

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Colin McFarlane, *Learning the City: Knowledge and Translocal Assemblage*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011. ISBN: 978-1-4051-9281-1 (paper); ISBN: 978-1-4051-9282-8 (cloth)

The ever-more-urban context within which we live has compelled many scholars to ground their theoretical and methodological inquiries in cities, and to ask whether and how these particularly dense, layered and dynamic spaces recast social life in ways not previously experienced or understood. In a now classic scholarly tradition, they ask, *how do we know the city?*

For Colin McFarlane, the central challenge is not necessarily to know the city, or even to understand the multiple ways that an individual or collective might forge such knowing. Instead, McFarlane takes interest in the processes through which collective knowledges develop and travel - between members of a social group, across multiple social groups, and across space. Readers who have ever puzzled over the movement of particular discourses or knowledge systems from one urban context to another, or between otherwise disparate groups, will find in this volume an exhaustive and compelling effort to theorize the development, movement, and effects of learning.

Learning the City brings together two powerful conceptual challenges: one, to understand the social specificities of the contemporary and future city; and two, to discern the production and diffusion of knowledges within it. McFarlane engages this latter project by building a theory of urban learning.

He begins by arguing that the theoretical challenges presented by urban sociality and learning are inseparable. “Cities...”, he writes, “...as spaces of encounter and rapid change, of concentrations of political, economic and cultural resources, and of often confusing unknowability, develop particular manifestations of learning assemblages” (p. 181). As such, to inhabit the city is to constantly confront the unknown, and to assemble from and through it a set of coherent lifeway strategies. At stake in the constant process of urban learning, McFarlane suggests, is the possibility that the actual city might become something else - the possible city, the imagined city, or the more just and equitable city.

Thus a primary objective of the book is to call for a clearer and fuller focus on learning as a social process. Toward that end, McFarlane offers an extensive review of scholarship that has engaged this issue in some way, whether explicitly or indirectly. He then weaves from and through that scholarship a clear articulation of a theory of learning.

To build and narrate his theory, McFarlane draws on field experiences in sites that range from Mumbai to Berlin. Rather than serving as points in a systematic ethnographic analysis, however, the field references provide snapshots to narrate his logic of learning. This technique may leave readers interested in more detailed, critical engagement with particular cases somewhat unsatisfied, but McFarlane takes repeated care to interpret his field examples as limited in their scope and generalizability.

McFarlane's focus is the knowledge that allows certain forms of navigation through, negotiation with, and advancing of interests in, a field of urban power relations in which there may be many possible knowledges, and many meaningful accounts of the city and/or its various processes. His work calls not for more knowledge about the city, then, but rather for a more vigorous theoretical engagement with *learning* itself - that is, the ways in which the multiple forms of knowledge and the meaningful accounts that accompany them are forged, and in turn solidify particular relations of power, social affinities and agentive potentials. McFarlane's conceptualization relies on learning as an everyday, multi-scaled process. He is especially interested in learning in translocal context, and the kinds of arenas, which he calls "environments", in which learning takes place.

The book's key conceptual tool is the "learning assemblage" active at the intersection of three processes: translation, coordination and dwelling. The text works through these processes by weaving together many strands of theory and scholarship that have engaged them in past work. In bringing together a rich and diverse collection of prior thinking about learning and assemblage, McFarlane builds a powerful foundation for his own synthetic contribution.

That contribution begins by exploring learning as an everyday practice. Drawing on examples from Sao Paulo and Mumbai, he notices an incremental quality to urban learning. Here, he argues, the homes of the poor or marginalized are often constructed through "gradual manipulations of the urban environment" (p.36), that in turn allow a shelter to become a home - an "assemblage of dwelling" (*ibid.*). Improvisation is then used to exemplify a form of urban learning with consequences far beyond material presence and possession - in this case, of a

house. It is, he argues, a “form of incremental learning that tweaks and alters existing urban arrangements” (p. 176), which are simultaneously social and material. It is here that a focus on learning enables a conceptual bridge to social strategies and tactics, important not only for knowing the everyday city, but also for contesting it.

McFarlane then moves to another facet of learning: that of its movement, particularly across localities. How, he asks, does urban knowledge travel and transfer across localities? How mobile are urban policies? He considers the learning strategies employed and experienced by members of Shack Dwellers International (SDI), a housing advocacy movement active in over 20 countries. Through this organization, members seek to learn from one another across national, cultural and political contexts, making it an ideal setting within which to observe how knowledge translation and coordination take place in a specific setting.

McFarlane uses the SDI example to show how three practices form the foundation for its translocal learning assemblages: one, learning in groups about the range of possible futures, in this case housing futures; two, enumerating the experience of substandard housing and poverty, and therefore learning to engage political organization itself; and three, promoting the idea that the learned citizen is empowered to negotiate with, rather than diametrically and wholly oppose, the state.

Using an example of a translocal urban learning forum between two organizational members of SDI, the Indian Alliance and the UK’s Groundswell, McFarlane points to important limits, or points of friction, in processes of translocal learning at SDI. In this example, SPARC, the NGO element of the Alliance, rejected the possibility of learning from an organization based in the global North, while Groundswell found the exchange productive, and even constitutive, of new and effective learning assemblages. He uses this example to make the point that learning through translation, the core of translocal learning, can only operate in the absence of, or in counter position to, “stubbornly persistent categorizations of global North and South” (p. 177).

Urban policy and planning arenas depend heavily on the potential of translocal learning, often seeking to promote it through large scale conferences and formal regional assessments. The production, promotion and circulation of specific universalized or regionalized metrics, best practices and other comparative tools indeed form the core of many organizational missions. It is in this arena that McFarlane’s efforts to theorize urban learning are particularly useful, both as a preliminary set of theoretical assertions and as the groundwork for much-needed future inquiry.

As McFarlane himself notes, few scholars have attempted to derive a thinking framework for understanding translocal urban learning in the policy arena.

This is not to say that transnational policy has gone unstudied. On the contrary, a rich body of scholarship has described the discursive dynamics and power relations that often undergird transnational and regional conference settings, offices, and networks. Yet to focus on these using his lens of learning, McFarlane argues, foregrounds analytical sensitivity to ideology.

He notes the forms of power that structure exchanges through which translocal policy learning takes place, the objects of translocal policy learning that ideology can produce, the organizational forms that structure learning encounters, and the form and content of the imaginaries that compose this arena's realm of the possible. He asks, is translocal urban policy learning an open experiment with learning through difference? Or do its exchanges confine learning to the ultimate privileging of particular world views and objectives?

But what characterizes that latter, more open, and therefore effective, learning environment? How do different environments structure encounters between actors in ways that enable the formation of learning assemblages? To address this, McFarlane reminds us of the observations of decades of scholars who have cautioned that coming together to *participate* need not automatically produce more equal relations of power. In fact, efforts to forge participatory learning environments sometimes reinforce old asymmetries or produce entirely new ones. McFarlane refers here to an example from Porto Alegre, where participatory budgeting programs seem to have been particularly effective.

The book concludes by attempting to develop a critical geography of learning. McFarlane outlines a framework that would identify dominant forms of urban knowledge, the learning processes through which they are reproduced ("evaluation"), open these forms to multiple groups and knowledges ("democratize"), and advance alternative forms of knowledge and processes of learning ("propose"). This is a complex analytical and advocacy strategy indeed, one that would require far more grounded ethnographic engagement than the present work attempts to undertake. It is nevertheless a useful and compelling framework through which to structure future inquiries and articulate their potential.

Learning the City makes an exhaustive case for framing our studies of knowledge and power through the optic of the learning assemblage. Its revelatory power is arguably profound: for McFarlane, it promises nothing short of understanding the power to forge a different kind of

city (p. 179). In the 21st century city, the material and analytical stakes of learning could not be higher.

Anne Rademacher
Social and Cultural Analysis
New York University
anne.rademacher@nyu.edu

September 2012