

Intervention Symposium—“Urban Theory from the Global South”

Introduction

**Urban Theory Futures are Turbulent, Vernacular, and Incomplete
(and that’s okay)**

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In the 2016 collection *Urban Theory: New Critical Perspectives*, editors Mark Jayne and Kevin Ward introduce what they consider to be “a critical and accessible introduction to original and groundbreaking urban theory”. Theory, they argue, is a critical tool through which academics and students will “[generate] new ideas and thinking in relation to the production of more inclusive and just urban futures” (Jayne and Ward 2016: 1). In an increasingly interconnected global world in the midst of an “urban age”, these interdisciplinary projects have taken on a new form of urgency. And yet, debates about some of the most fundamental concepts—What is “the city”? Is the “urban” best characterized as a place(s) or a practice(s)?—continue to be deeply

rooted in the historical experiences of cities in the Global North. Now far from its origins as a field of academic inquiry in North American universities in the late 19th century, contemporary urban theory draws on increasingly diverse case studies and incorporates the reflections of an increasingly diverse collection of authors. And yet, in these kinds of major collections—trumpeted as a comprehensive survey of the field—there is a persistent dominance of European and North American cities: both as examples of “the urban” and as aspirational sites of future urban imaginings.

In the quest to identify and clarify universal definitions of core concepts, examples from the Global South challenging Eurocentric narratives have too often been pushed to the side as marginal or exceptional. Assessed as sites of governance, infrastructure, and institutional failure, cities located beyond Northern geographies are seen as lying outside of, and thus incommensurate with, “urban theory”. Parallel to these normative conversations, however, scholars of the Global South have, over the last 20+ years, been generating their own theories of “the city”. They often embrace what Teresa Caldeira (2017: 3) calls “peripheral urbanization” in order to “de-center urban theory and to offer a bold characterization of modes of the production of space that are different from those that generated the cities of the North Atlantic”. The acceleration of intersections across and through diverse geographies of theory means that these conceptualizations have recently begun to puncture long-standing theoretical, normative, and epistemological fortifications.

The pieces presented here seek to directly address this ongoing challenge by centering the work of emerging scholars from the Global South. They developed out of a “dream conversation” on “Urban Theory from the Global South”, co-sponsored by the Global Urban History Project and the African Urban Dynamics Collaborative Research Group affiliated with AEGIS, the consortium of African Studies organizations in Europe. In this introduction, we highlight some of the common themes that come out of and connect across these pieces. We do, however, wish for the work to speak for itself. As such, our introduction represents less of a conventional analysis and synthesis than a series of provocations that invite your engagement with the texts. We thus seek to write in the spirit of AbdouMaliq Simone’s concluding call to

embrace the turbulence that emerges when we release our demands for stability, certainty, and order to better think through the future of urban(ism) studies.

Anwasha Ghosh asks “how do we do urban histories from the Global South?” Addressing the implications of the question’s *we* is crucial to the task at hand. The term suggests not just the need to unpack and problematize so-called universalized or grand narratives of the “urban” in favor of introducing a more contextualized, rooted, and provincialized framing and analysis following the tradition inaugurated by Southeast Asian and Indian theorists of post-coloniality. To us, the claim is clear and without much controversy—though, as noted at the outset, some theorists and practitioners may have to be dragged kicking and screaming towards such a position. A further de-layering of Ghosh’s question, however, sets us off on a thornier line of inquiry in that the answer implicates the authors of this introduction along with much of the Euro-American readership of *Antipode* who are engaged in these kinds of themes. She writes:

Southern Urbanism marks an intervention not only at the level of analysis but also on the plane of language and semantics. It signals the limits of existing language that struggles to adequately address the realities of the South ...

The limits of existing language. This phrase suggests an urgent need to not just recalibrate, but to reconstitute, dominant orderings and vocabularies into new substantive juxtapositions and temporalities of varying degrees of permanence and ephemerality. Such an undertaking not only collides with the limits of the ability to do the work of unlearning what urban scholars trained in the dominant traditions have long been taught, but also, perhaps even more so, ultimately runs aground on something even more immovable and immalleable: the rootedness, positionality, and contextual subjective perspective of the theorist. Echoing vociferous debates across disciplines dating back to (and beyond) Geertzian arguments about when—if ever—an outside ethnographer can transition to insider status to conversations about language, power, and coloniality inspired by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, the problem(s) posed by language and translation of both words and experiences pose significant theoretical barriers that go beyond rhetorical stylings, the meanings of words, and the rhythms of language. Contemporary urban scholarship

ought to acknowledge not only that urban theory must create conceptual space for the urban “South”, but also that theory *on* the South must be driven by scholars *from* these diverse geographic localities.

Wangui Kimari further contributes insights to this question via her discussion of vernacularity. Kimari’s evocative essay addresses the “margins within the margins”—in this case, residents dwelling within the Mathare informal settlement in Nairobi, Kenya. She writes that in a location such as Mathare,

the metabolisms of racial capitalism—extractions and many other experiments on life—are heavily concentrated. But is it also here where I have been taught histories that rupture those that have become hegemonic—including urban theories—and been compelled to engage in naming processes that center, more clearly, more holistically, embodied vernaculars, which, concomitantly, prompt a more inclusive impetus for our times.

Here, Kimari isn’t just referring to the “embodied vernacular” of the urban theorist, but rather, the need to learn from and take seriously the lived experiences of those on the most marginal edges of urban society who daily grapple with the grinding violence of the accelerating and intersecting crises of “our times”. These embodied voices, largely unheard and unheeded within Nairobi and Kenya, let alone in geographies beyond, are best equipped to describe the processes and consequences of contemporary urbanization. Street-level vernaculars developed and deployed to depict their lived situation(s) inaugurate processes of naming and explaining that oppose “the limited plotlines of ... our new epoch”, which are themselves undergirded by the combined and multi-faceted forces of extractive capitalism, environmental collapse, and racialized inequities. If, as Kimari argues, our taxonomies and their perceived universality—their “coloniality of power” (to use Rafael Soares Gonçalves’ words)—are imperial and colonial, and thus repeatedly fail because they are not capable of understanding people and places from outside these frameworks, it is through these embodied vernacular languages that those consigned to what Ghosh calls the “waiting room of History”—or worse—can “continue to name

and reclaim their ‘stolen lives’” (Kimari). As Prince Guma highlights in this collection, this act of reclamation and the language it uses may sometimes—or often—be fragmentary, but that too is part of its challenge to universality.

Amidst multiple compounding crises, through vernacularity originates the possibility of empowerment. In this way, urban theory as conducted from the Global South becomes both a scholastic endeavor and a profoundly political practice as well. And, indeed, in the essays provided here, these dimensions become indistinguishable. This in part stems from the issue of “expertise”—in particular, what is counted as expertise and whose expertise “matters”. Imagining a(n) (urban) future that is just and inclusive requires that academics, practitioners, and policymakers take seriously these street scholars, who, as Kimari points out, originate from all walks of life. These approaches don’t balk at inconsistency or the fragmentary. And, indeed, this work, along with a more expansive idea of expertise, embraces ambiguity and diversity as a primary driver of innovation—what Gonçalves describes as “new syntheses that escape the urban imagination coming from the North”.

Collectively, then, these essays offer an urgent cry to move beyond a form of decolonial politics defined by the act of mere diversification of syllabi or bibliographies to directly and deeply engage the challenge of complexity, ambiguity, and incompleteness for which these scholars advocate. Such an undertaking requires not only the intellectual work of (re)learning and unlearning and recalibrating, but zeroing in on the grounded praxes—for example, Kimari’s “embodied vernaculars”—that offer a means through which to live within and work with contemporary turbulence. There are many ways to engage the pernicious predicaments of the moment. These essays, however, suggest that diving head-on into them is the only way forward if we seek to rise to the challenges of the present and the presents to come. The vernaculars described in this collection capture the essences of the past, present, and future. They stand as essential to making the past and present comprehensible, as well as to imagining the future(s).

The collected essays pose questions and raise challenges, but they point the way to tactics and strategies of engagement to answer and resolve them. As these scholars suggest, it is clear that the tools of urban studies are insufficient to capture the full range of diversity in urban form and practice—diversity that Gonçalves recognizes unites cities of the Global South as a “cultural

construction” rather than a definition. Our failures have implications not just for urban studies but, as Gonçalves suggests, for history more broadly as “[t]he urban phenomenon has come to be a necessary element for thinking about our societies, and consequently, it has become a central element of historical analysis”. Addressing these failures requires us to embrace methodologies that explore and appreciate what Guma calls the “molecular details of everyday life”. Echoing the arguments of his co-contributors, Guma asserts that we must adopt:

methods that incorporate everyday unequal experiences, that valorize the orientations and practices of those who create, sustain, and inhabit incomplete urban worlds, and that illuminate how different real-world in-situ experiences and practices produce novel forms and articulations that may exceed—at the time—the most dominant and hegemonic forms.

In doing so, we must not look for a new hegemonic order because, as Simone asks, “what makes us think that (dis)order is in need of a solution?” Instead, he reminds us, we should embrace turbulence, both as “a prevailing urban condition” and as a scholarly position. Urban theory from the Global South is not an exception or a branch edging off the “urban theory tree”, but rather, part of “the circulation of knowledge not as impositions, but as points of contact that precisely imply the hybridization of ideas, selective appropriations, influences, adaptations, and rejections” (Gonçalves). Acknowledging and embracing this conclusion will facilitate a fundamental rethink of the question “What is the city?” and the work of urban studies more broadly.

References

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