving. Indeed, each case study of neoliberalisation must demonstrate both its particularity or uniqueness and its relationship to the global realities of actually existing neoliberalism. For Jones (2019, p. 229), the case for Stoke's uniqueness lies in its designation by elements of the popular press as the Brexit Capital of the UK, with 69.4% voting to leave the EU. The question: how is this Leave vote to be explained?

To start an answer to this question, Jones sets out some context:

Stoke-on-Trent, home of the pottery industry in England and known as the Potteries with its local residents known as Potters, is surely the archetypal heartland of the 'left-behind people and places'. Stoke is an isomorphic space of dysfunctionalism. (2019, p. 230, emphasis added)

This characterisation is depressingly familiar. Stoke-on-Trent is left behind by processes of neoliberal economic development. Generic statements about the effects of neoliberal policy and globalisation apply. Stoke is a product of the failures of state intervention, of footloose capital, of deindustrialisation and of political marginalisation. Stoke is ‘a classic tale of the rise and fall of resource-based economies and the links between this, state intervention, parliamentary democracy, and their failure’ (p. 230). Bad management in the 1970s, followed by monetary policy in the Thatcher years, led to a collapse in competitiveness in the pottery industry throughout the 1980s. Globalisation, supported by the neoliberal state, had a catastrophic effect on Stoke, causing the pottery industry to fail and local economic fragmentation (an analysis originally set out by Imrie, 1991). A range of subsequent state (both national and EU) interventions designed to regenerate Stoke-on-Trent, through supporting the creative industries or consumption and leisure, were simply inadequate (as argued by Jayne, 2000, 2004).

Since the 1980s, the story goes, this cycle of economic decline and failure of state intervention has repeated. All over again. This is repetition without difference. There are two features of this analysis that are significant, both of which are connected to the idea of isomorphism. On the one hand, isomorphism is a consequence of the global reality of modern capitalism and the neoliberal state. It produces a spatial political economy in which all cities and regions (everywhere) are already embedded. Each city and region, thus, becomes a case study in the effects of this global reality. And, because of this global reality, the differential effects of this global reality can be measured, assessed and compared. On the other hand, isomorphism produces different effects in different places: the scale, shape and form of the specific conjuncture produce differential local effects.

In Stoke-on-Trent, the consequences of decades of economic decline and policy failure has led to a political crisis, manifest in its overwhelming support for Brexit in the 2016 referendum on United Kingdom membership of the European Union. For Jones (2019), voting Brexit was a direct outcome of neoliberal state policy, economic decline and social and cultural marginalisation. An argument that, logically, can be stretched to other ‘left behind’ Brexit-voting small towns and cities across England. Stoke-on-Trent is subject to the global realities of neoliberal state policy and modern capitalist economics, like everywhere else. It is a consequence; an example; a place where wider processes are replicated: a literal postscript of both neoliberalism and neoliberal urban theory.

So, if Stoke-on-Trent is dominated by the ontological regime of neoliberalism, what can it possibly tell us about ontological alterity? And, as important, how would this alter urban theory? Part of the issue here is the way that the case study functions within neoliberal urban theory. When Castree outlined the problem of the relationship between the
particularities or uniqueness of the effects of neoliberalism, the specific and contingent interventions of the neoliberal state and the abstract and universal principles of neoliberal ideology, he offered this in response: ‘I have no clever solutions’ (2005, p. 544). My suspicion is that there is no solution to this problem because neoliberal theory operationalises itself through a vertical relationship between the particular and the universal: thus, the case study is necessarily manufactured out of the particular and universal. The particular/universal binary animates neoliberal urban theory and it is this that generates its limitless ‘global realities’ (to which there is no solution) and produces singularities both in particular and in general. Perhaps, then, Stoke-on-Trent can suggest a way of learning that is not refracted through this particular/universal binary: or, put another way, can hint at a horizontal and provincial way of learning from experiences in different cities.

3 | STOKE-ON-TRENT: OF RONDBOULDTS AND OTHER ONTOLOGIES

I hope it does not sound unpromising or trivial, but I am going to start with two photographs: one of a roundabout (Figure 1) and another of a canal (Figure 2), both taken in Stoke-on-Trent.

As reported elsewhere, these photographs were solicited from participants in the Spiritualism in Everyday Life project (see Bartolini et al., 2019, especially pp. 1130–1133). The aim of this project was to trace the experience of Spirit in people’s everyday lives. One research technique the team thought would yield interesting results was to give participants disposable cameras, so that Spiritualists could show their experiences of Spirit as they happened in daily life. Many photographs were of natural landscapes, in the countryside around or visible from Stoke-on-Trent, showing (for Spiritualists) the intimate connection between nature, beauty and Spirit. This is not quite what I personally was expecting: where was the city? Only two pictures, for me, were about everyday life in the city, yet even these appeared not to be that urban, nor were they even self-evidently locatable in Stoke-on-Trent (Figures 1 and 2).

I anticipated pictures of pubs, supermarkets, high streets, post-industrial ruins, shops, Spiritualist venues, home interiors and the like. These were often spoken about by Spiritualists, but it was the research team that had to take the photographs (see MacKian et al., 2016; Sambo et al., 2016 for photographic essays of the project). Spirit, it seemed, was not experienced as something that is of the city. Nonetheless, Spirit and spiritual experiences occurred in the city and were woven through the fabric of the city. Spiritualists’ experience of Spirit begins to unweave the tacit assumption that something that is in the city is also therefore of the city (and, also, logically vice versa).

Thus, Anne’s photography (Figure 1) shows us a roundabout with cars, lorries and a bus. With trees and greenery, it’s almost impossible to identify which roundabout it is. In fact, the location is not what Anne is seeking to show in the picture. Rather, she is interested in the movement of different kinds of vehicles (so it is actually significant that the bus and the SUV in the foreground are cut off at the edges). For her, the movement of the vehicles resembles the movement of bodies through life. The vehicles (like the human body) carry people along, yet when the vehicle has reached the end of the journey, the people leave to go on with their lives in a different way. The flow of vehicles represents people’s journey through life and into life after death.

FIGURE 1 A roundabout in Stoke-On-Trent.
Source: taken by Anne (not her real name), a participant in the Spiritualism in the Everyday Life of Stoke-on-Trent project, around December 2014.
Anne is not just saying that life is a journey, nor that bodies are carriers for Spirit, she is emphasising the materiality of life and Spirit. In making this connection, she is weaving Spirit through the everyday life of Stoke-on-Trent. Thus, Spirit becomes evident in Stoke's buses and roundabouts, in its grass verges and roadside signs. It is just not visible as such, especially as these things are too mundane to have Spirit associated with them. Spiritual experiences, for Anne, are ordinary. So, the spiritual is in the city, in its everyday life. But not as an extraordinary or ritualised or revelatory moment. Rather, you have to attune yourself to Spirit's in-everythingness.

Martin's photograph (Figure 2) contains one of the central tropes of Spiritualist imagery: a strong light source, especially light shining through (often trees) and/or leading the way (down a path). For Martin, the scene's natural beauty evokes the spiritual. Here, there is something about the quality of light, of the moment and of the scene that evokes the spiritual. Light is a highly significant word in Spiritualism, appearing alongside nature and truth in its motto. Martin's photograph evidences the truth of Spirit through the blend of nature and light. Stoke-on-Trent has receded into the background, no longer visible as a space of light, nature or consequently truth. The city has disappeared.

Except, Stoke-on-Trent has not disappeared, it is alongside this scene – an ontological alterity that coexists with Martin's spiritual experience. Stoke-on-Trent's canals, as with most cities in the UK, have a specific resonance. The canals evoke a history of industrial innovation and power, but also of decline and deindustrialisation, to be replaced with the absence of industry (whether it is cast as leisure or nature). This canal used to transport china clay from Cornwall to the pottery industry of Stoke-on-Trent. Moreover, as Jayne shows, the canals were part of regeneration schemes in the 1990s due to their perceived attraction for tourists (Jayne, 2000). It appears to be a scene of natural beauty, but it is entirely manufactured (or, indeed, ‘post-manufactured’). The canal is in the city, made for the city, and of the city. Yet, the city is absented from this spiritual mode of existence, however fleetingly or contingently.

In both photographs, Stoke-on-Trent appears in the negative or, perhaps better, in the tain of the image: a background that reflects back a virtual space, simultaneously absent and present. In both photographs, there’s no clue as to where the canal or the roundabout is, no clue that there is an urban context, that these are part and parcel of the urban infrastructure, or part of the everyday life of the city, or indeed that there is such a thing as a city anywhere close. This starts to hint at an ontological alterity: the city and the spiritual coexisting, both real, yet in distinct lived realities or modes of existence. On the one hand, there is nature light and truth in the spiritual landscape, but on the other hand the city is somewhere else, not of Spirit. Two ontologies, side by side: related, but not co-related, not co-extant, nor indeed isomorphic; or, possibly, sometimes, not related (see Harrison, 2007).

Thus, it is possible to separate out these modes of existence: the urban and the spiritual into two different worlds that never quite meet. Yet, these photographs, I argue, evidence the coexistence of these ontologies, not just side by side, but together. That is, it may be hard to distinguish between what is neoliberal ideology-in-practice and faith-based experience. Indeed, neoliberalism might be as much a faith-based experience as Spiritualism is an ideology that underpins rugged individualism. Other easy dichotomies might blur too: thus, Spirit is not merely ethereal or natural, just as cities are not merely material or unnatural. This can be seen in both photographs. In both photographs the spiritual is also material, it is in the cityscape; in the commonplace experience of walking canal-side in a UK city: all major UK cities have artificial or modified waterways of some kind.
Rather than thinking of Spirit as the ineffable, the ethereal, the immaterial, Spirit is through the fabric of the city. The fabric of the city materially altered by the presence of Spirit. During the Spiritualism project, the project team (but especially the researcher Nadia Bartolini and graphic artist Marco Scerri: see Bartolini et al., 2019, pp. 1118–1124) produced a Spirit Trail, which mapped Spiritualism across Stoke-on-Trent (see MacKian et al., 2016). To better show Spiritualist locations across Stoke-on-Trent, the designer Marco Scerri progressively removed as much clutter from the standard map as possible. By the end, the map shows the town names, the major roads and the spiritualist locations, with pictures (Figure 3). Unfolding the map, reveals more details of the history and geography of Stoke-on-Trent's Spiritualism. For me, thinking about this map afresh, I now see that stripping back the detail of Stoke-on-Trent to reveal its spiritualism evokes the kind of ontological foregrounding and backgrounding through which Spiritualists encounter the city. As Spirit comes into focus, the city recedes; and vice versa. Like pulling the focus on a movie camera. But not exactly. The disappearance of one urban reality does not mean an exclusive focus on another. Rather, the city is no longer as operative as it was, no longer as present. Change in focus is one frame through which the coexistence of ontologies might be understood. Another is change in mode of existence. In this instance, Spiritualists shift between realities: one organised around the city, the other around Spirit. Let me describe the example of Market Street in Fenton (see Figure 4).

In 1915, a Spiritualist church was registered as a place of worship on the first floor of 80 Market Street. In 1921, the church moved next door to Number 82. Not only has the building now been demolished, even the street name has gone. It is now King Street, without a number: deindustrialisation is entangled with the spiritual landscape. To understand this, coexistence is not simply a matter of layering one mode of existence on another, but rather a shift in a mode of existence. Stoke-on-Trent is demonstrating that coexistence itself is not a singularity. Perhaps this means making more of the idea that Stoke-on-Trent is made out of six towns: a metaphor, perhaps, for six coexistent ontologies, each distinct, separate, yet never more than 15 minutes apart (every journey by car in Stoke-on-Trent seems to take 15 minutes, a space–time peculiarity of its road system).

Thus, the two Towns, Spirit and City, are not in two different worlds, they coexist. Except, unlike the photographs, usually the coexistence of multiple ontologies is hidden, absent from view, in (neoliberal) urban theory. (And, metaphorically, given there are six towns, there will be others too that remain hidden.) Disappointed at the lack of cityness in the photographs produced by the Spiritualists, I realise that I am missing the point. The point is that I am not seeing ontological alterity – as I am too fixated on a particular version of the materiality of the city and of what makes cities real (which is more than a little ironic given Pile, 2005). Importantly, these ontological alterities are operable – it is not just that people live their lives through different modes of existence than others within the city, the coexistence of these lived realities makes things happen: it is political (see also Pile, 2021, chapter 1).

It is not just that neoliberal and religious ontologies coexist. Or indeed that neoliberal and religious ontologies are merely coequal belief systems for understanding the city. Or that this (re)presents a choice: to live either in a neoliberal or a spiritual reality. The point here is that this coexistence composes the city and city politics in different kinds of ways, sometimes in ways that background the city and make the city disappear as a backdrop to experience and political action, other times as a shift in emphasis in what is significant and actionable. Simply, the example of religious ontologies leaves me thinking about how food, clothing, accommodation arrangements and sanitation practices – how love, life and death – are all composed differently by ontological alterity. In cities. Perhaps, by the city. But not always necessarily of the city (see Jazeel, 2018; Roy, 2016).

The coexistence of ontological alterity does not necessarily create unlike worlds or incommensurable worlds, though it might. Indeed, living in worlds of contradiction, uncertainty and paradox implies that ontological plurality is normal. But an argument like this pushes Stoke-on-Trent once again into the terrain of the particular and the universal. Thus, a case study of Stoke-on-Trent’s particular relationship with Spiritualism scales into a universal argument about religion or Spirit.6 But this is not the argument I am making. I am asking, rather, what it means to place these limited and provincial ontologies side by side.

Thus, considering the neoliberal city and the spiritual city: it is not that one foregrounds materiality (as in bricks and mortar or labour contracts) while the other see only the immaterial (spirit/s, God/s). Rather, the city is being composed out of material (bricks and mortar also make churches – and other immaterial objects such as monuments and shrines) and immaterial (such as the labour theory of value or Spirit) ‘stuff’, albeit in differently entangled ways. To get at this alterior production of urban spaces and experiences, I will turn to the work of Tariq Jazeel and his work on ‘incomparable geographies’ (2019). Here, I stage an encounter between Stoke-on-Trent and urban theory being generated to understand the lived realities of people in South Asian cities (and elsewhere).
FIGURE 3 Extract from the spiritualism in Stoke-On-Trent Spirit trail. The Spirit Trail is a self-guided map of locations used for spiritualist activities dating back to 1870 (2015: PDF available from the author)

Design by Marco Scerri.
In his succinctly titled paper, ‘Singularity’ (2019), Tariq Jazeel sets out a manifesto for what he calls 'incomparable geographies'. This manifesto builds on earlier work taking to task planetary urban theory for building an urban theory with no outside (2018). These two interventions in urban theory offer fruitful ground for helping me learn from Stoke-on-Trent. Later in this section, I will also flag some synergies with recent arguments in anthropology about ontological alterity. What is most useful about these parallel arguments – and helps develop an understanding of the significance of the coexistence of multiple ontologies – is the way they pose an outside to the ways that cities are understood in general.

However, what I learn from Stoke-on-Trent is that this outside is also inside: that is, that cities are, in part, defined by their internal heterogeneity – and the production of heterogeneity (now understood as ontological heterogeneity). Indeed, thinking topologically, that insides and outsides are constantly being drawn and redrawn, and indeed necessarily coexist. Thus, Jazeel helps us understand the coexistence of insides and outsides – and the means through which, for him, urban theory builds a world without an outside or a limit, thereby universalising a singular ontology (even where there is an intention to do otherwise).

In his paper on urban theory with an outside (2018), Jazeel wishes to make the case for an analytical gaze that values its own outside: one that acknowledges and indeed engages difference, unknowability and, following Spivak (2003), alterity. Jazeel specifically seeks to extend the logic behind comparative urbanism (as in Robinson, 2006), while challenging the assumptions behind planetary urbanisation (as in Brenner, 2014). Jazeel acknowledges the critique of globally ambitious urban theory, as presented by Jenny Robinson and Ananya Roy, both separately (Robinson, 2015; Roy, 2015) and together (Robinson & Roy, 2015). Indeed, comparative urbanism is in many ways launched by a desire to provincialise Western urban theory (see Leitner & Shepherd, 2015). However, for Jazeel, the desire to limit Western theory, and to create urban theory from elsewhere, in comparative urbanism ends up creating a ground for comparison that is itself without an outside, albeit against its own intentions.

What I take from Jazeel’s argument is that accounts of planetary urbanisation create a globalised theory that, as a consequence, seems to not only be applicable everywhere (such that there is no outside) but that also tends to see all things that take place in cities as a consequence of globalised urbanity, such that cities themselves are stripped of their internal difference, unknowability and alterity. It achieves its globalised account by assuming that the planet is produced by a singular ontology (in accordance with a neoliberal urban theory) that encompasses the entire world. Arguably, then, this globalised planetary urban theory does more than just assume its ontology is everywhere, it also assumes it accounts for everything important about cities. Planetary urbanisation (and comparative urbanism) creates a flat world ontologically, with no outside, such that either no other ontologies exist outside of it or that these ontologies are simply too local to count or make a difference.

This creates, in Jazeel’s critique, a singularity (2019): a singular ontological framework for understanding everywhere; a flat, flattening and flattened ontology of cities, urban experiences and city life. Through his work on Sri Lanka, Jazeel wishes to introduce difference, unknowability and alterity that exists beyond planetary and comparative urban theory – in much the same way that I am arguing Stoke-on-Trent produces difference, unknowability and alterity within the city.
While for Jazeel ontological alterity arrives, as it were, from outside the city (and urban theory), Stoke-on-Trent insists that ontological alterity also is a product of cities and cannot therefore be excluded from an understanding of cities (by urban theory). The paradox is important: ontological alterity can arrive, be accommodated within and be produced by cities, yet be productive of urban experiences and politics that are disconnected from the city (and similar).

The starting point for Jazeel’s critique of singularities is the ‘decolonizing geographical knowledge’ agenda (2019). His case for thinking about the coexistence of multiple geographical knowledges is based upon a reading of postcolonial literatures. In these literatures, Jazeel shows how experiences of cities are expressed that are incommensurate with, ignored or overlooked by planetary and comparative urban theory. The demand to flatten the difference between cities around the world – to make them all as ordinary as one another – so as not to privilege analytically or falsely confirm the superiority of Western cities has, for Jazeel, created an urban theory that masks the difference, unknowability and alterity to be found in cities of the Global South. Ironically, while this means that the urban experiences of Berlin, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, Paris and London are flattened into a common optic, it also means that urbanism such as this is normalised and spread across the world.

Ultimately, this creates a global reality that is, once again, measured against what is normal about cities of the Global North. While this enables a comparative urbanism that can trace certain kinds of shared relationships between cities, it fails to register dynamics that actively produce the not-so-ordinary forms, functions and experiences of city life. Thus, for example, Jazeel talks about the ways that Buddhism ethnicises and aestheticises urban space in Sri Lanka, producing a particular political geography that cannot be read against the norms of the planetary or comparable city (see also Jazeel, 2018). Rather, the weaving of the spiritual through city life must be assessed on grounds other than those produced by an implicit dichotomy between the secular and the sacred (drawing on Beaumont & Baker, 2011; Della Dora, 2016; Kong, 2001).

Instead, Jazeel demands an attentiveness and attunement to what he calls the singularities of elsewhere, such that the coexistence of these elsewhere singularities can be acknowledged and engaged with on their own terms. For Jazeel, singularities emerge over time and in space through the play of repetition and difference (following Deleuze, 1994 [1968]). This understanding of singularity is relational, a relational ontology that is produced and productive in time and space. Singularities, therefore, do not describe pre-existing reality nor an assumed reality, but realities that emerge relationally through time and through space (see Jazeel, 2019, pp. 9–10). This is important, as it is about seeing and valuing ontological alterity. This brings Jazeel close to demands to acknowledge and engage with ontological alterity that have been made in Anthropology by, for example, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2015).7

For Viveiros de Castro, the ‘ontological turn’ in Anthropology (Anthropology is not alone here) has seen epistemology insidiously converted into ontology. Thus, particular accounts of, or perspectives on, the world (developed in the Western academy) have become taken to reality itself. For Viveiros de Castro, the effect of this ontological turn is to ‘delocalise’ alterity, such that otherness is always judged against the same. In Jazeel’s terms, this is ontologisation without an outside. An example Viveiros de Castro offers is the human/non-human, where the non-human is always in relation to the human: the non-human (see Viveiros de Castro, 2015 p. 5).8 Yet, Viveiros de Castro is not thinking about air pumps or scallops when he invokes the non-human; he is thinking about something strange in the human itself. For Viveiros de Castro, what the flattening of ontology achieves is to hide, ignore or de-privilege indigenous ontologies, render them irrelevant and anachronistic: an exotic curiosity, but no more.

The persistence of indigenous belief systems is of course a continuing concern in the anthropological and development literature. Indeed, entire sub-disciplines have emerged to value and re-value such knowledges. However, Viveiros de Castro’s point is that these knowledges end up being consigned to ‘belief systems’ such that their ontological alterity is denied and rendered unimportant. Thus, Viveiros de Castro argues:

“When a shaman shows you a magic arrow extracted from a sick man, a medium gets possessed by a god, a sorcerer laboriously constructs a voodoo doll, we only see one thing: Society (belief, power, fetishism). In other words, we only see ourselves. (2015, p. 15, emphasis in original)"

In the accounts of both Jazeel and Viveiros de Castro, therefore, it is possible to see beyond the coexistence of multiple ontologies to the existence of ontological alterity. This provides some confirmation of what I am seeking to learn from Stoke-on-Trent. Except, Stoke-on-Trent is teaching us a little more. For both Jazeel and Viveiros de Castro, ontological alterity exists outside of Western ontology – whether that ontology is in the form of planetary/comparative urban theory or actor network theory or colonial geographical/anthropological knowledges. For both, this outside
encounters the ontological imperialism of the West/Global North in ways that are profoundly political, shaping as they do culture, space and politics. Both, finally, use religion as a way to exemplify ontological alterity (beyond the West), whether it is through Buddhism-inspired architecture and landscapes or through shamanistic practices and mediumship. Indeed, the spiritual and the occult has been a strong theme in thinking about cities outside the West. Thus, for example, Filip de Boeck and Marie-Françoise Plissart discuss the witch-children in Kinshasa (2004, chapter 5), while AbdouMaliq Simone points to the significance of the spectral in the production of urban life in Douala (2004, chapter 3). For AbdouMaliq Simone and Edgar Pieterse, spiritual beliefs and practices are constitutive of the ordinary, makeshift, paradoxical production of African and Asian cities (2017, chapter 1). Similarly, Mitchell has shown how the beliefs of non-Western migrants into European cities create challenges to its neoliberal assumptions, norms and values as well as to the spacings and timings of its cities (2017; see also Dwyer et al., 2016). All this is important to remember.

That said, what Stoke-on-Trent demonstrates is that difference, unknowability and alterity (including its spiritual, occult and spectral forms) exist – and are, critically, produced – within the West, within its cities. Spiritualism is a thoroughly modern religion, produced in and spreading outwards from New York State in the late 1840s and arriving in Stoke-on-Trent soon after (see Bartolini et al., 2019, pp. 1117–1118). Spiritualism reached its peak of interest in Stoke-on-Trent during the First World War and in its immediate aftermath. Yet, the production of evidence of the persistence of Spirit after death continues in over 300 Spiritualist churches around Britain. Every week, mediums up and down the UK talk with Spirit, providing a line of communication between the living and the dead (see Pile et al., 2019). And not just in the UK; Spiritualist churches can be found across Canada, the United States and Australia. The extraordinary practice of talking with the dead, Stoke-on-Trent teaches, is mundane and ordinary. It is in cities. In the very fabric in the form of its churches and missions. In its affectual infrastructures. And Spiritualism is not alone. In wider religious practices such as parades, praying and pilgrimages (and the like) are not confined to the physical infrastructures of sacred buildings. Moreover, they are also in money and financing, in gifting and acts of generosity, in investments and returns. They are also in acts of terror and hatred and abjection.

Here, Religion as a mode of existence is clearly more than a set of fixed beliefs, or reducible to faith, as it is also composed out of a (delimiting) range of rituals, practices, institutions, affects, materialities, embodiments, infrastructures and the like (as the contributors to Bartolini et al., 2018b, all attest). This provides a path for extending the argument away from spirituality and religion to suggest other forms of ontological alterity that might coexist within cities (or not). One form of extension might be to consider the neoliberal condition itself to ask whether it itself is productive of ontological alterity. Thus, it is possible to speculate that the super-rich, who are capable of spending £2 million on strawberries at a single party for family and staff (as revealed in the Princess Haya bint al-Hussein divorce settlement), do not have the same lived reality or mode of existence as rough sleepers on the streets of UK cities. Another example might be QAnon or Anti-vaxxers, whose belief in official science and overt governmental ideology is, at best, patchy. Their faith is placed instead in their own science, their own facts, and the search for proof of hidden agendas.

It is possible to speculate further about ways of thinking about ontological alterity: for example, by including vegans or climate change deniers or extinction rebellion activists; black lives matter or an ever-changing landscape of white supremacy organisations. (In the UK, The White Rose combines white supremacy with anti-vaccine conspiracy theories.) Cities, Stoke-on-Trent suggests, are constantly generating experiments in new modes of existence. But the point is not to argue that the production of ontological alterity is a ‘new universal’; or to ask that a particular ontology (Spiritualism) is contextualised by, or highlights the embedded workings of, abstract relationships (Spirit, Faith). The question is, rather, how the horizontal relationships between ontologies align or do not align: that is, what limits and possibilities they place upon one another, where they become operative (if they become operative). Ontological alterity, the production of ontologies and ontological experimentation, in this view, counts for something. Or, to put it another way, this is to argue that ontological difference should not be looked into only to see ourselves.

Ontological alterity is a political question. For sure, thinking back to Stoke-on-Trent’s six towns, there could be a desire to recognise and valorise some kinds of ontological alterity, but perhaps not others. Some modes of existence may rub up against and grate against one another. This may be productive, it might involve co-production, but it might not. Sometimes, invisibility is the better option. Thus, it requires an ongoing assessment of the relationship between knowability and unknowability, between seeing and not-seeing, listening and hearing. Isomorphisms, flattened ontologies, co-productions (and the like) are not to be presumed. Or globalised. What the coexistence of ontological alterity does is require a political evaluation of coexistence, but this will always be in situ.
COEXISTENCE OF ONTOLOGICAL ALTERITY

1. **The coexistence of ontologies.** In this discussion, ontology has been used to highlight the different lived realities or modes of existence that coexist in UK cities. I argued that capitalism, neoliberal state policy and spiritual experiences produce coexisting ontologies. I used the idea of Stoke-on-Trent's six towns in one city to hint at the variable geographies that separate and join ontologies. So, the fact of coexistence is not so interesting as the 'modes of coexistence' between different ontologies. I have indicated that lived realities or modes of existence are generative of an everyday politics, and these can work both together and against one another. Thus, breaking apart coexistence is a way to understand the different modes through which community becomes operable: no longer defined by some kind of internal logic or homogeneity, but rather comprised out of difference, unknowability and alterity. Further, Stoke-on-Trent brought to out attention the way that ontologies coexist in cities, but that might not be produced by the city nor be of the city. Thus, the coexistence of ontologies can make the city disappear as a backdrop to political or community action within the city – as much as the city can prompt political or community action. This implies that the coexistence of ontologies is constantly drawing and redrawing the boundary between what is considered inside and outside of the city, what is and is not urban, and the significance of the city as a necessary spatial category for thinking urban theory. Bluntly, urban theory is a mess of spatialities, many of which are not urban – and consequently takes too little account of the non-urbanness of city life (to follow Jazeel, 2019; Roy, 2016).

2. **Ontological alterity.** The coexistence of ontologies should not make for a one-dimensional account of how this coexistence is to be characterised, nor the nature of the alterity that comprises those relationships. Sometimes alterity might mean that ontologies are incommensurable, incompatible and liable to produce conflict, injury, inequality and harm. They may create unknowabilities. That is, ontological alterity might produce ways of knowing that refuse, deny or prohibit the communication of difference such that others are excluded from knowledge or knowability. On the other hand, alterity can be communicated and worked with. It can be at the heart of the formation of alliances and solidarities that do not seek assimilation or compliance with a singular world view. It is this politics of alterity that is being missed by neoliberal urban theory (despite its focus on internal contradiction, locally embedded outcomes and processes that do not seek assimilation or compliance with a singular world view). Instead, alterity is a product of Western Thought, evident perhaps in the use of Spivak or Deleuze to understand alterity (as the unknowable, or the incommunicable, or radical otherness). In fact, such a grand category as Western Thought is not necessary to see this. In Stoke-on-Trent, Spiritualists lead what could be called dual, or better multiple, lives: they are thoroughly engaged in debates about Spirit, about Healing, and about evidencing the persistence of life after death, within and beyond Christian traditions; while also dealing with the everyday experiences of post-industrial urban life, of political and cultural marginalisation, of ageing and dying. Spiritualism in

3. **The production of ontological alterity and the city.** Key to what can be learned from Stoke-on-Trent is that ontological alterity is not only to be found in places considered exterior to ‘Western Thought’ (such as former colonies in Latin America and South Asia). It is also a product of Western Thought, evident perhaps in the use of Spivak or Deleuze to understand alterity (as the unknowable, or the incommunicable, or radical otherness). In fact, such a grand category as Western Thought is not necessary to see this. In Stoke-on-Trent, Spiritualists lead what could be called dual, or better multiple, lives: they are thoroughly engaged in debates about Spirit, about Healing, and about evidencing the persistence of life after death, within and beyond Christian traditions; while also dealing with the everyday experiences of post-industrial urban life, of political and cultural marginalisation, of ageing and dying. Spiritualism in
Stoke-on-Trent has always been engaged with other forms of lived reality production within the West, with its seemingly endless capacity to produce new modes of existence.

This is not simply about different modes of spirituality, but about the West’s always ongoing engagement with other knowledges and modes of existence. Spiritualism is just as engaged with Native American shamanic traditions as it is with Buddhist ways of understanding Spirit: not so as to assimilate or co-opt them, but so as to learn and to continue to draw inspiration from them. Stoke-on-Trent today shows that Western Thought is not a singularity, though it is evident some strands of Western thought behave as if they are (evidenced in their own versions of a flat earth: the global reality of the neoliberal city). This ontological heterogeneity – and its production – within towns in a small northern city in the UK is political. The politics lies not in some accountancy of ontological alterity, but in the ways in which the production of ontological alterity creates new forms of cut between the knowable and the unknowable, visibility and invisibility, speakability and hearability. What Stoke-on-Trent questions, then, is the globalisation of reality without an outside and without a limit inside the West.

Stoke-on-Trent is an ordinary city, so appears on the map of urban theory as a case study of other things, not that it shows up very often. Yet, this city is more than ordinary, where ordinary is a reduction of an optic to something presumed to be shared and in common, spread across the surface of the earth like butter on hot toast. In fact, Stoke-on-Trent is extraordinary. Arguably, then, all cities are extraordinary: they have something extraordinary about them that challenges universalised experience, categories, knowabilities, vocabularies. Arguing this returns us to the question of how cities can learn from one another (following McFarlane, 2011) and how incomparable geographies might be operationalised (following Jazeel, 2019). Put another way, the extraordinary cannot now become a universal standard against which all cities are compared, even with the caveat that the extraordinary is itself folded into and out of the ordinary.

To argue that all cities can be extraordinary is to insist that the incomparable places limits and contingencies upon universal statements about the urban condition; and, on the other hand, that the particular is not swept up into abstract relationships that convert the local into the global. Indeed, if heterogeneity is a defining characteristic of cities as the Chicago School wished, then maybe this is best thought of as the city’s capacity to enable people to produce new and different modes of existence (but not inevitability). And, if urbanism is a way of life, as the Chicago School insisted, then this is itself internally heterogeneous and perhaps not always entirely that urban. And this is the important point. If critical urban theory cannot see the production of ontological difference, then it cannot anticipate, or participate in, its production. Thus, critical urban theory ends up simply repeating its own truths (all over again). Rather, Stoke-on-Trent teaches that there is a need to re-engage understandings of difference, unknowability and alterity; here and everywhere. Partly perhaps to account for the extraordinariness of cities (that exists beyond realities held to be in common), but more to imagine all the extraordinary things cities could be. Including Stoke-on-Trent.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The data that support the findings of this study are available on reasonable request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions.

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ENDNOTES
1 There is a clear parallel here with Rancière’s argument about the relationship between aesthetic regimes and politics (see Rancière, 2004, 2010). In effect, I am shifting Rancière’s argument to create a sense that ontological regimes structure what he would call ‘the sensible’. This is deliberately to de-privilege the aesthetic without, I hope, removing or marginalising it (see also Pile, 2021).
The findings of the research project from which these examples are drawn is reported elsewhere: see, for example, Bartolini et al. (2017, 2018a, 2019).

This broadly anthropological understanding differs, say, from Latour’s recent use of the term to describe different domains of knowledge/practice (2013).


Citing texts such as Brenner (1998, 2004); Brenner et al. (2012); Harvey (2005, 2011, 2016); Jessop (1990, 2000); Jessop et al. (2008); and Peck (2010).

Worth noting, therefore, that Spiritualists debate the ontology of Spirit and, arguably, it is this desire to debate and investigate with an open mind that draws them together, not faith in God-given universal truths (see Pile et al., 2019).

As the title of Viveiros de Castro’s paper indicates, there is a long-standing debate about the alterity of indigenous ontologies and their relationship to modernity and the West: see, for example, Escobar (2007), Grosfoguel (2007), Quijano (2007) and Walsh (2007) or de Sousa Santos (2014).

Conceivably, Viveiros de Castro is taking on not only Bruno Latour’s We have never been modern (1991) in evoking the non-human, but also arguments about multiple ontologies elsewhere in science and technology studies (STS), such as Anne-Marie Mol’s The body multiple (2002). In STS, an ontology of multiplicity is common. Thus, objects of study are rarely, if ever, a thing unto itself. Yet, this ontology remains singular. In Mol’s case, for example, multiple ontologies are produced by specific medical practices (producing as medical specialism that partition the body in a variety of ways). However, the biomedical model that produces and integrates these medical practices remains both silently undisclosed and implicitly singular in Mol’s work. Thus, ‘practice’ functions in much the same way as ‘isomorphism’ in neoliberal urban theory to create a common ontological ground which is (paradoxically) generative of multiplicity (see also Trubina, 2018, pp. 68–70). Yet, each is right that there is a politics in all this that must be addressed (to extend the point made by Mol, 1999).

This is not the only way to make this point. Clive Barnett argues that theories of neoliberalism carry a blind spot, which he calls a ‘social residual’ (2005). For him, this social residual comprises long-term social and cultural changes that act on governments and economies. What this affords, from my perspective, is that these changes are being driven by the existence of other ontological regimes and practices and it is these that animate Barnett’s social residual.

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