

Global Urbanisms and the Nature of Urban Theory
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Urban studies is currently in a phase of rich experimentation, with the proliferation of paradigms and exploration or invention of various methodologies inspired by the diversity and shifting geographies of global urbanisation. In particular, there has been an effort to rethink the EuroAmerican genealogy of urban studies and to consider the relational multiplicities, diverse histories, and dynamic connectivities of global urbanisms. Such a task is especially important at a time when significant urban transformations are underway in the global South. From the remaking of the developmental state at the urban scale to fierce struggles over land, housing, and urban services to ambitious visions of the world-class city, these urban processes cannot be understood as simply a postscript to the urban transformations of the North Atlantic.

This symposium therefore presents contributions from a group of scholars eager to decentre and reframe the widest conceptualisations of the urban in ways which are open to being inspired by the multiplicity of urban outcomes across the globe. Excerpted from a series of paper sessions organized for the 2013 AAG conference by Helga Leitner, Jennifer Robinson, Ananya Roy, and Eric Sheppard, this “Debates and Developments” section in *IJURR* convenes an investigation of global urbanisms as a heterodox but intertwined and exploratory field of inquiry. Each paper here seeks to experiment with new possibilities for a more global urban studies, to work with but also press at the limits of extant urban theorization and method and at the same time to explore the potential to start with some entirely different resources and places.

As we were preparing the papers for publication after the session, we became aware of some emerging concerns with this rich and, we think, highly generative body of work. For reasons which we feel need some exploration (and Roy, this volume,

interrogates some wider intellectual currents which might be at work here), there is some anxiety about this proliferation of new lines of thinking the urban. Specifically, we came across in draft form the recent IJURR essay by Scott and Storper (2014) which seeks to subsume the complex and heterogeneous urbanisms of the global South into an already existing, productive but universalizing, analysis of urbanization. Although we have each in various ways been inspired by the work of these two senior urban scholars, and certainly wish to foster respect for the value of different approaches and concerns in developing theoretical insights, we were surprised to realize that their intervention proposed to replace cities of the global South as little more than variations on a universal form. Since we have each expended a great deal of energy and words in careful argument to support an expansion and transformation of urban studies to be able to speak in the broadest theoretical language from and about the cities and contexts we have studied, often “off the map” of urban theory, we were puzzled by this. Our concern, of course, is and has been that the universal form of analysis of “the nature of cities” which Scott and Storper are proposing is conceptualized on the basis of the urban experience of a handful of iconic cities in the global North.

While the essays for this collection were taking shape, then, each author found the need to arc elements of their argument in response to this intervention, in some way. Thus this collection provides a venue for setting out a number of rigorous and inventive initiatives for a sustained and serious engagement with global urbanisms, especially but not only with the diverse urbanisms of the global South. The papers explore the potential of a series of different starting points to generate the alternative modes of inquiry and new geographies of theory and theorizing which such a project requires. And the papers also rehearse a range of responses to the provocations of Scott and Storper. The burden of the papers, though, is to demonstrate positively the vitality and diversity of emerging ways of thinking the urban.

Global Urbanisms

As urban scholars grapple with the shifting contours of global urbanization, new imaginations of the urban are being charted, in conversation with varied theoretical repertoires. We draw on the term, “urbanisms” here to signify “theory” (always a multiplicity) as a proliferation of imaginative projects inspired by and productive of the great diversity of urban experiences. We enjoy the generativity implied by this term and also the way in which it indexes the unruly materiality of the urban as it presents itself to our imaginative engagements. We want the term “urbanisms” to carry echoes of its use to describe numerous practical and creative interventions and styles producing and performing the urban. It insists that urban theorizing takes place

in the midst of fields of politics, power and practice which delineate the limits and implications of extant theorization but equally draw scholars and practitioners to imagine something new. The authors here outline a series of projects to transform “theory”, which we might craft as revisable interpretations of the urban. They experiment with different tactics to dislodge and hopefully to re/invent the concepts which drive and shape conversations about the nature of the urban. Their initiatives take shape as so many genres of “global urbanisms” – practices, styles, and political commitments as starting points for initiating and diverting conceptualizations.

It is “the city” itself which presses on Simone and Peake – but for them it is the sharply disjunct nature of different experiences of the urban which motivates the multiplication of theoretical registers and practice. Simone’s wider work insistently pulls conceptualisation from the heterogeneity and emergent associations of urban life (Simone, 2011). Here he asks a definitive question for contemporary theorization: “how does one get at a city that is more than its multiple mechanisms, that exceeds any definitive attempt to pin it down, and that yet remains something specific and not a potential-making machine?” (this volume). He traces the particular racialized orderings of urban life in the Americas where the shifting “surface” of blackness, of cities demarcated through the superficiality of black and white, is in tension with diverse, singular experimentations at living the city. Attending to these rich experiences is to refuse the political and theoretical erasure of black collective life which this superficiality of racial orders signifies. Thus, he proposes that “blacks have long ago earned the right to say something about the city no one else can, and if we are really prepared to listen, we could not rest at ease with the theories of the city being put into play today” (this volume).

Peake considers how “women fall away from urban theories”, but also charts, like Simone, the starkly violent nature of urban orders, in what she describes as: “a double indignity; women can and do fall away from sight in the urban from fear, exhaustion, and violence ... while also being the objects of the epistemic violence of their dismissal from urban theory” (this volume). Her challenge is the failure of critical urban theory, in its many current guises, to concern itself with women. Her practice is a situated feminist knowledge alert to the partiality of theorisation, inspired by a “praxis” of the “subjugated” and by everyday social and political struggles. She articulates a post-colonial feminist commitment to unsettling the delimitations of theory aligned differentially across global North and South and instead proposes to think with the connections between places. Her call is for a capacity for “shaping urban theory to travel across difference” (this volume). The hope is to disorient urban theorizing by starting with the everyday struggles of urban dwellers, “the complex scaffolding upon which the vast majority of the world’s women living in cities, the working poor, hinge their hopes and dreams on” (this volume).

Parnell and Pieterse scope as a starting point for new “genres” of global urbanism the multiple but pressing demands of urbanization across Africa. Grounded in the practices of urban transformation in South Africa, and in a commitment to collaborations across other African contexts, their model of “translational research” articulates the need for a significant opening up to different theoretical and methodological practices: “Either Africa must be ignored or the theory, method and data of urban studies must change”. Politicised methodologies foreground collaboration and development practice as ways to engage with the unstable institutional configurations common to cities in this region. But they also point out the difficulties of theorization in the face of weak or missing data. The pre-eminent need therefore is for basic, descriptive research, often in the context of politically engaged research practice. This presents a direct challenge to the nature of wider conversations in urban studies. Thus, in their view, global urban studies needs to “embrace divergent methods, not just concepts and values in order to ensure greater representivity” (this volume).

It is clear that developing new analyses of cities in the spirit of a more global urban studies requires agile and innovative methodological approaches. Robinson, and Leitner and Sheppard propose ‘comparativism’ as a way to redress the uneven and restricted geographical foundations of inherited approaches to urbanism, building theoretical insights from a diversity of specific urban outcomes, processes and contexts. In a classic comparative imagination particular urban or regional contexts might be analytically placed alongside one another to transform existing conceptualisations. These two papers propose some new approaches to comparison which yield tactics for revitalising the theoretical practices and cultures of urban studies. Here then are some practical ways to nudge out the centred and, as Roy provocatively styles it, “ideological” theoretical voice of universalism to make space for a self-reflexive, located subject of urban theory whose starting points and destinations for thinking might incorporate any city, and whose insights will be seen as provisional and revisable.

The promise of a reformatted comparativism requires a move aside from universalizing ambitions and in this spirit authors in this symposium also pose questions of the growing interest in the idea of “Planetary Urbanisation”. Notably, Brenner and Schmid (2014) draw on Lefebvre’s hypothesis of the complete urbanization of society to inspire new vocabularies for conceptualizing the spatial complexities of contemporary urbanisation. This work shares a place alongside post-colonial interventions in urban studies in Scott and Storper’s irritation with new trends in the field (discussed further below). In this case Scott and Storper feel the relatively self-evident territory of the city remains a useful basis for theorization

despite the emergence of complex, extended urban formations in many parts of the world, and the impact of what Brenner and Schmid style as the “operational landscapes” of urbanization processes across much of the planet. The papers which follow here join theorists of Planetary Urbanisation in bringing to interrogation a perplexity of spatialities, where the production of urban spaces through wider connections and flows, as well as the resonant unknowability of the city (for reasons of complexity but also for pragmatic reasons of the lack of recorded observations) draw us to question what and where the urban is. The papers in this symposium share then a sense of the need for innovation in thinking the urban, as Brenner and Schmid put it in their recent paper in this journal, “Inherited analytical vocabularies and cartographic methods do not adequately capture the changing nature of urbanization processes, and their intensely variegated expressions, across the contemporary world.” (2014, p. x).

But Leitner and Sheppard, as well as Peake, raise concerns with (still emerging) conceptualizations of Planetary Urbanisation which seem to have a tendency to universalization - not least as a result of the provocation that the urban might be considered to be world-wide, dispersing the possibility of constitutive outsides capable of disrupting these perhaps too anthropocentric perspectives. Peake (this volume) is especially concerned with the too quick alignment of urbanization with global capitalism, limiting the scope for diverse processes shaping the urban to emerge into theorization. We do see grounds for continuing critical engagement here, though, building on the attention to urbanization as historically produced and differentiated and on the acknowledged need for “contextually specific yet theoretically reflexive investigation” (Brenner and Schmid, 2014, p. x). We think that the papers here contribute significant insights into how that might proceed.

With the call to attend theoretically to the complex spatialities of urbanization, comes the need for extensive methodological innovation. In Robinson’s reformatted approach to comparativism these innovations emerge from precisely the multiplicity of interconnections which tie urban outcomes across the globe together. And the elements of urbanization which might draw our differentiated and comparative imagination might as well be different circulations and flows as specific contexts. Nonetheless, the inheritance of the post-colonial critique is to sustain a lively vigilance for difference – to open possibilities to speak from somewhere else, to think otherwise, and in Jane Jacob’s (2012) formulation, to subtract from dominant narratives by seeking the limits to their force rather than feeding them with (conforming) data. Leitner and Sheppard offer the metaphor of “a shifting ecosystem of critical urban theories” within a comparative imagination working closely with difference, but open to the abstraction and wider conversations across specificity which are necessary for theoretical thought. In this ecosystem, we hope there is scope

for the energetic prosecution of many different empirical and theoretical trajectories starting, as Robinson insists, in fact anywhere. These initiatives would inspire a lively interrogation of conceptualisations of the urban, both putting them to work and testing their limits. The papers collected here therefore chart a series of creative ways beyond the dangers of theoretical impasse signposted by the encounter between ambitious universalisms and the diverse multiplicity that is the urban. We turn then to the thread of engagement with Scott and Storper's provocative essay which runs through this collection.

The Nature of Urban Theory

In their essay, "The Nature of Cities: The Scope and Limits of Urban Theory" Allen Scott and Michael Storper (2014: 1) seek to assert a "theoretical framework" that "identifies the common dimensions of all cities" and that can "distinguish intrinsically urban phenomena from the rest of social reality." Identifying new directions in urban studies, from postcolonial critique to assemblage methodologies, as "cacophony," they dismiss Roy's (2009) call for "new geographies of theory" and Robinson's (2011) call for "the comparative gesture" as "iconoclasm" (Scott and Storper 2014: 4, 12). In their efforts to "reveal a coherent concept of the city," they reduce new theorizations of the urban to "particularism," arguing that this is merely "empirical variation" and "descriptive color" (Scott and Storper 2014: 11, 12). In this collection of essays, we register our disagreements with these claims to universalizing urban theory advanced by Scott and Storper.

While discussed at length in the papers that follow, two key points of engagement and disagreement are worth highlighting in this brief introduction. First, as Roy notes in her essay, Scott and Storper misread historical difference as empirical variation. "Such a misreading," she argues, "pivots on confusion between the global and the universal. While urbanization may indeed take a global form, while capitalism is undeniably global, the universality of such processes is another matter." Thus, in their essay, Leitner and Sheppard urge us to interrogate the universalizing claims of critical Anglophone urban theory, noting that this may very well be "an incipient monism." The issue at hand here is what counts as urban theory and who gets to claim such theory and on what grounds. Scott and Storper (2014, 11-12) acknowledge the "rich ethnographic studies produced by many promoters of postcolonial approaches to urban analysis" but take them to task for being "superficially correct, but radically incomplete." Singling out Simone's (2004) "description of urban conditions," they call for "high levels of theoretical generalization" that can encapsulate "systematic regularities in urban life." But as Roy notes in her essay, what Scott and Storper

advocate is only one of many modes of generalization and thus only one of many ways of producing urban theory. What they label as “ethnography” might very well be read as theory; what they claim as theory might very well be read as *a* theory, one rooted, as Leitner and Sheppard note in their essay, “in the ‘laws’ of geographical economics.” Many of us turn to postcolonial theory or feminist theory because they remind us, as does Peake in her essay, of the limits of totalizing discourse. By rejecting the value of such theoretical perspectives, Scott and Storper fail to recognize that their theoretical formulation, this “‘god trick’ of seeing everything from nowhere” – a phrase we borrow from Peake - is also “radically incomplete.”

Second, following Simone’s essay, we ask what is at stake in such “compulsions for clarity.” Why does it matter that some theoretical viewpoints are dismissed as ethnography while others are performed as god tricks? What are the implications and outcomes of such theoretical enclosures and foreclosures? For us, what is at stake is the renewal and vitality of concepts and methodologies of the urban. Agglomeration economies, given much prominence by Scott and Storper, are indeed important and necessary. But this cannot be the only theorization of the urban, especially at a historical conjuncture when significant urban transformations are underway in the global South. In their essay, Parnell and Pieterse thus conclude that Scott and Storper’s framework is “either dismissive or ignorant of most southern urban realities that are characterised by economic informality, multiplicity, marginality and dispersion, not agglomeration”, and Robinson explores some African starting points which decentre Scott and Storper’s proposal for economic agglomeration and the “urban land nexus” as appropriate theoretical narratives for all cities.

This collection, like the “Genres of Global Urbanisms” sessions we organized at the 2013 AAG conference, is an effort to delineate a heterodox field of inquiry which, in the last decade or so, has been tremendously enriched by lively debate, a proliferation of paradigms, and experimentation with various methodologies. Be it Leitner and Sheppard’s call to provincialize global urbanism or Simone’s blackness as urban method or Parnell and Pieterse’s concept of translational research, the approaches explored here are neither particularistic nor parts of a single approach to urban theory. Instead, each demands attention on its own generalizable terms, and taken together they present a fascinating opportunity for debate, even disagreement. These conversations would be foreclosed by singular and monistic claims to urban theory. As Parnell and Pieterse as well as Peake note, there are important political stakes in this debate. At stake too is the very possibility of a more global urban studies. As Parnell and Pieterse remind us, global urbanism without Africa is an absurdity; it is not possible to make universalizing claims for theoretical approaches to the urban which patently have little or no purchase there. For the kinds of theoretical innovation in urban studies which the authors in this collection are hoping for, we are aware that

significant transformations are needed in the “mode and style of urban theorisation itself ... from an authoritative voice emanating from some putative centre of urban scholarship to a celebration of the conversations opened up amongst the many subjects of urban theoretical endeavour in cities around the world” (Robinson, this volume).

While this collection of essays provides only a glimpse of the many alliances and collaborations through which the field of inquiry that is global urbanisms is being produced and reshaped, we very much hope that the various papers collected here indicate some of the methodological and conceptual initiatives which can support and encourage the renewal of the cultures of theorizing in the field. It is our great hope that out of this collective effort, this field of differentiated and co-existing urban knowledges, we can actively produce theoretical insights that can help to make sense of and be put to work to transform the many different urban contexts that have inspired our work.

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