The Southern Turn in Urban Studies: A Literature Review

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Introduction

In their widely cited essay, Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nutall argue that the academic representations of Africa construct it as a residual entity, "the study of which does not contribute anything to the knowledge of the world or of the human condition in general" (2004). They suggest two strategies to allay this scholarly malaise: deprovincializing Africa by studying its connections with other places, and taking seriously the fact that Africa like other places is a space of flows and flux. For these strategies to work new sites and archives need to be found that "defamiliarize commonsense readings of Africa". Perhaps one way to heed their call is to consider the possibility that the malaise is not unique to the study of Africa alone, and the study of at least some other places are also relegated to the confines of the particular, the unique, and the residual-- that these other places are also known through certain familiar narratives. Taking my cue from Ananya Roy's discussion of the worlding of the Indian city through the trope of 'megacity' (Roy, 2011), in this paper I explore the discourse around the study of the cities of the Global South among urbanists.

Carried out in the pages of the *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* and other journals and edited volumes, this sprawling multidisciplinary scholarly conversation identifies and critiques the various parochialisms of urban scholarship, and suggests some new research agendas for the field. Through a survey of this literature, I argue that urban scholarship has been parochial to its traditional disciplinary home of Western Europe and the United States. In its fairly recent 'Southern

turn,' urban theory must attempt to be comparative, collaborative, and self-reflexive. And, it must produce historically informed and ethnographically rich studies of everyday life in the cities of the Global South.

Urban Studies and the World: A Brief Historiography

In her brief intellectual history of studying cities in a global context, Diane Davis (2005) writes that until the 1950s, urbanists studied American cities without reference to their global context. This was due largely to the disciplinary dominance of Urban Sociology with its Durkheimian preoccupation with culture. This was to change in the 1950s and 1960s when US urbanists started to study third world cities in the context of the Cold War, and, more so as Marxist critiques started making an impact on the field in the 1970s and 1980s. Methodologically, the anthropologically savvy urban studies of 'comparative urbanization' placed in the third world cities gave way to more macro-sociological studies of structural dynamics, which facilitated a shift toward studying cities in a global context.

Although this 'global turn' was largely economistic and studied third world cities through the dependency paradigm, some works built on studies of imperialism and global capitalism. Concepts such as primacy, internal colonialism, and uneven development entered the fray. The reigning paradigm, however, was the world-system theory. The world system, the theory held, placed third-world cities in a position of dependence, and determined their urbanization paths. Local, regional, and national contexts (to say nothing of the culture and everyday life in these cities) exerted no influence of consequence.

By now, Davis writes, American urban sociology itself was on a steady decline and had become somewhat marginalized. This, of course, did not help Urban Studies of

the Third World, already marginal because of "the general ethnocentrism of American academia" (Davis, 2005, p. 98). The dire situation for Urban Sociology improved in the 1990s, by the increasing awareness of globalization and neoliberalism. However, the study of cities *in* a global context became, to a large extent, the study of 'global cities,' many of which were right here in the backyard of the American Academy. The methodologies preferred by the early wave of this scholarship was quantitative rather than ethnographic— a shift that Saskia Sassen (see below) among others have criticized, and, indeed a growing body of historical, ethnographic, and sociological work has been assembled since.

All in all, the frameworks that came out of the World Systems theory and Marxian story of global capitalism— core-periphery, global hierarchy, world-cities and global cities, urban imaginaries, developmentalism, dependency theory— have paradoxically both broadened urban studies beyond Western cities and limited the ways in which non-Western cities are read. For instance, can the story of capitalism be told without reference to colonialism? Anthony King's 1989 article draws attention to the fact that most of what are now considered global cities were once colonial metropolises and that this is not an accident. Colonialism, he argues, was central to the formation of the capitalist world economy, and if global cities of today are considered nodes of this economy then it is all the more important to understand these cities with reference to their colonial past. King points out that while there has been, at least since the 1950s, scholarship on the cities in the colonial periphery that references colonialism and 'dependency', there existed, at least at the time that he wrote this article, a lacuna in the study of Western metropolises with reference to colonialism and how that colonial

relationship had shaped these cities at the 'center'. But what kind of reference is to be made?

Swati Chattpadhyay argues that there are two kinds of stories to be told about capital's global reach (2012). The first, as narrated by the "liberal histories of the British Empire," only considers colonialism as an instrumental arm of capitalism, extending the metropolitan culture of the European bourgeois culture and state. In this narrative, colonial cities emerge as being imperfect copies, and peripheral even if ensnared in capitalist accumulation centered in Europe. From this historicist understanding, the colonies are "embryonic stages of fully fledged capitalist development," and, therefore, the "third-world cities are 'premature'" (p. 77). In this story, the present day third-world cities are what the first-world cities were a couple of centuries ago. Through the traces of its past, the advanced world already contains and knows the present of the third-world, and so "third-world urbanism has nothing original to contribute to urban theory per se. It is theoretically redundant" (p. 77). This also means that third-world problems can be defined and solved based on what is already known in and through the advanced world's own trajectory. This story, she suggests, animates developmentalist thinking.

The other story of global capitalism—one that informed the colonial urban policy—considers the colonial and ex-colonial world as constitutively different and deficient because the conditions for fully-fledged capitalist urbanism did not and will not exist there. This colonialist view, Chattopadhyay writes, "at least has the advantage of stating explicitly that liberalism obeys a different set of rules in the colonial terrain" (p. 78), that the supposedly universal laws of capitalism have to be remolded here. In this understanding, Colonialism in practice emerges as "functionally and structurally" distinct

and not merely capitalism's extension. The colony and the metropole exist in different worlds.

Chattopadhyay argues that David Harvey's *The New Imperialism* expresses a variant of the view in which the territorial logic of imperialism simply inhibited the development of capitalism in the colonies beyond the stage of primitive accumulation. She also writes that Harvey, in his earlier work *The Urban Experience*, considers the capitalist developments of eighteenth-century Britain to be product of its internal developments, with colonialism having only a parenthetical role. She writes that an inability to delve into "colonialism as a phenomenon integral to capitalism" leads Harvey to "misapprehend the very principles that power imperialism and offer it resistance," and, in his *The New Imperialism*, to propose a kind of New Deal by the West on the global stage as a panacea—in short, yet another invitation to do empire better. Chattopadhyay asks rhetorically, what in the historic experience of the ex-colonial world gives Harvey the idea that they will consent to it? She argues that theorists need to reflect on "the logic of colonial difference" and to take seriously in theory-building "the role that colonial experience played in the construction of metropolitan modernity, precisely because social and urban experiments could be conducted more ruthlessly in the colonies than in the metropole" (p. 85). (See for example, Nightingale, 2012; Graham, 2010.)

But Chattopadhyay's conception of the colony as a place of ruthless experimentation is itself not without problems. It simply reverses the logic of Chattopadhyay's first story of global capitalism. Now we can look at the Third World city to foretell the ravages of capitalism headed for the Western city— the Southern city as an apocalyptic horror shows a la Mike Davis (Davis, 2006). Whether lagging behind or

being in the forefront, as Europe's past or its future, the (post)colony remains a mirror for the metropole.

Vyjayanthi Rao (2006) in her reading of Mike Davis' *Planet of Slums* makes clear that in such conceptions, Europe remains the subject and object of history within which the 'global' emerges as the key analytic and "'the city of the South' as its proxy subject." She terms this 'slum as theory' wherein the "slum serves as a shorthand" for dysfunction and violence, or for resistance. 'Slum as theory,' she argues, is one of the very few ways available for taking the 'Southern turn' within urban theory.

But the 'Southern turn' is not a lost cause. Chattopadhyay notes that urban research that takes colonialism as an important analytic had moved on from sole consideration of colonial domination to producing against the grain readings of the colonial and elite archives. This "second generation" of scholarship, she writes, "restore[s] the power of imagination to the colonized and ex-colonized" to envision, see, and represent the urban landscape (p. 86). They, of course, already know this; it is the metropolitan scholarship that has been fashionably late. As advantageous as this move has been, it does not shift the vantage point from which everyday life and culture of third-world cities appear a chaotic mess. This, she writes, is the problem of representation subalternity presents by definition. She ends her essay on a call for urban theory 'beyond the West' to grapple with this problem, and engage in "a sustained exploration of the *principles of contingency* that shape these spaces […] if it is to delimit the overextended claims of dominant theories of capitalist urbanization." (p. 91)

The Global Turn

Since the late 1980s the globalization talk has made the connectedness of cities across the world hard to ignore. Andreas Huyssen (2008) writes that the globalization literature's convergence with writings on cities has produced a line of thinking that suggests that in its functions the city as a real space shall yield to virtual space. Due to its focus on technological connectivity and flows, some of the globalization talk suggests that place and locality does not matter anymore, and hence the traditional scholarly tools like ethnography are inadequate or obsolete. Arguing against this thesis, Saskia Sassen highlights that place still matter even in the context of globalization (2000). She argues that cities are an important site for the study of new macrosocial phenomena at the turn of the twenty first century, such as globalization, information technologies, translocal and transnational currents, and sociocultural diversity. When thinking about cities, Sassen argues, we also need to think historically about power, especially its production and reproduction in and through spatialization. However, she suggests that instead of starting with the city, we theorize the spatiality of larger phenomena through which "the city enters the discourse." The network of international companies is her example. This network, she argues, constitutes a new geography of power that binds together key global cities across the globe in a transnational urban system. That most of the literature I discuss in this review mentions Sassen's 'Global Cities' construct is a testament to the efficacy of this concept, and to how beneficial it has been in thinking about cities and their interconnections. However, the focus it draws on a small number of cities is unhelpful. Let me elaborate.

Tim Bunnel and Anant Maringanti (2010) write that the various critiques of the

global city paradigm are leveled at what they term its 'metrocenticity.' It privileges the experience of powerful finance centers such as New York. Bunnel and Maringanti argue that this metrocentricity is performed and reproduced through practices of teaching and research. It is also a problem of the parochialism of research practices such as the reluctance to venture out of one's comfort zone— in the English-speaking world, for instance, for US scholars— and conducting research from a distance with the use of secondary data. They suggest that the research projects students and teachers select should use methods such as ethnography and those that require learning language skills and cultural competencies "usually associated with area studies training". Since they see these aspects of metrocentric research emanating, at least in part, from "unreflexive research practices," they call for rethinking the fieldwork— a rethinking that draws from feminist thought to engage with "issues such as the researcher's positionality, habitus, body and subjectivity as much as on ethnographic techniques in the field." Bunnel and Maringanti draw attention to two aspects of this metrocentricity: a hierarchy of attention and value, and the parochialism of global-city research. They say that when researchers frame certain cities as the epitome of 'world-cityness', they render other cities either as "wannabe cities" or as cities devoid of extra-local connections. The authors charge that this aspect of the metrocentricity of global city research reproduces hierarchy of attention that renders most cities of the world invisible to urban research.

David Bell and Mark Jayne (2009) take this critique further by showing how metrocentricity of urban theory has led scholars to ignore small cities in their quest for generalizability and for theorizing broad urban agendas and phenomena. In restricting their focus to few large cities in the Global North, ironically, such theories lose their

generalizability. They identify an "urban studies orthodoxy obsessed with 'the big city' as being the biggest" which in effect translates into a majority of the cities being labeled as 'lesser' and irrelevant. They argue that studying small cities enables us to see the full extent of the heterogeneity of the urban form. However, they shun a case-study approach "that considers small cities as an urban 'other' to the global metropolis". They delineate some popular stands of urban theory that they argue ignore small cities. The first is the epochal city theorizing. Concerned as it is with theorizing a city form that exemplifies a period of history (modern or post-modern, Fordist or post-Fordist, so on and so forth), the template for such archetypal urbanism have been cities like New York, London, Paris, and L.A. A corollary of such theorization is attempts at characterizing urban hierarchies through various schemas. Global city theorizing, they argue, has an aspect of normative judgment akin to the urban hierarchy schematization, since the elements identified as being the key to the power of 'global cities' come to constitute criteria with which to judge all cities. The last strand of such theorization they discuss is the global city-region thesis. A successor to the global city construct, it portrays a more complex and situated form of globalization by considering the region-wide coalitions that "work through a regional network of cities to enhance competitiveness." But this research too has been focused on a small number of city-regions of high population (in excess of 20 million) to the exclusion of a much large number of city-regions of a population size of around a million.

Bell and Jayne ask for a small cities research agenda that eradicates the "'sizism' that has marked urban theory and urban policy." Such an agenda must theorize the smallness of small cities in productive ways— such as their "influence and reach," the

ways small cities link with other cities— so as to identify the elements that relate to small cities, to shed light on processes that have been peripheral to urban theory in order to push back against "the notion that globalization of the city means globalization of the metropolis" (p. 690), and to develop an understanding of how this smallness is associated with particular ways of seeing and being. Lest we lose sight of the urban, they caution that we must also study the *cityness* of small cities and their distinct ways of being urban.

In his 2008 article, Yasser Elsheshtawy traces how the debate over cities and globalization has shifted from the global cities construct to include "other cities" (Elsheshtawy, 2008). Perhaps this shift is epitomized by Andreas Huyssen's edited volume *Other Cities, Other Worlds: Urban Imaginaries in a Globalizing Age* (2008). In his introduction to this edited volume, Huyssen points out that despite the differences in Sassen and Friedman's approach, what is similar is that "most large African cities and many other Asian, Middle eastern, and Latin American cities fell through the cracks of an approach that opposed the genuinely modern city to the developmental city and that still seemed predicated on the idea of globalization as a new version of the modernization theories of the post-World War II era" (p. 10). Huyssen writes that he is in agreement with Jennifer Robinson's critique that the global city has become simply the new way to assert the primacy and advanced modernity of the Western centers of power that others should and do aspire to. He however finds Robinson's 'ordinary cities' thesis limited for it "risks veiling the vast asymmetries of power and influence between cities". Instead, he argues that Anthony King's notion that all cities today are world cities is more useful for its acknowledgment of globalization of all cities of the world, which, in turn, is helpful in expanding the "field of debate".

Huyssen's motivation, he writes, in putting this volume together was of a pragmatic nature that Western scholarly and citizen critics of neoliberalism need to know more about urban areas in the world than they do. He brackets out cities of North America and Europe, neither to say that the impact of urban imaginaries of Western cities do not matter, nor to ignore histories of imperialism and domination. He is simply concerned with wanting to know more about the historic evolution of modernity in non-Western cities, and their meaning for 'city cultures at large'. He thus differentiates 'bracketing' from Dipesh Chakrabarty's notion of 'provincializing Europe' and acknowledges the limitations of bracketing as "a necessary but insufficient way to dislocate accounts of modernity from the West." (p. 2). Though laudable in locating and studying 'global cultures' outside Euro-America in the particularity of the many global-local mixes, Huyssen's edited volume, nonetheless, focuses on what Huyssen calls, its "primary production sites" (p. 4). These sites being the increasingly familiar roster of megacities of the South: Mumbai, Istanbul, Beijing, Mexico City, and Johannesburg, etc.

The Southern Turn

Sheppard, Leitner, and Maringanti (2013) argue that the experience of North America and Europe is implicitly taken to be the norm for 'global urbanism'. Such theorization simply considers knowledges emerging from the Global South as raw data "to be made sense of by utilizing theories advanced by Western scholars." Sheppard, Leitner, and Maringanti call for 'provincializing' Euro-American urbanism, and ask for alternative theorizations that take seriously the situated knowledges that emerge from what they call "Southern livelihoods and practices". They seem to hold participatory research as an important way to disrupt this "epistemic hierarchy." They argue that a

research praxis that produces articulations of 'knowledge commonalities' across the various divides, and is in turn produced through critical solidarities among scholars and practitioners, "contain[s] the potential to speak back to pre-existing urban theories produced within the academy". What would such collaborations look like? In what follows I discuss a few edited volumes of urban research that have emerged from such scholarly collaborations. I will conclude this essay with a discussion of comparative methodology that some scholars have argued to be key to building a cosmopolitan and internationalist urban theory worthy of the name.

In the introductory essay to their edited volume, *Urban Theory beyond the West: A World of Cities*, Tim Edensor and Mark Jayne (2012) charge that urban theory, unlike other fields and disciplines (such as cultural theory or political theory), has been slow in participating in debates about epistemologies, typologies, and dualisms used to define and fix meaning. They seek, in this volume, to challenge the assumptions underpinning the study of cities and investigate the ways in which parochial theoretical agendas have dominated the field. They count this volume to be part of a recent wave of urban scholarship and theory that seeks to re-imagine 'the city' so as to decolonize the imagining of cities and therefore urban theorizing. The editors of this volume put ample stock in collaborations between Western and not-Western academics, intellectuals, and theorists, as demonstrated by the list of contributors to this volume. However, it is unclear how such collaborations would change the power-differential between the Western academy and the rest. Nevertheless, they highlight that such collaborative "theorizing back" in and through comparative urban research, at least, offers an

opportunity to reflect "on the geographically uneven foundations of contemporary urban scholarship and to engage with previous research" (p. 26).

Comparative Urbanism

Kamran Asdar Ali and Martina Rieker's edited volume *Comparing Cities: The Middle East and South Asia* came out of the initiatives and conferences of the Shehr network for comparative urbanism, a network of scholars working on (and some of them living and teaching in) cities of Middle East, South Asia, and Africa. The editors write in their introduction that the comparative framework employed in this volume builds on the shared historic connections between the two regions, connections of colonialism, nationalism, modernity and urbanity that are deepened by the history of Western Indian Ocean that linked South Asia, Middle East, and East Africa in a shared world of trade, mobility, and pilgrimage. This south-south comparison is akin to the bracketing strategy discussed above, and seeks to "question the dominance of Euro-America in our imagination of geographies of power" (p. x). They place their work in the genealogy of the broader spatial turn in social sciences, and specifically, with the rising importance of Henri Lefebvre's work, in the 'urban turn.' However, what Rieker and Ali argue for is that we remain analytically attuned to the play between "the urban (read: megacity)" and other spatial scales. The gap they identify in the urban studies literature on both Middle East and South Asia is "the lack of a social historic understanding of cities" (p. xvi). They argue that to develop a better understanding of urban social practices, "subaltern social histories within particular and comparative urban projects" need to be understood. Doing so would enable questioning of the research that posits cities of the Global South as failed cities, "cities always in need of something more—whether infrastructure, governance, or

economic development." That such labeling leads to interventionist politics of development, they argue, means that the emphasis should be to study the urban fabric of these cities as a product of individual and collective agency.

Another volume to have emerged from Shehr network is Ali and Rieker's edited volume of *Social Text* (2008). This volume asks questions of urbanity, rurality, and marginality in the small and middle-sized cities and the periurban backspaces of megalopolises of South Asia, Middle East, and Africa. Citing the case of Pakistan, they state that industrialization since the 1950s has led to an increase in rural-urban migration, and most of these migrations have been absorbed by small- and medium-sized cities. These small to medium-sized cities, however, lacked adequate planning and job opportunities. In these developments, Ali and Rieker argue, we can see the older dichotomy between city and the rural countryside being played out in the gaps between small cities and megalopolises. But, the intense focus on the megacities has not only meant that little attention has been given to small cities and provincial towns but also that even lesser consideration has been given to the kinds of questions such 'marginal' cities bring to fore.

Another important collaborative effort is McFarlane and Anjaria's edited volume, *Urban Navigations* (2011) that presents 'grounded accounts' of South Asian urbanisms and "everyday practices" with an eye towards urban infrastructure and materialities as they relate to how dwellers come to know, traverse, navigate, and negotiate the city, and "how things get done in the city" (p. 7). They place this volume within "a broader momentum in urban studies to 'rematerialize' the city, i.e. to attend to the crucial role of urban materials …" (p. 7)—in short, within a 'material turn'. The comparative element in

this volume, they write, works temporally as well as spatially. Such comparative projects, they say, also bring to fore the disparities in scholarship on various countries within the region, and cities within the same country. For instance, they mention that one the one hand they were unable to secure contributions on urban Bangladesh, or Pakistani cities other than Karachi, but on the other hand, sifting through the large number of potential contributors working on urban India, most of them focused on large cities such as Delhi and Mumbai, presented a problem. They also place this volume in the growing body of comparative urban studies that seeks to theorize the city outside the Euro-American context. The recent global cities literature, they write, is focused not on cities per se but on the international connections between them. Through this volume, they seek to shift urban studies' emphasis towards diverse urban contexts (p. 11).

Conclusion

Jennifer Robinson considers urban studies an "intrinsically comparative field" but one that "offers little by way of comparative research" (Robinson, 2011a). To underscore the need for thinking about comparison, Colin McFarlane (2010) argues that any theoretical claim about 'the city' is inevitably a comparative claim. It is this inevitability that demands that urbanists reflect on comparison as an implicit mode of thought that informs how we construct urban theory and knowledge, and on "what might be gained from attempting to make our implicit comparative moves more explicit." He argues that comparativism as a strategy has the potential of revealing the "assumptions, limits and distinctiveness of particular theoretical or empirical claims, and secondly for formulating new lines of inquiry and more situated accounts." But comparative urban scholarship has been caught up in unexamined assumptions underpinning its methodology about what

counts as similar or different cases? Must one learn solely from comparing only (seemingly) similar cases? What is to be learnt from a comparison across difference? Constructing archetypes and other typologies within which to recognize similarities and differences has further inhibited critical comparative thinking. For instance, focusing on colonial inheritance of comparative analysis, Jennifer Robinson has highlighted, elsewhere, its use to order and arrange countries and people based on a teleological approach and showed how the 'planes of equivalence,' the conception of comparability of cases were determined by "political and contextual factors" (Robinson, 2011b).

In the same vein, McFarlane argues, "if comparison is to rethink urban knowledge and theory, one useful framing for thinking postcolonial urbanism is to attend to the epistemic and institutional lenses that frame comparisons". He then outlines a trifecta of such a comparative epistemology: theory cultures, learning, ethico-politics. In comparisons across theory-cultures the idea is not so much about comparisons across spaces and processes but across different "ontological and epistemological framings that inform how the world is being debated, how knowledge is being produced and questioned". Theory-culture here refers to constellations of theorists of various stripes, institutions (journals, university, etc.), forms of citations and writing, and modes of distribution—"relational networks of interests, approaches and methods that cut across different parts of the globe." With respect to *learning* McFarlane urges us to rethink the process of learning, traditionally conceptualized as a linear stacking up of knowledge blocks. Urban lessons can rarely be transferred directly across historic contexts and particularities. The necessary work of translation with its creative possibilities of adaptation and misreadings needs to be pursued as a conscious strategy. These

sophisticated uses of the word 'translation,' however, should not blind us to its most basic usage: across languages. As Patricia Ehrkamp (2011) reminds us, the project of building a cosmopolitan and internationalist urban theory is severely hampered by the dominance of the English language.

Ehrkamp notes that urban theory cannot merely be informed by internationalist concerns and commitments, it has to be transformed by them (Ehrkamp, 2011). McFarlane's comparative strategies of indirect learning and learning across theory cultures must also be an occasion to reflect on the questions of scholarly authority, positionality, power and privilege, and to pledge to an internationalist commitment and praxis that entail being personally engaged, vested, and accountable to the community urbanists write about and for—a set of questions and concerns McFarlane terms *ethico-politics*. These three overlapping areas that McFarlane identifies are of utmost importance if, in his words, "comparison is to assist in producing research that reflects a more global understanding of the urban."

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