



# **theoriSE**

**debating the southeastern  
turn in urban theories**

**edited by oren yiftachel and nisa mammon**



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# CARDINAL INSUBORDINATION

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The notion of the 'Southeast' (SE) has the potential of bridging a set of urban sensibilities and intertwined urbanisation circuits. It builds on initiatives in search of locating and giving visibility to other ways of knowing emerging from the Southeast. However, we can fall into the trap of essentialising both the urban knowledges coming from there and the role of theory in fostering social change. Would the 'Southeast' become a new trope to designate what now is framed as the global South?

Imperial projects have used cartography to frame an understanding of the world that gives no room to think of geographic difference outside the cardinal points. In the same light, Western thought has used dichotomies as foundations to classify the world and its relations (i.e. West-East, North-South, science-myth, nature-culture, and so on). Are we dichotomising our perspective by framing SE and the rest? A renewed project of progressive academia and transformative theory building needs to unearth the white privilege of authoritative knowledge about city-making practices and go beyond the cardinal determinants.

I propose to think on a 'cardinal insubordination' as a provocation. This provocation calls for thinking anew not only the palimpsest of urban relations across contexts but also the constellation of actors that remain at the margins of who is considered a theory maker, and the myriad trans-local solidarity networks we need to learn from. I argue that thinking about 'cardinal insubordination' enables us to reimagine theory-making as a linchpin strategy to foster epistemic and restorative justice, to heal the "colonial wound" (Mignolo 2005) departing from urban practices.

The idea of cardinal insubordination consists of questioning the very terms of the geographical emulation and the kind of theory we aspire to generate using the notion of Southeast. Insubordination here relates to the responses to the epistemic violence (Spivak 1988) exerted in the deployment of Northern urban theory, and the *need to generate restorative justice in knowledge production of the urban*.

Cardinal insubordination also relates to the epistemic disobedience that rejects the hubris of the zero-point epistemology of the West (Castro-Gómez 2007) and aims to cultivate epistemic justice when thinking how cities are produced and can be imagined otherwise. If the cardinal points became the key way-finding strategy to orientate in space, how can we think theory-making while acknowledging them and not getting lost there? Nowadays, the urban cannot be thought of without the planetary circulation of capital, information, and people, and the expanded patterns of resemblance of city-making processes. We need to overcome geographical determinisms considering SE as vantage point and a locus of thought, rather than a fixed geography. But what does SE allow us to see, and what is foreclosed? Is

the SE where the intellectual compass for emancipation and self-determination lies? In times of generalised social uprising, from Iran to Chile or Hong Kong to Haiti, we urge to align theory-making to change the terms of the engagement with knowledge production and its social purpose.

Based on the idea of the cardinal insubordination, I propose three strategies and key questions to advance the idea of TheoriSE:

### REMAPPING THEORY FROM 'RELATIONAL ONTOLOGIES'

Imperial domination used cartography and cardinal points to portray a Western-centric understanding of the world. In fact, the cardinal points and the Cartesian coordinate system are embodied in how we navigate space. Following a Cartesian tradition also, a separation of the body and the outside world has permeated our understanding of knowledge generation based on a logocentric perspective and a dualistic ontology (Varela 1999). Ontologies are enacted through practices, and the narratives of worldviews – theory-making then – can capture other worldviews if thinking from the SE, but remain a challenge to locate multiple ontologies in dialogue. Latin American decolonial scholars have discussed the notion of “relational ontologies” (Escobar 2014) to engage with the links to the human, non-human and spiritual worlds to address the de-sacralisation of territorial relations of meaning-making. This approach is grounded in interculturality and defines that any

single entity cannot pre-exist to the relations that constituted it in a type of “grammar of the surroundings” that goes beyond the cognitive understanding of spatial relations (Restrepo 1996). How can we remap theory-making to depart from ‘relational ontologies’? While place-bounded conceptualisations are pivotal for situated theories, SE has the risk of becoming a residual geographical category: “All that is not Western and Northern”. If we accept that one key feature of ‘Southernness’ is that the urban majority is exposed to multiple vulnerabilities (Simone and Pieterse 2017, Bhan 2019) and that ‘Southeastness’ is also marked by armed conflict, contested homelands, and bordering practices based on ethnic sectarian lines (Yiftachel 2006), then we need to think the historic trajectories of human and spatial agency and the networked practices of innovation embedded in multiple places. We have advanced in thinking cities through elsewhere (Robinson 2016), posing questions from the South in the North (Roy 2003), and the multifarious circuits of urban learning and policy mobility (McFarlane 2011, Theodore and Peck 2015). While avoiding a local trap (Purcell 2006), how these conceptualisations contribute to think: *Where is the Southeast?*

### SHIFTING THE 'MASTER NARRATIVE' THROUGH DECOLONIAL VOCABULARIES

It is necessary to point at the Western privilege shaping what constitutes authoritative knowledge and the institutors that sustain it. But that



is no longer sufficient. We need to deconstruct the ‘master narrative’ (Montesinos 1995) of urban Western thought, and the infrastructures that reproduce it. Inasmuch as urban Western theory became the story the West tells itself about itself (Roy 2015), what if we see theory-generation as a counter-storytelling project? And discuss how this project can bring about a new configuration of the myriad territorial inscriptions of urban stories? To walk this path, we could use some of the vocabularies that Latin American decolonial thinkers offer to enact other narratives of the urban. Since narratives frame subjectivities, thinking through new vocabularies can contribute to de-linking from the Western thought and find avenues to involve new idioms against universal grammars. Particularly, narratives that weave forces to free us from the modern/colonial project of development, such as border thinking (Anzaldúa 1999), pluriverse (Escobar 2012), and Sentipensante (Fals-Borda 2009).

- The notion of border thinking implies an embodied consciousness of Chicano/experiences of inhabiting in the threshold (‘la frontera’) of hegemonic and alternative systems of knowledge production and voicing the domestic subjectivities of (undocumented) immigrants, migrants, refugees, and so on. What would urban theory look like if written by them?
- The notion of pluriverse, a reaction to universality, derives from the ethno-territorial and ontological struggles

in the context of violent extractivist logics advocating for the multiplicity of worldviews and counter-capitalist projects coming from black and indigenous communities in the Colombian Pacific Coast and the Zapatista project seeking a world where many worlds fit. What are the other worldviews forgotten in the explanations and proposals to tackle the extractivist materialities of the urban?

- The notion of Sentipensante can be understood as a way to think and feel with the territory using ancestral knowledges, collective affection, and people’s economies. This term comes from Afro descendants living in/ from the rivers and marshes of the Colombian Caribbean coast. How can feeling collectively urban territories (including ‘nature’) inform theories and create opportunities for healing and reconciliation?

With these notions in mind: *Who is entitled to speak from and about the SE?*

#### LEARNING OTHERWISE WITH ‘CRITICAL URBAN PEDAGOGIES’

A feature of Western urban theory is the disregard of other ways of knowing-being-doing. In the same light, academic institutions have entrenched protocols for upholding the cannon and performing the role of gatekeepers of what counts as knowledge and constitutes theory itself. In this context, how do the ways in which we construct, teach, and disseminate knowledge about ‘Southeast cities’ undermine or promote alliances to foster critical urban theories/



Stencil art representing  
South America as a heart  
that sees.

**PHOTO:** Catalina Ortiz

practices? To start grappling with this question is necessary to think about pedagogy and bring the legacy of critical pedagogy as a precondition to cultivate self-determination, the restoration of utopia, and an educated hope (Freire 1970).

Critical pedagogy insisted that the relationship between cognitive/affective learning and theory/practice was ‘undichotomisable’. This legacy provides insights that push for instituting a critical pedagogy that goes beyond the educational system and engages with the constellation of urban actors, sensibilities, and practices that shape cities into becoming learning sites. Perhaps new strategies to re-shape urban learning processes require a greater focus on “resistant texts” (Winkler 2017) as the locus of endogenous systems of knowledge production and the epistemic values of localities to anchor their transformative potential.

For thinking how to learn otherwise, I pose the notion of *urban critical pedagogy* (Ortiz & Millan, 2022) that connects an understanding of the ‘urban’ – as the plural sphere of collective socio-material struggles – to the potentials of the ‘critical’ – as it refers to the force that shapes the disjuncture between the actual and the possible in rejection to the status quo that furthers systems of oppression – and to ‘pedagogy’ – that describes the strategies for learning rooted on existing practices of city-making in search of alternative spatial imaginations for the present and future. Urban critical pedagogy faces the struggles of revealing the political

economy of urbanisation and, at the same time, the contingent possibilities of decolonising Northern universities and Southern universities alike. However, if not committing to reshape our pedagogies, instituting possibilities for epistemological and reparative justice will remain elusive, and the efforts to build trans-local solidarity networks could be jeopardised.

This allows us to ask: *How do we learn the Southeast, and what for?*

In summary, framing TheoriSE as cardinal subordination advocates the advancing of a corpus of thought that derives from and illuminates the multiple ways in which cities are shaping anti-colonial, anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal, and anti-racist endeavours, foregrounding the role of spatial processes.

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**BELOW:** Wiphala flag symbol of the interconnectedness of indigenous resistance. **PHOTO:** Catalina Ortiz

