Authors Meet Critics

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Participants

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Karaliotas, Lazaros
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Lombard, Melanie
Manella, Gabriele

Nwachi, Christy
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<Torrisi, Giovanni> Welcome to everybody. Today we will discuss 'The Comparative City: Knowledge, Learning, Urbanism' with Professor Colin McFarlane. My experience of this initiative has taught me that time is always short on these occasions. So, I will immediately give the floor to Professor McFarlane for a short introduction. In the meantime, please post your questions.

<McFarlane, Colin> Hi all! First, thanks to Giovanni and Yuri for organizing this! I'm looking forward to it. I won't introduce the paper because I think you've read it, but obviously the key argument has been to consider an alternative reading of comparativism in urban studies.

Perhaps I should say that I wrote the paper partly about development debates, and the ghettoizing of development theory into global North and South, and then came to urban debates from that perspective. Reading Robinson's (2006) '*Ordinary Cities*' was particularly important for me because it showed that these issues aren't confined to development or urbanism, but are more engrained.

<Torrisi, Giovanni> While we wait for the other participants to join I will ask the first question…

What made you choose the quotation by Italo Calvino at the beginning of your article? — 'To distinguish the other cities' qualities, I must speak of a first city that remains implicit.' (Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*)

<McFarlane, Colin> Giovanni — the phrase from Calvino was pure coincidence. I was reading *Invisible Cities* while writing the paper. I loved the book, and it struck me that Marco Polo, in his tales of far-away cities, often referred to his own city — Venice — so there was an implicit comparativism…

And then I thought, don't we all do that? I'm from Glasgow originally; I guess when I visit new cities somewhere in the background I am informed by my experiences of that city.

<Torrisi, Giovanni> Comparative urban studies is a very interesting field of studies. Some time ago, we also organized a blended Masters course on this subject at www.e-urbs.net.

<McFarlane, Colin> I think comparative urban studies is becoming more popular, partly because of growing interest in the cities of the global South.

<Torrisi, Giovanni> OK. Let us begin with the first question from Lazaros Karaliotas.

<Karaliotas, Lazaros> First, thank you for a stimulating paper. In your short description of Mumbai's 2003 Vision (p. 738) as a mode of integrative comparativism, you mention power relations as an important aspect of the production of comparisons. What was their role in the case of Mumbai that you mention?

<McFarlane, Colin> Lazaros: thanks for the question. I think the role of power in relation to Vision Mumbai was multifaceted. Part of it was a power of seduction — the seduction of an image of the city as global, ordered, easy, and 'attractive' in a particular way, but there was also the power of association — of enrolling different actors in the comparison with, say, Shanghai. Those actors included think-tanks, companies, architects and elite residential groups.

<Torrisi, Giovanni> Lazaros, would you like to add something?

<Karaliotas, Lazaros> Thank you, no this answers my question.

<Torrisi, Giovanni> Very good. Thanks to both. Christy Nwachi proposes a question. Let us read it.

<Nwachi, Christy> Hello Professor Colin McFarlane and everyone. A well written and thought-provoking paper indeed. It seems comparativism has always been implied unconsciously in urban studies because each urban study, in its own uniqueness, points to defects and merits in other settings. Do we, then, really need to make the process of comparison so obvious? How will such open comparisons help in formulating policies that would increase the livability of urban centers in their diverse environmental, political and cultural externalities? Urban phenomena seem too divergent and complex, and this is where categorization comes in. It seems to be unavoidable if comparativism is absolutely necessary, leading to the danger of over-generalization from a few examples.

<McFarlane, Colin> Thanks Nwachi. Good question! Policymakers constantly use comparison to develop policy — e.g. around the creative city, or zero tolerance, or architectural design — so part of the task for critical urbanists is to interrogate those comparisons. But then there is the question of whether there might be things we can learn from other cities that make cities — as you put it — more livable. So, we might look to how some cities in the 'global South' use subsidized food stores, or participatory budgeting (in its radical form). In other words, comparisons can widen the discursive field, multiply the options, and those options can produce new categorizations. The hope is then that they are more progressive and can be maintained as such, and there's no guarantee of that of course!

<Torrisi, Giovanni> Nwachi, would you like to answer to that?

<Nwachi, Christy> Yes I agree, but comparativism should not be seen as a panacea for all urban studies.

<McFarlane, Colin> I agree that comparativism is no panacea. More is needed. In terms of a project of postcolonial urbanism, for instance, there are institutional elements and power relations that preclude a more equal engagement between scholars in different parts of the world. This is about more than just debates on comparison.

<Torrisi, Giovanni> Thanks a lot. Both Sai Balakrishnan and Melanie Lombard stress the relationship to the discussion during the online meeting with Professor Robinson. Let us begin with the question by Sai.

<Balakrishnan, Sai> This is a question that I've been thinking about since our discussion with Professor Robinson. Are there any disciplinary inheritances in the comparative

method? For instance, anthropologists are generally wary of comparative method; political scientists always bound comparisons within national and other, similar political-economic contexts. What do these disciplinary biases mean for comparative method in urban theory? Also, could you talk more about a very intriguing question that you raised at the end of the paper: 'how do we differentiate or specify comparison in relation to its related family of terms —— for example, juxtaposition, analogy, homology, mobility, connection, and convergence?' (p. 739).

<McFarlane, Colin> Sai: great question, thanks! I think I am writing from a geography/development perspective, where comparison has featured largely in relation to the North–South divide and to certain forms of paradigmatic urbanism (e.g. LA)...

Anthropology as you point out is different. We could look at this by saying: "Okay, what can we learn from different disciplinary traditions of thinking comparativism?" So, in anthropology, one of the things I find interesting (in James Ferguson's, 2006, work e.g.), is the clear sense that you can read larger processes —— colonialism, capitalism, socialism, etc.—— in local sites. This disrupts the idea, more prevalent in geography, that you have to think city-nation-global as interacting scales. Meaning that the unit of comparison —— something Jenny Robinson opens up brilliantly —— becomes not about city/nation but about sites which contain the presence of other scales in different ways. So there is something here about opening out the unit of comparison. And I guess you could do the same with political science.

In terms of the family of terms… I guess the point here is that I was aware writing the paper that I switched between different kinds of comparison: juxtaposition (e.g. just experimenting with different cities to see what comes out the other end), analogy (this city seems different, this one seems similar)… and so you start to think perhaps it is not simply comparison we're talking about here, but different forms of relationality. All of which might lead us into new advantages and disadvantages.

<Torrisi, Giovanni> The question from Melanie Lombard follows:

<Lombard, Melanie> Hi Colin, thanks for an interesting paper —— it resonated with Robinson's 'Cities in a World of Cities', which we discussed previously. I am interested in a point which arose implicitly in both papers, and which you address in the final section of your paper, regarding framing categories such as 'North' and 'South'. In my own work on lived experiences of urban informal settlements in Mexico, I have struggled with the concept of 'informality', which is usually conceived as the undesirable counterpart of 'formality'; but replacing such categories can be equally problematic. Perhaps these are 'non-dispensable fictions', as Robinson (quoting Mitchell) suggests; or do you see the potential for rethinking, or replacing, such categories, which seem to underpin the imperative for a postcolonial urban studies?

<McFarlane, Colin> Hi Melanie! Thanks for your question. I've read some of your work and really liked it, so it's nice to hear from you. The formality/informality thing is central, it seems to me, to the comparativism debate. Partly because formal is usually associated

with the global North, and informal with the cities of the South. I think Ananya Roy's work is critical here. She has been arguing that when we compare internationally, we see a much more complex and variegated picture.

So, for instance, planning, she argues (2005; 2009) in relation to Indian cities and others, is often an informal enterprise —— e.g. suspending regulations, back room deals, and so on; while the lives of 'informal settlements' can often be very formally organized. I think this is partly what Chatterjee (2004) gets to with 'political society' —— that informality can be very formalized, and goes through different routes from those of 'civil society' as a bourgeois conception.

All of which means comparativism can unsettle the division of formal and informal, both in terms of comparing within cities (e.g. planning and 'slums') and between cities (e.g. North and South). Ultimately, I think we need informal and formal, but only as heuristic starting points —— they quickly break down in the practices of different groups (planners, residents, activists, etc.). —— I hope that begins to answer your question.

\<Torrisi, Giovanni\> Melanie and Sai, would you like to respond further to Professor McFarlane? You can intervene directly in the 'lesson' window.

\<Lombard, Melanie\> Yes, I think unsettling the categories is part of it (looking for the informal in the formal, and vice versa); but I think that equally important is the recognition of dynamic tension within existing categories —— such as the recognition that informality can be creative and productive too.

\<Torrisi, Giovanni\> Sai?

\<Balakrishnan, Sai\> My question is answered, thanks.

\<Torrisi, Giovanni\> Wonderful... let's give the floor to Daniell Labbé:

\<Labbé, Danielle\> Following up on this idea of 'implicit comparativism', I am unclear on how this translates into research. Is it mostly a matter of making one's previous urban experience known to the reader (in the kind of reflective way promoted in gender studies) or should it play out more directly in the construction of theory? And if so, how?

\<McFarlane, Colin\> Thanks Danielle. The point about implicit comparativism is to open up comparison a bit. Urban studies has tended to think of comparison as explicit —— e.g. comparing case study A with B —— so I wanted to ask about comparison as a kind of architecture of thought. Partly this is about self-criticism, in a positive rather than negative sense. So yes, thinking about what we are referring to when we make a claim about the city, and what informs it. We don't have perfect knowledge about our thinking, but it's worthwhile to ask where our assumptions/claims come from....

In terms of research, what does that mean? It might mean deploying a more explicitly comparative mode to inform our thinking and challenge our implicit comparisons. I talk about a 'travelling imagination' in this respect: trying to find

idiosyncrasies and analogies as we relate different cities, and being prepared to change our position. For me a lot of this is about an ethic of doing theory.

<Torrisi, Giovanni> Danielle, are you interested in introducing more points?

<Labbé, Danielle> No, thanks for this insightful answer.

<Torrisi, Giovanni> Now, I will send some real criticism from Wouter Van Gent — we are at 'Authors meet critics' for a reason!

<Van Gent, Wouter> Dear Professor McFarlane, thank you. Your paper was very interesting and I enjoyed reading it. However, I feel a bit ambiguous about it (I also felt ambiguous while reading Jenny Robinson's paper we discussed earlier). I can't help but wonder how to cope with or internalize your arguments and points concerning (North and South) comparisons in my own work. I chiefly compare neighbourhoods and cities across Western Europe or within my country, the Netherlands. Now, I don't consider myself to be a closed-minded, neocolonial, positivist urban researcher (does anyone?) but I often find myself wondering what or how I can learn from your arguments (beyond mere intellectual curiosity). Do you yourself do comparisons within Western contexts? And/or do you have any thoughts or comments on it?

<McFarlane, Colin> Thanks Wouter! There are a couple of things in the question. I guess the first thing to say is that in talking about the dominance of Western cities in relation to urban theory (as referent points), it needs to be clear that we're not talking about the West as colonial in its scholarship. Nor is it closed-minded. The critique for me is more modest than that. It is to say that we might find things to learn from very different (or seemingly very different) cities — and that is a worthwhile pursuit. I'm not saying we should all be constantly comparing outside the West, or that just Western comparisons are somehow a problem, but that there might be something to learn from the 'rest' and there is a tendency not to consider this.

So, my argument would be that looking to other cities across the globe might prove productive. Not that one should, but that it might be useful.

<Van Gent, Wouter> Thanks for your answer; like I mentioned in the services messages. It is funny that I often juxtapose my 'European findings' with US theory to demonstrate theory is (partly) wrong, so I get what you are trying to do.

<Torrisi, Giovanni> Here's another related question by Lewis Nathaniel.

<Lewis, Nathaniel> Hi Professor McFarlane, thanks for a really thought-provoking paper, especially for someone who has probably relied up to this point on a distinctly North American viewpoint for urban-focused articles and papers. My question is related: for a paper that is (1) geographically specific or narrow, and (2) not explicitly comparative in its focus — say, a one-city exploratory case study of a downtown redevelopment approach

invented in Canada and transferred to and popularized in the USA — is there still a benefit to mentioning loosely similar and/or instructive (though not really comparable) approaches from Global South cities, or would this feel very much parachuted in?

<**McFarlane, Colin**> Thanks Nathaniel. The parachuted urbanism image is a legitimate concern. But there are different ways of looking around at other cities for connections and disconnections. For instance, if we think of a travelling urban imagination in our research. We might consider that working at different levels. There is the quick scan: are there other examples out there that look like my case, or that share something, even if they look different; or that *are* different and therefore might be interesting to juxtapose? Following the quick scan, there might be a more sustained engagement with two or three cases. And if there is something in there, then there is a focusing further down into those contexts to consider how the argument emerges, whether there are different perspectives from the same place or project — in other words, engaging with the context in-depth.

<**Lewis, Nathaniel**> Thank you! That actually provides a lot of food for thought on how to approach this kind of 'imaginative' comparison — in other words, with a little creativity and imagination, one can always find a way to make it relevant and useful.

<**Torrisi, Giovanni**> Let us continue. Gabriele Manella introduces a different point to the discussion:

<**Manella, Gabriele**> Thank you for being here and for your paper. I have recently read *Villa Victoria* by Mario Small (2004); it is an ethnographic work in a Puerto Rican Boston neighborhood. Small proposed a conditional approach to study urban poverty and social capital, which means to say individuating some mechanisms which are not universal but could work in several situations. Do you think it could be a good 'solution' for comparative urban studies in general?

<**McFarlane, Colin**> Thanks Gabriele. I don't know the book you mention. That sounds sensible to me — trying to find similarities across spaces without assuming they are universal. I guess the question here is: Which variables do we look for? Robinson's argument around the unit of comparison seems important here — that there is a tendency in urban studies to use variables from more privileged settings and look for them in less privileged settings. So I guess it's important that we are alert to the fact that the variable we're comparing might not be the right variable in some cities — i.e. that other variables matter more in some cities than others. All of which is just to echo your point — I should read the book you mention!

<**Torrisi, Giovanni**> Gabriele, anything to add?

<**Manella, Gabriele**> Thanks Professor McFarlane. Sorry, I think it was a very particular question on a very particular aspect! I really agree with your comment: deciding which variables we look for is the most difficult task. Small focused on neighborhood resources

and neighborhood framing of residents; perhaps, it could be a good point to start!

<Torrisi, Giovanni> A question from Stuart Schrader:

<Schrader, Stuart> In the work that I am hoping to do for my dissertation –– on overseas/rural counterinsurgency by the US in the 1960s as it is transformed into domestic/urban policing in the 1960s and 1970s –– I have been struck in my preliminary research by the extent to which state officials, informed by social scientists, were expressly comparative in their thinking on how to 'solve' the problems they faced. So I am wondering how a new approach to comparativism that you and other scholars encourage can deal with the empirical fact that rather traditional and perhaps politico-ethically bankrupt comparison has been so important to creating and conditioning 'the urban' around the globe as we know it today. My subject seems to suggest that a new type of comparison is desperately needed but I also feel that, from the perspective of historical scholarship, it is not possible to simply wish away the power of implicit comparison or more traditional epistemologies of comparison used by powerful actors, which produced or strengthened the North/South divides and the developmental logics we find problematic.

<McFarlane, Colin> Thanks Stuart, your research sounds very interesting! Military thinking, and I guess counterinsurgency, is very interesting in relation to comparison, because there is often a sense of learning from other places (attacks, battles, responses) and models (predictions, pre-emption, ways of anticipating), etc. And as you say, a lot of that comparison is universalizing and sometimes Orientalist, for example. I think we need to separate out here the form of comparison counterinsurgency might do, which we need to interrogate –– looking at where the comparison came from, what was included/excluded, how the comparison produced a new object, what that object did, how it travelled, etc. –– and the sorts of comparison we might want to see in scholarly debate and practice. Counterinsurgency is never likely to want to practice postcolonial forms of comparativism (!), although it's interesting that they often actively seek out examples from social science. I guess in the same way that policymakers look for comparisons that fit their pre-given agendas.

<Torrisi, Giovanni> Stuart, would you like to answer to that?

<Schrader, Stuart> Thanks. Maybe my research will uncover 'postcolonial' forms of comparativism in unexpected places …

<Torrisi, Giovanni> Maybe. It seems a good idea to me. Adhya Anirban asks if the basis of case cities' selection has become an important factor in theorization:

<Anirban, Adhya> You have explained comparativism in urban studies as a broad framework for philosophical thinking and knowledge creation, as well as a methodological tool. Robert Yin, in his book on *Case Study Research* (2009), discusses literal replication

(predicting similar results) and theoretical replication (predicting contrasting results) as two ways of conducting case study research. Do you find there is a need for different strategies for selecting cities (for comparison) as a critical step in comparativism in urban studies? Does the basis of selection become a critical factor in knowledge creation and theorization of cities in this process?

<McFarlane, Colin> Thanks Adhya. I guess it depends on what research questions you have set yourself. For me, there is a tendency in urban studies to seek out similar cities. I'm not arguing against that, but I do wonder why very different cities are often left out automatically from selection.

The individualizing, encompassing, variation-finding schema seems useful here. I'm particularly drawn to Nijman's (2000; 2007a; 2007b) idea of the multiple-oriented comparative approach — i.e. the idea that we look for elements that are similar and elements that are unique, and try to begin with complexity rather than design research that looks for similarity alone.

<Torrisi, Giovanni> Hiba BouAkar goes back to the criteria to be used in comparative urban studies:

<BouAkar, Hiba> Thank for a very interesting paper. I agree that comparisons are necessary to enrich our understanding of cities, urbanism, and urban politics. However, while reading the paper, I got the feeling that lurking under the discussion there is a certain idea of 'kinds' of urban studies that allow for such comparison (examples that jump to mind: policies, interventions, models, etc.). Can you please expand more on that? How can we decide what study can be more informative through comparison? Boundedness? Size? Connectivity? Processes? And does the invitation to 'compare' only work in between cities like Beirut and Lagos, do we learn from comparing 'within' the same city? To your mind, would this be a different political project? Sorry it ended up being a long question.

<McFarlane, Colin> Great question Hiba. The unit of comparison is a key question. But it partly depends on what you are looking for. If you are looking for, say, how municipalities perform across the territory of their city, then you might want to compare the territorial unit between cities. But if you are interested in urban economies, you might want to compare the geographies of those economies in different cities, and that might mean comparing translocal flows of which cities become a part. Or you might be interested in particular models or forms of architecture and how they travel, in which case as you follow the model as it travels you might end up in cities you didn't previously expect to end up in...

So, there is no necessary blueprint to what we should or should not compare. The geography of the comparison is wide open — it is driven by the object of comparison.

As for comparing within cities, I am just finishing a project comparing two neighbourhoods in Mumbai. They are in some respects worlds apart. I think this is a different type of project, though, from the one I outline in the article. The commonality is

in the nature of comparison: i.e. using comparison to unsettle existing claims, to provoke new lines of inquiry, to operate as an experimental space in the research.

<Torrisi, Giovanni> Thanks a lot. Some questions from Manoj Teotia:

<Teotia, Manoj K.> Cities differ when looking at them from a structural-functional point of view (normally we try to do that in urban sociology) — of course there might be many similarities also; while differences and similarities make grounds for comparison on how to look at 'similarities' or the 'differences' . What might be a better way of comparing cities to reach better conclusions? To look more at the similarities, or to look more at the differences? To me the context matters, and differences seem to be more dominant grounds for comparison. And if this is true, how do we compare 'un-comparables' — say Northern and Southern cities?

<McFarlane, Colin> Thanks Manoj. Comparison is a relation of similarity and difference. But it is the differences that often fall out of the picture — not within particular comparisons, but as a basis for doing comparative work. Where does looking for differences take us?

It opens an experimental space for thinking about comparison. I think there is a real absence of work that pushes the learning-through-difference angle that is explicitly uncertain in its form.

As for un-comparables, I'm not sure what they would be. I don't think there is a general rule through which we can arrive at 'uncomparable'. It is a contingent decision based on the project you are interested in at a given time, I think.

<Torrisi, Giovanni> Perfect. A comment by Adya Anirban:

<Anirban, Adhya> Rather than a question, this is more of a comment and realization. Reading your thoughts on the single case study approach (one city for implicit comparison), I started to think about some possibilities of understanding translation of urban theory and knowledge as well as its appropriation after the transfer. For example, if we study Chandigarh as a single case study of a completely new capital city, it allows us (a) to understand how Le Corbusier's principles (as evident in his theoretical *La Ville Radieuse*) were transferred and translated in the Indian context, and at the same time (b) to study how the resultant urban environment has been appropriated over the years by local residents in their residential and community spaces. In some ways, this combines colonization of architectural ideas with its subaltern appropriation.

<McFarlane, Colin> Interesting stuff, Adyha, thanks for that. I'd be interested in hearing what the residents that in part do the subaltern appropriation think on this. It seems to me that urban residents constantly make comparative moves when thinking about the city (their own city and cities in general), and that we know very little about the nature/politics of comparison-as-learning amongst ordinary people (it's all policy and civil society stuff).

<Torrisi, Giovanni> Adya, any further comments on that?

<Anirban, Adhya> No, thank you. Professor McFarlane highlighted the need for understanding and learning the local knowledge constituted by the residents.

<Torrisi, Giovanni> OK. Another question by Melanie Lombard follows.

<Lombard, Melanie> Colin, earlier you mentioned Orientalism and you cite Said in your article. Could you talk a bit more about his influence on your work? In particular, what do you think the idea of Orientalism could bring to urban studies?

<McFarlane, Colin> Thanks Melanie. I think in some ways Said's work has filtered into urban studies around the idea of imaginative geographies — i.e. the resources and knowledge through which difference is produced as a comparative archive that separates 'us' and 'them'. This is interesting in relation to comparison, because Said's use of imaginative geography is explicitly comparative...

And what's captivating about that comparison, to me anyway, is that it is an archive. In other words, the circumstances and terms of the comparison may change over time, but what remains constant is the relation of us/them. This happens because new events or information is rolled into the archive: i.e. it remains both different and new, and familiar (e.g. another instance of the difference between us and them).

Then there's all the stuff on contrapuntally and travelling theory, which is to me very useful for thinking comparatively and has been picked up in literary studies in particular. A lot of what we've talked about today seems to be about contrapuntality — i.e. thinking against the grain of existing assumptions, and propagating new directions in experimental ways, even while recognizing how difficult that process is.

<Torrisi, Giovanni> This is the first time we have finished our questions on time! It shows we are ready for our holidays.

<McFarlane, Colin> Not sure that's a good or a bad thing!

<Torrisi, Giovanni> Any further questions or comments? Otherwise we could call it a day. It is already 16.45 and we began sharp on time.

<McFarlane, Colin> Can I just thank everyone for taking the time to read my article and ask questions. I really appreciate it!!

<Torrisi, Giovanni> I would like to thank Professor McFarlane for this very interesting online meeting. And to thank you all for participating in it with your insightful questions.

<BouAkar, Hiba> Thank you for the great discussion.

<Torrisi, Giovanni> Yuri Kazepov was not able to be with us today, but he sends all his

best regards to you. I hope to see all participants ready after the (Northern) summer holidays. Our next chat will be with Professor Bae-Gyoon Park (University of Seoul, Korea) and Professor Asato Saito (National University of Singapore) on 12th October. Have good holiday seasons.

<**McFarlane, Colin**> Wishing you all a great summer!

<**Torrisi, Giovanni**> For somebody it is winter ;-)

<**Lewis, Nathaniel**> Thanks —— have a great week/weekend! …

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