Comparative global urban studies in the making: Welcome to the world of imperfect and innovative urban comparisons

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Introduction, Comparative Global Urban Studies in the Making: Welcome to the World of Imperfect and Innovative Urban Comparisons
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in
The Routledge Handbook of Comparative Global Urban Studies, pages 1-26.
1st Edition (2024) Routledge
eBook ISBN9780429287961

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The world of urban studies was classically not very comparative. Until the 2000s, with some exceptions, when urban comparisons were initiated they usually dealt with a limited number of cities and metropolises, and often compared cities more or less from within the same region or with similar economic and political profiles - for instance, classic urban comparisons from Abu-Lughod (1976; 1999), Clarke (1995), Walton (1998), Logan and Swanstrom (1990), Préteceille and Ribeiro (1999), Sassen (1991), King and Pierre (1990), Le Galès (1993), Sellers (2002) Fainstein (2001), Savitch and Kantor (2004), Tammaru et al. (2014), Davis and Tajbakhsh (2005). But, as the world is becoming more urban, diverse and interconnected, this has changed. The urbanisation process has reached new heights and 2.2 billion new urban residents will be added by 2050, mostly in African and Asian Cities (UN Habitat, 2022). The processes of globalization and circulation of knowledge and research together with the production of new data and a shared climate crisis have triggered a boom in comparative urban studies, now with a firmly global scope and perspective.

Comparison is dead, long live comparison! Urban studies has multiple traditions, theories, and empirical strategies. Comparison is one of them, arguably more necessary in a period of increased interdependencies. Conventionally, the comparative method based on variation-finding strategies requires the comparison of independent units. But this no longer makes sense today. The processes of globalization, circulation and networks make cities and metropolises units that are increasingly interdependent. It is no longer possible to make comparisons in the strict methodological sense of the term. Welcome, then, to the world of imperfect and innovative urban comparisons, articulated at several scales, taking into account interdependencies and globalization processes, and including attempts at "comparing the incomparable", as anthropologist Marcel Detienne (2008) suggests in his wonderful essay. And welcome to a world where cities in Europe and North America are only part of a vast number of cases, and where original work and comparisons involving cities across all continents and

contexts will contribute to innovation, renewal, contestation, hybridization and enrichment of urban studies and social sciences more generally.

In the wake of these trends, this Handbook is the result of emergent and ongoing lively debates about renewing the terms of urban comparison, reinventing the practices and methods of urban studies, initiating many creative comparative urban research projects, and expanding debates amongst urban scholars globally. The basic ideas for this volume are the following :

- **The world is becoming more urban**, but the urban world is becoming more varied and at the same time also more connected, more organised by circulations, networks, transfers of people, capital, goods, ideas, policies: a more varied, diverse, globalizing urban world. All those relations make classic comparisons less relevant. Urban units of analysis, whatever they might be, cannot be considered independently anymore, but are clearly part of wider processes of globalisation, resulting in a myriad different urban formations. The search for innovative modes of comparing is contributing to what some might see as "imperfect" comparisons responsive to the changing global urban world.
- In the global urban world in the making, urban comparisons have to be able to expand to **take into account a vast number of cases that were largely ignored** in twentieth century comparative urban studies. The accumulation of comparisons about different types of cities in different parts of the world should lead to a new wave of theorisation, with ideas and approaches enlarging the analysis and understanding of the urban world. Existing theories and concepts could also be applied to different cases than those which initially inspired them, and that may lead to their evolution and revision. Both would encourage greater precision and innovation in understanding the diversity of urban experiences and processes.
- The academic world of urban studies has been dominated first by traditional European universities and then by the modern American universities created in the nineteenth century. **The domination of the Western intellectual world**, albeit with nuances, was blatant over the twentieth century. The making of English as the intellectual vehicle of research globalisation reinforced the strength of the elite rich universities of the US-UK nexus. But the globalisation of urban research increasingly takes place in universities in Asia (including China), South America, Africa, and post-socialist contexts. The Handbook aims at showing the inheritance of comparative urban studies in different geographical areas, including the concepts, methods, strengths and originality of research emanating from a range of different geographical contexts. In other words, as the urban studies domain is becoming more global, this Handbook is a contribution to the making of the global comparative urban research field.
- Within an expanding world of imperfect and innovative urban comparisons, imagination is required and **the range of experiments** in terms of research questions, design and methods, as well as the objects and processes to be compared is on the rise. The Handbook takes stock of a number of such initiatives. It aims at encouraging a comparative imagination taking into account and responding creatively to questions of overlapping scales, complex power relations and prolific connections. This imagination and innovation is central in terms of reinventing comparative methods.

- The renewal and reformatting of urban comparison is also a practical question of method, including the mobilisation and creative use of different sorts of data, partly found and partly produced through different kinds of empirical research; a wide array and great variety of data is increasingly available for supporting comparative global urban analysis in particular in relation to the climate crisis. This Handbook therefore explicitly introduces **a range of different methodological approaches**, both those which are more positivist and those which are more constructivist. It stresses critical questioning of received categories and innovative ways to account for dynamic and fluid processes, forms of stabilised and institutionalised collective action, or patient ethnographic efforts to build careful insights into specific urban experiences and situations. But it also showcases the strengths of rigorous quantitative research, conventional controlled qualitative comparisons, and efforts to understand explanatory causal processes, methods that are central in political science, some fields of economic geography, and in varied academic contexts. We see in this methodological inclusiveness potential to expand analytical debates across the urban world and to encourage innovation in comparative research designs.
- **Methodologically, then, urban studies is diverse**. Some urban scholars favour inductive bottom-up approaches stressing differences and singularities (Lancione and McFarlane, 2016) while others are more interested in identifying and tracking the wider processes operating at different scales (from the neighbourhood to global city regions) in different contexts (Brenner et al., 2010). Both are included in the Handbook. Relatedly, urban scholars use urban comparison to explain urban transformations but also to interpret and to describe, relying more on humanities and cultural studies as well as ethnography (Krause, 2016). Chapters in the Handbook reflect a wide range of different ontologies and epistemologies. In urban sociology in particular the use of mixed methods to study segregation or inequality has become a defining trend of the field (Small, 2011; Small and Adler, 2019), for instance, in order to compare the transmission of poverty in different neighbourhoods (Sharkey 2013) or "the intergenerational transmission of context", which is an important contribution to avoid the hyper constructivist conceptualisation of context.
- The explanatory potential of **modelling and developing generalizable accounts** of urbanisation processes has absorbed many scholars in urban studies – to the extent that they might sidestep questions about revised forms of urban territoriality, or the long-term historical trajectories of cities (Henderson and Venables, 2009; Storper and Scott, 2016). The Handbook does not pretend to be exhaustive, but it does cover a range of different disciplinary and interdisciplinary traditions that contribute to comparative urban research. We also do not aim at contributing to the elaboration of an "urban science", although authors address many questions which will be crucial to consider in any such endeavour (Parnell and Robinson, 2017; Acuto et al., 2018). There is a creative tension between some who take urban studies closer to philosophy, post modernism, post-/de-colonial and gender studies and those who want to reinvigorate positivist social sciences in more sophisticated context sensitive mode (Simmons and Smith 2021). We expect the debates aired in this Handbook will illuminate both these initiatives.

- **Different disciplines are contributing to a renewal of urban comparisons** in a more global world: geography, which has proved the dominant discipline in urban research of the past two decades, has brought concerns with specificity, policy mobilities and critical analysis, but many other disciplines have both important traditions and new directions contributing to comparative urban studies: sociology, political science, history, anthropology, critical literary studies, post-colonial studies, environmental studies, Science and technology studies have all seen a renaissance in comparative analysis. Anthropology, for example, while steeped in comparativism from its earliest incarnations, has had to reflect on the sometimes uncomfortable links of a comparative imagination to colonial knowledge practices, at the same time as grappling with the tensions entailed in building comparative analysis while relying on methodologies of deep ethnography (Candea, 2019). Although of concern to all comparativists, perhaps more than others anthropology has to confront the need to build conceptual insights through attending to specificity (Hannerz, 1980; Strathern, 1999; Fox and al., 2002; Candea, 2019). However, as Descola suggests, comparison should not just be intuitive or based upon one case. In his last set of filmed Collège de France lectures about comparison (2022), he observes "that it is not a single people or even a single regional lifestyle that can enrich the understanding of the world, but rather the knowledge of the plurality of social and cultural forms of expression, provided one knows how to bring out contrasts, or even a single regional style of life can contribute to the understanding of the world, provided that one knows how to draw from the contrasts that these forms present the sparks of a less conventional way of thinking about the way in which humans associate with each other and with other beings. This is also the condition for conceiving other forms of association, which have never been inventoried by ethnologists or historians, but which the present state of the world urgently requires that we try to imagine."
- Anthropology is also reflexive about the European trajectory of modernism and the **limits of categorisation**, such as those which rest on distinctions between society and nature. Following the radical ontological turn (in anthropology and social sciences (Latour, 1987; Stengers, 2011), scholars question the centrality of human beings and explore ways to take into account non-human agents, in particular in relation to the climate crisis. The challenge is to identify different processes of group creation including humans, objects, representations of the world, beliefs – here Descola (2022) offers a more stabilised and less network-form than Latour's assemblages. He suggests to compare different emergent groups in their diverse understandings of the world; we may add urban worlds. In this spirit, rather than taking for granted the grounds or units of comparison, in this handbook we have tried to encourage scholars to creatively explore and clarify what can be compared.
- Following **different theoretical approaches**, the degree of abstraction and grounds for building concepts and understanding will vary considerably. Most scholars try to articulate comparison with 1) some degree of attention to the empirical processes of mobility, circulation, connection; 2) variation, variegation or hybridity and differences associated with particular contexts and 3) some more general processes. Depending on

the theoretical repertoires mobilised, this articulation may take very different forms, involving different levels of abstraction and suggesting contrasting research questions (Robinson, 2022). For instance, in his sophisticated analysis of conjunctural urbanism Jamie Peck directs attention to pan-urban processes, as well as the contextual formation of power across scales (2015, 2017). This suggests that conceptual assumptions closely inform the design of comparisons – which is particularly crucial in urban research given robust debates about the nature of the urban and its complex spatialities.

- Within the urban studies field, both **territorial formations (cities, metropolitan regions) and urbanisation processes** draw analytical attention (McCann and Ward, 2012). The debate is quite robust between those who stress the renewed importance of cities and metropolises, including questions of group formation, conflict solving mechanisms, democracy, governance and institutions, and those who think in terms of urbanisation processes, more or less fluid. Both conceptions are important and present in the Handbook. Many chapters try to articulate them together, considering at once urbanisation process and the territorial trajectories of cities.
- Cities belong to a world of cities - but not just cities, **a world that comprises international, national and transnational organisations**, including international bodies, states, mafias, INGO's and a myriad of different transnational networks and organisations as well as both formalised and more ephemeral groups at different scales. Hence the need to rethink and reformat research design for comparative urban studies beyond comparing "cities". Most urban scholars agree with the questioning of the urban and the limits of the city concept. However, some are intellectually interested in examining a myriad of relations, an infinite diversity of connections and experiences while others associate cities, networks and relations more with the longer-term historical trajectories of urban territories, the developments of robust social groups, organisations and institutions and the slow evolution of democracies (Le Galès, 2002). Yet this is not an irreconcilable opposition. In his book *Cities in Relations*, the geographer Ola Söderström (2014) articulates the question of circulations, mobilities and globalization processes with urban transformations in specific contexts, as seen through the material and built fabric of the city. And other works of urban sociology on migrants or executives make sense of emergent urban politics and urban change associated with mobilities on the one hand, and deep embeddedness and reproduction on the other (Kraal et al., 2017; Favell, 2009; Andreotti et al., 2015).
- Several excellent Handbooks of urban studies have been published in recent years. This Handbook of (Global) Comparative Urban Studies takes the particular angle of **urban comparisons as a major domain of global urban studies in the making**. This Handbook reflects the current moment of innovation and experimentation in the field of urban studies, in which a renewed comparative imagination figures strongly. As recent debates have shown, some scholars are looking for an intellectual revolution in conceptualising the urban or seeking to define and contribute to a new urban "science". Others, less impressed by the rhetoric of the "new conception of the new urban world" nonetheless have been opened to different insights, theorisations and contribute to the design of innovative intellectual tools. In responding to a changing global urban world,

the contributors to this Handbook mark the centrality of the question of method, and the vitality of a comparative imagination.

This Handbook has sought to reflect these various debates in an open, pluralist way, making space for many different kinds of traditions, conceptualisations, methods, experimentations, theorisation and tactics, all of which, we suggest, contribute to and expand the potential of comparative global urban studies.

Good Reasons to avoid urban comparisons?

While this Handbook celebrates the many urban scholars who have embraced a revival of comparative analysis, the relative dearth of comparative research in twentieth century urban studies gives pause for thought. Tentatively, we felt it useful to identify theoretical reasons that explain this relatively weak tradition of comparative urban studies, as this illuminates ongoing challenges but also sites of innovation in the field.

A first reason to stress in explaining the dearth of comparisons in urban studies is that the twentieth century was mostly the century of the rise and rise of nation states as the dominant political organization, leading to forms of methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick-Schiller 2002). The strength of the nation-state form did however open the opportunity for many intra-national comparisons, especially where data were reliable and extensive. Cross-national comparisons were less common, often hampered by inconsistent categories and data, complex problems of urban districting, as well as widely varying allocations of functions and responsibilities to urban government (Kantor and Savitch, 2005). In Latin America, the Brazilians, who have a great tradition of urban research, have mostly ignored the rest of the continent, and some relatively timid comparative research has sometimes been undertaken between Mexico City, São Paulo or Santiago, Buenos Aires and Bogota (see Marques, in this Handbook). American urban studies is particularly characterized by the weakness of international comparisons but this is also the case in Europe where national traditions prevailed with some exceptions. In Asia, similarly, in India, Korea, Japan or China, language questions and national traditions often led to research being specialised on one particular metropolis: Tokyo urban scholars were rarely interested in Beijing or Seoul (Waley, 2012).

All this is somewhat surprising, especially since historians, though renowned for numerous monographs, have developed a strong tradition of comparative research on ancient cities, Chinese cities and South American cities (Clark 2013). This is also all the more surprising given that Durkheim or Weber constructed the sociological method in part on a comparative basis. In the section of “Economy and Society” known as "The City", Max Weber (2019) mobilizes his conception of ideal-types and a wide scoping of extant historical literature to compare the political associations forming in the medieval Western (Occidental) city to those of ancient cities and cities in other contexts such as China, India and Turkey. Even if it was not his ambition, Weber not only helped to define the field of sociology as such, but also contributed

to the foundations of urban sociology, offering a comparative sociology of cities. Despite all the limits of his approach, he developed a sophisticated, systematic comparative method (Robinson, 2022).

A second stage of US-centred urban sociology can be identified in the Chicago school or, rather, the successive schools or generations of the sociology department of the University of Chicago where Robert Park, Louis Wirth and their colleagues, inspired by Georg Simmel, analyzed the city as a laboratory of modernity. Jones and Rodgers (2016) remind us that the Chicago department was until the late 1920s a department of sociology and anthropology, and that Park himself supervised research on different contexts (including Bahia in Brazil) and travelled and was interested in other cities around the world, notably Beijing where he spent some months teaching (Ren, 2019). He supervised and contemplated undertaking research in a number of different contexts, and encouraged Redfield, for example, in his comparative endeavours (see chapter by Jones and Rodgers in this Handbook). The postulations of the Chicago school in turn invited many comparative analyses as anthropologists followed in the tracks of urbanising populations around the globe (Robinson, 2006).

A third stage of urban studies (centred in the US and Europe, but not only there) can be identified in Marxist geography and sociology. In this theoretical perspective, the level of abstraction is higher in order to account for social and economic processes shaping urbanization. Comparisons consisted in analyzing the dynamic and varied effects of the capitalist political economy on urban transformations. The first years of the *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, launched in 1977 by the young Turks of Marxist urban research (Michael Harloe, Chris Pickvance, Manuel Castells, Edmond Préteceille, Enzo Mingione), are a good example of this (Harloe 1981), with articles on the political economy of urbanization in West Africa, Europe and Latin America, including their interdependence (Slater, 1978) or, exceptionally, comparative analyses of urban class conflicts (Lubeck and Walton, 1979). Castells' (1977; 1983) comparative analyses across South America, Europe and the US established a more Althusserian reading of the politics of urban social movements.

A second factor accounting for the limited number of comparative studies in the field is that, for many scholars, urban studies is mostly about the analysis of one particular city in its history, trajectory, and distinctiveness. In a way, every city is unique and interesting in its own way. A lot of urban research has historically focused on in-depth, long-term research on a particular city. Anthropologists most often work on a village, or a neighbourhood, community or a particular group within a city. The question of comparison is therefore of little relevance or is postponed to a later stage (as Pinson considers, in this Handbook). The evolution of an anthropology of the city that opens up to comparison is quite recent, allowing for an extremely fruitful renewal of previous work (Jones and Rogers, 2016) and inviting innovation in research methods (Hannerz, 1980; Streule, 2020). Beyond anthropologists, classical historians and geographers have a well-established tradition of preparing imposing landmark monographs that represent considerable, sometimes a lifetime's, work on a specific city. In the vein of contemporary critical geography, Mike Davis' (2006) *City of Quartz. Los Angeles, Capital of*

the Future stands out, as do Filip de Boeck's works on Kinshasa in anthropology (de Boeck and Plissart, 2006; de Boeck and Baloji, 2016).

Recourse to the monograph as a major format of intellectual production in urban studies, or the refusal to compare, is often justified in a somewhat tautological way: "because city X is so different". The most striking example is undoubtedly that of Chicago and the famous Department of Sociology and Anthropology of the University of Chicago. More than 900 books have been devoted to the city. It is no exaggeration to consider that as a "Chicagology" it has become a rich sub-field of urban research, with its own codes, references and sometimes methods. It is a research tradition that remains very rich, with renewed and important works, such as Rob Sampson's *Great American City* (2012) and Mary Pattillo's *Black on the Block* (2007): major works that deal with relations between ethnic groups, racism, urban renewal and gentrification. However, despite their more general analytical ambitions, they remain deeply determined by the Chicago experience. And Chicago is not the exception: "Shanghaiology" is thriving in China (Lee and Li, 1999), not to mention the most dynamic, "Lagosology" or Lagos Studies, which even has its own society, conference and summer school (https://www.lagosstudies.org/)! The so-called Los Angeles school (Scott and Soja, 1998) put much emphasis on the extraordinary peculiarity of a "post-metropolis" of a new type, suggesting the incomparability of an exceptionally large, sparsely populated case with no real city centre. While this might stand as a prototype, or "archetype", in relation to other existing urban forms (Beauregard, 2003) to declare a city "extraordinary" in order to establish it as an exceptional model is perhaps irrelevant when one lacks the more careful tools of comparison.
American ethnographers also represent a great and still very fruitful research tradition that has focused on one neighbourhood or one city (Small, 2004, Anderson 2000). However, some have sketched out comparative grids to compare ghettos or drug use in different American cities but, except for Bourgois (2002) comparing San Francisco and New York and sometimes Central America, the reference remains a city or a neighbourhood followed by a questioning of the conditions of generalization (Klinenberg 2018). Loïc Wacquant, who has contributed to this type of research, is an exception given his meticulous conceptualisation and empirical research comparing France and the United States (2008). Vigorous debates have also shown the need for methodological caution and in-depth analysis in designing comparative ethnographic research on these topics (Wacquant 2002).

A third reason we can offer for the lack of comparative work arises with the growing strength of Marxist approaches in urban studies from the 1980s. In this tradition, the question of cities and metropolises as such can seem to be secondary; it is the capitalist processes of urbanization that matter (Katznelson, 1993). For David Harvey, following Marx, urbanization is a process (or a set of processes) explained by the dynamics of capitalism, which produces particular urban forms. For Harvey (1985, 2002), the category "city" had little meaning and did not contribute significantly to an explanation because it is the result of urbanization processes intrinsically linked to a type of capitalism (market, industrial, Fordist, or financial and globalized today). Consequently, in this perspective comparison can be mobilized at a high level of abstraction in order to show universal processes of convergence shaping different types of industrial or financial metropolis, or to draw attention to the different political formations associated with

capitalist urbanisation (Cox and Mair, 1988). The comparison is therefore not absent, but it is framed within an analysis of processes of urbanization to be able to be apprehended with a shared theoretical vocabulary, associated with the circulation of capital, (de-)industrialization, or (today) financialization or neoliberalism. Comparisons are therefore only intended to show differences in temporal dynamics or, at the margin, differences in context that are little explained or analyzed, as they were considered to be of secondary importance (Harvey, 1996). These early Marxist urban studies had great difficulty in articulating macro explanations with contexts, to account for the processes and mechanisms producing distinctive urban dynamics and forms. The power of macro explanation focuses analysis at a high level of abstraction, and comparison is rather uninteresting since divergences are thought of as anomalies or temporary exceptions, or already interpreted within wider systemic analyses of uneven development (Lubeck and Walton, 1979).

But these questions of differentiation have persisted and come to the fore in more recent political economy studies which have provided an important foundation for a revival in comparative urban studies (Leitner, Peck and Sheppard, 2019). They been tackled largely in the work of critical geography on neoliberalism and neoliberalization processes, conjunctural urbanism and variegation. Neil Brenner, Jamie Peck and Nik Theodore (2010; 2013) and Jamie Peck in particular (2017) have proposed an original theorization of these non-linear and non-deterministic processes which justifies comparing their differentiated implementation and also, the effects of urban transformations for the wider processes. Framed within a shared "conjuncture", different cases can be seen as contributing to theorisation of these wider processes, and also understood as shaped across multiple scales. As Peck notes, methodologically this implies an "orthogonal" manoeuvre, "spiralling up and down through cases and contexts as a different (but arguably complementary) strategy to that of working laterally, 'between' cases" (2017, p. 9). This can inspire a distinctive set of comparative practices. For example, for Leitner and Shephard (2020), considering "how conjunctures vary across space as well as time" (p. 496) is one tactic. Methodologically, then, the task is to identify shared tendencies across space and time from detailed analysis of spatially and temporally specific particularities (p. 498). In this perspective, this implies a multiscalar research design, from individuals and neighbourhoods to local and national governments, and global processes.

In a way, Saskia Sassen's major work on The Global City (1991) proceeds from a similar analytical conundrum, since the new type of metropolis she identifies is the result of the processes associated with transnational capitalism (productive and financial). But she explicitly develops a comparative analysis to account for the specific trajectories of New York, London and Tokyo, shaped by the different but inter-related localisation dynamics of the firms involved in management of the transnational global economy. Work on gentrification (on "planetary gentrification", see Lees et al., 2016) could be understood in a similar vein, with the difference that "gentrification" is not so much a globalising process, but a conceptualisation of urban change (Bernt, 2022). Using this term across different urban contexts has consequently led to much debate not only about its apparently differentiated forms, but also its relevance as a concept to explain the great diversity of urban processes and outcomes around the world (Maloutas, 2012, Ghertner, 2015). In contrast to Sassen, Janet Abu-Lughod (1999) considers

the long histories and multi-dimensional social and economic processes shaping the three largest US cities, Chicago, New York and Los Angeles, in which processes of globalisation are placed in close relationship with other dynamics. And in a major contribution, Tom Goodfellow (2022) uses a comparative approach to build understandings of urban politics in Africa beyond the narratives of variegation of globalising processes. The analytical dilemmas posed by Marxist and post-Marxist urban studies with their strong focus on wider and circulating processes as well as differentiated or distinctive urban outcomes (see Brenner, 2001, on Abu-Lughod, for example), is a concern for urban studies more widely, then, and has strongly informed the recent terrain of innovation and experimentation in comparative urban studies.

Comparisons to think about different cities and different urban worlds, a path to theorisation

If comparative approaches have long been a minor part of the landscape of urban studies, they have recently seen a renaissance as part of a wider set of responses to developments in the field: analytical uncertainty in the face of new patterns and processes of global urbanization (Brenner and Schmid, 2015; Schmid et al., 2018); the explosion of data for urban analysis and the growing role of geospatial data in international urban policy and governance (Robinson and Parnell, 2017); and the rise of very large metropolises presenting common challenges in many different regions and countries, as well as new forms of urban politics (Le Galès, 2017, Mossberger et al..2015); the expansion of comparable data across different contexts (Storper and Scott, 2016, Sampson, 2012). Comparative analytics "in the wild" have also grown exponentially through the proliferation of circulating forms of urban knowledge and are practically embedded in new forms of international urban politics, especially with the rise of networks of cities as political actors accumulating resources to contribute to global policy debates and solve collective action problems at a planetary scale (McCann, 2011; Acuto, 2013; Parnell, 2016).

Part of the revival of urban comparison is rooted in the critique of positivism in Western social science, challenging classical conceptions of variation-finding comparative method while directing attention to distinctive social formations and the complexity and multiplicity of social dynamics (see Tilly, 1984; Lijphart, 1971; Sartori 1991; Denters and Mossberger, 2006; Ragin, 2014; Nijman, 2007). Relatedly, post-colonial and global critiques have strongly insisted on the diversity and divergence of urban experiences, and the emergent nature of social processes, including those associated with "capitalism" (King, 1989; McFarlane, 2010; Ward, 2010; Robinson, 2011; 2016; Roy, 2016; Gidwani and Ramamurthy, 2018; Leitner and Sheppard, 2016). There is a risk here, though, of not going very far beyond the celebration of differences and complexity, which Descola (2022; quoted above) has cautioned against.

So, even as conventional approaches to comparison find new motivations to be put to use (Pierre, 2005; Denters and Mossberger, 2006), the challenges of mobilising existing comparative methods to explore diverse and divergent urban contexts (Robinson, 2011) has stimulated the search for creative approaches, in critical geography in particular (Jacobs, 2012;

Hart, 2018; Robinson, 2016). These scholars argue that the substance and scope of comparative methods has to be enlarged, possibly substantially reimagined for the twenty-first century city (Hall and Burdett 2017). As the leading edge of urbanization shifts from Euro-America to Africa and Asia, unlike classical urban comparisons which were restricted to relatively similar cities, methodological approaches need to be able to include both wealthier and poorer cities, or cities from different regions, within the same field of interpretation while recognising and working with strong differentiations of urban processes and outcomes (Roy, 2009; Robinson, 2011; Parnell and Oldfield, 2014). Cities are closely entwined with globalization processes, so comparative methods also need to enable researchers to attend to deterritorializing and reterritorializing aspects of urbanization, including the prolific wider connections, circuits and flows which stretch beyond and across urban contexts but which strongly shape localized urban outcomes and specific city futures (Friedmann and Wolff, 1982; Ward and McCann, 2012; Halbert and Rouanet, 2014; Robinson, 2016). These are also empirical questions that require the systematic use of different methods, measures, and combinations of qualitative and quantitative methods, imbricating different scales. As the urban is often extended across vast expanses, at times fragmented and disconnected from existing centres, and even small urban settlements are tied through movement and circulation into distant territories, comparison may combine classic categories of cities and metropolis together with new imaginations of urban territories (Brenner and Schmid, 2015; Kanai and Schindler, 2019).

This Handbook takes as its starting point, then, the proposition that an enlarged, agile yet rigorous suite of comparative practices is essential in the search for different understandings of, and creative responses to, contemporary global urbanization. Whether contemporary global urbanization requires a new conceptualization remains open for debate. Certainly, comparative urban studies injects a sense of methodological rigour and a commitment to careful evaluation of claims across different contexts, which will enhance current debates in the field. Comparative traditions and contemporary comparative practices in urban studies seek to interrogate given theoretical claims and norms, as well as assess parochial or outdated analyses (Pickvance, 1986; Kantor and Savitch, 2005). A renewed comparative practice grounds propositions for theoretical insights on global urbanisation based on the diversity of urban experiences, opening analysis to empirical observations from cities and urban territories across the world.

Drawing on rich traditions of comparative urban studies and wider social science methodologies, and repurposing these for the contemporary urban condition and current philosophical, political and methodological concerns, comparative urban research signposts an enlarged repertoire of investigative methods, theoretical practices and conceptual insights relevant to the twenty-first century city. To some extent, a reformatted comparative urban studies, able to work across urban differences and trajectories, and with the wider processes of globalization and urbanization, brings forward a distinctive contribution in its own right to global urban studies. Insisting on the value of working closely and rigorously at the interface between concepts and empirical specificity, comparative urban studies proposes practical ways to explore, and potentially adjudicate competing claims to characterise “the urban” or “cities”.

Comparative approaches can provide guidance on working analytically and methodologically across an emergent and changing field of urbanization. Reinvigorated comparative analyses contribute to rebuilding theorisations of the urban in three ways: 1) responding to the diversity of emergent sprawling and fragmented urban forms and extended urbanisation processes; 2) being drawn through the global circulation of urban practices to think across quite different urban contexts, and 3) engaging with the numerous crosscutting social, economic and political processes and mechanisms of urbanization that need to be compared at different scales. Crucially, urban worlds are differentiated both within and across different territorial formations, but they are also often converging as a result of the multiplicity of wider connections, institutions, political conflicts, flows, social and ethnic groups, and circuits of material phenomena, ideas, people and practices which shape urban outcomes through their differential institutionalisation and reproduction over time.

In an enlarged format of comparative urban studies, the very entities ("cases") and grounds of urban comparison are reconsidered (Robinson, 2016). For example, comparative research could focus on the "repeated instance" resulting from prolific global connections (Jacobs, 2012); the different territories of institutionalisation (including emerging forms of governing urban regions – see Harrison, int this Handbook), as well as the different spaces and strategies of collective action; the common yet differently experienced challenges of the climate crisis; or the differentiated outcomes of urbanisation processes in different contexts; or the wider relations which link one context with others and draw them into comparative reflection (Ward, 2010; Hart, 2003; 2018). Researchers might be invited to develop comparisons with and across many diverse kinds of urban contexts (small and large settlements, exurban and central city developments) by tracing the profound interconnections which are the basis of urban outcomes, involving circuits and circulations of all kinds (Robinson, 2022). In that sense, urban scholars are following the transnational and interconnecting turn in history that has profoundly transformed not just the field itself (Friedmann and Wolff, 1982), but the whole comprehension of the trajectories of contemporary societies and cities in different parts of the world (Boucheron and al.2014, Irye 2012).

However, the implications of the interconnections shaping urban life must also be seen as an empirical question: sometimes those connections explain very little in terms of urban transformation. In addition, circuits and circulations themselves need to be considered comparatively, to be measured and for mechanisms of changes to be identified in order to illuminate the different dynamics, trajectories and implications of circuits of people, policy, practice and investment (Theodore, 2007; Söderström, 2014; Halbert and Rouanet, 2014; Peck and Theodore, 2015; Simone, 2020). Importantly, differentiated outcomes of wider processes and connections bring into analytical view a diversity of rooted groups and institutions, which can form an important basis for comparative political and social analysis (Savage and al. 2004, Andreotti, Le Galès and Moreno-Fuentes, 2014).

Comparative insights can therefore emerge from research designs across the many different formations of the urban. This could include emergent, ephemeral and associational processes and experiences (informality, practices, assemblages – Simone, 2011; McFarlane, 2011),

institutionalised power relations, mechanisms associated with the reproduction of inequalities, distributions and orderings of space (spatial differentiation, segregations, circulations – Didier et al., 2012), or the generative formations of place (experience, encounter, centrality – Hancock and Srinivas, 2008; Becker et al., 2013). The problems of the power relations inherent in defining measures of comparability, as well as the potential for radical incommensurability must be addressed (Jazeel, 2019). An enlarged horizon of comparative urban studies might also focus on processes and mechanisms that are triggered or configured differently in different contexts (on this see Heller and Mukhopadhyay in this Handbook). Also, comparative research design can build on existing data to provide probabilistic explanations, to revise understandings of causality, to strengthen accounts of the articulation of micro, meso and macro processes of transformation. These comparative methods might contribute to the development of urban theory aimed at hierarchising explanations of outcomes as opposed to simply asserting multiplicity (Pierre, 2005; Scott and Storper, 2015; Peck, 2015).

While this Handbook is oriented towards convening innovations in comparative urban studies, we do not suggest this signals an inevitable rupture with earlier endeavours. Even as expanding and innovating in comparative methods responds to contemporary urbanization processes, comparative analysis has deep roots in social scientific practice and methodological debates, from the use of Weber's ideal types (Wacquant, 2008) to Science and Technology studies - STS (Stengers, 2011). Importantly here, the question of data and evidence in social science research signals the need to bring into comparative urban studies debates and wider insights from STS including research on instruments, algorithms and quantifications, tools of representation of the city (MacKenzie, 2008; Christophers, 2014; Deville et al., 2015; see Bouillier in this Handbook). More generally, comparison reaches to core problematics of social science in general, including the relationship between empirical observation and conceptualization, and how researching human subjects come to know, be mobilised by, represent, engage with and formulate insights into social, non-human and material worlds (Robinson, 2022). Debates and propositions about comparative methods resonate with contemporary social science, philosophical and theoretical debates, but many conundrums of comparative thinking are very longstanding. The potential and challenges of building theorization through extensive data or modelling practices are also important traditions in disciplines such as comparative urban politics or quantitative geography, as well as emerging fields of data analysis linked to global urban policy developments including "sustainable development goals" or "smart cities" (see Söderström, in this Handbook).

The climate crisis is radically going to move the signposts, to destabilise existing social and political orders, to provoke major urban transformations, mitigations, adaptations, conflicts, production of new data and new objects. Comparative urban research, as the rest of social science, is already profoundly in the midst of a process of restructuring at the ontological level in response to urban transitions; relatedly, building new understandings of urban sustainability and the politics of infrastructure is already finding some crucial resources in comparative analysis (Simmons and Smiths, 2021; Simon et al., 2020).

This Handbook therefore aims to expand methodological and conceptual imaginations: in urban studies, as in many other corners of social science and humanities, epochal changes require all sorts of ambitious and experimental research.

An effervescence of comparative practices for global urban studies: what is in this Handbook?

As in all collections, we had to make some choices about how to organize the papers into different sections to match the overall ambitions of the Handbook, and these guided the authors in preparing their papers, and in offering their titles. This structures our comments in the brief Introductions to each section, and in the summary overview at the end of this Introduction which presents the book as a whole. As we read the papers, often several times from early abstracts to final drafts, they exceeded our hopes, in so many ways – the quality and scope of the papers is impressive, with some reporting on extensive and long-running collaborative comparative research which brings together different genres of comparison, including transdisciplinary and practice-based research (notably, Lanz, Chapter 44 and Söderström, Chapter 15), others reaching deep into their disciplinary histories (Andreotti and Coletto navigate the long histories of sociological comparative traditions, and Post those of political science) or bringing into the wider conversation practices and traditions of comparative research from often overlooked contexts (notably, Trubina, Chapter 29, on comparison in Russian urban studies). But in their rich discussions, many of the papers also spoke beyond the section themes we had allocated to them. As readers, we trust you will navigate your way through the papers following your own enthusiasms and interests, and we anticipate you will find many resonances across the different sections which will enliven and set new trajectories and questions for comparative urban research and methods. A few such cross-cutting themes stood out for us.

A world of comparative practice

Many of the chapters draw closely on scholarship from specific national or regional contexts in developing their ideas on comparative urban studies. As we look across the Handbook, these have scope to speak to each other, signposting the potential for a globalisation of urban scholarship and the expansion of urban debates between scholars from different regions (Roy, 2009; Wu, 2020). Bringing these different scholarly traditions into conversation will help to track the empirical globalisation and extension of urbanisation but will also enrich wider debates about the nature of the urban, and urbanisation processes. Comparative research is crucial for this.

Scholars engaging with the Indian context, for example, highlight the complex patterns of urbanisation there, including a diversity of urbanisation processes and urban territories. Zérah (Chapter 43) presents the implications of "sulbaltern" urbanisation, a term which focusses on India's smaller urban centres, and refers to globalising processes which are potentially disconnected from the dominant processes shaping major metropolises (Denis, Mukhopadhyay and Zérah, 2017; Zérah, 2020). Also, relevant here is Gururani's (Chapter 30) detailed presentation of the complex imbrications of infrastructure-led urbanisation and diverse agrarian actors and landscapes.

From these insights, there is scope for opening a conversation with scholars working on and in different African contexts (Myers, Chapter 36), where authors argue that it is important to attend to the variety of forms, sources and extent of circulations, from material flows (Choplin, Chapter 42 on concrete) to national and transnational financial investment (Kanai and Schindler, Chapter 33; Goodfellow, 2020). This strengthens analysis of the diversity and differentiated nature of flows and circulating processes shaping urban politics and urban economies. The wider research agenda, then, is established to expand the processes which are considered important in shaping urbanisation and urban politics, a point which Hart (Chapter 23) makes in relation to colonial histories, nationalism, as well as racial and gendered orders which enmesh very diverse urban contexts and indicate scope for comparative analysis. Stanek (Chapter 31) points to processes of "socialist world-making" which highlight connections and flows beyond those which have dominated in western-oriented analyses of globalisation. His paper brings central and eastern European urban histories into conversation with African and Asian contexts where close collaborations on urban development informed different ways of thinking about comparison, highlighting the possibility of sharing insights across similarly peripheral contexts.

The Handbook demonstrates the potential for the wider cross-national conversations that are required for global urban studies: regional and national traditions of comparative analysis are not developed in isolation but result from shared experiences with close neighbours, as Marques (Chapter 2) shows for Brazil. Colomb and Kazepov (Chapter 5) offer related reflections on the comparative analyses which have shaped European urban scholars concerned to understand differentiations across these highly interconnected cities and countries in that region, as well as the wider colonial-inflected dependencies of both experiences and analyses in these varied contexts. Machimura (Chapter 4), too, insists on the shared but distinctive histories of globalization in relation to Asian cities, notably as he discusses in Japan. Opening from that context to wider theoretical conversations on themes such as global cities and neoliberalisation also highlights distinctively Asian concerns with economic stagnation and megau-urbanisation. Strikingly, Ferenčuhová (Chapter 27) shows how the severing of scholarly relationships between eastern and western European scholars in the cold war era, together with the challenges of poorly resourced institutional contexts shaped the content and scope of comparative analysis. Jones and Rodgers (Chapter 1) offer an important critical perspective on the formation of key "western" ideas in urban studies, in their revisionist account of the "Chicago School of Sociology". They extend the understanding of the importance of Chicago in shaping their ideas by noting that these scholars "worked in many more cities than just Chicago, and were moreover instilled with a comparativist curiosity, to the extent that they can plausibly be said to have represented the first group of scholars motivated by a global urban sensibility".

Attending to a world of comparative urban practice expands and enriches global urban studies, and draws attention to the already interconnected worlds of urbanisation and of the concepts through which we seek to understand it. Many of the Handbook chapters offer insights on this.

Evidence and explanation

In this Handbook we have adopted an open and inclusive approach to methods, and a range of papers demonstrate the potential of different methodological approaches to frame comparative urban research, including some experimental initiatives, to realise new insights on urban life and urbanisation.

The multidimensionality and diversity of urban life itself establishes methodological inclusivity as an important yardstick of comparative (global) urban studies. Some seek to understand the rich and diverse experiences of urban life, including the emotional life of cities, which presents some methodological challenges for comparative analysis (Ben Prestel, Chapter 36). Kramsch (Chapter 40) explores the cultural representations which inspire understanding of the deep imbrication of different places, bringing Chongqing in China and Duisburg in Germany into practical and imaginative proximity. Boudreau, Bensali and Ferro (Chapter 41) recount a creative collaboration in which researchers from very different urban contexts bring into conversation emotional and tactile experiences of urban space. Pinson's (Chapter 17) call for book length manuscripts on individual cities as an essential format for comparative analysis speaks to the highly specific nature of each urban context, partly informed by these dynamics. At the limit, though, the complexity of the urban forms a kind of opacity which perhaps makes urban life unyielding to comparative analysis, "always reaching out beyond the terms through which it might be apprehended (Simone, in this Handbook; Simone, 2019).

Other authors draw creatively on methods involving statistical analysis and modelling along with clarifying assumptions to seek to carve through the seemingly endless richness of urban life to articulate specific relationships or causalities and to illuminate the different outcomes associated with these (Kübler and Sellers; Chapter 19; Bouillier, Chapter 17; Sampson and Candipan, Chapter 11). Bouillier (Chapter 17) explicitly engages with the complex relations between qualitative and quantitative data, or as he discusses, "fat" (few cases with observations along many dimensions) and "tall" (many cases, few dimensions) data. No longer at odds with each other, these two possibilities come together in new forms of contemporary data sets and their analyses. On the one hand, exploring all possible dimensions to a problem through accumulating large quantities of data, made possible through Big Data, new computational capacities and machine learning techniques; and on the other interrogating closely questions of categorization and causality through different sensibilities and practices of computation and data analysis. The concerns of so-called quantitative and qualitative data analysis are closely related.

It is in the discipline of urban politics that a rich seam of methodological innovation encompassing both qualitative and quantitative dimensions of data has yielded a substantial body of comparative urban studies research. Post (Chapter 8) provides a comprehensive review of different comparative approaches and research within the political science tradition: variables-oriented, experimental and quasi-experimental approaches, and process-tracing involving within-case analysis as well as comparative research to establish the scope of operation of processes. Kübler and Sellers (Chapter 19) present results of a research programme which has compiled a rich data base to support transnational comparative analysis of the varied spatial dynamics of metropolitanisation, and its implications for politics, inequality and

redistributive politics. A number of authors use a range of methods to focus in on the processes and mechanisms shaping urban dynamics and urbanisation. This has also been important for disciplines beyond political science. Sociologists Heller and Mukhopadhyay (Chapter 7) take their inspiration from Charles Tilly and focus on « generalizable mechanisms that operate across a range of diverse cases and that can only be identified and explained through careful historical and contextual analysis ». Schmid (Chapter 22), approaching this in a Lefebvrian idiom (Lefebvre, 2003), sees the urban as always a specific category; thus empirical observations on specific urban territories can identify urbanization processes, which might be generalized through comparative analysis. Randolph and Storper (Chapter 15) address an under-researched theme in comparative urban studies, the relationship between international migration and levels of urbanisation, « the urban transition ». A crucial topic for many poorer country contexts predicted to experience very high levels of urban migration over the coming decades, they draw on statistical analysis to identify causal relations, and probe and build analyses of the varied causes of urban transitions in different contexts.

The collected essays in this Handbook suggest that statistical, modelling, evidentiary and experiential data are all needed in urban studies, and inspire different comparative strategies.

Where and what is urban?

A major concern of contemporary urban scholars - the extended, fragmented and dispersed form of the urban - presents an empirical challenge for urban studies, as well as a methodological conundrum. If urbanisation is shaped by many different processes, often emergent from the rich complexity of distinctive urban areas, how can we design methods to identify these across vast, sprawling mega-urban regions? And, on what grounds might one contemplate the analytical juxtaposition of different urban terrains? Across the Handbook, authors offer different theoretically-informed answers to these questions, and a variety of practical ways forward to conduct comparative experiments in the midst of such an urban(ising) world.

Trubina (Chapter 29) observes in the case of Russian urbanisation that the urban as a conceptual and administrative category has long been occluded – in this case, because in the Soviet era the focus of planning and academic research alike was the region, and state-directed economic and infrastructural investments did not take the “city” as the unit of analysis. The vast sprawling urban regions of the twenty-first century in Russia and other contexts equally undermine the possibility of identifying areas of municipal or metropolitan government, a staple unit of comparative urban politics (Post, Chapter 8). Harrison (Chapter 39) makes this challenge of identifying urban territories itself the basis for a comparative practice. He focuses comparative attention on the everyday thinking through which urban actors across the BRICS countries are both defining and responding to newly emerging urban forms and processes.

The analytical and methodological challenge posed by the expanding range of transnational processes which produce urban territories has come to be the focus of a range of intrinsically comparative analyses, as these wider connections draw researchers to think across different contexts (Ward, Chapter 34). Bassens, Derudder and van Meeteren (Chapter 32) draw attention to the methodological innovations which followed on identification of a concentration of global

city functions and activities directly resulting from transnational economic activities in certain parts of urban areas. They describe how researchers used systems, typological and relational comparative analyses to understand this phenomenon. Kanai and Schindler (Chapter 34) trace equally powerful globalising processes of policy, investment and project conditioning which are producing (peri-)urbanisation in remote regions of some of the poorest countries in the world - often contested or pre-emptively shaped by the practices and choices of residents. They coin the phrase "genomic comparisons" to indicate the value of looking at repeated instances of such globalised formations. Choplin's chapter (42) on the material processes of urbanisation along the West African coastal corridor highlights how some of the poorest of urban residents are shaping these processes of extended urbanisation (Simone, 2020).

Hart's (2003) classic contribution to comparative analysis indicates clearly how the connections which link different contexts can themselves become the grounds for comparing different places and urban experiences, which has come to be known as relational comparison. Part 3 of the Handbook focusses on this but a number of authors throughout the Handbook mobilise this insight to invent new grounds and methods for comparing or to expand existing repertoires for comparative practice. Peck and Theodore (Chapter 13) as well as Ward (Chapter 18) draw directly on the extensive policy mobilities literature to develop innovative approaches to comparison through tracing connections across cases. Peck and Theodore track both the "frames" and the "flows", while Ward considers this proposition in detail through the case of circulating policies of Tax Increment Financing which link together experiences of contexts like Edinburgh and Chicago (see also Söderström, Chapter 14). Aalbers (Chapter 32) reflects on the complexities of developing research agendas on the pan-urban processes of financialization, insisting that cases might be drawn on for their cumultative insights on these wider processes, and Keil reviews the related methodological implications of researching infectious diseases, in which both urban contexts and circulations matter (Chapter 40). Lanz (Chapter 45) reflects on a large, collaborative, multi-disciplinary and multi-site research project on transnational religiosity, and presents what should stand as a thorough, state of the art account of how a range of comparative methods and tactics can shape creative efforts to work with the rich intersections of diverse transnational processes and distinctive, complex, experiential urban worlds.

Grounds for comparing?

In thinking across the many contributions and approaches assembled in the Handbook, we anticipate that readers will find much food for thought concerning the grounds on which scholars might plausibly compose comparisons.

If the grounds for configuring comparative analyses are imagined to be a specific phenomenon or mechanism which can arguably be located across many different contexts, this can give rise to significant conundrums. On the one hand, comparativists question whether urban contexts are (too) diverse for this strategy, as phenomena of concern are far from ubiquitous or don't take the same form in different contexts (Kantor and Savitch, 2005). Alternatively, this concern could be inverted, that is, the concepts being used to describe urban phenomena are too parochial, largely reflect Western or northern experiences, and thus can't be effectively used to

frame comparisons (Robinson, 2006). This might apply to some of the staple concerns of comparative urban studies, such as local development politics (Lauermann, 2018), or urban regimes (Harding, 1994). Maloutas (Chapter 21) expands on his earlier observations on the limits of "gentrification" as a valuable term to capture urban change in different contexts (Maloutas, 2012; see Lees, Shin and López-Morales, 2016). He refers in the current essay to the highly varied spatiality of socio-spatial segregation, which can confound comparative research design – what should be the scale for comparing experiences of segregation - cities, neighbourhoods, or buildings? This diversity of the relevant spatiality of segregation is addressed also by Sampson and Candipan (Chapter 11), who focus on the role of networks and mobility rather than residential neighbourhoods in shaping racial inequality; and Barwick (Chapter 25), who considers fleeting neighbourhood interactions.

Fourchard (Chapter 3), notes, though, that too narrow a focus on the phenomenon of segregation provides a limited perspective on the complexity of power relations and spatial dynamics in colonial situations, even though segregation was an important structuring feature. A broader perspective on the whole "colonial situation" is needed, highlighting the range of power relations at work. Thus, alternative concepts arise which might become new starting points for comparative analysis. Fourchard advances an assessment of two concepts which have emerged at the intersection of African studies and urban studies, based on detailed ethnographic research: the "colonial situation", and "twilight institutions". He notes that, while "developed from grounded empirical research in the continent … [they] have been increasingly used outside of the continent showing their capacity to travel beyond their original contexts". Twilight institutions (Lund, 2016), especially, he offers as a way beyond the "informal-formal" binary which has long segmented urban studies, to frame comparative analyses of emergent institutions and power relations, and the complex and uneven ways in which states "permeate urban social worlds", beyond and including African contexts (see also Tuvikene, Neves and Hilbrandt, 2016). Julie Ren's chapter (12; see also Ren, 2020) considers how "making a theoretical case", inspired by John Walton's (1990) seminal contributions on urban comparative methods, can help in this task of interrogating and developing concepts through comparison. This approach also de-exceptionalises different urban contexts as places to theorise from, and holds the ambition to bring any relevant case into comparative perspective.

But the potential for comparability, which many of the Handbook authors hope for, cannot be taken for granted. Ferenčuhová (Chapter 27) points to the fractures that regionalized scholarship and unequal institutions introduce (see also Parnell and Pieterse, 2016). At times, too, the grounds for comparative analysis may be absent, or ill-advised. Some writers are mindful of some of the colonial and racialised "hauntings" of a comparative imagination, notably in the very terms of constituting any difference, or bringing "entities" into some relationship. On the racialised terrain of global geographical difference, the ambition to trace comparisons of equivalence, inspired by Edouard Glissant, is discussed by Myers (Chapter 35) in his careful exploration of comparative analyses across China, Tanzania and Jamaica. But for Maliq Simone (Chapter 23), the grounds and terms of comparison are deeply problematised. The foundational difference of racialised power signals the "racial haunting of comparison" not in any replaying of two opposed entities, as in master and slave, to be compared, but by means of the very terms

of "blackness" which, Simone suggests, is excavated from this setting to produce the possibility of continuing and abstracted formulations of difference and commensurabilities. But these are "out there", distinct from entities and individuals, "territory, ground or place". Abstracted from the real, differences operate to dissipate subjectivity and produce expendability; there is no grounding of comparison in bodies, identities or place. Myriad circuits, algorithms, computations and interoperabilities as transversal technologies indicate bodies and urban worlds which are residues only of "encounter". Comparison perhaps finds some (unrealizable?) potential in the reaching for each other of entities, "individuals, households, institutions" otherwise set "a part" as a rupture in "belonging", in the "space of expendability", but refusing to compensate or "clamour for inclusion". Nonetheless, and "despite the messy, sometimes violent, coercive ways in which this reaching is done, something emerges that is specific, unmeasurable, beyond property, that doesn't properly belong to anyone".

More prosaically, grounds for urban comparison have often been identified in national contexts – comparing cities within the same national context, or across national contexts which share many features (Kübler and Sellers, Chapter 19; see Abu-Lughod, 1999; Kantor and Savitch, 2005). Therborn (Chapter 24) considers "cities in their states" and opens up this national framing of urban government itself for comparative interrogation. He shows how the pathways of nation-state formation strongly influence both political-economic processes of urbanisation and juridical forms of local-central state relations. Therborn calls for new (comparative) research to understand this landscape of "cities in states", which indicates an array of possibility for comparative analyses.

Stretching beyond the national framing of urban experiences, the value of conjunctural analysis in inspiring new ways of framing urban comparative analysis has been established by Peck (2017) and others (Peck, Leitner and Sheppard, 2019; Leitner and Sheppard, 2020). This work provides inspiration to design comparative analyses in both horizontal (across difference) and vertical (cross-scalar) dimensions. In the Handbook, Gill Hart (Chapter 20) explores Gramscian notions of "conjunctural analysis" to bring together analyses of extensive political-economic processes from different contexts. Hart's analysis is distinctive in that it opens up grounds for distant contexts to be considered comparatively, as they are enmeshed in long term shared global processes of racialised colonial histories (the USA and South Africa) and authoritarian nationalism (the USA and India). These "conjunctural proximities" hold the potential to provoke new political and analytical insights through comparative analysis across urban contexts often considered to be divergent.

In an application of Pierre Bourdieu's work, Wacquant (Chapter 39) offers further resources for considering urban processes in relation to wider societal dynamics. He focuses on the spatial dimensions of the social processes shaping cities, opening to wide-ranging possibilities for comparative analyses to inform and refine these foundational theoretical insights on urban social life. Schmid's chapter (22) presses at the rich multidimensionality of the urban as seen through a Lefebvrian lens to ground comparative analysis in the always specific "patterns and pathways" of urban territories. Reflecting across the widest diversity of urban contexts, concepts of urbanisation processes, as instances of the general category of "urbanisation",

identified in one or some contexts might be useful (or not) in others (Schmid et al., 2018). Relatedly, Benassi (Chapter 30) summarises the rich body of comparative urban insights which have emerged from interrogating the processes of territorial differentiation in the Italian context - highly specific, local configurations of economy, society and politics.

These insights together suggest that urban contexts provide the potential to open to comparative reflections in many different directions (Robinson, 2022, Chapter 6). Abu-Lughod's suggestive essay, "New York and Cairo: A view from street level" (Chapter 37; Abu-Lughod, 1990) is a creative experiment in thinking across two very different urban contexts, both of which she knew deeply. Many lines of connection, shared experiences and sharp differences guide her reflections, and can inspire urban scholars to initiate experimental conversations across different urban situations, with many different possible starting points (Boudreau, Bensali and Ferro, Chapter 41).

This rich complexity of the urban inspires some to suggest that analyses of the urban, and thus comparison, might be approached in a less holistic way. Thus, comparative analysis might begin with fragments of urban experience providing "lures" to other situations (Mcfarlane, 2019), or bringing different contexts together to open to new, modest conceptualisations which aim to stay close to the intrinsic heterogeneity of the urban (Lancione and McFarlane, 2016). A number of Handbook contributors are inspired by such alternative ontologies of the urban to initiate and guide comparative experiments. Notably, Actor Network Theory informed Söderström's (Chapter 14) use of "object biographies" to excavate the material dimensions and wider relations of urban developments, notably their built form. This opened up analysis to trace circulations of designers, decision-makers, construction, design and use to understand how globalized dimensions of urbanisation produce novel outcomes, and not just "the same everywhere" despite ubiquitous forms of design, which poses a key conundrum for any comparative urban imagination. Similarly to Söderström, de Munck (Chapter 6) is interested in the postcolonialising potential of comparative analysis, and he also finds in actor network theory and related understandings of "assemblage" grounds to achieve this through attending to the proliferation of networks (religious, cultural, economic) shaping the histories of urbanisation across different contexts. The focus of comparative analysis and methodological innovation shifts, then, to fostering new experiments for thinking across and with these complex spatialities of the urban.

We conclude our introduction with a brief review of the focus of each section – more detail is provided in the introduction to each section. Here we can sense the cumulative impact of the rich collection of papers in this Handbook.

Sections Overview

The Handbook is organised in five sections each of which is preceded by a brief introduction offering an overview of the themes raised.

The first section presents traditions and innovations in comparative urban literature in different disciplines and different continents, without any claim to being exhaustive. These chapters critically discuss and explain the types of urban comparison that have been done, or not done, the categories that have been used, some of the key topics considered in comparative analyses, and some discuss also the methods adopted. The chapters demonstrate major changes over time in urban studies in different contexts and discipline, for example, urban comparison was an important question during the first phase of the Chicago school, and has been particularly significant over a long time for disciplines with more positivist approaches, such as in political science. In some disciplines, such as Sociology, there has been much concern with the methodological and analytical challenges of defining the units of comparison in relation to a "micro-macro nexus", and determining the point of comparison – to identify causal mechanisms, or common aspects across different cases, and considering heterogeneity alongside social structures. New theoretical analyses have shaped the topics and modes of comparison which have been put forward, such as taking Charles Tilly's insights "South" or historians turning to actor network theory to inform their comparative analyses.

As argued in this introduction, urban comparisons raise many questions of method. The second section brings together a series of chapters, mostly from geographers and sociologists but also with contributions from political scientists and urban economists, that present experimentations with different kinds of research design and empirical methods at different scales, and which seek to engage with some of the core challenges of urban comparisons in creative ways. For example, working with the urban as both made up of circulating and territorialised features, or considering the complex formations and variety of urban political institutions, or innovating alongside new kinds of social relations, notably new forms of data, or governance practices. These showcase fruitful comparative research methods which are bespoke to urban form and process, and which include very precise qualitative and quantitative methods, or a mix of both in some cases. The papers all engage closely, from different theoretical and disciplinary perspectives, with the challenges of navigating the specificity or distinctiveness of individual urban contexts, and their enmeshment in wider circulations, institutions and processes (economic, social, political).

This conundrum provides the starting point for the third section: how can comparative method and practice conceptualise and work with the idea of "context", given the centrality of this to any concept of the urban? Whatever the level of abstraction and theorisation, most developments in urban comparative studies have become more precise and aim at defining and accommodating contexts in different ways, from the more constructivist (theoretical approaches which work with the idea of conjunctures, or see context as introducing variation into wider processes, or, more strongly, which see specificity as a starting point for theory-building), to those which consider the more institutionalised context (the state), or which seek to codify distinctive contextual outcomes in terms of variables. This section provides contrasting examples of approaches to take different contexts into account with different research strategies and conceptualisation, including questioning the assumptions of territory, entities or bodies as the terms of analysis: "context" and comparison are dissipated in "encounter", of myriad, overlapping transversal technologies, capacities and computations. The

section also includes chapters which place the question of "context" on the side of the researcher: being located in or writing from different contexts sets certain methodological agendas or constraints on urban researchers. "Context", then, is not just a theoretical problem - how contexts relate to wider processes, for example, and how to accommodate these in comparative analysis. "Context" is a dynamic presence in comparative analyses, and brings forward distinctive and generative forms of theoretical analysis, method and topics, which the chapters explore in relation to Post-socialism, China, Russia, Italy and the US-EU.

The fourth section concentrates on the major factor transforming the world of urban comparative research, namely, the rise of relations, networks and circulations. Contrasting chapters emphasise how comparative research might work with the wealth of connections at different scales – always in tension with and transforming urban territories, from the global city region, to new and often remote forms of peri-urbanisation or agrarian urbanisations. The circulations themselves become the focus of comparative attention, too, and their proliferation and multidirectionality play an important role in expanding the geographical scope of urban studies, and reconfiguring the relations amongst different contexts and actors – Edouard Glissant's poetic-theoretic reconstruction of comparisons of equivalence provides guidance and inspiration. The debate between the understanding of the urban world in terms of processes of urbanisation versus cities and metropolis takes different forms in relation to different themes, circuits and contexts. Certainly, methodological innovations contribute to making this opposition less salient as many authors attempt to articulate an understanding of urban specificity and urban territories in terms of the myriad processes and connections shaping them. Cities, then, are articulated in different ways with wider processes, and with other urban contexts, providing strong grounds for composing analytically and politically creative comparisons.

The final section presents chapters that are developing a wide range of innovative approaches to comparison which each grapple with the urban as a multidimensional and often elusive formation, both physically (where is the urban, now?), sociologically (a neo bourdieusian sociology of cities) and experientially (how can we try to understand the emotional, embodied and ephemeral dimensions of urban life?). New lines of inquiry to practice and conceptualise urban comparison from different intellectual traditions and disciplines come forward here. For example, those more influenced by thinking from the materiality of the city and the insights of STS, those who work to consider how to gain comparative insight into the role of emotions and unconscious experiences in comparative urban history, in everyday life and urban practices, and even in efforts to make sense of extremely large-scale urbanisation processes associated with transnational urban corridors, or China's terraforming Belt and Road initiative, for example. Other chapters consider the possibility to think comparatively about the kinds of huge and administratively complex city regions which are emerging in many countries (focussed on the BRICS) and about the diverse circuits of urbanisation within countries, such as India, which calls for new comparative strategies. Further experimentations are targeted at navigating the lived experiences of cities in relation to highly transnationalised flows, for example in relation to Covid and religion.

The Handbook introduces a unique set of contributions, from different continents and disciplines, all of which contribute to the making of the intellectual field of global comparative urban studies. Others are making similar efforts to bring urban analysis into line with arguably epochal changes in its object of study, from different angles. We hope that readers will find much food for thought here, as we certainly did, and resources to support their own experiments for engaging in comparative urban research.

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