

## Comparative urbanism and global urban studies: theorising the urban

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For some time now, post-colonial critiques of urban studies have sought to expand its horizons to respond to the global and globalised nature of the urban and to decolonise its concepts and practices (Southall 1976; Mitchell, 1987; Hannerz, 1980; Parnell 1997; Robinson 2001; 2006; Parnell, Pieterse and Watson, 2009; Roy 2009; Wu 2016). In the process, many theoretical and methodological challenges have come to the fore. These have inspired sustained debates, which have to some extent productively stretched the vocabularies and practices of urban scholars (for example, Robinson, 2006; Pieterse, Parnell and Watson, 2009; Roy, 2009; Brenner and Schmid, 2015; Scott and Storper, 2016; Buckley and Strauss, 2017; Bhan, 2018). These debates also expose the ongoing limitations on which voices amongst urban scholars across the globe shape the terms of urban theorising (Parnell and Pieterse, 2016; Ferenčuhová, 2016), even as the leading centres of urban research become more globally dispersed (Parnell and Pieterse, 2014; Revi *et al.*, 2016; Marques, 2020). Nonetheless, the issues presented by a more global framing of urban studies are far from settled – and indeed, are of long-standing concern (Abu-Lughod, 1976). Alongside the ambition to de/post-colonialise urban studies, and to frame the problematic of the urban and urbanisation as “global”, open to consideration based on the experiences of any urban settlements and the wide diversity of urbanisation processes across the planet, coming into view are a series of conundrums associated with thinking the urban, globally. What/where is the urban? What is the relation between individual cases and wider theoretical propositions? How to build new insights from distinctive urban contexts? What is the status and scope of ideas about the urban? Whose voices count in framing understandings and concepts of the urban? Writers of course bring their various political engagements, practices, vocabularies and philosophies, empirical concerns and theoretical preferences, regional and locational embeddedness, and positionalities, to addressing these questions (Angelo and Goh, 2020). But the problematic of theorising the urban, globally, also brings forward shared concerns which urbanists seek to throw light on. More than positionality and theoretical perspectives inform these debates – often a deeply shared commitment to engaged urban practices and issues of social justice inspire writers concerned with the urban world. And of course, the urban world itself presses on any conceptualisations of the urban.

Starting from the practical challenges of building knowledge of the urban within the rubric of a more global urban studies, and in response to the unruly and often divergent nature of contemporary urbanisation, all urbanists confront the challenge of thinking the urban in a “world of cities” (Robinson, 2011) and thus of building concepts of the urban across difference. The search for a new “geography of theory” (Roy, 2009) to support a post-colonial and global urban studies (Robinson 2006) has inspired a number of scholars to revisit the nature and terms of comparative method (Nijman, 2007; McFarlane, 2010; Ward, 2010; Robinson, 2011; Peck, 2015; Hart, 2016; Leitner, Peck and Shephard, 2019). Comparativism has been explored as a broad theoretical practice of global urbanism associated with ways of

coming to understanding of and engagement with the urban, as a “comparative imagination” (McFarlane, 2010), bringing different urban experiences into analytical conversation (Ward, 2010), and “thinking with elsewhere” (Robinson, 2016). Comparativism also draws attention to processes of conceptualisation, as individual cases are drawn into reflections across more than one case (Connell, 2007); and to the agency and role of the specific researcher in framing comparative experiments. The agentful researcher, her positionality and trajectories (Ruddick *et al.*, 2018), her engaged commitments in specific urban contexts (Smith, 2009), her inspired conceptualisations and expansive horizons (Zerrilli, 2009) are key elements in analyses of the urban. In this vein, comparative urbanism emerges as much more than a method. It indexes a thick and dynamic research practice which calls for careful attention to different contexts, to the diverse positionalities and concerns of researchers, and to the dynamism of concept formation. Comparativism indicates a mode of theory building which sees concepts as strongly revisable in the context of bespoke and natural experiments, rigorous evaluation and ongoing contestation of insights. At its most expansive, this chapter suggests, comparative urbanism adds up to a theory of the urban. That is, in searching for ways in which a comparative imagination – thinking with elsewhere – might be specifically formatted for global urban studies, a distinctive perspective on the urban emerges. Different spatialities of the urban convene the methodological experiments and enable conceptual innovations which a comparative imagination invites.

Here, it is important to clarify what a “global” urban studies might entail. Whatever the urban might be thought to be, it is *the possibility to define this from any urban context* which articulates the meaning of “global” urban studies (Robinson, 2016). Thus “global urbanism”, far from signposting the possibility of a definitive, universal, or generalised account of the urban, indexes rather the potential for theoretical and pragmatic practices, insights and orientations towards and within the urban, brought forward by scholars or practitioners, residents, artists, policy makers and planners - starting anywhere (Robinson and Roy, 2016). Thus, diverse ways of thinking, practice and experience produce and perform the urban (Lefebvre, 1994). Global urban studies convenes theoretical practices deeply aware that the urban takes place, is produced and lived, within a globalised world of diverse urban contexts, and a multiplicity of processes of urbanisation. “Global” urbanism, then suggests an analytical and pragmatic project of coming to understand the urban across its many formations, from a wide diversity of contexts and experiences, resulting in knowledge which is strongly revisable, open, diverse and non-singular. Whatever the urban might reference within global urban studies, it is not singular or universal, but differentiated and fractured, even disjunct – as any critical geographical or spatial understanding of “global” indicates.

Indeed, if we follow Doreen Massey’s foundational “global sense of place” argument, the multiple trajectories and inter connections which produce any space as a “simultaneity” (Massey, 2005) are never “global” as opposed to “local”. Her still productive formulation portrays a generalised condition of globalised and “stretched out” social relations composed through complex spatialities. In his important contribution, John Allen (2016) unfolds spatial relations as not simply material trajectories or flows, but draws attention to the intricate spatialities (topologies) of relating, which compose presence, absence and reach in the midst of a globalised social world. In the tracks of this spatial imagination, the open possibility of the urban within the framing of global urban studies is emergent from simultaneously globalised-and-embedded interconnections. These connections need to be appreciated in

their full diversity beyond political economy (Buckley and Strauss, 2017), and the submerged, “submarine” or occluded trajectories of black histories, articulations of global history have been largely written out of urban studies as critical race studies powerfully insists, frame an urgent agenda for urban studies as for other fields of research (Glissant, 1990; McKittrick, 2012; Simone, 2016; Myers, 2020). To follow Massey (1994, 2005), then, urban outcomes, or territorialisations of urbanisation processes, are intimately and intricately produced at the same time as (are the same as) the prolific circulations which amount to globalised, extended processes and the operational landscapes of urbanisation (McCann and Ward, 2012; Brenner and Katsikis, 2020). These stretched, out, circulating, globalising, fragmented empirical formations of the urban, represent the core challenge for twenty-first century urbanism in many parts of the world (Watson, 2014; Murray, 2017; Kanai and Schindler, 2019). These are precisely the grounds for the provocations and questions articulated towards understanding “planetary urbanisation” (Brenner and Schmid, 2015). Any theorisation of the urban in the context of efforts to encourage “global urban studies” therefore needs to be open to engaging insights from any urban context, or any of the dispersed, extended, fragmented territories of contemporary urbanisation (Monte-Mor, 2013; Brenner and Schmid, 2015; Keil, 2017; Murray, 2017; Kanai and Schindler, 2019). As a theoretical practice, then, urban scholars need to be willing to follow the circulations, extended tracks and trajectories of urban experiences and urbanisation processes, and to take account of “whatever” urban emerges (Simone, 2011).

The concept, urban, then (“global urbanism” as theoretical and engaged practice in relation to any urban whatsoever) can only ever exist as emergent and multiple, in a state of constant, strong revisability. It is through prolific circulating processes and interconnections, for example, that the urban is composed of *differentiated* (repeated) outcomes. “The urban” emerges through topographical traces and topological foldings and their territorialised assemblages (Jacobs, 2006). Thus, conceptualisation of the urban entails the movements needed to track processes of urbanisation which link many different urban contexts (Robinson, 2018). As socio-spatial formations, the urban also emerges as *diverse*, as outcomes of the specific socio-spatial and locational dynamics associated with urban forms (Scott and Storper, 2015) as well as the lively materialities of “city life” (McFarlane, 2011; Lancione and McFarlane, 2016; Amin and Thrift, 2017), the ephemeral emergences of “people as infrastructure” (Simone, 2018) or city-formation as “rumour” (de Boeck, 2004). There are a diversity of territorial outcomes and urbanisation processes (Schmid *et al.*, 2018) evident in different regions and urban settlements, yielding sometimes shared features (not necessarily connected to one another) which researchers might draw attention to and which might be worth thinking together to enrich and stretch understandings of each (Ward, 2010; Robinson, 2015).

One further spatiality of the urban is crucial to “global” urban studies: the urban is always *distinctive* - we can come to know it only through its specific outcomes – through its singularities and specificities. In the classic Hegelian triad (universal-particular-individual), the “urban” is the “individual” which always interrupts and presents itself as the unruly ground to any effort to conceptualise (Schmid, 2021 [2005]). Attending to the individual case study, comparative urbanism signals the potential for starting conceptualisation from specificity. The key insight for our purposes here is that whatever the “concrete totality” of the urban might be, in Lefebvre’s (2003) terms it is a rich complexity, fundamentally unknowable and

open. This makes any conceptualisation of the urban (or of any urban outcome) profoundly uncertain, empirically determined, historically located, in conditions of ongoing emergence – and therefore contestable<sup>1</sup>. Lefebvre proposes that: “It [the urban] is form itself, as generator of a virtual object, the urban, the encounter and assembly of all objects and subjects, existing or possible, that must be explored” (2003 [1974], p. 122).

Whatever the “urban” might be, however, it comes into being (always also) as a concept, through processes of conceptualisation. The material emergences of urban life (all the possibilities of what the urban might be-come), entwined with the virtual series of all possible interpretations and imaginations, present themselves for engagement, practice, interrogation and confrontation, generating concepts (Deleuze, 1994; Robinson, 2016). Thus, materialities as such provide no solace from the open potential that is the (global) urban, although concepts may be imagined as tightly tied to specific contexts, or more wide ranging (contrast Lancione and McFarlane, 2016; Bhan, 2019). Differentiated, diverse and distinctive. Emergent. Always conceptual. These aspects of the urban emerged from methodological reflections – how might we go about building insights on the urban as part of a practice of “global” urban studies. But such reflections also pose themselves as starting points for conceptualisation of the urban: for “comparative urbanism” as both a theorisation of the (global) urban and a theoretical practice.

A reformatted comparative urbanism – as a practice of global urban studies - therefore builds on a view of the urban as emergent from the prolific circulations, trajectories, socio-material proximities and associational practices: whatever the urban is or becomes in any given context, it can be seen as an outcome of all these possibilities of urban spatialities of differentiation, diversity and distinctiveness. In this sense, in the interests of critiquing, rebuilding and reinventing the conceptual repertoires of the field, comparative urban practices of “global urbanism” can respond to and work with the complex spatialities of the urban (Robinson, 2020).

“Genetic” grounds for building comparisons refer to situations where the spatiality of the genesis or emergence of the urban itself draws the researcher towards reflections across different contexts and cases. Such comparative practices work with the profoundly interconnected nature of urban processes and outcomes, following the many urban phenomena which are repeated across different contexts (Robinson, 2016; Hart’s (2016) wider work on relational comparativism has been important here). Thus, repeated instances emergent from the vast array of interconnected processes constitute possibilities that might give rise to “any urban whatever” – to paraphrase Maliq Simone (2011). Urban forms and processes are distributed promiscuously across perhaps quite different urban contexts suggesting the need and potential to think, for example, large scale developments or satellite cities, across a multiplicity of different urban contexts (Robinson *et al.*, 2020). This leaves little scope for *a priori* segmentation of urbanization processes or the urban (as in a putative “southern” urban theory – see the critical commentaries and reflections of Yiftachel, 2006;

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<sup>1</sup> A point Brenner and Schmid (2015) and their critics (Ruddick *et al.*, 2018) agree on: “The urban society is thus never an achieved condition, but offers an open horizon in relation to which concrete struggles over the urban are waged. It is through such struggles, ultimately, that any viable new urban epistemology will be forged” (p. 178).

Parnell and Oldfield, 2014; Robinson, 2014; Lawhon and Truelove, 2020; Müller, 2020), and rather speaks to the potential for an expansive and promiscuous geography of the urban.

*“Generative” grounds* or reasons for bringing different cases or contexts into comparison lie in the curiosity of the researcher to understand a phenomenon or problem. Researchers might design comparative experiments which could help to think in a more focussed way about the puzzles that specific contexts, or a number of diverse contexts and their shared features or divergences present to analysis (Robinson, 2015). This might entail seeking to understand the variety of forms of a phenomenon by turning to question the limits of concepts to hand, perhaps their inability to stretch to provide understanding across the different cases. For Deleuze (1994), the field of available concepts constitutes a virtual series, the series of all possible ideas, which goes alongside and works with the virtual series of all the material possibilities of the emergent urban world which could present themselves to us. These pose questions or “problems”, pressing at existing understandings. The intersection of these two series is the generative site in which new concepts might be produced, and old concepts reach their limits. Genetic processes and generative explorations intertwine in the practice of comparing. This is a challenging, slow and emergent research practice, in which the potential for comparison, the comparator, can be thought of as “assembled” across the elements of cases, wider literature, individual researchers, evidence gathered, interlocutors, not least collaborators, residents, practitioners, who have their own productive “wild” comparisons to put into the mix (Clarke, 2012; Deville et al, 2016).

In a reformatted urban comparativism, insights therefore emerge from the practices of researchers, seeking to invent, expand, enrich, and perhaps reach the end of the utility of a certain concept; perhaps finally exploding concepts to reveal new starting points, inspired by the “difference” drawn off, the aspects of specific phenomena which remain unexplained by available concepts as we consider different phenomena, or cases (Robinson, 2016). Thus, an agentful researcher might compose a comparative practice across different contexts or cases, drawn by the conceptual challenges she faces to expand insight, test concepts to redundancy, and be inspired by new ideas.

The important question of who this researcher might be presents itself. In addition to questions of positionality and diversity in scholarship (Ruddick [et al.](#), 2018), the dominant figure of the Northern or diasporic urban researcher embedded in the demands and vocabularies of the Northern academy or Northern-centric politics, also needs to be addressed (Todd, 2016; Lawhon and Truelove, 2020). Practices and conceptualisations emergent from what Roy (2011) termed, “new subjects of urban theory” have proposed dynamic and hugely important new insights and agendas, transforming the landscape of global urban studies (Smith, 2009; Parnell and Pieterse, 2014; Ren, 2015; Revi [et al.](#), 2015; Simone and Pieterse, 2018; Bhan, 2019; Marques, forthcoming). Much more of such transformation in the authoring of global urban studies is called for.

This is a triple challenge. Firstly, addressing the uneven presence of different urban contexts in theorisation - which could be achieved largely through northern-centric and diasporic researchers. Secondly, prioritising insights and concerns of writers from a wider range of languages, backgrounds, scholarly and theoretical traditions, and geographical contexts (Sidaway [et al.](#), 2016; Bhan, 2019) - which also involves an internal critique of Anglo-American

hegemony within northern-centric urban studies (e.g. Müller, 2019). But, crucially, this entails confronting the extreme inequalities in institutional and personal resources amongst urban scholars. Thirdly, radically contesting and transforming the institutional norms of “international” scholarly production which militate against the emergent conceptualisations of many scholars gaining wider purchase (Ferenčuhová, 2016; Parnell and Pieterse, 2016).

Thus “global urban studies” is not only about disjunctive and new arguments inspired by different contexts or specific urban experiences – although clearly this remains an important agenda. More intractable challenges persist and have barely been addressed despite considerable editorial goodwill. So long as what counts as excellent is embedded with the institutional norms and definitions of northern and well-resourced academies, and claims to conceptual innovation are expressed in certain globally resonant authorial voices (confident, dominating, authorizing, unmarked) and enabled through the practicalities of unevenly resourced circuits of knowledge and publishing, “global” urban studies can only be a distorted reflection of these institutional injustices and inherited practices.

Of course, some of this needs an assault on the global political economy and extensive neoliberalisation of universities, as well as decolonisation of the global academy. Not happening tomorrow. But the infrastructure of how global urban studies is practiced, how comparative urban imaginations are mobilised – is at least to some extent in the gift of scholars across the world. Wherever we can, the structures of intellectual political economy and practice which sustain exclusions, disfigure urban studies and restrict contributions urgently need to be dissipated. The agenda is extensive (see Jazeel, 2019, Chapter 9, for a valuable summary). This might include some of the following. Changing review practices in all urban journals to embed alternative and decentred expectations for assessing excellence and rigour, originality and other criteria which valorise different forms of knowledge. This should include detailed empirical research and reports on practice from scholars whose embedded knowledge and long engagement with contexts offers rich insights (Parnell and Pieterse, 2016). Too often such deeply original knowledge and committed urban practice is completely hidden in the extensive but unacknowledged support which southern scholars offer to northern scholars who might secure the time and money to undertake research and write up insights. The infrastructure and under-labouring of highly skilled, innovative and significant urbanists in many different contexts needs to be acknowledged in a committed and dynamic programme of changing publishing norms. Researchers who collaborate with institutions and scholars in different contexts need to follow accredited partnerships of equivalence, and be pressed at each stage (from grant application to conference presentation to publication) to explicitly acknowledge, reflect in authorship, and pay for, the contribution of scholars they rely on for their insights and knowledge. Intellectual theft is no basis for “global” urban studies. So, without scrupulous accounting and accountability for collaboratively produced insights, work should be barred from publication.

In addition, northern urban studies needs to get its own house in order, and commit to the propagation of modes of theorizing which are actively open to being revised and modest in their voice. Wider conceptual claims should always be precise about locational co-ordinates (both physical and social). And careful, accurate and respectful reading of the contributions of others should underpin critical engagements – or how will marginalised voices in the field find the confidence to promote their insights. Certainly, some of us need to write much less,

and dedicate our energies to the infrastructural and institutional transformations and collegial support for scholarship in less well resourced contexts, which are the necessary and sufficient conditions for “global” urban studies.

For any theorist of global urban studies, “the urban” poses significant challenges and conundrums as an object of study. This inserts open and productive dissonances into any attempt to singularise the urban: in its rich fullness and complexity, its uncertain spatialities, the urban is always more than any theorisation of it (Lefebvre, 1994); and in a “world of cities”, the urban is always also somewhere else than where we are looking for it (Simone, 2011). Thought methodologically, these are less *problems* for theory, than invitations to crafting conceptualisations from anywhere, and from any starting point, within the full richness of urban life. Comparative urbanism as one kind of “global” urban practice, expands the potential for urban scholars, new subjects of urban theory (Roy, 2011), to launch contributions from anywhere and to build collective and expansive horizons of conceptualisation (Zerilli, 2009) from which the urban can be reconfigured within an expanded global field, and in which new urban futures can be imagined. Any such conceptualisation, this chapter has argued, will be provisional, revisable, starting anywhere, open to elsewhere, inspired from differentiation, diversity and distinctiveness, and always incomplete. And any such wider programme for global urban studies has a great deal of hard work to do to undermine northern dominance of this agenda, and to build the solidarities and institutional networks which facilitate both new geographies and new subjects of urban theory.

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