

Chapter XX

NEW GEOGRAPHIES OF THEORISING THE URBAN: PUTTING COMPARISON TO WORK FOR GLOBAL URBAN STUDIES¹

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Trends in contemporary global urbanization pose a significant challenge to theorizing cities. The well-documented shift in the leading edge of urbanization from wealthier countries (which have historically informed much urban theorizing) to middle-income and poorer country contexts, including the highly populous countries of China and India and the economically challenging circumstances of many African countries, establishes the need for a more global urban studies (Satterthwaite 2007). This chapter argues that global urbanism, the commitment to producing an understanding of the urban which is potentially open to the experiences of all cities - to a world of cities - is best served by a comparative imagination. Thinking cities – the urban – in a world of cities requires that researchers navigate the great diversity of urban outcomes while building broader theoretical understandings; that they engage in producing conceptualizations of the urban which begin with the multiplicity of distinctive experiences of the urban but which also travel beyond the city in question in order to participate in wider scholarly conversations. In this chapter I explore what kind of comparative imagination could support such a project of global urban theorising.

The spatiality of theorizing the urban experience, of thinking cities in a world of cities, maps well onto the core elements of a comparative imagination – thinking across different ‘cases’ to produce conceptualizations which contribute to wider understandings of the processes being analysed, and which might then, in turn, be considered in relation to other contexts or cases. However, the comparative methods which have conventionally underpinned urban

studies have not been well placed to serve the project for a more global urbanism (Robinson 2011). Theorizing cities can benefit from a comparative imagination, but comparative methods need to be refitted to support a more global urban analytical project, including a substantial reconfiguring of the ontological foundations of comparison. For example, what might be considered a ‘case’ needs to be redefined to avoid the restricting and territorializing trap of only comparing (relatively similar) ‘cities’: we might rather compare, for example, specific elements or processes in cities, or the circulations and connections which shape cities, thus rendering urban experiences comparable across a much wider range of contexts, and building research strategies which are adequate to the complex spatiality of urban forms (Robinson 2011; Ward 2010). Comparators - the “third term” which establishes the grounds of comparability of cases (Jacobs, 2012) - need to be selected so they are relevant to a diversity of urban contexts, rather than seeking relatively similar cities for comparison as is conventional. In this way, they will be able to stretch theoretical concepts to the breaking point required for the reinvention of urban studies for global analysis, and not simply reinforce parochial and limited understandings (cf. Pierre 2005). More generally, the status of the case itself needs to be reimagined, in relation to both the wider empirical processes shaping particular outcomes, and the conceptualizations which are an important ambition of comparative strategies; this is essential to ground an adequate post-structuralist comparative method which moves beyond both quasi-scientific explanations and a view of the world in which wider structures are drawn on to explain complex specific outcomes.

The second part of the paper therefore engages with how the “case” might be conceptualised in urban studies. Is the case to be seen as an instance of a conceptually predetermined process, like global capitalism? Or does it potentially bring to light new, emergent conceptualisations of processes which do not invoke overarching singular explanations

(Jacobs 2012)? Finally, a theoretical practice which produces revisable, mobile conceptualizations is essential to support understandings which are open to a world of cities and which do not reproduce theoretical practices (or theory-cultures) which are closed to contributions and interruptions from elsewhere, notably those cities previously excluded from analytical consideration, broadly from the ‘global south’ and especially from poorer cities in danger of a new round of marginalisation from emerging global hegemony (Parnell et al. 2009). If urban studies is to build theoretical analyses which can speak to a world of cities, which provoke recognition and engagement from different urban experiences, scholars will need to be alert to new parochial narratives being proposed as universals, and to take some care to prevent the re-entrenching of divisions and assumptions of incommensurability between different cities

More generally, I suggest that reconfiguring the tactics and form of the comparative imagination aligns with significant issues in the wider theorization of the urban currently provoking considerable debate. How can we approach the conceptualization of the urban through the specific instances of different cities (Goonedewarna et al, 2008)? Can we best understand cities as assemblages of circulating phenomena, or as outcomes of wider social processes (Jacobs 2006; McFarlane 2011a; Brenner et al. 2011)? To what extent is it possible to configure a conceptually adequate theorization of either the city or the urban (Brenner and Schmid 2013)? How do concepts of cities relate to the phenomenal elements of the urban world which present themselves to us through observations and encounters (Simone 2011)? These are fundamental issues of both method and theory in urban studies, and they have strong synergies with the core challenges facing a comparative urban imagination: building theorisations across a world of (different) cities. These rather abstract theoretical debates are therefore analytically closely connected to the practical challenges of producing a more

international urban studies: they speak to the task of reconfiguring the methodological architecture for grappling with the conceptualization of the urban across a world of diverse, distinctive cities.

The first part of this paper will consider some recent innovations in formulating the grounds for a more global urbanism, and will build on their insights to suggest that a reformulated comparative imagination could address some analytical and methodological issues which are emerging in this initiative. The second part of the paper will work with theoretical debates concerning the conceptualization of the urban in order to outline a reformatted comparative method to support a more global urban theoretical practice. Here some of the broadest questions concerning how to conceptualise the extent and nature of the urban are relevant to reframing the comparative imagination, especially the webs of interconnections which make it necessary to think the city beyond territory and through the great diversity of urban forms around the world. Finally the conclusion will propose how a reformulated comparativism can help scholars move beyond the potentially divisive territorialising traps of regional and developmental categories for thinking the urban.

SOME ANALYTICAL TACTICS OF GLOBAL URBANISM

It is widely agreed that urban studies needs to embrace a much wider repertoire of urban contexts in building understandings of contemporary urbanism and to revisit parochial interpretations of the past: the challenge of thinking cities in a world of cities is not somehow only newly arrived! But what exactly is to be done? Different scholars have set out on this project for a global urbanism in a variety of directions, establishing productive and interesting lines of analysis. Pulling them together here I would like readers to join me in being inspired by the extent and range of work which supports global urban studies, and to try out these

different paths, while at the same time reflecting on how collectively they also bring into the open some of the emerging challenges of thinking across the diversity of urban experiences.

Some 'strategic essentialisms': Critiquing the parochial state of urban studies in the 2000s - and the numerous occasions previously when scholars have pointed out the limited resources shaping dominant understandings of the urban - some initial manoeuvres for a global urban studies involved locating and then dislocating the conceptual foundations of what appeared as 'Western' urban studies (Southall 1976; Mitchell, 1987; Hannerz, 1980; Parnell 1997; Robinson 2001; 2006; Roy 2009; Wu 2010). Now, over a decade later, it seems this work of critique needs to be ongoing - for it turns out to be far too easy for scholars working in such contexts to simply name their location - northern cities, or regions such as US or EU cities - and to continue to ignore the rest of the world of cities while forming their analyses. Given that such well-resourced scholarship still dominates the key journals, not to mention the institutional resources dedicated to international urban research, again and again, I expect, those of us concerned for a more global perspective, or who live in, work on and think through different kinds of cities will need to review, critique and extend such parochial conceptualizations. The challenge here is that such ideas, even if named as parochial, continue to be styled as universal arguments, and thus gain traction and set themselves on the move, becoming hard to avoid when cities everywhere are analysed. The claims to universalization which are embedded in authorial voice (confident, dominating, authorizing, unmarked) and enabled through the practicalities of unevenly resourced circuits of knowledge and publishing could be further dissipated through embedding expectations of quite different practices of theorisation - not only a critical reflexivity on the part of writers, but the propagation of modes of theorizing which are actively open to being revised, much more modest in their voice, and precise about locational co-ordinates (both physical and

social). Some of the practices of comparative urbanism outlined in the next section could be helpful in framing different practices of theorizing.

In turning to articulate new dimensions of theorizing cities from elsewhere, authors have sought new geographies of authority and voice. Surveying the key ideas about cities emerging from different regional contexts (Asia, Africa, South America), Roy (2009) proposes a form of strategic essentialism as a grounding for this work. Certainly, it is important to make the space to speak back to arguably ‘western’ theory by drawing on the best insights of scholars in different parts of the world. The ‘strategic’ epithet indicates some of the limitations of this approach though. For of course these grounds for voice for new subjects of theory (Roy 2011) can emerge from embedded regional scholarship and regional circuits of theorisation which are productive and important in their own right (Myers, 2011; Sanyal and Desai, 2011). Every city, country, region, supports and produces communities of scholars, and diasporic networks of interpretation, whose concerns are distinctive (if internally highly differentiated): at the same time connected to wider debates and intimately driven by the histories and politics of that context. The tension between these sources of influence has been a key area of debate in post-colonial scholarship in many parts of the world (Connell, 2007 offers some useful reviews). However, wherever one begins, both the city as an object of study and the challenge of conceptualising the urban draw on a much more than regional geography or area studies imagination, as Tim Bunnell (2013) helpfully explores. Thus, “the region” as a ground for theorisation can be a substantively important and generative context in terms of scholarly networks, traditions and practices, but it is already open to a wider array of contexts, influences and theoretical conversations (Dick and Rimmer, 1998). Insofar, then, as cities are more than regionally determined, framed by globalising processes, circulating policies and the numerous re-iterations of urban forms, the

“region” as a basis for theoretical voice might be claimed, momentarily, but is quickly called into question through internal differentiation across the region, the wider processes of globalisation and competing geographical frames of explanation (not least the nation, the city). Our analyses of cities cannot necessarily be circumscribed by the regions or even countries in which they are located. Cities are, as Mbembe and Nuttall have it ‘embedded in multiple elsewheres’ (2004: 348)

Regional theorisations, then, are productive, and provide generative insights which can be launched into the wider world of theorisations, with which they are often already intimately connected. But regions are deeply entwined with a wider world (substantively and conceptually) and certainly represent geographical delimitations which are artefacts of power and cartographic imagination rather than analysis. Building new subjects of urban theory on such essentialisms runs certain risks. On the one hand they simply highlight a classic challenge of theorizing cities in a world of cities – trying to build wider theorizations of the urban while always having to start in a particular context or with a particular urban outcome. Advocating the benefits of a speaking position defined by a particular pre-existing geographical container (albeit one framed as leaky and multiple – Roy 2011), could re-entrench isolation of different analytical projects, and prevent us seeking some new grounds for speaking more generally about the urban condition. Insights framed as regional can too easily be dismissed as of limited relevance to other cities rather than help to provoke lines of conversation across diverse but highly interconnected urban experiences; in the worst case this form of strategic essentialism could re-establish the lines of incommensurability which saw urbanists disavow insights from geopolitically, developmentally and regionally different contexts. The dynamic strengths of regional scholarship need to be balanced by a strong attentiveness to the range of different geographies relevant to thinking cities (Bunnell, 2013)

and perhaps most importantly, tied to theoretical projects which seek to launch emergent understandings into wider conversations, rather than territorialise analytical voice.

This same challenge of deploying strategic geographical imaginations as grounds from which to speak new accounts of the urban faces the idea of a 'southern' urban theory. In this case the geography of the south is even more complicated to work with. On the one hand it borrows the geopolitical metaphor linking poor nations beyond the capitalist heartland and western core to figure the broadly critical 'ex-centric' positionality of the scholar whose perspective does not derive from the mainstream (western, northern) academy. It does not always rely on the sense of a line of 'poverty', though, which is the original meaning of the term as formulated in the Brandt line dividing the world into north and south, and critically its re-orientation as 'global' south allows for inclusion of poor countries north of the equator and to excavate poverty wherever it is found, including in wealthier contexts. Some quite different bases for the delineation of North and South support postcolonial approaches in academic debate. Raewyn Connell's (2007) path-breaking book, *Southern Theory* develops a *sui generis* analysis of the lines of exclusion of many parts of the world from the labour of sociological theorization, contesting the positioning of some places as sources of data rather than theory, and insisting on a reinvention of theory for a sociology 'at a world scale'. The appeal of the global south in academic analysis is created then through its dual appeal as a critique of wealth and power in the global system and its figuring of the ex-centric scholar or location, which can disturb or speak back to dominant knowledges in a radical idiom framed by critiques of global capitalism (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012). It is in some ways a highly productive tactic for global urbanism, and has inspired the articulation of important challenges to urban studies, especially when allied with calls for an engaged, politically committed practice, informed by the inventive analyses emerging from city dwellers, policy

makers, states and other actors in some of the poorest cities which have been highly marginalized in urban studies to date (Parnell et al. 2009; Watson 2009; Pieterse 2013).

Both these moves, to evoke a 'southern' positionality, and to excavate regional distinctiveness, are important moments in the emergence of new approaches in urban studies. But they are both 'strategic' opportunities, interim moves, and more sustained formulations for building global urban analyses will be required. With the strong intersection of urban studies and spatial thinking, would a more subtle analysis of the geographies of theorizing be possible? Rather than bundling a diversity of analytical manoeuvres into the pre-assigned, geopolitically problematic and analytically over-laden spatialities of regions or imagined geographies such as the 'south', I would propose a much more reflexive and decentred spatiality to ground the multiple subject positions of global urban theory. And a more precise and diversified analytical formulation of the lines of critique relevant to understanding cities is possible: the uneven geographies of global capitalism, the complex spatialities of global poverty, the steep inequalities of scholarly production across the world, and the geopolitics of regions or nations should be interrogated on their own terms, rather than bundled into the cavernous and analytically rather bankrupt forms of region and hemisphere. Certainly, it could be argued that regional configurations do often matter for cities – shared economic positions and political histories shape certain aspects of urban processes: the simultaneity and shared roots of economic crisis in some regions is crucial to understand the rise of informality in some cities (Santos, 1979); or the range of interconnections which support regional economic configurations might evoke a form of regional distinctiveness (Roy and Ong 2011). But it is intellectually important and analytically essential to be precise about these spatialities, not least because even these shared histories are unevenly experienced and strongly exteriorised, part of wider global processes (see Bunnell 2013). Such precision

would open up the possibility for on-going conversations across diverse but interconnected urban outcomes across the globe, rather than render cities incommensurable or irrelevant to analyses elsewhere through the invocation of a blunt spatial analytics. In the final section below I indicate how a comparative urban imagination might provoke some thinking about new geographies of theorizing. While postcolonial moves are seeking to stretch the imagination of urban theory to draw on the resources of urban experiences across the world, debates within mainstream urban studies also offer some new openings for such efforts.

The disappearing city: A growing interest in the idea of ‘planetary urbanization’, drawing on Henri Lefebvre’s (2003[1974]) suggestive hypothesis of the ‘complete urbanization of society’ has brought a concern for the fate of cities (literally) everywhere into the heart of urban theory. The sprawling extent and diverse forms of many cities, or even urban galaxies, as Soja and Kanai (2007) would have it, with the proliferation of extensive urbanization processes stretching amongst cities and far beyond the physical form of urban settlement has provoked a growing attentiveness to the impossibility of answering the foundational questions of urban theory: where and what is the city (Brenner and Schmid 2011; 2013; Brenner 2013)? The city, Merrifield (2013) insists, is a ‘pseudoconcept’ and along with others working in this field, he invites us to rather seek to re-specify the theoretical content of the ‘urban’, in the wake of Wirth, Castells and Lefebvre (Brenner and Schmid 2013). We might pause to reflect that Wirth’s efforts to ground urban theory in ideas of size, heterogeneity and density were instructively parochial (informed by the experience of particular – US and European – cities) and were widely criticised at the time by sociologists and anthropologists around the world for that reason (Robinson 2006); Castells’ search for a mapping of theoretical concepts onto the city was motivated by his eagerness to displace the heterodox Marxist analysis which Lefebvre was offering to think the city with by insisting

that the “ideological” formulation of the city through a theorisation of space distracted from what he considered to be the proper focus on conjuncturally significant structural processes which had become aligned with the city – namely, collective consumption (Stanek 2011). In the meantime, urban geographers have attended most carefully to the dual spatialities of territorialization and interconnection which shape this impossible, unbounded, fuzzy object of analysis (Massey, Allen and Pile 1999; McCann and Ward 2010). Certainly the territorial referents of the term, ‘city’, do service for only a small portion of urban processes – perhaps the territorializing moments of political demarcations of administration and governance which frame inter-city competition (although these are supremely exteriorized (globalised) in the circulations of urban policy); or the constitutive nature of social relations of place (but again, urban social and cultural processes are also highly globalized). This search for new vocabularies of the urban to replace the increasingly unworkable territorial shadow contained in the notion of the city, drawing on the idea of planetary urbanization, is both in step with wider trends in the spatial vocabularies currently used anyway in urban analysis and, more importantly for this paper, a significant opening for building urban theorization which takes account of the world of cities.

I use the term city from time to time here, alongside the idea of different “urban outcomes” to hold the sign of many aspects of the urban which intervene in the project of theorizing the urban globally: differentiation in urban outcomes, particularity, territorializations, path dependencies, lived spaces, contestations or occupations (Benjamin 2008). And most importantly to insist that any project of theorising the urban at a planetary scale still confronts the challenge of approaching this across the great diversity of urban processes and urban outcomes; Brenner and Schmid (2013, p.x) suggest that urbanization is variable, polymorphic, and historically determinate and so what needs to be theorised as urban takes

many different forms. Transitions to a more fully urbanised population in some places – with the limitation that this is assessed at the national scale (Brenner and Schmid, 2011) - coexist with the stagnation and decline of formerly successful industrial cities (Le Galès, 2000); the surge of state geopolitical ambition in the styling of cities across Asia (Ong, 2011) accompanies the intense privatism and state withdrawal from shaping cities in many former authoritarian contexts (Hirt, 2011); the informal expansion of rapidly growing cities sits, sometimes literally, side by side with the explosion of concrete and glass in the emptied public spaces of corporate urban landscapes and the resultant elite capture of the intrinsic capacities of many cities to engender vitality and centrality (De Boeck, 2011; Schmid, 2011). And we could rehearse many more distinctive varieties of urbanism; indeed, a multiplicity of forms, trends, and interpretations of the urban condition can be identified around the world.

In this sense, then, and following Lefebvre himself, the theorization of urbanization will always find itself disrupted by this diversity; and in the face of that, any theorization must find itself provisional and insecure. In their philosophically-informed ‘third-wave’ Lefebvre studies, Goonedewarna et al. (2008, p.297), observe that Lefebvre was both sceptical of any ‘premature intellectual totalisation’, alert to the necessary incompleteness of theoretical specifications, and concerned to attend to the differential multiplicity of centres from which to build understandings of the urban. I return to this below.

The challenges for a theorization of planetary urbanization, if it is to be a part of a project for a global urban studies, include being alert to disclosing the locatedness of its inspirations – the places and cities which shape theorisation (for Lefebvre these were certainly European, but also through his life-time he was influenced by quite a wide-ranging set of urban contexts), and the trajectories of theoretical insight (the vocabularies which draw on strongly

European philosophical categories). Wider theorisations of the urban also need to keep open the possibility to be disrupted by understandings of urbanization from elsewhere; and to take care not to pre-ordain the theoretical determination of urbanization on the basis of earlier (located) rounds of theorizing, for example, as simply a form of (certain theorizations of) global capitalism (Merrifield, 2013) - thinking from different contexts can bring into view a much wider range of relevant processes. In the same way, then, as neoliberalism does not exhaust or even specify the terrain of urban politics (Robinson and Parnell, 2011), capitalism does not delineate the processes of urbanisation everywhere. And from the outset, the repertoire of inspiration for thinking urbanisation beyond the city could be significantly widened. For instance, in a number of different contexts a more developmental and perhaps policy-oriented urban literature (see Parnell and Robinson (2012) for a discussion of the importance of drawing on this literature in framing wider urban studies debates) has long been concerned with the ways in which “the city” and the countryside are woven together through an intricate range of (often transnational) relationships: circular migration, as a constituent and long-lasting feature of many Southern African urbanisms bears attention here (see Potts (2010) for an important discussion of this).

While planetary urbanisation as a response to the challenge of the disappearing city (since it is now everywhere – see Wachsmuth, 2013) is largely pursued through the lens of political-economic analyses, mainstream urban studies has also drawn a strong engagement with alternative post-structuralist traditions which offer competing vocabularies for more global conceptualisations of cities. I review one of these now, largely inspired by the work of the French philosopher, Gilles Deleuze.

Repeated instances: The final emergent approach to global urbanism which I will review here draws its inspiration from Gilles Deleuze's (1994) account of repetitious differentiations which suggests we attend to how we come to a conceptualisation of singularities or specific outcomes through working with "difference". As memory and intuition bring objects to "thought", we enter the realm of the 'virtual', where objects can come to be conceptualised through actively exploring connections with other possible configurations and instances in a field, and in relation to an ongoing sensibility to matter. Thus (our concepts of) specific urban outcomes could be understood as intimately connected to many other possible (preceding and future) outcomes, through their shared conditions of conceptualisation (as, for example, many instances of "gentrification" could be drawn on in trying to specify how a certain instance of urban regeneration might be understood), And in the case of urbanisation (and certainly for "gentrification") many of the processes of production are shared across different instances (such as with policy circulation, or circuits of investment related to urban regeneration). In this view, then, each instance or repetition is only a step aside from other instances, or singularities, distinctive but intimately connected with other specific outcomes (Deleuze 1994). This philosophical intervention offers much food for thought in trying to imagine an interconnected conceptual project across a world of distinctive urban outcomes. In urban studies the most succinct example of this thinking is to be found in Jane Jacobs' (2006) analysis of the globalising residential high-rise. Here the distinctive achievement of each repetition – almost-the-same – through globalizing circulations and specific assembling of diverse elements to produce each building provides an insight into what it might mean to think with the productivity of the virtual in the sphere of the urban (Farias 2010: 15). The achievement of urban modernity in the repetitive architecture of international modernism emerges from the relatively unpredictable multiplicity of circulations and manifold elements able to be assembled into each construction – buildings which are both repeated and yet

produced as original objects, with an equally original yet partly repeated and interconnected set of meanings crafted locally, each time (King 2004): ‘the making of repetition – or more precisely, repeated instances in many different contexts – requires variance, different assemblages of allies in different settings’ (Jacobs 2006: 22). For Jacobs, each instance *produces* the global *effect* of international modernism in her comparative research on the residential high rise: each case is a singularity, and not an example of an already given global process (Jacobs 2012).²

Unfortunately the lines of opposition have been drawn between political economy approaches and the kinds of analyses which have been inspired by Deleuze and Actor Network Theory after Bruno Latour. Thus McFarlane (2011a) invokes the idea of ‘assemblage’ as a metaphor for interpreting the city as composed of relatively unpredictable but agent-ful combinations of objects, techniques, practices and human actions using the examples of the informal production of housing and mobilisation of resistance amongst poorer urban dwellers. And as we saw above, Jane Jacobs focuses on how each instance of residential high-rise is produced through the “assemblage” of different human and non-human actors in specific places. Brenner *et al* (2011) see this as at odds with the political economy perspectives which broadly support the theorization of planetary urbanization (Brenner, Madden and Wachsmuth 2011) and they seek to contain the influence of assemblage thinking to a methodological innovation bringing into view non-human actants and which might propose new topics for enquiry that would continue to be driven by the wider perspectives of political economy. However, they also note suggestively, that:

Could it be possibly here, faced with the extraordinary challenge of mapping a world-wide yet internally hierarchized and differentiated urban ensemble that the conceptual

and methodological gesture facilitated through assemblage approaches becomes most productive?

Brenner, Madden and Wachsmuth 2011: 237

In this regard, Ignacio Farias (2010) is correct to suggest that the use of Actor Network Theory in urban studies has been empiricist and post-hoc and thus descriptive of phenomena which are rather familiar, and has paid little attention to the challenge of being open to identifying the unpredictable, creative emergence of entirely new kinds of concepts and objects which Deleuze's thinking might inspire. This approach has certainly not sought to generate any understanding of the urban more generally. Moreover, Deleuze's interest in the domain of *conceptualization* as part of the process of emergence is significantly absent from this work, limiting their potential to contribute to wider or more theoretical conversations about the urban (Deleuze and Guattari 1994). Insofar, then, as we might seek to find some common ground between planetary urbanization's search for new conceptualizations of the urban, and the now extensive urban research in the idiom of actor network theory, I would agree with Brenner et al. (2013) that this could be found in the more Deleuzian-inspired opening to reformulating how the urban might be thought across the diversity of urban outcomes. This places the urban as a conceptualization profoundly open to reformulation in response to both differentiated emergent forms of urbanization and the nonetheless interconnected conceptualisations which we might be provoked to consider as this 'urban manifold' makes itself known to us (Simone 2011). This sets the scene, I would propose, for a new formulation of urban comparativism.

REFORMATTING URBAN COMPARATIVISM

Building critically on the practices of urban comparison, as outlined in the discussion above, we could reimagine comparisons as involving the broad practice of thinking cities/the urban through elsewhere (another case, a wider context, existing theoretical imaginations, connections to other places), in order to better understand outcomes and to contribute to broader theorizations and conversations about (aspects of) the urban. Thinking comparatively can highlight the differentiation of outcomes, it can bring into view the distinctive (or shared) processes shaping a certain urban outcome, it can put to work theoretical insights drawn from other instances or cases; it can insist on the incompleteness of analytical insights drawn from different contexts; moreover, it can suggest new objects of analysis by displacing ethnocentric assumptions which arise from the inevitable locatedness of all theory. In the case of cities, the opportunity to think comparatively is ubiquitous by virtue of the multiplicity of urban outcomes³, or the simple fact of having to think cities in a ‘world of cities’: any act of urban theorization from somewhere is by necessity a comparative gesture, putting a perspective informed by one context or outcome into conversation with wider theorizations. Thus one of the most useful comparative tactics in urban studies is the case study, brought into creative conversation with a wider literature. In many ways this format, the case study – whether understood as a city, a specific urban phenomenon or form, or wider circulating urban processes - brought into conversation with theoretical debates and other cases, is well suited as a model for global urban studies. It insists on taking seriously the scholarly output of people working in different places, thinking through that work to inform one’s own located analysis, and in turn, suggesting new lines of theorization based on the new case study. The call for a more global urban studies is in some ways well formulated as an insistence on more critical ‘planetary’ reading practices (see Jazeel 2012).

The intrinsic comparativism of urban studies can also be put to work more purposively, and here the repertoire of comparative strategies has been expanding through attention to relational comparisons (Hart 2003; Ward 2010) and to the need to formulate comparative methods which are adequate to the specific spatialities of cities (Robinson 2011). Thus the project of ‘composing’ comparisons can be reconfigured to map better on to current understandings of the urban. Thus, the territorialized figuring of the individual ‘case’ as a city is clearly redundant (see Wachsmuth, 2013) and instead we would seek to put a comparative imagination to work to consider: the range of urbanization processes which stretch far beyond the physical form of cities; the diverse array of social and spatial forms which emerge in different urban settlements; the repeated instances and circulating phenomena (such as policies, forms, visions) which draw highly differentiated urban outcomes into the same frame of analysis. We might draw analytical insights by considering cities through the specific shared connections which shape each, highlighting the impact of different histories and contexts, as Hart (2003) pioneered in her consideration of the effects of rural dispossession on small industrializing towns in northern KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, through tracing the largely Taiwanese industrialists who chose to locate there in response to a late-apartheid industrial incentive scheme. We might compare the webs of relations which creatively draw cities into practical engagements with circulating policies, economic networks, transnational political influences, or direct engagements with actors from specific other cities, as Söderström (2013) does in his comparison of the two ‘cities in relations’, Ougadougou and Hanoi. And the proliferation of repeated instances across cities provides a basis for a locationally promiscuous research agenda to inform a global conversation about many aspects of contemporary urban life (for example, on neoliberalism, Goldfrank and Schrank 2009; on gentrification, Harris 2008; or Jacobs 2006 on the residential high-rise).

Reformatting comparison to support a global urban studies therefore has many possible practical tactics for proceeding: building comparisons through *reading* strategies to put case study work into wider conversations; *composing* bespoke comparisons across diverse outcomes or repeated instances; *tracing* connections amongst cities to inform understandings of different outcomes or to compare the wider interconnections and extended urbanization processes themselves; and, as we discussed in the previous section, *launching* distinctive analyses from specific urban contexts or regions into wider conversations.

A new conceptualisation of the meaning of comparison is also required, which amounts to a new geography of theorising, or generating concepts. Firstly, as we have seen, an account of the process of building concepts through engaging across the differentiated field of the urban needs to provide for a radical deterritorialization of the ‘case’. Theorizing the urban ‘now’, following Walter Benjamin, for example, provides one possible resource for re-imagining the spatiality of comparison, and a method for *theorising cities in the midst of elsewhere*. Whether through the logistics of composing, tracing or launching, the comparative imagination calls for attention to the strong exteriorization of the urban – i.e. the fact that cities are shaped by processes that stretch well beyond their physical extent. Benjamin presents the ‘now’ – the ‘now of recognizability’ – as a dialectical image (1999 Arcades Project N7: 7) in which the present, rather than being seen as a result of a sequential (progressive) historical causality, is understood, or brought into recognition, through moments of the past which are scattered in time. To capture the sense of the now, various elements of the past, he suggests, need to be blasted out of the course of positivist history in which time is seen as continuous (or within the rubric of an abstract sense of enduring time, following Kant), and realigned in a constellation of ‘now’-time – a dialectics at a standstill bringing different elements of the past and present crashing together, and in which the

relations of temporality itself are immanent (Hamacher 2005). As Benjamin suggests: ‘For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: it is not progression but image, suddenly emergent’ (Benjamin 1999 Arcades Project N2a: 3).⁴

Thus an urban ‘now’ would involve analytically drawing together elements from cities and places distant in both time and space, with leaps of explanation and connection reaching back in time as well as across to other places to constitute the immanent interpretive space-times of globalizing urbanism. In such a re-crafted image of the urban ‘now’, interpretations of different cities are potentially multiple, depending on your analytical constellation. But these are also intimately interconnected through many shared circulations and mutual inhabitations (see Robinson 2013; Caygill 1998). Thus we find here in Benjamin’s historical method resources to insist on both the empirical multiplicity of the urban (a diversity of inter-related urban outcomes) and the multiplicity and interconnectedness of possible conceptualisations or analyses of the urban.

If the resources for imagining new spatialities of comparison can be retrieved from the mainstream history of urban studies, reconceptualizing the status of the case is closer to hand in contemporary debates inspired by Gilles Deleuze. In order to recompose the significance of the case we need to question whether it is helpful to see the case either as an example of wider processes or as a ‘context’ in which wider processes are hybridized. Thus, in a Deleuzian idiom, as I outlined above, cases could be thought of not as examples of wider processes (such as restructuring, in Clarke’s (1995) excellent study), nor their hybridization (as in Peck et al.’s (2009) analysis of neoliberalization), but as singularities - specific (if repeated, differently) outcomes resulting from empirically determinable processes. But this is

neither to jettison conceptualisation, nor to return to an opposition between wider systemic processes and their contextualized outcomes. Even in its post-colonial idiom (for example, Chakrabarty, 2000) this imagination, which preserves the idea that structures (such as global capitalism) derived in analysis can be identified locally in a hybrid, differentiated form, generates a view of many places as residual to theorisation, marking only the hybridization of processes derived (and already conceptualised) from elsewhere. This both retains the centrality of conceptualisations informed by only some contexts, and reduces the study of different places to a form of ‘defanged empiricism’, unable to transform understandings of these wider processes and leaving conceptualizations relatively intact (see Chaudhury 2012; Connell 2007). Drawing all cities into the conceptualisation of urbanisation would benefit from reimagining this relationship so that theorisation of the urban can be informed by the widest range of urban experiences. This clearly requires considerable further specification but, as a prosaic example, empirical investigations into the many shared processes shaping different cities could both contribute to a more open theorisation of the urban and draw inspiration from a wider range of urban contexts. Rather than being seen as abstract “structures”, perhaps the ‘rule regimes’ of global capitalism (Peck et al. 2009), or extensive urbanization processes (Brenner and Schmid 2013), alongside the circulations of urban forms (Söderström 2013) and the emergence of specific state capacities (McFarlane 2011b) might be empirical objects of investigation in their own right (i.e. not assumed as already conceptualised structures), and open towards conceptualisations of the urban after “virtuality” – in which understandings of distinctive outcomes emerge through exploring interconnected conceptualisations and the range of also interconnected relations, dynamics and processes which help to specify one among a multiplicity of possible urban outcomes⁵. This would perhaps offer a way to appreciate the diversity of urban outcomes while

supporting wider conversations and explanations with purchase on the significant political challenges associated with making and surviving urban life.

Thus the key comparative ambition to *explain outcomes* can benefit from re-framing the meaning of the ‘case’ in comparative analysis as not simply an example (perhaps hybridised) of singular overarching processes (Jacobs, 2012), but as specific outcomes (singularities) which open opportunities to interrogate and conceptualise the wide range of dynamics constituting the urban. In this framing, both Benjamin and Deleuze can inspire us to propose the precarious nature of conceptualizations – their openness to revisability, and the necessary instability of their empirical referents. The urban manifold, as Simone (2011) puts it, in its many expressions ‘makes itself known to us’. This prompts processes of conceptualisation, presents new entities to our imaginations, draws us in to *revising theories*, remaking interpretations, generating new concepts, or performing new iterations of an emergent urban. In this imagination, conceptualization is a dynamic and generative process, one subject to rules of experimentation and revisability (Deleuze and Guattari 1994).

That theory can be practiced and conceptualised in this way, as radically revisable, is essential for a more global urban studies. In this regard, Lefebvre’s postulation of the urban as a ‘virtual object’ – but with a somewhat different meaning of “virtual” than in Deleuze – can reinforce this. Lefebvre observes that ‘the theoretical approach requires a critique of this ‘object’ [the city] and a more complex notion of the virtual or possible object’ (Lefebvre 2003: 16), as both theoretical and historical possibility. In one of his comments on this he suggests that the urban is virtual, in the sense that it can be analytically deduced, like the rules of language, from the range of processes at work in cities (2003: 50-54). Or, as Kipfer et al. (2008: 292) note, Lefebvre’s analytics of space establishes the idea of a ‘concrete utopia

of an urban society as a differential space-time'. Thus the virtual notion of the urban, its openness to history, supports the one sense in which the urban 'revolution' might be figured through the transformative potential embedded in urban space as 'differential', and open to being remade and reimagined. He also considers the urban revolution in another sense of the historical revolution underpinning the idea of the 'complete urbanisation of society' in which the field of the social comes to be determined by the urban. The urban is made 'world-wide' – not only in its extension across the planet, but in its complete determination of the social formation.⁶ For him, though, it is important that the urban is also a political and practical achievement – the urban is to be made through political contestation. Lefebvre's sense of the urban as a 'possible-impossible' ties the emergence of urban society to the unpredictable dynamism of urban space; as Schmid (2011: 59) insists, Lefebvre's urban is both a conceptually and a politically open space in which 'urban society is not an already achieved reality, but a potential, an open horizon'. Its virtuality lies in its inability to be completely theoretically specified both because it is never possible to completely specify any conceptual object (totality), and also because the urban is radically open to historical transformation. In this sense, then, the urban and our conceptualisations of it are always emerging.⁷

Conceptualisations of the urban, if they are to respond to the interconnectedness and emergent unpredictability of the diverse forms of cityness in a world of cities need to be formulated as radically revisable: as Simone puts it, 'the urban is always 'slipping away' from us, always also somewhere else than where we expect it to be' (2011: 356). A reformatted comparative imagination thus draws us to proliferate the grounds for comparability across "cities" through: re-specifying the spatiality of the case in order to more adequately theorise cities in the midst of elsewhere; reconsidering the status of the case to be able to explain outcomes in such a way as to ensure that cases are not seen as simply

exemplars of pre-given overarching processes; and insisting that the concepts generated through comparative analysis can be understood as revisable. This reformatted comparativism opens up the possibilities for new geographies of theorising to support a more global urban studies.

NEW GEOGRAPHIES OF THEORIZING

It is the argument of this paper that rather than grounding global urbanism on new geographies of theory (Roy 2009), which suggests a static distribution of ideas across different places which are often lacking in analytical coherence (as with regions or the “global South”) and which potentially render different urban experiences once more incommensurable, we need to look for new geographies of *theorizing* which destabilize the terms of the urban and set in motion conversations towards its ongoing reinvention. This chimes with current theoretical debates within urban studies. Theorists might be drawn to the geographical referent of the ‘south’ to initiate a critique of metropolitan theory but I have proposed in this paper, that we attend much more closely to the caveats which theorists present when they discuss concepts such as the “global South” (see, for example, Comaroff and Comaroff, 2012 and focus on the less prominent geographies of circulation and punctuation which surface in the impossibility of operationalizing or demarcating the tenuous regionalizations of knowledge exemplified by the idea of the global south, or present in regionalized (African, Asian, European, post-Socialist) urbanisms (see Roy, 2011 for a helpful discussion of this). A reformulated comparative imagination for post-structuralist times directs our attention to the multiple geographies and temporalities of the urban, and to the globalized, deterritorialized exteriority shaping specific urban outcomes.

Building more globally relevant understandings of the urban will require conversations about urbanity across the diversity of twenty-first century cities and their multiple histories. In the spirit of the ‘urban now’, such conversations - multiple, innumerable and not easy to anthologise or canonize - will have many starting points and circumscriptions. There could be specific places or practices which originate them, and cities or events which some conversations won’t be able to encompass. Like the cities which urbanists find themselves challenged by, these geographies of theorizing the urban will be hard to trace, sometimes impossible to place, tracking across and beyond the contexts and events on which they hope to have purchase, beholden to a changing constellation of concepts and experiences, crafted from a literal manifold of the urban. This imagination – which fits well with a reformulated comparativism – opens up the potential for a more radically decentred and reflexive subject of theorizing. Losing the territorialized referents of theory inherited, for example, from developmental discourses such as the ‘global south’ does not need to signify an unmooring of the theorist of the urban, or suppose a power-laden and resource-rich planetary view from nowhere. I would hope it might rather provide the opportunity for practices to emerge which rely on much more precisely specified grounds for theorizing (from anywhere) without entrenching difference or legitimating analytical isolation. In seeking to locate the place of critique, theorists could draw on the rich spatiality of the urban to define more productive cartographies from which to launch analyses of the urban, inspired by the assumption of the vital revisability of theorising cities ‘now’ to imagine that their voices can transform theory.

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² The second part of this paragraph draws on Robinson (2013b)

³ I am using the term, "urban outcomes" here to indicate some specific urban space, or process. If the term city is under erasure, for the moment I am hoping this term would refer to specific examples of the wider range of spaces and processes we are interested in.

⁴ This paragraph draws on Robinson (2013b)

⁶ Goonedewarna et al explain very well the different meanings of 'world' intended here; and see also Madden for an insightful review.

⁷ Parts of this paragraph draw on Robinson (2013 a). For Deleuze scholars, however, this more determined sense of the 'possible' is rather different from the 'utterly unpredictable force' of creations which is characteristic of the virtual for Deleuze (Hallward, 2006, p. 38).