A more global urban studies, besides empirical variation

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Abstract
An expanded set of sites, a more differentiated set of references and linguistic diversification have been discussed as needed changes in urban studies. The critiques of the limitations of urban studies, in terms of both the scholarship and the scholars, offer important and concrete responses to expanding the scope of the field. Yet this tremendous special issue on ‘Comparative Methods for Global Urban Studies’ with 10 papers cutting across a range of sites and topics is decidedly not only about empirical variation; this is an important distinction worth drawing more attention to. The creativity expressed in these papers comes at an auspicious time in urban studies where new routes for doing urban theory are needed to move past debates about singular versus plural epistemologies of the urban. As a kind of research that demands more translation, exchange and collaboration, perhaps comparative urban research as a mode of theory-building can help to humble the chest-pounding, posturing, privilege of thinking and speaking the language of theory. The theoretical ambitions of these very different papers show how urban theory need not only be about better understanding urbanisation within the epistemological confines of late capitalism. Rather than reifying a shared grammar of urbanisation as a necessity to understand each other, they may entice scholars everywhere to develop a broader vocabulary and perhaps even learn another language.

Keywords
comparative method, comparative urbanism, language, urban theory

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An expanded set of sites, a more differentiated set of references and linguistic diversification have been discussed as needed changes in urban studies (Kong and Qian, 2019; Mott and Cockayne, 2017; Müller, 2021; Sheppard et al., 2013). The critiques of the limitations of urban studies, in terms of both the scholarship and the scholars, offer important and concrete responses to expanding the scope of the field. Yet this tremendous special issue on ‘Comparative Methods for Global Urban Studies’ with 10 papers cutting across a range of sites and topics is decidedly not only about empirical variation; this is an important distinction worth drawing more attention to.

What is the problem with variation? In her piece ‘Who’s Afraid of Postcolonial Theory?’ Ananya Roy responds to the misreading of the call for ‘new geographies of theory’ as ‘an argument about the empirical uniqueness of cities in the Global South and thus as a mandate for adding empirical variation to existing urban theory’ (Roy, 2016: 201). In this misreading, the value of postcolonial critiques is dismissed in favour of ‘fundamental common genetic factors underlying urban patterns, and a robust set of conceptual categories within which urbanisation processes and urban experiences can be analysed’ (Storper and Scott, 2016: 1115). As a consequence of committing to these established conceptual categories, however, the experience of the majority of the cities in the world is reduced to ‘little more than variations on a universal form’ pre-determined in a few ‘iconic cities in the global North’ (Robinson and Roy, 2016: 181). This debate highlights the tension between adhering to a shared language for ‘the urban’ through which to understand urban experiences everywhere, and the insistence that doing so is not only reductive, but falls prey to the ‘dangers of Eurocentrism’, which continues to haunt urban studies (Roy, 2016; Storper and Scott, 2016).

The present collection of scholarship posits comparative urban research as a way forward from this debate. These papers acknowledge the uneven structures of power that determine the terms in which the urban is framed, the categories of understanding that confine most cities in the world ‘in a prison house of radical difference ... locked
in a European episteme’ (Gikandi, 2018), written about and analysed in ‘terms of theory built elsewhere’ (Bhan, 2019: 641). Jennifer Robinson has argued that ‘instead of seeing only some cities as the originators of urbanism’, it is necessary to recalibrate the terms of engagement so that divisive categories that ‘privilege certain experiences’ can make way for more creative scholarship (Robinson, 2006: 1). Inspired by Robinson’s work, what these papers represent is a new culture of theorising, which acknowledges ‘elsewhere’ as authoritative (Robinson, 2016a), with the power to make an analytical difference in its revisions to prevailing urban theory (Robinson, 2016b).

The different uses of ‘elsewhere’ referenced by Gautam Bhan and the ‘elsewhere’ in Robinson’s comparative tactics demand a clarification of position or standpoint: whose elsewhere? Whereas Bhan references a concept of elsewhere that operates as a source of imposition, Robinson considers the elsewhere more broadly, as another case or a wider context of an ‘other place’ to engage with (Robinson, 2016b). By reframing this ‘other’ as a site of potential engagement, it connects to Gayatri Spivak’s guidance to approach ‘the language of the other not as a “field language”’ and to consider instead how they represent active co-producers of knowledge rather than passive objects of study (Spivak, 2003: 9). Instead of framing ‘other’ cities as receptors of theory, like lab mice on which to be tested as case studies, these studies grant their comparative sites the agency to set the terms of discussion. Granting ‘elsewhere’ or the ‘other’ a place of authority implies their urban experience can reshape the epistemological trajectory of urban studies as a field, and demands a ‘reading practice open to learning from writing on other contexts’ (Robinson, 2016b: 21) or open to reading research from certain places as theoretical (Ren, 2021: 6). Instead of falling into the dichotomies of so-called ‘North’ and ‘South’ or taking cities ‘elsewhere’ simply as ‘units of analysis’, Gillian Hart suggests that we can more usefully understand them as ‘vantage points’ (Hart, 2018: 389). Neither a source of theoretical imposition nor merely field units, sites (everywhere) become active standpoints.

The engagement with ‘elsewhere’ and the aim of a more global urban studies is not only about representation, as important as this is. The task cannot be reduced to practices of ‘corrective inclusion’ (Gilroy, 1993; Ren, 2020; Roy, 2017: 34), of adding more empirical studies to answer the same theoretical questions, but entails a far more challenging task of developing new ‘theoretical repertoires’ (Robinson et al., 2022). Despite their differences in terms of empirical methods, scales of analysis, and topics, the papers in this special issue highlight the value of comparison in their engagement with ‘elsewheres’. The dialogues presented here between the many different sites and contexts are not only relevant for area specialists, and thus vulnerable to being confined to the margins of the discipline (Jazeel, 2016; Sidaway, 2013); they make methodological and theoretical contributions relevant for urban studies in general.

Several papers focus on the approach to comparison, offering revisions to the ‘quasi-experimental’ suite of established comparative methods that often served to restrict comparison across presumed differences (Robinson, 2011). Rather than taking comparative sites as starting points, some papers begin with a theoretical case (Ren, forthcoming; Walton, 1992). Investigating the consequences of model city designations and the mobility of expertise, Sergio Montero and Gianpaolo Baiocchi present a posteriori comparison as a means to critically assess the residual impact of ‘best practice’ narratives on Bogotá and Porto Alegre (Montero...
and Baiocchi, 2021). The authors do not situate Bogotá and Porto Alegre as most similar cases simply because they are in Latin America; they first establish a theoretical case about global policy circulation and investigate the ways that urban success emphasises small-scale policy changes rather than the broad reforms necessary to make those changes possible (Montero and Baiocchi, 2021: 2–3). Doing so, they engage with Bogotá and Porto Alegre in a way that opens up these cities to being comparable with many cities also held up as international best practice references; Singapore comes to mind (Huat, 2011).

In contrast to Montero and Baiocchi’s study of relatively discrete contexts brought together by a shared trajectory, Camila Saraiva’s tracing of slum upgrading policies in São Paulo and eThekwini shows how understanding the cooperation between these two cities helps to better theorise slum upgrading in general (Saraiva, 2021). She connects the international institutions, capacity building programmes and specific events that facilitate expertise exchange, and shows through evocative detail that these are not only coincidental meetings. For example, she quotes an eThekwini practitioner who described a network meeting like ‘a dating service’ and made explicit their intention: ‘we want to learn about upgrading from São Paulo’ (Saraiva, 2021: 7). Thus, learning becomes a kind of theoretical case, central to understanding the site selection, and an alternative to site selection based on the similarities or differences between the slums in these two cities. Though they offer different approaches to site selection, both Montero and Baiocchi (2021) and Saraiva (2021) offer ways to justify comparing their sites that do not reduce them to presumed similarities based on regional location or even more antiquated notions of ‘development’ that might bring together cities dealing with slum upgrading. They both also offer further innovations for alternative ways of doing comparison – through collaborations with researchers who have specialised knowledge through previous single-site studies or travelling – with policies to consider the tensions between the local and the transversal.

Indeed, a recurrent theme in these papers is the balance sought between context and interconnection in explanatory analyses. Through a comparative conversation between Nantou, an urban village in Shenzhen, and Church Grove, an affordable home project in London, Shaun SK Teo creatively shows how the interplay of different actors in these projects is both institutionally shaped, and institution-shaping (Teo, 2021). Moreover, in the researcher’s sequential analysis and movement between the two sites, the comparative researcher is positioned to analytically interpret each site in terms of the other ‘without relying on a priori and contextually specific analyses of state entrepreneurialism or austerity localism as separate, perhaps incommensurable, theoretical frameworks for conceptualisation’ (Teo, 2021: 17). In contrast, Oded Haas offers an entirely different approach by beginning with the idea of contextual specificity, and starting with singularity in order to better understand settler-colonial contexts through the ‘specific narratives of the colonised’ (Haas, 2021). By centring the narratives of Palestinian citizens of Israel, Haas examines the cities of Tantour in Israel and Rawabi in the West Bank, both designed to deal with housing crisis. The study traverses a fraught border with an ethnographic account, revealing contradictions about what housing projects mean as both colonial and commercial projects, and politically in terms of both cooptation and resistance. Rather than focusing on the cities as containers that are host to housing projects, or framing housing in a context of global processes of commodification, then, both Teo
and Haas situate housing in a far more complicated field of analysis that allows for conversations across enormous distances – geographically and politically.

The papers dealing with infrastructure development similarly lend themselves well to complicating the overreliance on contextually specific analyses that might render places incommensurate. In her study of desalination plants in Chennai and London, Niranjana Ramesh shows how these infrastructures are embedded in technological contexts rather than repeated instances within a global circuit (Niranjana, 2022). Doing so, she centres the processes of infrastructure development in fragments rather than taking fragmentation itself as the basis for theory. This allows for an interrogation of what the ‘seemingly seamless’ idealised infrastructure in cities like London might be concealing (Niranjana, 2022). By unsettling the category of ‘infrastructure’ (Lancione and McFarlane, 2016: 2403), she contributes to theorisations of infrastructure across dualistic assumptions of the ‘seamless’ and the ‘fragmented’ that she shows are often tied to the so-called North and South.

Perhaps it is precisely because of the spatially extensive nature of infrastructure that it lends itself well to complicating more insular, bounded-orientations of urban theory. Like Niranjana, Miguel Kanai and Seth Schindler focus on infrastructure, though at a different scale with regards to ‘infrastructure-led development’ (ILD) and its proponents like the World Bank or G20 (Kanai and Schindler, 2022). Through examples like mega-plantations, they show how conforming to the demands of these ILD programmes and attendant private investment logics results in ‘strategic enclaves with select functions disembedded from their surroundings’ (Kanai and Schindler, 2022). Thus, it is not only a matter of balancing context and interconnection, but of understanding the ways that connectivity can transform urban or peri-urban space. The nature of large-scale urban development recurs in the comparative study of Johannesburg, Shanghai and London (Robinson et al., 2022), where the simultaneous interplay of circulating practices, trans-scalar actors and bounded regulatory formations complicates the spatialisation of urban development. Whereas Kanai and Schindler focus on the ‘peri-urban’, Robinson et al. consider the distinctive territorialisations and specific impacts of these projects on urban politics – from electoral dependencies to the competition between state actors (Kanai and Schindler, 2022; Robinson et al., 2022). They render concrete the benefit of comparative approaches for contributing to debates about the nature of the ‘urban’. Although most papers in this special issue deal with theoretical cases that traverse urban topics like policy circulation or housing development, they do not necessarily grapple with the question of the urban itself (at least not explicitly). Perhaps it is the scale of their comparison that renders Robinson et al. particularly attuned to theorising urbanisation processes.

In addition to rethinking comparative methods and the analyses of the urban, these comparative studies also suggest a fine-tuning of the ‘global’ ambitions of a ‘more global urban studies’. In Stefan Kipfer’s study of Frantz Fanon’s epistemological legacy and its tricontinental internationalism, the examples of the creole literary movement in Martinique, Indigenous activism in Canada, and political anti-racism in France show how it is difficult to reconcile Fanon’s nuanced internationalism with localised terrains of power (Kipfer, 2021). For instance, after Fanon’s death, creole intellectuals sought to supplant his anticolonial internationalism with a more ‘national-regional and cultural-linguistic alternative’ (Kipfer, 2021: 10–11). This illustrates how Fanon’s international anticolonial agenda is mediated by the
political actors appropriating or subverting the terms of resistance. The ‘global’ or ‘international’ as a kind of ambition is also employed in Łukasz Stanek’s historical study of ‘socialist worldmaking’, which considers how an idea of a world is constructed in relations between socialist and postcolonial countries (Stanek, 2021). He draws attention to the idea of a world not only theoretically constructed in comparative thought, but also produced through trade agreements, collaborative urban planning and design, and educational exchange programmes offering Africans and Asians scholarships in socialist countries. Both Kipfer and Stanek begin to point towards an internationalism or a world-making that is not necessarily universal, but rather mediated (i.e., by intellectual movements, planning ideas or educational institutions) and attached to political agendas.

Taking some inspiration from Kipfer and Stanek, and given that the papers in this issue generally subscribe to the aim of a ‘more global urban studies’, it would be intriguing in future work to reflect on how expansive these comparative worlds may be. Which mediating factors define the nature of globality? What happens when the politics that animate these global aims are made more explicit? For instance, what is the role of equity in aiming to be more global, how does it influence the research questions or the approaches being taken? What is the relationship between authority and globality in shaping who gets to contribute to global theory building agendas or in giving prominence to certain scales of analysis?

These papers are not just additive empirical explorations, diversifying the field of urban studies. Their approach to comparative urban research is clearly intellectually demanding, as seen in the scope of the scholarship they reference, the languages and methodological skills necessary to pursue this work, and the analytical creativity required for establishing new starting points for comparative research. The effort is also clearly fruitful, helping to challenge assumptions about established categories, methods, concepts and ambitions. It is precisely this effort that distinguishes these papers from examples of ‘mere’ empirical variation, by drawing out theoretical findings for the nature of infrastructure, the process of policy learning or the meaning of housing crisis. For instance, learning about *sumud* (‘steadfastness’ in Arabic) as a way to understand resistance among Palestinians in Israel (Haas, 2021) prompted me to revisit the scholarship on *ding-zi-hu* (‘nail houses’ in Mandarin) in housing activism in China (Shin, 2013); these papers inspire new reflections about the global urban in terms of its practised and lived experience.

The creativity expressed in these papers comes at an auspicious time in urban studies where new routes for doing urban theory are needed (Lawhon and Le Roux, 2019; Palat Narayanan, 2021; Schmid et al., 2018) to move past debates about singular versus plural epistemologies of the urban. As a kind of research that demands more translation, exchange and collaboration, perhaps comparative urban research as a mode of theory-building can help to humble the chest-pounding, posturing, privilege of thinking and speaking the language of theory (Zeiderman, 2018). The theoretical ambitions of these very different papers show how urban theory need not only be about better understanding urbanisation within the epistemological confines of late capitalism. Rather than reifying a shared grammar of urbanisation as a necessity to understand each other, they may entice scholars everywhere to develop a broader vocabulary and perhaps even learn another language.
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