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Authors Meet Critics

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Articles: Cities in a World of Cities: The Comparative Gesture (2011, IJURR 35.1, 1–23)

Participants

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Balakrishnan, Sai	Manella, Gabriele
Cage, Caroline	Nwachi, Christy
Chatzi, Venetia	Qian, Junxi
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Karaliotas, Lazaros	Uffer, Sabina
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<Torrissi, Giovanni> Welcome to our third appointment with the ‘authors meet critics’ initiative. Today we will discuss ‘Cities in a World of Cities: The Comparative Gesture’ with Professor Jennifer Robinson. Let us wait a few moments before beginning our online meeting.

Welcome to Professor Robinson — I see she just joined us — Professor Robinson, do you receive us?

<Robinson, Jennifer> Hi everyone, I had a small delay getting to the meeting!

<Torrise, Giovanni> No problem. We are right on time.

If you do not mind, I would like to begin immediately sending you some of the questions...

<Robinson, Jennifer> Thanks Giovanni, lets get going then.

<Torrise, Giovanni> There are already some in line, waiting. Thanks a lot.

<Van Gent, Wouter> Hi. I thought it was an interesting paper, but I had a hard time placing it, i.e. who is the intended audience and why did you decide to write this paper (was it from your own experience)? So, could you illuminate some of the background considerations/objectives?

<Robinson, Jennifer> Thanks very much. Yes, the background is trying to find ways to start to build broader understandings of cities across different international contexts, and looking for some specific methodologies or examples of that...

And then being rather disappointed when I read various comparative studies which were so restricted in their geographical scope as to be unhelpful, so I started asking why that was the case, and how we might change the expectations for doing comparative work. Does that help to explain it?

<Van Gent, Wouter> yes, but I was wondering who is your academic 'adversary'? (if that makes sense...)

<Robinson, Jennifer> Interesting way to put it. I like to think we are all on the same side, eager to understand cities better, and it is always, I find, a good idea to write in a way that draws people in to new ideas rather than alienates them by setting things up as adversarial...

I would hope to convince people who think that poorer and wealthier cities can't be compared with one another (or big or small cities, or 'Asian or 'African' cities) that they can find rigorous ways to think across these differences ... to ensure that urban scholars can find a voice for discussing urban experiences which can be more useful as it travels — so I would like more people to be able to join in that venture.

<Van Gent, Wouter> That makes it clear, thanks

<Robinson, Jennifer> Shall we take the next question, Giovanni?

<Torrise, Giovanni> Very well. Thanks also from my part.

Yes, now we have a question about the epistemological status of urban planning by Sai Balakrishnan.

<Balakrishnan, Sai> Dear Professor Robinson, thanks for a great paper. Each of the methods you outlined seems to reflect a disciplinary bias. The individualizing/detailed case study is preferred among anthropologists. The variation-finding method is reflective of a political science bias in controlling national political and economic variables. The encompassing method is commonly used in geography, when working with the assumption of overarching structures. Urban planning, as a discipline, is young, and I think it lacks its own paradigms and methods. This is evident from the fact that most of our leading urban theorists (yourself, Susan Fainstein, Diane Davis, Neil Brenner) are from fields other than urban planning. For doctoral students like myself, who are from the discipline of urban planning, is it better to position ourselves within another discipline and then critique the methods of that discipline as applied to urban studies, or are there intrinsic 'urban planning' methods for the study of cities?

<Robinson, Jennifer> Another great question!

I think planning theory might have more of a specific set of links with the transfer of urban knowledge historically, in terms of its engagements with practice... So I wonder if there is a greater openness to thinking about the ways in which ideas are moved and changed across different contexts — quite a lot of the earlier work on urban policy mobilities has come from planning experiences. So this might point us to some issues about circulations as modes of comparison, but also to questions of repetition and mimicry...

My sense is that the case study method is terribly important for planning theory, exploring the detailed politics of planning decisions. Might it be worth exploring that? But I think you ask a good question, which would be worth exploring further.

In terms of illuminating and learning from the different disciplinary histories of comparative thinking, did you have any thoughts for us on that?

<Balakrishnan, Sai> I'm working with Professor Fainstein (a political scientist) for my dissertation, and am using the comparative variation method... but am very interested in what the methods are that 'urban planners' use. I have been thinking about it, but can't find too many examples.

<Torrise, Giovanni> Professor Robinson, would you like to further reply on that?

<Robinson, Jennifer> Well, good luck with that, I was thinking of Peter Newman and Andy Thornley's text on *Planning World Cities* (2005) in relation to case study methods, but also plenty of other work in that vein. We look forward to your thoughts on that ...If you're interested in what planners do — as opposed to planning theorists — you would of course also need to start thinking about issues of best practice, global benchmarking, etc.

<Torrise, Giovanni> Very well, let us continue with a question by Sabina Uffer. Bridging

abstract and concrete is always a complex matter.

<Uffer, Sabina> Hi Jennifer. Thank you for this very interesting paper. In the paper you argue for causality and a more creative approach to comparison. You also mention the challenge between abstraction and the concrete/complex. In housing research, there has been an attempt to use a critical realist approach for comparison. I was wondering how far such an approach was in your mind when writing the article and what you think of it as a way to bridge the gap between the abstract and the concrete.

<Robinson, Jennifer> Hi Sabina. I guess I would not personally be very drawn to the realist approach in terms of making a clear distinction between abstract and concrete. I think I would rather turn to more contextual explanations, which see a range of different processes coming together to shape specific outcomes. I am not sure why one would privilege some as abstract or concrete, except in so far as they are signs of a theoretical privileging, which I would prefer not to determine in advance.

But the core problematic of building comparative explanations does lie in understanding how different places are made different, or might seem to be entirely similar.

So you put your finger on the core dilemma of a comparative imagination: finding the things which are more widely relevant to many cities, and things that seem to be distinctive and specific, but in a post-structuralist theoretical framework there is no easy way to separate these things out. The one point I would make is that in a realist framework, the 'abstract' is not at all to be confused with the general, nor the concrete with the specific... so in that sense it almost sits at a different level of theoretical explanation.

Did you want to take that further?

<Uffer, Sabina> No, that was a good answer. Thanks.

<Torrise, Giovanni> Christy Nwachi has a suggestion:

<Nwachi, Christy> I believe there are forms of relatedness in all the seminars of this program. In the last seminar, I presented a question that has been giving me a hard time in relation to undeveloped cities. It could not be resolved. As a follow-up, it is indeed very clear that there is a great chasm between cities in the northern hemisphere and those in the south. To establish common grounds for comparison between this divide is indeed a bold step and a great challenge. A small suggestion. Global comparativism could be possible if factors of comparison are dimensioned — historical, social, economic, etc. For the historical dimension, global comparison would be possible when the antecedents of one city are used in comparing the growth of another. However, for other dimensions, comparative studies of cities of the same rank would be necessary so as to reduce the level of bias in the analysis. Urban theories that would eliminate biases, if that is possible, is what is being advocated for.

<Robinson, Jennifer> Thanks for the comment, quite a few scholars I have spoken with

have this set of questions in response to my argument here. There are a couple of different points you raise, so I'll try to deal with them one at a time...

Firstly, on what basis might we compare urban processes? The main point I try to make is that we should not aim to compare cities as such, i.e. at the city scale. So, while there is a great diversity of urban processes to consider across different cities, it is not reasonable to base our judgments about what to compare or how to do it on the aggregate dimensions of the city. And this is especially important in eras of great connectedness and circulation amongst cities, for even the most poor and the wealthiest, or most highly ranked cities, share many common urban processes.

It strikes me that we can build comparability across these common processes as well, e.g. participatory democracy, forms of gentrification, informal urban politics... But then I think there are important points to consider in relation to aspects of urban processes being perhaps very different from place to place, and so there may well be experiences or processes of the city that are disjunctive — My colleague on the IJURR board, Maliq Simone has indeed challenged me that there are certainly aspects of urbanism in some cities which have been through deep economic and institutional crises which need to be taken seriously as different from some others.

And then the question of method is raised by your concern with the idea of eliminating 'bias' and I suppose I would encourage you to wonder about whether this is possible, and what an approach to methods for understanding cities might be that aims to move beyond quasi-scientific analyses.

Would you like to offer us your thoughts, Christy?

<Nwachi, Christy> The main challenge is the elimination of the bias because cities have different growth rates.

<Robinson, Jennifer> I would say that the question of bias must depend on your question...?

So if you are wondering about processes of urbanization, then it may well be sensible to compare cities with similar rates of urbanization... But they may well be cities from very different regions, or of different sizes, so even that would depend on the question you have to ask, for instance if it is about regimes of managing growth, there may be different useful comparators.

Good to think hard about this issue I would say.

<Torrise, Giovanni> Let's give the floor to Carolina Cage:

<Cage, Carolina> I was interested in your discussion of units of analysis, and the idea of 'closeness' in terms of power rather than location. In my research I would say that I am exploring an urban process (urban poor involvement in decision-making). Therefore, in terms of deciding on comparisons, I have looked at similar processes happening in other countries (taking into account their specific context at the same time) which are therefore 'closer' in terms of power dynamics, rather than geographically. I find the concept of similarity (or difference) in terms of power relevant, more so than, as you say, comparing

specific units within a city. As the world becomes ever more connected do you see this type of comparison becoming increasingly important, rather than geographically related comparisons?

<Robinson, Jennifer> Yes, that is very interesting. The idea of closeness here is potentially metaphorical, i.e. cases are close in their similarities in relation to a specific process. But also substantively closer in that these processes influence one another in a variety of different ways.

For me this is a question I am currently puzzling over, how can we constitute cases for comparison, and how might we understand the relevant processes of causality in a more topological vein — which is where the metaphor/process of closeness comes from. And here I am drawing on John Allen's ideas of topological space (2009), which is very provocative in terms of thinking about how near and far are composed, and thus potentially in terms of understanding what makes places or processes comparable.

More practically, I sense that you are interested in the politics and specific power relationships associated with urban processes as good grounds for comparison... And linked to Christy's question, then, we can already see some examples of such comparative work, for example, participatory budgeting in many different contexts, with some interesting work in IJURR a couple of years ago by Sintomer *et al.* (2008) on the transfer of PB to Europe.

<Torrise, Giovanni> Manoj Teotia has accustomed us to very long and interesting questions. This time too:

< Teotia, Manoj K. > Hi Professor Robinson... I congratulate you for a highly informative article on the crucial issue of the comparative method in urban context. No doubt that the analytical framework of the issue under consideration is interesting. There seem to be fragmented knowledge islands in the field of comparative urban research, which seem to focus mainly on small urban systems in the West/North, while there is no — or negligible — research on huge Eastern/Southern urban systems — like the Chinese urban system (the largest urban system in the world) and Indian urban system (the second largest urban system in the world) — either within these two countries (between cities) or between the cities of these two countries, or no research on comparison of these two urban systems with that of systems in Western countries or with that of other Asian countries. I feel that Western scholars using comparative methods should also make a gesture, and reorient their studies towards these two largest urban systems of the world and other urban areas in Asia and Africa, etc. I find that there is negligible, or almost a complete absence of, 'comparative research' in the Indian urban context. You referred to Janet Abu-Lughod in the concluding part of your article, who is in favor of 'universalizing statistical comparative research' and she did comparative analyses of urban processes in two regions — North Africa and the US. Like you I am also worried about how comparative urban research can be scaled up? In addition how it could be reoriented towards the South and also comparisons between North-South, South-East, South-South, East-West and so on.

<Robinson, Jennifer> I agree with you entirely, and that is very much the reason why I have set out to explore and re-ground comparative methods.

There are certainly grounds for thinking comparatively across urban processes in countries like China and India. One example I am interested in is internationalizing the analytical foundations of regime theory (which has been very US focused) — looking, for example, at the incentive structures of different actors in the urban development process and how these enable, or not, different kinds of alliances for certain growth paths at the city scale.

So in the US you have a strongly property based taxation system, a strong interest in land development — as is also the case in South Africa, where I do most of my work... And I understand that in China one of the main drivers of urban development there has been the possibility to promote land development at the metro or city scale, with income from land leasing, etc., going to local governments. Thus, a property development incentive structures the 'urban regimes' there too...

Other ways in which different urban experiences like those in China and India should influence a wider urban studies, is to be launching points for theorizations or narrativizations of urban experiences, which then scholars elsewhere might be able to learn from. So I am most interested in how ideas about 'informality' which have been developed very much in an African and Indian context, can be put to work elsewhere; be made to travel, to help us think comparatively...

Which allows me to make the point I feel most strongly about, which is that 'comparative urbanism' is as much a mode of thinking across different cities, and learning from different scholarships, as it is about composing new methods for purposeful original comparative work. That is too easily entrained into reinforcing the agendas of those in institutions which are well resourced for lots of foreign research.

< Teotia, Manoj K. > Thanks a lot. Another point ... I also understand that there are analytical constraints in comparative urban research. The Context Matters (Yuri). The similarities and differences in cities are further constrained by certain context specificities. What prescriptions do you suggest while doing comparative urban research?

<Robinson, Jennifer> Would you like to offer us some ideas about how places like China and India might enter into wider comparative work?

< Teotia, Manoj K. > Yes. There might be governance parameters ... environmental dimensions ... urban management practices and so on...

<Robinson, Jennifer> You make another good point, which is that we can isolate specific instances or processes which draw us to think comparatively across different cities — say, a gated community...

But then the context in which that is developed, relations of governance and wider urban citizenship, would be very divergent, potentially. Perhaps an elite informality driving the development in one place, perhaps a flight from the city by the middle classes in another, while elsewhere a concern with security may ironically indicate a very safe society (say,

India, South Africa, UK...).

For me the value of comparative thinking is to encourage us to ask questions about the understandings we have of different urban contexts and processes. So, we find the 'most different' comparative imagination can work to make things we are familiar with strange, and thus help us to understand better. For example, if we see that in the UK people can live in gated communities and be easily part of the city both practically and as a citizen, it might help us to wonder whether even in places with high crime rates, self-seclusion like this does not necessarily mean non-participation, or an absence of feelings and practices of belonging.

So, bouncing differences off against one another, thinking speculatively, exploring quite different contexts, I think is a really productive way forward...

Any thoughts from others on that?

<Torrise, Giovanni> We have still a lot of questions, maybe it would be better to proceed with that.

<Robinson, Jennifer> ok

<Torrise, Giovanni> Thus, I pass directly to the next one by Nora Libertun.

<Libertun de Duren, Nora> Thank you for a very interesting paper. I think that the question of the *audience* is quite relevant. One of the points that I appreciate in your paper is the difference in terms of relevance of comparing cities between academics and policymakers. I would love to hear more about that point. I think that the appreciation is based on the different goals of the two ... but then again the two of them respond to different but equally strict definitions of 'applicability'. Can you please articulate more this comparison, as you present it in your paper? Thanks!

<Robinson, Jennifer> Thanks, yes, I started off with a sense that policymakers compare rather promiscuously, i.e. anything with anything else. And that as scholars, we might be encouraged by their example, but then seek to compose more careful and rigorous comparisons — the paradox of the infinite comparability of policymakers' imaginations and the really very restricted comparability within academic writing was really the puzzle which I began with... And in some ways now I think that we could to some extent take that promiscuity of the policymakers as a productive starting point for more experimental comparisons, to help us break free from the past restrictions...

But then I also think we need to recompose the grounds for rigour so that we can offer good scholarly reasons for comparing. And these would have to be very different from the dynamics of policymakers, who draw on ideas from different places as part of wider circulations of policy ideas which are shot through with complex power relations, all sorts of technologies which make things useable in different contexts from their origin... like making a black box, cutting out information that detracts from the value of the policy idea, drawing on the image and influence of a place to make a policy idea travel and seem comparable.

So I wonder if these deeply political dynamics of what makes policy ideas comparable might make us ask some questions about the processes and resources we as scholars use to make ideas and processes comparable ... and so we get back to the real limits of the idea that categories of cities, or cities at supposedly similar levels, are comparable. This sounds as problematic a grounds for comparison as the policymakers' reasons...

<Libertun de Duren, Nora> What I found based on my own experience at the NYC gov, is that policymakers are as strict as academics. They just use different variables.

They respond to a different objective when comparing cities, not be confused with politicians making big statements... and I don't think the procedure you describe, 'the black box' exists as such.

<Robinson, Jennifer> Yes, I agree with your comments on policymakers, exactly, and very often there are careful and well thought through comparisons.

So in my own work on urban policy mobility in relation to South Africa, I would certainly sense that policymakers draw careful and carefully thought-out comparisons ... but differently from scholars. And certainly there would be different ways in which that is done by different people, plus also the ways in which policy ideas are put into motion by powerful agencies needs careful thought ...

By the black box I would mean, for example, the attempt to put the city strategy process into a formal technocratic model, or to tell certain sanitized stories of places... But you are right that these don't travel alone, and in practice seldom function in that way... but does the technology of paring something down, making it a moveable thing, is that what lets things move easily?

It sounds like we have more thinking to do here, thanks! Great comments.

<Torrise, Giovanni> More questions about 'comparison' from Jun Wang.

<Wang, Jun> This paper is very inspiring, especially the part on units of comparison.

This reminds me of the concept of 'global assemblage' proposed by Stephen Collier and Aihwa Ong. The concept refers to an unstable constellation shaped by interacting global forms and situated political regimes. Although the concept rejects hegemonic order, it still has the 'whole' and the 'part'. In your proposed comparative research that examines the flows, connections and circulations among cities, is there a mobile global norm that travels across different territories? Or are all cities 'parts'? Thus my concern is, would abstract theorizing need to be very abstract or even vague, to accommodate various mutations?

<Robinson, Jennifer> Jun, I am not quite sure I got the last part of your question about abstraction...

but this is a useful issue to raise. The thing I find challenging about the assemblage's focus on the parts is that we don't often get to the 'urban' as such in the sense that we might have a sense of 'context' or a 'territory' of governance, or a sense of identity and

belonging... so a wide range of spatialities of the urban are simply abandoned. And then we also find little to draw a link between the assemblage of parts and the prosecution of the power relationships, which any urbanist would be very aware of. So more work here... but again I am not sure it would take the form of abstract/concrete.

<**Torrisi, Giovanni**> Stuart Schrader:

<**Schrader, Stuart**> I greatly appreciate the idea that 'The connection becomes the case'. But I wonder if you see this as a historically new basis for comparison related to neoliberalization/state rescaling/'planetary urbanization'/etc., or if this mode of identifying units of comparison represents methodology catching up with something that has been 'actually existing' for a long time. If the latter, how long? The reason I ask relates to changes in the territoriality of the city in recent decades. Is 'the city' no longer the useful or adequate unit of comparison and analysis because the historical city of long-used ideal-types in social science is itself disappearing as processes like those I just listed above erode the distinctions on the ground between city and not-city? Do we need an entirely new vocabulary that doesn't use 'city' as if it meant something eternal across time and space in order to grasp the changing grounds of comparison?

<**Robinson, Jennifer**> Stuart, I like the question which wonders about whether connectivity as a grounds for comparison is a new phenomenon and therefore this direction is reflecting historical changes...

I would just reflect a little on the persistence of connections in the very long history of urban settlements — it is perhaps the case that connections are what defines and makes possible the very idea of the city. In which case we have much catching up to do with thinking comparatively across all those highly interconnected urban experiences, e.g. of colonialism, neo-imperialism, etc. On the question as to whether to abandon the idea of the city... this is a perennial issue for urbanists, and one which mostly we sidestep in favour of a pragmatic appreciation of the complex spatiality and imprecise extent of cities.

<**Torrisi, Giovanni**> All of this is very interesting. It also allows us to read the article again with new eyes. Lazaros Karaliotas:

<**Karaliotas, Lazaros**> You write: 'there are many urban processes for which neither formal administrative boundaries nor the functional regions of cities would be the relevant scale for comparison. Instead, processes that exceed a city's physical extent — circulations and flows — as well as phenomena that exist and operate at a smaller scale than the city should be the relevant units for comparison' (p. 14). In an effort to move beyond economic and/or political reductionism I was wondering if the recent discussion within geography concerning policy mobility/circulation from 'model cities' in terms of creativity, sustainability, etc., and the travelling elite of technocrats who promote and implement such policies could add insights in an effort to study cities in a comparative context?

<Robinson, Jennifer> Certainly the issue of policy mobilities is one I am very interested in. There is much interesting work to be done on the different circuits of urban policy, e.g. consultants, international agencies, cities themselves launching international profiles, more informal learning... Certainly we can compare these, which Peck and Theodore are doing in interesting ways with various policy circuits. It also asks us to think about the processes of making up city policies, and to think comparatively perhaps about the politics and dynamics of this in different places, so it doesn't necessarily evacuate the need to think about places.

However, studying policy mobility doesn't necessarily address the reductionism problem, as it's quite possible to think that policy circuits are reproducing neoliberalism. It's up to us how we study and think about them, but I think that looking at them in detail will head us towards more open-ended outcomes in different contexts — power relations again, and agile policymakers, as with the NYC, example earlier.

<Karaliotas, Lazaros> Thank you for your comments.

<Lombard, Melanie> Thanks for a very stimulating paper. I'm interested in the power dimension of comparative urbanism, particularly in a postcolonial context, relating to your concluding cautionary note about comparativism's 'co-emergence with colonial practices of knowledge' (p. 19). When making comparisons between places which have been linked by past (or current) uneven power relations (such as cities in Spain and Latin America, or Europe and Africa), how do researchers avoid reproducing these?

<Robinson, Jennifer> Yes, this has bothered me too. So I spent some time last year reading about this, and feel that the concerns with the colonial origins of comparison are rather specific, linked to a moment in the history of anthropology when the ideas of a 'family of man' placed comparison in the service of certain colonial ideas. But more broadly, comparisons undertaken by colonial powers or in colonial times can look rather different from that. One of the colonial inheritances, though, is to place cities in different time zones, e.g. lagging behind, or perhaps incomparable (!) or set them up as copies of others... so while the methods may not necessarily be colonial, there are colonial imaginaries we live with which can certainly limit how we think about cities comparatively.

I wrote up a short paper on that if you would like to get in touch I can send it on... (see Robinson, 2011).

<Lombard, Melanie> Thanks, that would be great

<Torrise, Giovanni> Please, send it to me so that I can forward it to all the participants. A question from Junxi Qian.

<Qian, Junxi> Dear professor Robinson, I really appreciate this paper, and I do think it is of pivotal importance to reconsider different experiences across various urban contexts stemming from multiple causal relations. But between the local context and the global

connection, both of which you have accented, how can we reach an analytically solid balance between the local trajectories and the global connections (although this dichotomy itself is open to question!)? I like your book *Ordinary Cities* tremendously, but when I read your discussion about the imagination of modernity in Kuala Lumpur, I cannot really convince myself with your idea that the application of localized cultural elements can be used as evidence of a local version of modernity. As we know in the contemporary framing of a postmodern aesthetic, the 'local' is becoming trendy in a 'global' circulation of knowledge and ideas. The 'local' is a new cultural symbol of a globalized idea of modernity and aesthetics. Isn't it possible that Kuala Lumpur is another example of using localized simulacra in a global circulation of hegemonic knowledge?

<Robinson, Jennifer>

That's an interesting question, on KL... I shall be very interested to see how you have explored that. My view is that all these things are possible. Local practices are set into circulation in the service of global ambitions, or wider processes and imaginations are made local in certain mimetic ways, but I suppose I have been impressed with the ways in which the same can be made different in so many ways — through material hybridization as well as reimagining something that seems otherwise identical.

I would say we need to be open to the empirical dynamics which make specific outcomes composed from the near and far, rather than to prejudge the power relations associated with these?

<Torrisi, Giovanni> We are nearing the end of our time together. There are still some questions in the list.

<Lombard, Melanie> I'm also very interested in exploring processes as an alternative unit of comparison to cities, and in particular, the notion of 'seductions of ideas' circulating among policy arenas and practitioners. In a previous meeting we had a great conversation with Jamie Peck on his critique of Richard Florida's 'creative cities' idea, and how this has had immense success in terms of circulation. Can you say a bit more about how you imagine these discursive circulations — did you have a particular example in mind, and how would you go about mapping them?

<Robinson, Jennifer> I'll try to be brief, but am delighted to hear others' comments and discussion.

I am interested in the diversity of ways in which discourses are composed and circulate, but for me the interesting part is why and how they matter. I would probably be tempted to a model of more slow policy transfer, looking out from any given city where I am aware that policy change is very hard won.

And also, going back to the previous question, the ways in which something that seems entirely the same can mean something completely different in different contexts. I like the idea of seductions, and taking seriously how that might work as a spatiality of policy transfer — less a trajectory or circuit and more a topological spatiality...

<Torrisi, Giovanni> Thanks. If any of you would like to interact, please let me know in private.

I am sending the next question.

<Anirban, Adhya> I found your two specific issues of 'unit of comparison' and 'the geographies of urban theory' very insightful in terms of thinking about the methodology and research design of comparative research. The Space Syntax research (coming out of the UCL Space Syntax Lab — Bill Hillier, Julienne Hanson and others) could be seen as an interesting example of this model. In many cases, they are investigating spatial configuration, across diverse cities across the globe, with 'space' as the unit of analysis and with the premise that cities have a specific pattern of spatial configuration across history and geography. (a) Would you consider this body of research to be working with some of the specific tools you discuss in your paper? (b) In my own research on comparative study of college towns from the United States, Europe and India I intend to use a comparative framework with spatial configuration between the campus and central business district as the unit of comparison. There are some universal spatial patterns across the cases, with distinct narratives of culture and society, presenting variations. Do you find that for global comparative studies, identifying appropriate variables becomes critical and often complex?

<Robinson, Jennifer> This is a very interesting question for me as it raises the issue of more quantitative approaches to comparative methods, which would have different ways of configuring and accounting for context, and 'universal' processes... And also interesting directions to take us in, in terms of new mathematical models of causality — i.e. as opposed to the rather tired ideas of unidirectional influences of specific variables.

For me the difficulty of linking into this syntax approach is more to do with the delinking of space from the social and material processes shaping the patterns — on the other hand it can illuminate processes which are otherwise hard to see. So, I guess this is an interesting potential area for thinking through — thank you.

<Labbé, Danielle> My question relates to the pragmatics of research. Your paper suggests that high-quality comparative research requires a good knowledge of the cities taken into consideration (their histories, cultures, etc.). From my own experience, researching on Hanoi (Vietnam), I found that getting 'intimate' with a city means a long personal investment (a decade in my case). It calls for the kind of investment that anthropologists/area studies specialists make (learning the language, etc.). My question is quite down to earth but don't you think that the depth required in your proposed approach plays against the scope (multi-city) implied in the comparative gesture? Would you argue for collaborative work as one way to get around this problem? Any other thoughts on how to make the kind of multi-site comparative work you propose happen?

<Robinson, Jennifer> Another interesting question! Certainly, one can't expect that there will always be a need for detailed intimate knowledge of cities to do research but on the other hand, I am very concerned about the geopolitics of knowledge production in which

some scholars are well resourced to do 'international' research while others build excellent long-term analyses of cities, with little recognition or opportunity to publish into these circuits of academic knowledge. So, yes, I would argue strongly for good long-term relationships with specific cities, linked to strong support for scholars and attention to scholarship there, and then for more collaborative working to build useful empirical comparisons. And mostly I would argue strongly for taking seriously the scholarship on and from other contexts as we build understandings of the cities we work on.

But then there is that question of quantitative work, and following circuits of policy, multi-sited ethnography... So again, the city may not be the relevant scale or spatiality for considering questions of research embeddedness. My main concern is that we don't re-entrench the power relations of scholarship which have meant only certain cities enter into theoretical narratives, and only certain voices get to travel to help us understand cities. How can we do this better?

<**Torrisi, Giovanni**> 'Limitations and errors'. A question from Nathaniel Lewis.

<**Lewis, Nathaniel**> Thanks Professor Robinson, this was a really thorough and thought-provoking article — especially for someone who has worked mostly in a North American context and is looking for ways to extend his work in the future! I was excited by all of the research possibilities that it opened up but was also hoping that you could expand on some of the limitations at the end — are there particular methodological errors that need to be avoided (e.g. treating cities as faceless polygons or 'containers' of variables) or an example in your mind of a comparison that just doesn't 'work' (or hasn't 'worked')?

<**Robinson, Jennifer**> I am pleased you enjoyed the paper... I guess the question as to what comparison works for is the important one for me. There have been many rigorous and careful comparisons, which illuminate much, but which then keep us stuck in the paradox of a parochial but travelling urban theory which does not work well across different contexts. For me the question you ask is a crucial one for recomposing the method of comparisons, as the imagination of 'variables' and comparing 'places' does not fit very well with contemporary understandings of explanation, so I would be delighted to hear more from people who are puzzling over this too!

<**Torrisi, Giovanni**> In almost every question there is much appreciation for the article. We have the last 5 minutes, so I will send Burak Kose questions.

<**Kose, Burak**> Thank you very much for the great article. I am wondering about how the objects of analysis or the units of observation could be delineated in the context of a postcolonial comparative urbanism so as to make a comparative research possible between wealthier and poorer cities. More specifically, I would kindly ask you to elaborate on the idea you support in the article that 'the most abstract concepts offer an opportunity to incorporate the widest range of cities within comparative reflection. Abstract concepts are also the level at which urban theory is most open to a creative generation of concepts that might help us look differently at cities and their problems'

(p.17)? I am currently working on a research project on urban and suburban governance in South Asia and I am having a hard time with the concept of governance itself. I am questioning whether the concept of governance is a term that can be stripped of power relations in and through which it has traveled to the South Asian context (I am thinking about the notion of 'good governance' as it is promoted by international donor agencies) and used as an abstract concept to translate different experiences of urban politics from different parts of the world. I am wondering what you would say about how to save these concepts from the power relations in which they are embedded and how to turn them into abstract concepts that will allow a postcolonial comparative urbanism.

<Robinson, Jennifer> Fantastic question! Perhaps the ways in which the concept is embedded in power relations is precisely a good starting point?

I think the things that governance flags as it travels through these developmental policy circuits is the much wider range of processes and actors involved in urban governance than we see in the US cases of regime theory. Lisa Weinstein's (2008) article on Mumbai in *IJURR*, concerned with informal and 'mafia' actors in urban development in Mumbai, brings this out. So the power relations of the policy baggage carried by governance, and the array of actors referenced by the ambition to create 'good' governance, all ask us, I think, to consider the concept at its most abstract, and to question the ways in which urban 'theory' to date has rested on a very particular interpretation of this. It's these kinds of travels which upend and destabilize how we conceptualize and interpret the urban. Might we find that informal governance is really crucial everywhere? London, for example, entirely relies on informal negotiations for the Mayor to set a city-wide strategy — see the paper by Ian Gordon (2004).

<Torrise, Giovanni> We are out of time, but I think we can send these last two questions by María José Zapata and Christopher Herring.

<Zapata, María José> How would/does Actor Network Theory's sociology of translation with the principle of a flat ontology fit with your proposal for a revitalized and experimental international comparativism in urban studies? In my research I explore how ideas of city management and sustainable urban development travel from North-South, South-South ... and I found the related concept of action-net (Czarniawska, 2002) and the travel metaphor (how ideas, objects and practices travel) very useful 'to follow' the circulation of ideas, practices or technologies from one place and time to the city. Do you see any contribution by bringing these theoretical stances together with the post-colonial approach to urban studies? Sorry for the vague formulation of my question...

<Robinson, Jennifer> Thanks María José, I think your work sounds excellent, and the ANT approach certainly gives one so much to work with in terms of understanding policy circulations, and how different places are 'made comparable' or brought within the same circuits and thus would benefit from being thought together. The issues I raise in relation to this approach are about the moment of localization or composition, i.e. specific outcomes — ANT is less useful, I find, to specify the located urban politics of this. And

also, we are trapped in a very physical world with ANT, quite often, in which we can follow specific things, but we may not capture how things arrive somewhere, i.e. less as a book posted, or another person bumped into, but perhaps more as an idea that captures the imagination, or a place that shines as an example. Would we need some different spatial vocabularies for these dynamics?

<**Christopher, Herring**> You extol McMichael's approach of incorporated comparison, but it is hard for me to think of solid examples of research that take this explanatory path. Do you have any particular comparative studies that exemplify this approach?'

<**Robinson, Jennifer**> I am not entirely aware of specific studies that take this approach, but I would say the careful and sophisticated way in which Brenner *et al.* manage the interactions between local hybridizations and the systemic innovations of neoliberalisms might offer a good example of that.

I have so enjoyed the opportunity to think through your questions, and appreciate so much you taking the time to engage with the paper. Do get in touch if you want to take things further. All the best, Jenny

<**Torrisi, Giovanni**> Thanks a lot to Professor Robinson. I really appreciated both the questions and the answers today. I will see you all online for the next meeting with Professor Colin McFarlane (Durham University, UK), discussing: 'The Comparative City: Knowledge, Learning, Urbanism'.

<**Kazepov Yuri**> I would like to thank Professor Robinson very much for her insightful answers. I think they added much to her important article. Thanks also to you for the very good questions. The exchanges we have are really providing 'food for — further — thought'.

Let's meet online on the 29th of June. All the best to all.

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