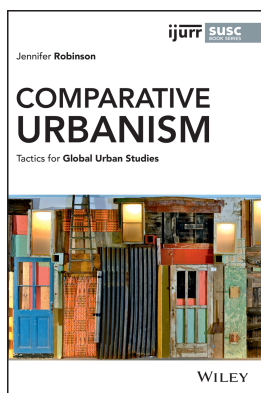

Book Reviews: A Symposium

Jennifer Robinson 2022: *Comparative Urbanism: Tactics for Global Urban Studies*. New York: Wiley-Blackwell



Every city matters

Reading *Comparative Urbanism* by Jennifer Robinson is a bit like immersing yourself in the collected works of one of your favourite authors; you rediscover with pleasure the words, themes and arguments that are so familiar and inspiring. But there are also surprises: the book opens doors onto new thoughts and ideas, as Antonio Ole's artwork 'Township-Wall' on the cover suggests.

For two decades now, I've been mobilizing Robinson's methods and theories to address the complexity of the urban as I observe it in West Africa. I've long been an adherent of Jenny's ideas, trying to put little-known African cities 'on the map' of urban theory. Like her, 'in the spirit of a decolonial agenda' (p. 8), I believe in the importance of thinking about the urban by decentring the gaze and post-colonializing urban studies. I have adopted her credo: 'starting anywhere, thinking with [elsew]here' (p. 159), because 'every case and every city matters' (p. 154).

Recently, I have been trying to contribute to Robinson's reflections on the conceptualization of the urban through an emblematic case study: the West African urban corridor that runs from Abidjan to Lagos, which is the archetype of 'expansive planetary urbanization' (p. 2). Nearly 40 million people live, move, consume and build along the 1,000-km route that connects 6 major metropolises around the Gulf of Guinea: Abidjan, Accra, Lomé, Cotonou, Porto-Novo and Lagos. Between these metropolises, secondary cities are expanding. In the interstices, rural areas are gradually disappearing under the material flows of construction sites. On a large scale, the region appears to be one continuous urban area, but on a smaller scale it reveals great differences and heterogeneous urban forms that express different cultures and identities, historical trajectories, and political choices and modes of governance. How can these cities and urban areas be compared? How can the diversity of urban production and global phenomena be highlighted?

In *Comparative Urbanism*, Robinson proposes some useful methodological tools to fully consider these urban patterns without taking shortcuts and erasing local nuances. As she suggests, the idea is not to compare cities with each other, but rather to compare urban forms and manifestations of the urban. To do this, she looked for the 'multiplicity of differentiated (repeated) outcomes' and for 'connection, variety,

repetition' (p. 10). Following Robinson's approach, my aim is not to compare five countries and six cities to each other, but to take into account the specificities of each city while observing the major urban trends that are emerging and giving shape to this mega-urban region. To make this comparison possible, my research focuses on the materiality of the city and, in particular, on the material flows.

Flows and connections

In Part II of *Comparative Urbanism*, I found particularly relevant Robinson's statement explaining that 'Tracing flows and connections which constitute the urban brings into view processes of urbanization, different kinds of urban territories, and repeated (or differentiated) instances which make up urban contexts' (p. 136). During the three years from 2016 to 2018 that I spent in the field in West Africa, I decided to follow the building materials that circulate extensively along this corridor and, in particular, to follow the flows of cement, which turns into concrete when mixed with water and sand (see my own *Concrete City*, 2023). As concrete ensures the continuity of this corridor, tracing the production of cement and the uses of concrete helps us grasp both the common and also the different social, political and economic dynamics underlying this megacity region under construction.

Following material flows and connections is a heuristic tactic for comparative experiments. It makes it possible to look for 'shared features', 'repeated urban phenomena' and 'circulating practices', as Robinson suggests, and to bring different cases with their similarities and differences into the conversation. I deployed a comparative tracking method along the corridor. On the one hand, I adopted a horizontal perspective, for which I visited the main cement factories in the region as well as the limestone quarries, and followed the loaded trucks leaving from there and traveling long distances to storage and redistribution platforms. This tracking process helped me visualize the urban forms along the corridor, materialize the intensity of urbanization mechanisms, and measure the connections between the different cities, urban peripheries and rural areas.

In parallel, I adopted a vertical, multi-scalar approach, which involved meeting the actors involved in the value chain at all levels and in the different cities, thereby facilitating the comparison—from the managers of the cement and construction companies to government officials, planners and real estate developers, from donors at the top through to the ordinary dwellers at the bottom building homes on their plots, and from the contractors, site foremen and subcontractors to all the other brokers and craftsmen in between. Each one of these actors, at their level, plays a role in producing the urban. I also conducted longer observations of and follow-up visits at ten construction sites in different neighbourhoods in Cotonou (Benin), where I was based.

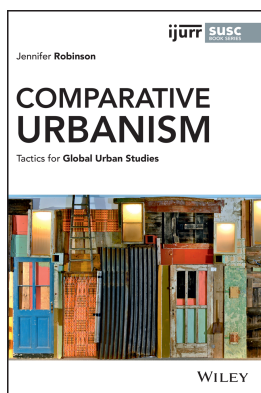
Urban territories

In her final section, Robinson develops some highly innovative and stimulating ideas about 'urban territories'. For me, as a Francophone, this notion of 'territory' makes sense because it encompasses not only political production but also the everyday practices of urban dwellers who reshape this space (p. 374). Like Robinson, I believe that the observed 'sprawling and complex forms of urbanization' (p. 313) cannot simply be described in terms of peripheries or suburbanization. The centre-periphery dichotomy no longer works; the urban has become central, large

and ubiquitous. I am convinced that the West African urban corridor is precisely one of the ‘territories that could be starting points for urban studies’ (p. 314).

If I agree with Jenny that every city matters, I would add that *Comparative Urbanism* is a book that also matters. This ‘complete work’ goes beyond a synthesis of her articles; she opens many doors to provoke unexpected and significant comparative experiments. In the conclusion, where she offers a stimulating reflection on the ‘explosion of urban studies’ (p. 383), Robinson feels that ‘some of us need to write much less and devote our energies to infrastructural and institutional transformations which are the necessary and sufficient conditions for opening urban studies to the future of the urban, and to its differences, its diversity, its divergences’ (p. 386). I sincerely urge Jennifer Robinson to keep writing, because her reflections are essential to understanding the future of the urban...

Armelle Choplin is an associate professor at the Department of Geography and Environment at the University of Geneva. She is also the Director of the Institute of Environmental Governance and Territorial Development.



The city—in another country

As an urban historical geographer, I came at this book with longstanding interests in what makes cities distinctive, and in comparisons over both space and time, as well as in the so-called ‘urban question’: whether, and how, the urban environment has an independent effect on our economic, socio-cultural and political lives.

To some, including Jennifer Robinson, apparently, the urban question has been resolved—by moving on. While Robinson does suggest that comparative research might ‘engage with existing conceptualisations’ (p. 8) and ‘interrogate’ them (p. 9), she then endorses (p. 35) arguments for planetary urbanization which are sceptical about traditional ways of thinking and which treat urbanization as being unconfined to cities (for convenience, I sometimes use ‘cities’ to refer to all urban places). Defining the city has become an ‘impossibility’ (p. 36). Instead, cities are ‘differentiated’, reflecting ‘diverse’ processes, each ‘distinctive’ in place and time (pp. 4–5) so that their ‘multiplicity of forms [and] trends’ calls forth a similarly wide range of ‘interpretations’ (p. 35). This is unpromising. Certainly, every place is unique, but what is it that enables us—not just urbanists, but everyone—to speak in generic terms about cities?

Over decades, many sociologists, geographers, historians, economists and political scientists have suggested answers to this question. Robinson mentions a few, but largely to dismiss them. Louis Wirth’s arguments are labelled ‘parochial’ (p. 35), while discussion of the ‘urban land nexus’ is sidelined because it too is culturally specific and ignores places without a land market (p. 272). Other arguments (notably, those relating to the economy, land rent, markets and governance) are hardly mentioned at all. This includes arguments developed by political economists such as Anne Haila concerning land rent; by urban economists such as Edward Glaeser, who discuss agglomeration economies, real estate markets, land values and externalities; and the arguments of historians, political scientists and others who have shown how juxtapositions of people and activities pose particular problems of governance that require regulation and infrastructure. It is true, as Robinson suggests, that some debates became ‘arcane’ (p. 39), but not all of them—and the stakes are high. These and related debates amount to a substantial body of useful thinking about what cities are and how they matter.

Passing over such issues, Robinson elaborates claims about the need to look beyond the global North to develop new ways of thinking about cities. As she shows, this is where comparative research (of various sorts) makes a valuable contribution. These are valid and important lines of reasoning, but they could usefully have built on existing concepts by assessing them in new settings, perhaps using the ‘most different’ comparisons that Robinson discusses.

Take for example the ‘urban land nexus’. It is unclear, globally, what proportion of urban places are shaped by some version of a capitalist land market; it would be important to find out. The proportion is probably high, and it include cities from all geographical regions. It might be that ‘land nexus’ serves poorly as a concept where the market does not dominate, such as informal settlements, towns in the global South or places where indigenous land tenure persists. Even there, however,

analogous methods are needed to handle the *de facto* externalities: the effects (both good and bad) of land users on close neighbours. The deployment of concepts such as ‘land nexus’ and ‘externalities’ is a potentially productive—Robinson might call it ‘generative’—way of testing (and if necessary revising) such ideas, and/or of generating more capacious ones. The same goes for other ways of defining the character of urban settings: just because a theory was developed in Chicago that does not make it irrelevant in Kolkata.

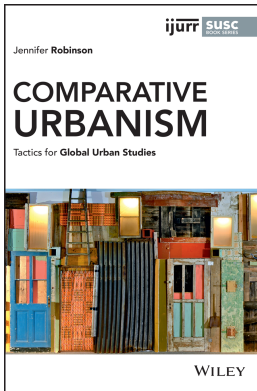
Having interests that are as much historical as contemporary, I am also struck by the need for another dimension in the discussion of comparison. As L.P. Hartley famously said, the past is a foreign country and they do things differently there. Casually, we make historical comparisons all the time, contrasting house prices, congestion and political preoccupations with what prevailed a generation ago. During the COVID-19 outbreak, many drew parallels with earlier pandemics; lately, commentators have compared the new cold war with the old one; as I write, financial analysts are contrasting fallout from a bankrupt Silicon Valley bank with what happened in 2008. Curiously, despite widespread interest in such comparisons, no-one (to my knowledge) has undertaken the sort of systematic analysis of historical comparison in the same way that Robinson (and others) has applied to the geographical.

Why so? Historians aspire to plain language and are notoriously, although not universally, averse to theoretical debates; social scientists favour neologisms and rarely go back further than the recent past. There are exceptions of course, and Robinson usefully discusses a few; notably, Charles Tilly and Philip McMichael. But neither she nor those writers have explored the parallels between historical and geographical comparisons. Discussion of ‘most similar’ and ‘most different’ strategies could be a place to start. An example of the former might compare the urban housing market in the United States today with that of a generation ago, before global securitization held sway. The latter might jump further back in time—and also sideways—considering whether ‘land market’ illuminates colonial Calcutta and, if not, what other understandings are needed. Some historians have made such leaps, but without discussing the methodological pros and cons.

The obvious challenge of historical comparison is practical: we cannot visit the past, nor encourage its residents to speak, while much evidence has been lost or destroyed. Conversely, one conceptual advantage is that—more so than with the geographical equivalent—it forefronts the social dynamics that bring about change. That could provide useful knowledge for policymakers, and indeed for anyone who simply wants to understand cities better. Robinson speaks eloquently about our need to understand social processes, and about how geographical comparisons can be used to reveal them. Adding a fuller historical dimension could surely help.

It should be obvious that the bees in my bonnet are not relevant only (or even primarily) to *Comparative Urbanism*. Indeed, by recognizing complexity and the value of historical thinking—most notably in her discussion of ‘genetic’ comparisons—Robinson advances the debate. Nonetheless, to my thinking the argument could be pushed further back in time, while being erected on a more substantial (if permanently unfinished) ‘urban’ foundation.

Richard Harris is an urban historical geographer at McMaster University.



Comparison by and against design: crossing lines with Jennifer Robinson

In researching and writing *Comparative Urbanism: Tactics for Global Urban Studies*, Jennifer Robinson has performed an extraordinary service to academic research. The book brings to fruition at least two decades of Robinson's thinking, reflection and rare openness to diverse theoretical traditions and geographies, as she pushes the boundaries of the comparative imagination beyond precedent. Those who have embarked upon comparative urban research in the past decade might take for granted that there is a vibrant and geographically expansive discourse on the value of comparison in urban studies. But this would be to wholly

underestimate how thin this discourse was before Robinson's work appeared and shot like electricity through the field, and how her triggering of the comparative impulse has reshaped the trajectory of urban scholarship, as well as having a personal impact on many urban scholars—myself included.

With this latter point in mind, in this short reflection I consider three themes that weave across Robinson's book: first, some aspects of *comparison as design* that have resonated for me and for several collaborative projects in which I am involved; second, the importance of *comparison as practice*; and third, what might be termed *comparison as experience*.

When beginning my doctoral studies in 2007 at the London School of Economics, the mantras of 'most similar', 'most different' and '*don't select on the dependent variable!!*' rang in the air for those pursuing comparative research; diktats honed over decades of theorizing in comparative politics. For a particular kind of comparative case-study research that prizes the isolation of critical causal factors, these principles have value. Attempting to think systematically through similarities and differences in the process of case selection was certainly part of my own journey. But attempting to adhere rigidly to these framings when comparing things as unwieldy, unbounded and thickly knit as cities soon becomes a straitjacket. As Robinson notes, even those who set out with such 'scientific' comparative procedures in mind will find that, in practice, their comparison bursts out of the frame to generate something quite different, and often much richer.

What Robinson has done, then, is to switch on the floodlights to reveal the boundless potential of comparative design, while at the same time intellectually legitimizing modes of comparison that people had already been pursuing or hoping to pursue, albeit hesitantly, without certainty and even with some degree of guilt. Moreover, she has done this not by rejecting extant modes of comparison, but by drawing on the best of comparative thinking emanating from key figures such as Tilly, Pickvance and Abu-Lughod, and augmenting these to present new terrains of possibility. Of particular interest to me are the ways in which she challenges the territorial foundations of conventional comparisons, and the 'privileging of the city scale as the site for urban processes' (p. 70), proposing instead to draw 'alternative maps of causality' (p. 70).

Rethinking the scalar ontology of urban research and urban comparison is something that resonates strongly with my own book, *Politics and the Urban Frontier* (which was being written concurrently with Robinson's, sadly preventing any direct

engagement with hers during the writing process). In her discussions of conjunctural comparison, Robinson argues that the prism of the ‘conjuncture’ enables any urban ‘case’ to be de-linked from the territory of the city (p. 253), and explores the potential for multi-scalar design to facilitate the reconceptualization of urban phenomena. In *Politics and the Urban Frontier*, the tracing of causal dynamics across interacting city, national and global scales as well as the scale of the supra-national region—in this case East Africa—was central to enabling me to distil drivers of similarity and difference that cannot be reduced either to forces acting *within* the city, or ‘global’ processes acting *upon* the city. A focus on East African regional dynamics and how they condition the urban has also featured in other comparative work emerging from within the region, which highlights the shared sense of urgency among many East African governments to transform the faces of major cities and usher in dramatic new infrastructures.

Robinson has also led the way in providing the intellectual foundations and legitimation for comparing cities across the global North and South; a practice that prior to the last decade was surprisingly rare. She rightly rebukes the economic determinism of previously dominant comparative approaches—which assumed that similar levels of national economic development were a pre-requisite for comparison—inspiring a wave of exploratory urban North/South comparisons. Indeed, the ways in which the ‘ordinary cities’ of the South might inform not just abstract urban theory but more practical urban questions in the global North is an area of growing interest. I would, however, also suggest that until recently there have been few systematic comparisons between cities in the global South (and within specific geographic regions), and it is important to address this oversight too. While it is positive (and overdue) that North/South comparison has become a legitimate exercise, we ought to take care to ensure that the inclusion of global North cities in any comparison is not seen as an indicator of its importance or innovativeness.

Another key contribution of Robinson’s book is her attention to how comparison unfolds in practice, and the exhortation to harness the richness of comparative practice in all its complexity. As she points out, the process of identifying, revising and refining grounds for comparison *is itself a process of conceptualization*. Meaning and even theory are produced ‘as part of the extended “event” of producing commensurability’ (p. 282). Recent large comparative projects such as those relating to the dynamics of planetary urbanization and the lives of African urban peripheries have in their published outputs disclosed the procedures, challenges and serendipities associated with building and sharpening a persuasive comparison over time.

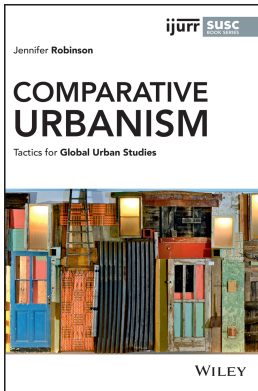
This focus on allowing the practice itself to be generative of comparative rationales and analytical frames has informed several collaborative projects in which I am currently involved, such as the Ethiopian-led ‘Migration, Urbanisation and Conflict in Africa’ project. With research teams spanning Ethiopia, Nigeria, Uganda and the UK, this nine-city comparative project was designed with three thematic axes of comparison in mind. But it has also involved an openness to other within-country and cross-country comparative logics that have, through the practice of the research, sometimes come unexpectedly to the fore. The real comparative configuration then appears more like an untidy cross-hatch than a set of ‘lines of comparison’, and through this some of the most surprising and fruitful comparative analyses have been allowed to emerge.

Finally, and shifting the focus to my own movements between cities as a researcher and resident, Robinson invites us to consider comparison as a realm of lived experience, transcending the distinction between life and work for those of us who have made comparison part of our 'business'. Citing Janet Abu-Lughod's reflections on how her experience of Cairo affected her interpretations of New York relative to Chicago, Robinson celebrates the opening up of 'comparative conversations' in which context is 'the starting point for conceptualisation' (p. 300).

Indeed, I cannot fully make sense of my impressions of Sheffield—my home city since arriving here (as a lifelong Londoner) for the first time in 2013—without taking into account my experiences of doctoral research in Kampala and Kigali from 2009 to 2011. These urban encounters somehow made Sheffield simultaneously more and less explicable. More explicable because I had now, in East Africa, already lived in cities with decimated industries set in a plunging topography of hills and valleys, with all the infrastructural challenges this poses, and where the tussle between built and natural environment is constantly on display. But less explicable because, having seen the economic growth and soaring infrastructure investment characterizing those East African capitals, it was hard to comprehend how a city in one of the world's richest economies had been so neglected and disinvested.

Can and should we attempt to separate our professional work of comparison from the resonances, analogies and epistemic practices that derive from our wider urban experiences? Robinson reminds us that, on the contrary, we should embrace the comparative impulse in all its fullness. Better still, she has given us a thoughtful and elaborate manual with which to take this practice forward.

Tom Goodfellow, is Professor of Urban Studies & International Development at the University of Sheffield.



Galvanizing spatial imaginations otherwise

Jennifer Robinson's *Comparative Urbanism: Tactics for Global Urban Studies* is an ambitious and inspiring manifesto to recalibrate the field of critical urban studies. I first encountered Robinson's *Ordinary Cities* when I was finishing my PhD in Urban Planning in the United States. At the start of my studies, I was told that to contribute to the field I had to engage with a case from the provincial United States and with a well-established debate in Anglo-Saxon academia. The complex urbanization dynamics of Colombian cities and urban Latin American thought seemed quite extraneous to conventional authoritative urban knowledge production. *Ordinary Cities*

became a powerful tool for me to reassert my (dis)jointed location in the daunting academic world and it gave me a language with which to frame my contribution. In a way, what has been at stake in Robinson's intellectual journey is a deep commitment to the de/post-colonial project that pushes us to recognize/imagine/produce urban knowledge otherwise. *Comparative Urbanism* offers a carefully crafted repertoire of tactics to enact multiple comparative imaginations. Here I will illustrate how I have been in conversation with three of Robinson's key ideas on comparative urbanism.

Every case matters: thinking through elsewhere(s) allows us to reassess the difference, diversity and distinctiveness of the urban

My work has examined what the reformatting of global urban studies as introduced by Robinson can offer to the field of urban design. I have proposed a 'comparative urban design' approach to think across the multiplicity of spatial agencies at work in different settings and to frame future-making strategies in the search for spatial justice. Using research-based design, we explored the potential of border-making practices in Medellín and Beirut. To engage with the multicultural background of our Master's students at University College London we prompted a set of pedagogical provocations centred on a relational enquiry of the urban. We combined a genetic (urban processes) focus with generative (research-led) comparisons as part of the studio pedagogy. On the one hand, we explored how to think with the materiality of urban space by focusing on the constantly shifting physical and symbolic construction of borders in the privatization of public spaces in Beirut and the exclusions brought about by urban growth management in Medellín. On the other hand, we traced the spatial agency of actors contesting those bordering practices so as to ground context-specific yet trans-local strategies of design intervention. This pedagogical experimentation enabled us to reveal possibilities for transforming the power dynamics that were embedded in their spatial configurations in conflict-prone contexts. Comparative urban design can thus become a method of both design inquiry and pedagogy, enabling us to share learnings between cities in order to foster global understandings of difference and to serve as a basis for enacting trans-local communities of emancipatory praxis.

Positionality is crucial for new conceptualizations and methodological innovation

I acknowledge that my space of enunciation is as a migrant mestiza from Colombia located in an elite university in the belly of the former British Empire. I am speaking from the privilege of this place and detached from the collectives that are on the front lines of anti-colonial practices imperilling their lives in this struggle. This (dis)location gives me grounds to propose the concept of 'cardinal insubordination' with which to reimagine theory-making as a linchpin strategy that can foster epistemic and restorative justice to heal the 'colonial wound' arising from urban practices. This provocation calls for thinking anew not only the palimpsest of urban relations across contexts, but also the constellation of actors that remain at the margins of who is considered a theory-maker and the myriad trans-local solidarity networks we need to learn from.

The essence of cardinal insubordination is to problematize the way imperial domination uses cardinal points to portray a Western-centric understanding of the world and locks us into seeing the world through North/South and East/West binaries. Following the Cartesian tradition, the separation of the body from the outside world has also permeated our understanding of knowledge generation, which is based on a logocentric perspective and a dualistic ontology. Latin American scholars of decolonialism have discussed the notion of 'relational ontologies' for engaging with the links to/between the human, non-human and spiritual worlds in order to address the de-sacralization of territorial relations of meaning-making. This approach reframes a 'grammar of the surroundings' that goes beyond a cognitive understanding of spatial relations. Although Robinson's work does not engage directly with the Latin American decolonial school, I recognize the echoes of conversations with postcolonial debates that nurture her work around how we can remap urban theory-making.

The intellectual future of urban studies is being rehearsed in myriad collective experimentations of collaborative work across places inspired by Black, feminist and anti-racist studies

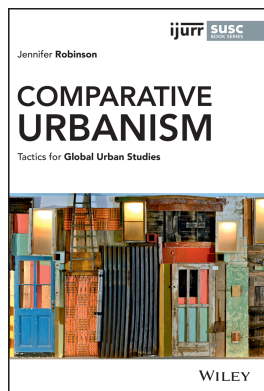
For comparative urbanism to thrive, it requires a different way of framing research. In my engaged scholarship I have used the notion of 'trans-local learning alliances' for knowledge co-production across cities with academic and non-academic partners. These alliances are understood as a collective space for enabling an ecology of knowledges where all the partners are active learners using the authority of their universities to work towards cognitive justice. Notwithstanding the power/knowledge asymmetries and contradictions of any collaborative project, I have worked with partners in cities of the so-called global South committed to fighting for the right to the city. We have explored how urban design and planning can foster cognitive justice as a necessary condition to advance urban equality, using storytelling as a pivotal means for bridging the ecologies of urban knowledges.

As with any collective experimentation, social bonds, trust and joy are required. In the context of our project on urban knowledge co-production for urban equality, and inspired by post-colonial feminism, we coined the term 'affective infrastructures' to refer to the unspoken relations that sustain trajectories of joint research that concatenate feelings and experiences when working across continents.

Nonetheless, if we want to continue to successfully navigate the challenges of trans-local collaboration and the political economy of higher education and academic publishing, it is essential that we enact new ethical protocols for co-authoring research. In other words, to crystallize the comparative imagination that Robinson invites us to enact we need to change many of our everyday practices of knowledge production.

In sum, Robinson's book brings an all-encompassing critique to urban philosophy and opens many windows—not only onto ways to theorize the urban from anywhere, but also onto the fertile ground of methodological innovation. This book is indispensable for all urbanists!

Catalina Ortiz is an Associate Professor at University College London.



The task of the comparativist

Comparative Urbanism offers a wide-ranging set of reflections on the state of the art of urban research in and through the problem of comparison. By including both ‘genetic’ and ‘generative’ forms of comparison within the discussion, Jennifer Robinson is able to present an overview of the debates about Weberian sociology, feminist urbanism, assemblage theory and theories of planetary urbanization, to name just a few. Reading these synopses, the reader also rediscovers numerous key terms that have been debated from competing perspectives. For example, Robinson reflects upon the promises and limitations of ‘informality’ as a hook for comparative method and a point of reference in the twists and

turns of urban theory since the 1970s. She concludes that after two generations of debate—and real-world dynamics of informalization—the notion of informality may have outlived its conceptual and methodological usefulness (pp. 358–62).

Reading *Comparative Urbanism* confirms that Robinson’s mobilization of Walter Benjamin’s ideas remains a fundamental and lasting contribution to urban research. The reader will remember that in *Ordinary Cities* (2006) Benjamin played a pivotal role in Robinson’s critique of neo-Weberian sociology on both sides of the Atlantic, including its developmentalist and Eurocentric habits of placing urban ways of life on an evolutionary path from tradition to modernity, community to society. She mobilized Benjamin’s dialectical (as opposed to ‘progressive’) conception of modernity as a fractured experience of time, a clash of temporalities experienced within the interstices of urban life, to develop a truly cosmopolitan form of urban research. She did so by pushing Benjamin’s own limited comparative gestures (in his ruminations on Moscow, Naples and Marseille) to recentre urban theory in the peripheries of the imperial world, notably through debates about the city, country and modernity in the Zambian Copperbelt.

Comparative Urbanism extends the arguments Robinson has developed since 2006 to firm up Benjamin’s place as a reference point in debates about comparative method. Elaborated in Part IV as well as in the book’s conclusion (pp. 305–6; 340–71) is the idea that Benjamin’s material conception of now-time invites us to study cities through ‘elsew(here)’ (p. 369). Grasping the modern urban experience as a dialectic of time (then and now), as Benjamin does, makes it possible to see that any urbanized material landscape represents an opening for comparative strategies because it is constituted by various layers of history. As such, it combines in distinct ways a range of temporalities with the temporality of commodity production; the temporality it shares with cities and towns in some other place, elsewhere in the world. I would say that Robinson’s project to mobilize Benjamin’s spatialized conception of temporal relations for purposes of comparative research remains as fresh as I thought it was when I first read it.

The Benjaminian threads that are woven through *Comparative Urbanism* also invite us to engage in further debate. One such debate concerns the relationship between time, capitalism and the world order. Benjamin's notion of now-time is predicated on the harmonization of time regimes; the rise to dominance of abstract or linear time through which the imperative of the 'new' establishes itself in the form of the commodity (and its necessary destiny: ruin). The comparability of urban social spaces (understood as the tension-ridden meeting-point of past and present) thus depends on myriad uneven and combined processes (from urbanization and state-bound territorialization to the formation of the world market) through which rhythms of production and reproduction are (re)integrated at various scales of accumulation.

In the modern world, there has never been a period when imperialism (colonial or otherwise) did not play a crucial organizing role in the tension-ridden production of abstract time. While Benjamin did not provide an integral account of imperialism himself (or, indeed, of historical capitalism), Robinson's original intervention clearly signalled that Benjamin can only be brought into debates about modernity in Zambia by correcting his lack of attention to the colonial foundations of European world cities (e.g. Paris and Berlin) and by specifying the role of British imperialism in organizing the networks between world market dynamics, (re)productive relations and town-country linkages in the Copperbelt.

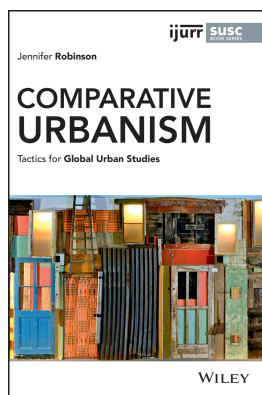
Comparative Urbanism does not, however, confront imperial questions head on. While the book is deeply committed to tackling geographic inequities in academic knowledge production (pp. 383–6), these inequities are not situated directly within broader (sub)imperial networks. And contemporary discussions (about Southern, Black and Indigenous urbanisms) that *might* provide openings to investigate the imperial aspects of today's capitalist world are not pursued in these specific terms (pp. 27–34; 210–16; 331–6).

Nonetheless, thanks to its impressive breadth, *Comparative Urbanism* does indeed offer several ways forward. In many respects, the book is a survey of the state of the field rather than a programmatic statement for a single (never mind integrated) perspective, and it therefore presents a number of opportunities to revisit the strands of work identified in the text. One could ask, for example, whether it might be possible to establish closer links between Robinson's Benjaminian insights and the chapters that deal with 'connections' and 'relations' (pp. 125–97). In other words, is it possible to use 'genetic' forms of comparison to embed Benjamin's micrological investigations of the object world in a relational approach (Gillian Hart) in order to understand the world as a concrete, moving and open-ended totality (pp. 108–18; 263–67)? While Robinson's discussion of relational and incorporated comparison is sceptical in important ways, her discussion of Benjamin hints at this possibility (pp. 348–53).

Deepening such linkages (across *Comparative Urbanism* and beyond) is important for political as well as methodological reasons. As we already know from interpreters like Susan Buck-Morss, Harry Harootunian and Daniel Bensaïd, Benjamin's method was intended to unearth critical—indeed, revolutionary—energies within the visual culture of the modern world. Robinson's use of photographs (of Paris and Lima, for example, pp. 198–9) gestures to the technique of montage, which for Benjamin was meant to render sensible—flash-like—the ruinous contradictions of capitalism by accentuating their spatial juxtapositions in the urban

world of objects. In this light, the constellation of ideas that is *Comparative Urbanism* invites us to relate the task of the comparativist to the task of the author as producer and translator (as Benjamin has it). Engaging in comparative tactics can thus also alert our senses to the disruptive energies hidden in plain sight. This may then generate a commentary powerful enough to make us grasp the contours of the world as if through a crystal, through the most minute material objects we encounter in our daily lives.

Stefan Kipfer teaches in the Faculty of Environmental and Urban Change, York University, Toronto.



Comparative tactics for global urban policy studies

Comparative Urbanism by Jennifer Robinson is an invitation to transcend standard notions of comparative urban analysis. The book proposes alternatives to conventional comparative strategies which assume that cases must share similar characteristics such as region, type of governance or population. All the way through, the reader is invited to imagine that studies do not necessarily need to compare cities in the global North such as London, Paris and New York to be of heuristic value. Instead, it stresses that every case can be relevant if the comparison is conducted with appropriate academic rigor. Here I highlight three main ideas of the book, which offer an initial roadmap for future

generations of scholars working on urban policy studies.

First, Robinson invites scholars across the globe to venture into imaginative comparative urban thinking. This involves comparing cities which lie in very different regions of the world: comparing Porto Alegre with Paris, for example, or Bogotá with Barcelona. Such a comparative endeavor has become increasingly necessary in recent years, given the global diffusion of policy innovations such as Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) and Participatory Budgeting (PB), which ignore the global South/North division and circulate around the world. Comparisons based on observing similar policies in different contexts have become crucial to understanding contemporary policymaking in cities. This exercise can reveal variations between policy models and how agents translate and adapt them to local realities. It also provides a way of understanding the power dimensions that underlie policy transfers, such as political ideology or geographic proximity, and the forces that resist them, such as civil society mobilizations against the forced evictions resulting from mega urban projects. At the same time, it offers an interesting methodological strategy to find out why some policies succeed or fail in different contexts and how policies transform the lives of inhabitants once a model has been transferred from elsewhere.

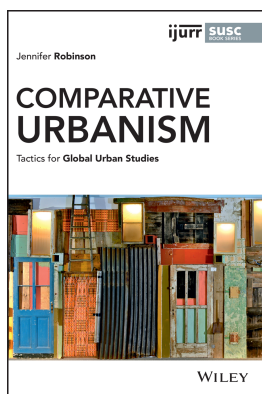
This leads to a second component of Robinson's book that I would like to emphasize, which is the idea of moving beyond the comparison of spatially bounded units such as a neighborhood, district or municipality. Such a perspective limits thinking about the global networked cities we live in today. Instead, *Comparative Urbanism* stresses the myriad transnational connections between territories, which often mean that urban phenomena in the global North and South are intrinsically intertwined. In fact, cities are not only affected by similar problems such as traffic congestion, gentrification and climate change, but are also influenced by the same agents offering advice, providing funding and advocating specific policy models, whether individuals (e.g. Peñalosa advocating BRT), international organizations (e.g. UN-Habitat promoting the New Urban Agenda and slum upgrading), networks (e.g. C40 and climate action plans), private advisory organizations (e.g. McKinsey) or foundations (e.g. the Rockefeller Resilient Cities Program). Nor is it essential to compare static units: researchers can analyze transnational processes as well as the movement of ideas, people, knowledge, symbols and models. Observing the '“labyrinthine capillaries” of the transnational' (p. 34) is a key component for understanding convergence and divergence between cities, as well as the (often 'invisible') interconnection between urban contexts and phenomena.

Finally, Robinson's reflection encourages scholars to explore new frontiers of conceptual innovation and theory building. The author insists on the need to 'bypass the often obligatory "northern" reference points of urban studies' (p. 30). In fact, concepts developed in certain contexts, such as cities in the United States or Europe, might not be appropriate to capture the changing urban reality of other places, such as the informality and local policies of Lima or Luanda, for example. Nonetheless, the obligatory use of certain notions frequently compels scholars to produce artificial fits for analyzing the urban; a practice that is often mandated in order to meet the demands of peer reviewers when trying to get funding or a paper published.

Providing new vocabularies is essential to understanding and accessing the multiplicity and diversity of urban phenomena that affect cities across the globe: concepts developed for understanding the reality in South African coastal cities such as Cape Town or Durban might also be interesting for understanding Recife in Brazil or San Francisco in the United States. Similarly, there is a need for creative and innovative theories. Scholars should therefore look to different sources and authors for inspiration, from other disciplines, schools of thought and regions of the world: Deleuze or Paulo Freire for example. Such a cross-fertilization of concepts and theories in the form of a dialogue between the global South and North could become a route to producing innovative thinking about urban phenomena.

Comparative Urbanism is a book of great value not only for urban scholars but also for policy researchers working with contemporary urban issues. Robinson draws attention to the multiple elsewheres that are present in each city and inspires academics to explore new avenues to find comparative methodological strategies. She also invites them to spotlight new cases from Africa, Latin America, Asia and other regions of the world that have been less covered by the literature to date. There is still much work to do in order to produce a critical mass of groundbreaking comparative urban policy analysis, develop a new repertoire of comparative urban practice and consolidate avant-garde approaches and concepts. This book is an important step in that direction.

Osmany Porto de Oliveira is Assistant Professor of International Relations at the Federal University of São Paulo.



For researchers of cities in Eastern Europe, Jennifer Robinson's work has been a great source of inspiration and innovative ideas for many years. The publication of *Ordinary Cities* nearly twenty years ago opened (for me, at least) new perspectives and raised questions concerning both the origins of our knowledge about cities in the global North and beyond, and also the relevance of current urban theory for the world of cities. This latest book develops these ideas further.

At the centre of *Comparative Urbanism* is the idea of opening urban research to comparisons across various geographies and typologies of the urban. I find this important in two respects. First, broader comparative agendas provide a genuine test for urban theories currently reliant on selective geographies of the urban and 'archetypal' cases located within the industrial societies of the North. The transferability of theories derived from such cases has been weakened by emerging patterns of urbanization, and changes in the geography of global production and trade, that have destabilized urban hierarchies of the industrial society. Second, broader comparative agendas open new horizons for theorizing from cities and regions positioned within demographic, political, environmental and economic settings other than those of the global North.

I will illustrate these points by referring to the post-socialist city. Research on post-socialist cities has often been described as being located at the periphery of urban theory. The reasons are many, and include language-related barriers, the lack of research funding, and the legacies of communism—where Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy subjugated the social sciences. Current criticism suggests that scholarship on post-socialist cities deals with regional issues but does not engage with urban theory beyond supplying cases. For scholars in and from the region, the true challenge is to retain originality and relevance for regional concerns and users, while at the same time achieving international visibility. Nevertheless, one may wonder why anyone elsewhere would be interested in post-socialist cities.

In this respect, *Comparative Urbanism* creates opportunities for stronger dialogue between scholars in various world regions. Through the idea of 'generative' comparisons, urban theory can accommodate a greater variety of world regions and types of settlements and hence respond better to developmental needs. The concept of 'generative' comparisons is presented in contrast to 'genetic' ones. The latter approach involves conventional and formalized comparisons, while the former treats comparisons as a 'conversation' between different cases—ones that are not necessarily directly 'comparable' in the conventional sense. I argue that there are at least three areas where research on post-socialist cities could benefit from a stronger comparativist approach, which could also be of benefit to urban theory if it is to become truly international. Specifically, this concerns our understanding of change and continuity, of neoliberalization, and of modern capitalism.

Turning first to our understanding of change and continuity, the shift from a centralized planning system to a market economy has been somewhat 'absolutized', in the sense that it has become a foundational narrative of the post-socialist city. Within that narrative, experiences of the former socialist countries are viewed as unprecedented, contributing to the sense of exclusion, incomparability and intellectual isolation. To refute that position, one could argue that other countries

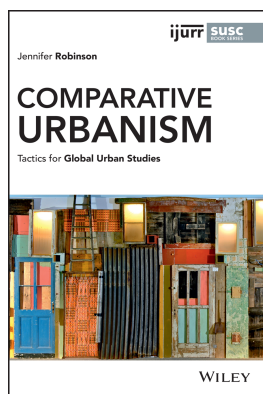
have also experienced political dictatorship followed by the collapse of their political and economic systems, and that economic crises and restructuring is nothing new to capitalist economies either. Here, the scope for comparison would be across various countries that have experienced radical change linked to economic restructuring, or the end of communism, apartheid or colonial rule. In addition, rather than treating post-socialist transition as an inexorable and irreversible shift towards a market economy and democracy, it should be viewed as a reiterative process of both radical and gradual adjustments leading to a number of possible institutional forms.

Second, we need to adopt a critical approach to the neoliberalization thesis. There is a tendency to employ 'neoliberalism' as a meta-narrative, supposedly capable of explaining urban change across various regional settings. Neoliberalism-centred narratives are bound up with the primary role of capital accumulation and exchange. While these narratives are relevant for explaining market-led development, they risk presupposing that neoliberalism is *imperative*, thereby reducing the researcher's task to that of specifying a local case of 'variegation'. If not neoliberalism, then what?

I suggest that while neoliberal capitalism may be an appropriate frame for advanced market economies, its use as a 'default narrative' to explain change in other political and economic settings has certain limitations. In post-socialist countries such as Russia, the state remains the dominant economic actor, while the institutional infrastructures necessary for a market economy (competition, property rights, private ownership) have not been adequately established. Such 'deviant' cases help to establish limits to the variegated neoliberalism narrative, and develop alternative explanations of state-market configurations in various spatial, institutional and temporal settings. Rather than presupposing the dominance of markets, research on post-socialist cities can explore settings in which state actors play the lead role while permitting markets to function in designated 'niches'. Comparative research on market-led and state-led urban development may help to identify governance mechanisms and institutional conditions that shape cities located in such apparently 'incompatible' settings.

Third, it is necessary to understand the diversity of modern capitalism, including its illiberal forms. 'New state capitalism' appears as a global phenomenon connected to various political regimes, including democratic, post-socialist and authoritarian ones. These emerging forms of economic governance indicate the need to engage analytically with its variants beyond the liberal core, including state-led and authoritarian forms such as those in China and Russia. While national cases may differ in terms of political organization, they display some similarities in their institutional forms in relation to wealth management, industrial policy and urban and regional development, for example. Studying urban development projects in different political and economic contexts transcends and expands the 'urban' research agenda into broader discussions on the nature of state-market relations, democracy and development, as well as the role of institutions. In that sense, urban research can contribute to the development of a more nuanced and conjunctural understanding of global capitalism from the post-socialist and global East perspectives.

Nadir Kinossian is a Senior Researcher at the Leibniz-Institut für Länderkunde.



Reading *Comparative Urbanism: Tactics for Global Urban Studies* was an unexpectedly personal experience. As my rational brain was trying to absorb the amplitude with which Jennifer Robinson draws upon the different currents of thought on the city and their philosophical genealogies, I found myself engulfed by buried memories. The Gall-Peters projection map stuck on the wall of my teenage room, for instance—probably the symptom of an unknown desire to shake up the vision of the world I was taught in the schools of the French Republic. Likewise, my teenage fascination with Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of how body and mind cannot be separated in the way we think and sense the world.

Beyond stating my positionality, I dwell on these reminiscences because they reflect the very essence of this book. It urges us to free ourselves from the shackles of a classical, Western-centric comparative urbanism, to search for creativity and innovation, and to be open and generous towards the scope of researchers' agency and lived experiences. This book believes that new ways of understanding the complexity of the urban world—and constructing a renewed urban theory—will arise from the multiple encounters of distinct case studies, a wide range of perspectives and a more diverse community of researchers.

This interlacing of rational thought and intuitive practice resonates with my own individual and collective work on India's urban turn over the last three decades. Let me build on two examples. First, as a collective, we decided to overturn the dominant reading: that India's urban transition is driven by its well-known megacities. Aiming to cast the net of comparison more widely, we researched smaller towns, peri-urban sites and even rapidly urbanizing villages. To draw some conclusions at the scale of the national urban system (which remains relevant) we compared a range of cases across geographies, across modalities of insertion within the national and global economy, and across governance regimes. We looked (quantitatively and ethnographically) at how multiple interactions, contemporary circulations and historical connections contribute to explaining the various urban forms that shape today's urban India. But we also believed in each researcher's intuitive capacity to root her analysis in the sensitivity of each territory and to allow each case to 'speak' from its own distinctiveness. Therefore, following the story of a three-generation family of truck assemblers in a medium-sized town in Tamil Nadu or the lived experiences of migrant workers in the furniture industry in a small town in Punjab was just as important to us as statistical analysis in our effort to propose a typology of subaltern territorial formations. Our coining of the term Subaltern Urbanization—both as a concept to better characterize some facets of a complex national system and potentially to join hands with others on how to think about world urbanization from invisible urban settlements—clearly emerged from this methodological openness and dialogue between disciplines.

A second example can be drawn from my work on forms of service delivery from a multi-sectoral (water, sanitation, electricity) and multi-sited perspective. Applying the tactic of thinking from each of the cases and situated insights in my work, I have tried to show how *localized socio-spatial configurations of access to services* arise from a creative tension between concrete and daily practices, stated

principles and tacit rules (whether inherited or otherwise), and the framework of public action. These configurations (which come close to the idea of constellations in the book) explain that India urbanizes thanks to a diversity of hybrid models whose foundations lie in mixed forms of moral economy. This moral economy emerges from the repeated but differentiated encounters between ideas and bureaucratic practices that circulate from the international to the regional scales, but also from the concrete reality of each site, its built form and its localized forms of social contract and historically constructed power relationships.

In this long-running engagement with India's urbanization I was confronted with some of the nagging questions raised in Robinson's book: how do we make sense of diversity without losing sight of common/shared wider processes? How do we think of connections and relation(ship)s and still treat each case as 'equal', be it a large metropolitan city like Mumbai or a small urban settlement on the margins of the global economy? How do we suggest theoretical framings that are not detached from the material realities of urban spaces? In this search for an expanded comparative inventiveness, I find that following an assemblage of what Robinson calls genetic tactics (based on connections, relations and the analysis of differences and resemblances) and generic ones (based on the plurality of perceptions and departure points) is a road worth travelling.

I would like to end with two comments that are loosely related to the book. *Urban Studies* is not alone in this effort to push the limits of our knowledge and to ensure we do it on equal terms. Again, I was reminded of Bernard Lahire's work in France and his attempt to cross borders with a sociology of dreams that engages with our individual and collective realities. And then Romain Bertrand's treatment of colonial and Javanese archives as equal, an example of exciting debates among global history scholars. In this search for new practices and vocabularies, the compulsion that we, as urban scholars, have to think with (and along) the material reality in which we are immersed opens up the potential to anchor these debates in the entanglements of diversity/singularity and connections/rootedness.

Finally, to return to my own positionality—as it is central to the agenda of a renewed comparative urbanism—although I am a tenured French scholar, I have been lucky to have spent most of my research years in India. Thanks to some wonderful colleagues, I feel (and was made to feel) that I too belong to the growing and vibrant community of Indian urban scholars. However, in today's India—as elsewhere—shifts in the world order and challenges for independent research have the potential to reshape our own practices as comparative urban scholars. These shifts will throw up some tough questions, and we must therefore remain vigilant and evolve new tactics to ensure that the agenda Robinson has set remains as alive, energetic and fertile in the future as it is today.

Marie-Hélène Zérah is a senior researcher at the Institute of Research for Development, Paris, currently at the Centre for Policy Research as a Senior Visiting Fellow.