

**Mary Lawhon with contributions from Lené Le Roux, Anesu Makina and Yaffa Truelove, *Making Urban Theory: Learning and Unlearning through Southern Cities*, London: Routledge, 2020. ISBN: 9780367344924 (cloth); ISBN: 9780429326141 (ebook)**

Mary Lawhon's *Making Urban Theory* is a considered and personal intervention into the urban studies canon. As such, it deserves a generous and personal review, which I hope to be able to provide. The book poses telling questions about how urban theory has been made to date, and provides some helpful pathways and tactics through which this body of thought can be remade, or at the very least expanded. In this review, I will outline three of the major lessons that I feel readers can take away from the book. I will also add some additional suggestions for pathways in theory-making that were prompted by reading and engaging with the text. The major lessons that I feel arise out of the text can be listed as follows: working collaboratively and in conversation; abandoning ego and approaching theory-making with humility; and interrogating claims through lived experience and careful research. The additional approaches that I outline focus on speaking back to the north from the south; taking diversity seriously and encouraging new scholars, rather than theories; and working with already-existing, alternative bodies of theory or approaches.

To declare my position from the outset, I am sympathetic to the intellectual project and general argument presented in the book. The premise that urban theory needs to be remade stems from the fact that the field is northern-centric and struggles to come to terms with or provide sufficient vocabularies, analytical frameworks and heuristics to deal fully with urban life in the global south. This position is articulated clearly and convincingly throughout *Making Urban Theory*. Lawhon draws on the work of scholars who have challenged the parochialism of urban theory, putting herself in debt to and conversation with Garth Myers, Ananya Roy and Jennifer Robinson, in particular. The acknowledgement of indebtedness to other scholars and the role they have played in shaping the author's thinking and stance on various issues is refreshing and well-handled in the book. This mode of writing

adds to the book's tone of exploration, intimacy and intellectual journey. Rather than staking a claim for herself as an originator of (southern urban) theory, Lawhon positions herself as contributing to an established and growing tradition of scholarship. The co-operative approach, in which Lawhon writes particular chapters with collaborators, including two current PhD students (Lené Le Roux and Anesu Makina), enhances the sense that this is a shared, rather than individualistic intellectual project.

This collaborative, intellectually generous and humble approach is required if the imbalance that defines urban theory-making is to be corrected. Without going into too much detail about arguments that have already been dealt with elsewhere and with more aplomb than I can do justice to here (for example see Robinson and Roy 2016), the preponderance of a handful of northern cities as the sites through which urban theory is generated is a shortcoming and epistemological failure. The general model in which an empirical process is observed in a northern city, usually London or New York, and then generalised to all cities everywhere leads to impartial knowledge, gaps in understanding and misrecognition of processes and socio-cultural contexts that are far more nuanced, complex and varied than this sort of approach allows. Even when particular phenomena, for example gentrification, displacement or Business Improvement Districts, recur in cities across the globe, we cannot assume that the causes and consequences of these occurrences will necessarily mirror the experiences, logics or outcomes already traced in the (northern-centric) literature. As Lawhon succinctly but compellingly puts it (in a chapter co-authored by Le Roux), "we can see the empirical thing happening, but its motives, causes and effects are not the same as what has already been articulated in the literature based on studies of northern cities" (p.78). It is therefore vital that more representative, democratic and plural theorisations are established and allowed to prevail in the academy. Working in community and concord with other scholars is one of the key ways through which this alternative form of theory-making should proceed.

Whereas northern urban theory has been egocentric, individualist and totalising, the generation of plural theories requires equally pluralised participants and ways of working. The method Lawhon and her collaborators, Le Roux, Makina and Truelove, adopt in the book is a good example of how to approach this form of knowledge generation and academic practice. With that said, the first tactic that we can take away from the book is the notion of *dialogic and collaborative approaches to research, theorisation and knowledge production*. Rather than seeing academic work as a competition of ideas, in which one body of work or theory outdoes others and comes to stand as the prevailing explanation for or account of all urban life everywhere, we should approach theory-making as a process of shared exploration and learning. Doing so invites us, as the book does, to engage in nuanced, complex and pluralistic approaches to understanding urban life and to treat theory-making as an ongoing conversation, rather than contest.

Alongside abandoning competition and treating theory-making like a competition, another tactic that emerges and that should be encouraged is *approaching theory-making with uncertainty and humility*. Writing in the conclusion, Lawhon sums up the arguments she has presented in the book and the intellectual journey she has traced with considerable modesty, uncertainty and even anxiety. She writes about struggling with imposter syndrome and that her claims to be in a position to make urban theory continue to feel fragile and unauthoritative. Writing with humility that is far too often absent in academic discourse, she confesses, “these are not ideas that one shouts with confidence from rooftops. They are a declaration of an imperfect process, a record of struggle” (p.100). These words should give the reader pause for thought and invite us to question the politics and practices of our field, particularly when it comes to theory-making. Why should making careful, considered, nuanced and uncertain conclusions feel like something to be scared of, something that undermines one’s credibility or authority and makes one feel like an imposter? Rather than provoking anxiety on the part of people who work and think with humility, we should question the (predominantly white male) terrain of totalising theory and entitlement to make

grand claims about the world that stands in such stark contrast to the more considered and humble approach communicated in the book.

Another tactic on display in the book and that others can learn from or try and adopt is Lawhon and her collaborators' approach to *interrogating the claims of major theories or concepts in the urban studies canon*. They do this through questioning some of the most foundational concepts in urban theory, starting with the question of "What is a city?". They disrupt what we often assume to be a settled debate by illustrating how questions about the applicability of northern theory to southern contexts have been asked since the 1990s at least. These questions became more pointed and pervasive in the 2000s, particularly after the publication of Robinson's seminal work *Ordinary Cities* (2006). In addition to reviewing some of this literature and bringing these (somewhat historical, particularly for younger scholars) debates back into focus, the book makes a novel contribution by illustrating how ideas about what makes or defines a city are far from agreed upon or shared, particularly amongst people living in the south. The chapter in which Lawhon and Makina recount their research into how people in South Africa perceive cityness is insightful and offers both a good, inductive inquiry that destabilises a seemingly innocuous and settled concept, and also provides a useful teaching tool too.

The tactic of questioning the limits of theory through inductive research and lived experience is displayed most effectively and compellingly when Lawhon reflects on her own academic journey, particularly her engagement with the environmental justice and infrastructure literatures. In both of these chapters, she demonstrates the limits of bodies of theory that have been developed elsewhere when confronted with the particularities, conflicts and contradictions of southern societies. In detailing, firstly, how concepts and ideas in environmental justice scholarship were insufficient to respond to the lived realities, concerns and political challenges confronting ordinary communities in South Africa, Lawhon demonstrates the need for more responsive and representative academic concepts. Showing how environmental justice activists in South Africa developed their own vocabularies and

concerns to confront questions of climate change alongside issues of racial injustice and deep inequity also demonstrates how southern societies and actors can be the sources of theory, just as much as learned northern academics. Secondly, in questioning the “modern infrastructural ideal” and its applicability to, feasibility for, or even desirability in southern cities, she again unsettles a seemingly settled notion and invites us to interrogate the basis on which normative knowledge has been formulated and travels in the world. This approach is valuable not only for urban studies and geography, but has utility in all disciplines, including development studies, science and technology studies, planning and engineering too. In this case, the book provides good examples of how to go about questioning assumptions and being alive to possibilities that destabilise and challenge ideas in light of lived experience.

A further necessary tactic I would suggest, and that is not taken up sufficiently in the book, is *speaking back to northern theory through southern experiences and knowledge*. Throughout the book there is a prevailing, unspoken sense that northern urban theory is settled and has nothing more to learn or alter, and that it is only up to people working, living and thinking elsewhere to develop new concepts for their own purposes. Through this approach, the book runs the risk of reifying northern theory and letting it off the hook, whilst downplaying the potential of southern theory to contribute elsewhere. Lawhon directs her writing to an already sympathetic audience, which is understandable and more likely to resonate. However, this means that the full potential of her argument is not realised. Elsewhere, I have urged scholars to take up the particularity and multiplicity of southern settings as representative of all societies (Mosselson 2017, 2019). The south is not the only setting that is volatile, uncertain, pluralistic, fractured and complex. Nor is the south the only place shaped by colonialism, imperialism, inequality and crisis. We inhabit a world of cities that is intertwined, co-produced and inescapably shared, as much as all cities everywhere are also particular. It is therefore appropriate that theory developed in and for the south should be able to travel and reflect back on northern experiences too. Some scholars have already started this work and deserve much credit for doing so (see for example Ha and

Picker forthcoming; Hilbrandt et al. 2017). However, this remains an ongoing challenge and one that needs to be taken up with seriousness, humility and in the cooperative, questioning spirit that Lawhon et al. illustrate.

Another tactic I would suggest and that remains underdeveloped in the book, is a *deeper questioning of the politics of knowledge production*. Calls for new theories in and of the south are longstanding, arguably to the point of being redundant. I would argue that, rather than constantly calling for new theories to be developed, more fruitful results would emerge were academia to take questions of representativity, diversity and challenging white supremacy more seriously. Whilst Lawhon rightly questions the assumption that emic identity is a source of knowledge or defines the place from which one speaks, the unavoidable reality is that academia, in both the north and south, remains predominantly the preserve of privileged, generally white, frequently male people. This is particularly the case, and gallingly so, in South Africa. Running through the list of former colleagues that Lawhon thanks in her introduction, the prevailing whiteness of South African geography, as other disciplines, becomes unmistakable and inescapable.

Whilst white scholars, including myself, are and have shown themselves to be perfectly adept at developing novel approaches, theories and questions, there are also limits to the types of questions people can ask and answers they can arrive at. These limitations are linked, although obviously not inherent to, the social identities that they occupy. Scholars of colour, who have different sensitivities, experiences, forms of cultural capital, research skills and insights, have already shown that they are able to introduce new ways of thinking and seeing South African urban geographies (see for example Huang 2020; Matsipa 2017; Tayob 2019). However, they remain in the minority and demonstrate clearly that their voices and others like theirs need to be multiplied and amplified as a matter of urgency. When this happens, the need for new theorisations becomes less acute, as new theories emerge out of diverse lived experiences and ontological starting points. Outside of South Africa, emerging Black geographies do much to destabilise the canon and introduce new ways of seeing and

making theory. This is exemplified by a recent intervention appearing in the *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* (Hirsch and Jones 2021). Again, rather than arguing that we need to make new theories, we might be best placed to work to augment, support and create more space for voices and ideas that are already there, but deserve far greater recognition and attention than they have been given to date.

Another alternative to looking for new theories is *engaging with other scholarly traditions*, as well as other scholars, that already exist. Personally, I have found it productive recently to try and think South African cities from settler colonial, rather than postcolonial, perspectives. Whilst the postcolonial approach has been helpful and shaped my work to date, I am inclined to think that it does not do enough to confront the enduring legacies and everyday realities of white supremacy and colonial domination that continue to structure the country. Similarly, decolonial approaches might offer more fruitful ways for arriving at the alternative theorisations that so many scholars call for. Attention to Indigenous knowledges, creative practices, spiritual and emotional landscapes and embodied realities are all ways through which the enduring coloniality of modern urban societies can be explored and critiqued. Urban studies and urban theory, in the north and south, would do well to look to this school of thought too.

In summary, *Making Urban Theory* is a challenging, productive and engaging book that offers important insights into the process of theory-making as well as the practices of academia generally. There are several important lessons that one can learn from reading the book, particularly if one adopts the same sort of open, questioning and honest approach as the author(s). However, lessons are only there to be learned if one is willing to be open to learning, to questioning oneself and asking uncomfortable questions. Responsibility for that does not lie with Lawhon and her collaborators, but with the reader.

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# ANTIPODE

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