

Wits Interdisciplinary Seminar in Humanities

3 June 2013

Debating ‘southern theory’ and cities of the south (and the north) of the world. Conceptual problems, issues of method and empirical research

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These pages are developing towards a book chapter. Comments invited. Critique welcome.

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Abstract

In researching and writing change in three cities on three continents, I have confronted the question: what to make of ‘southern theory’ (Connell 2007) in relation to cities in the south as well as the north of the world? This paper presents debate on questions such as: what is ‘theory from the south’ or ‘urban theory beyond the west’ (to cite the titles of works from Comaroff and Comaroff 2011 and Edensor and Jayne 2012)?

Mindful of the possible dismissal of such theorizing as merely an ‘obsessive anxiety about latest fashions in Northern theory’ (eg Mbembe 2011), the intervention explores what there may be to gain, for consideration of the world of cities, from new realities and new ideas emerging ‘in the south’. Cautions can be sounded around the problem of models – from Chicago to LA, and then on to Miami, Atlanta and cases in the elsewhere of global urbanisms.

The notion of ‘the south’ or ‘cities of the south’ evokes in general a postcolonial turn in many social disciplines, and its possible intersection with critiques of political economy. One key proposition in current argument is that ‘cities of the south’ present a space of experimentation that prefigures the near future of the west (or north). The risk of wholesale adoption of such perspectives may be ‘a larger set of claims that tend to obscure even while claiming to clarify’ (Aravamudan 2012).

The intervention asks, how those actively applying their minds to city futures in more collective senses may confront the question: what alternative urban policies and practices might flow from a ‘southern perspectives’?

In their recent book, *Cities: Reimagining the Urban*, Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift offer what they characterize as a ‘provisional diagram of how to understand the city’. They see this attempt as being limited, of course, by several constraints, not the least of which is the epistemological question of ‘what counts as knowledge of the urban?’ Along with this there are caveats to the effect that they were unable to cover, issues of ‘gender, race and the environment’ and that it was the ‘cities of the North’ that they had in mind while writing the book. None of these detracts from this excellent book, but they are reminders that the universal reach of the book’s title - the *reimagine the urban* - turns out to be somewhat limited after all. In a sense, this has always been reflected in the problem of the universal and the particular, which scholars of postcolonial studies confronted in the epistemological paradigms of the social sciences and humanities. It appears, however, that with the emergence of the global as an epistemological category we may once again need to revisit these old modernist dichotomies between universal and particular, in the context of the global career[s] of ... historical region[s]

Rao 2006: 225

Cities are always incomplete and in transition. Making sense of change and grasping a little more than ephemerally ‘what is going on’ is the purpose of much of my own work. I am interested in the fundamental question of urban theory: what difference does the city make to society? And the extension of that question: what is changing in the city-society nexus? My own major projects seek provisional answers to satisfy my own curiosity, and hopefully interest wider audiences.

As with most questions of theory, the generality of statements about cities inevitably arises. Do the same ideas, concepts and understandings help to comprehend what is going on in *all* cities; or are there distinct sets of cities, to which particular ways of thinking apply?

In conducting detailed work along some select comparative axes in São Paulo, Paris and Johannesburg (and their regions), I confront the possibility of distinction between cities in apparently very different settings. Is a single theory of cities appropriate to my chosen sites of enquiry? It is through these routes that the contemporary intrusion of ‘theory from the south’ into debate becomes significant for my work. And many prospective audiences are, indeed, being bombarded with notions of urban theory ‘from the south’. In leading journals of city studies, such as the *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* and *Urban Studies*, there is ample evidence of the intrusions to which I’m referring. In South Africa, interest in these questions has been piqued by Mbembe and Nuttall’s (2008) *Elusive Metropolis* and in contributions by Edgar Pieterse (2012). New publications pursuing related lines of argument appear with increasing frequency - one of the latest being *Rogue Urbanism* (Pieterse and Simone 2013). Students of urban anthropology, architecture, geography, history, planning, politics and sociology find themselves bathed in the idea that southern cities such as ours cannot be understood through western or northern theory, and need something new.

This paper asks the question: what to make of ‘southern theory’ (a phrase used by Connell 2007 amongst others) in relation to cities in the south as well as the north of the world? It presents debate on questions such as: what is ‘theory from the south’ or ‘urban theory beyond the west’ (to cite the titles of works from Comaroff and Comaroff 2011 and Edensor and Jayne 2012)?

Mindful of the possible dismissal of such theorizing as merely an ‘obsessive anxiety about latest fashions in Northern theory’ (cf. Mbembe 2012), the intervention explores what there may be to gain, for consideration of the world of cities, from new realities and new ideas emerging in ‘the south’. For as Aihwa Ong and Ananya Roy put it (2011), ‘both political economy and postcolonial frameworks’ are limited, there is a search for ‘new approaches in global metropolitan studies’, doing better than either positioning cities ‘within a singular script, that of “planetary capitalism”’, or searching for “subaltern resistances” in cities that were once subject to colonial rule.’ Neither, they claim, is ‘sufficient in enabling robust theorizations of the problem-space that is the contemporary city’ (Roy and Ong 2011: 307).

The paper consists of the following parts:

- 1 What is theory from the south?
- 2 What do we mean by ‘cities of the south’? and by theory ‘in’ or ‘from’ them? Is there something to learn of more general utility from cities of the south?
- 3 Are there some limits of the idea of ‘urban theory from the south’ or ‘beyond the west’?
- 4 What are some consequences for action in cities of theory from the south? That is for policy, for programme, for plan, for practice – And for democracy? And for possibilities of writing the city? Or, where to from here?

WHAT IS ‘THEORY FROM THE SOUTH’?

One might pause before continuing, to ask about the use of the term ‘the south’. My guess, following Aravamudan (2012), is that the initial origin of the term lay in Willy Brandt’s ‘North-South’ report

that attempted to transpose the major developing divide in the world of the 1970s away from the standoff represented by the Cold War that was seen as an ‘East-West’ divide. Sometimes ‘south’ merely and supposedly politely substitutes for ‘what we used to call the third world’ (Comaroff and Comaroff). All the same, as [Comaroff and Comaroff] acknowledge, the ‘South’ stands loosely for the ‘postcolonial’.

(Aravamudan 2012)

Of course we, or some of us, use that notion to include the entire world-after-colonialism and thus city spaces from London to Brisbane (for example Jacobs 1996). There can be no precision about these terms: that is hardly their intention. And indeed, there is a problem if we understand ‘the south’ as a geographical category, or the cities of the south as such, for then we are imposing such spatial ideas on a relational category: that of the south as referring to social relations, not to place. In

the end the oppositional binary which the term 'south' mostly conjures seems to be 'west' versus 'south', as in the title phrase of Edensor's and Jayne's (2012) collection, 'beyond the west'.

In this paper I use the term 'south' rather loosely - less as geographical expression (though that is inevitable and a conceptual/geographical tension persists), and more as referring to a dual situation of postcoloniality particular political economy. I do, in general, oppose the notion of the south to notions of north and sometimes west, as, I suggest, much of the current literature does: sometimes using other terms ('south-east' instead of south for example, in Yiftachel 2006 and Watson 2013 - something which might not resonate in South America!).

The first characteristic of what these present literatures term 'southern' is one of being at least previously very much under the hegemony of people and organizations and ideas of an 'elsewhere' and of 'different culture'. So one component of 'south' is undoubtedly coloniality/post-coloniality, even in subordinated geographies never (or scarcely) formally colonized (Thailand, Ethiopia). One cannot mean here that colonialism has 'gone', for as many scholars at least beginning from Bhabha (1994) argue, its cultures continually intrude on the present. And there is a second component: the global south refers here, particularly to conditions of scarcity for majorities - whatever the levels of superfluity for minorities may be. Such an image conjures familiar problems of negatively defining through 'lack' or absence, but the companion of scarcity is a complex of creativity, inventiveness and experiment, captured in the notion of the provisional in the relationships and interactions of people in the south of the world. The south, and cities of the south, are marked both by a political economy of insufficient resources even on average to provide decent life for all; and by (post) colonial disabilities. This approximation will have to do for now. It is in these intersections that those promoting 'theory from the south' endeavour to engage.

'Theory from the south' is 'set in the arena of current in part hegemonic (that is in many publishing and intellectual circles but not all) global theory and its global stars - the most sophisticated contemporary theorization on the global neoliberal moment, from time-space compression (Harvey 1991) and absolute real subsumption (Negri 2005, Deleuze [and Guattari 1994](#)) to financescapes and ethnoscapes (Appadurai 1996 or 2000) and from hybridity and difference (Bhabha 1994) to 'nostalgia for the present' (Jameson 1990) and modernity as a Neverland (Latour 1993) (Obarrio 2012b). This is the terrain of the interventions of two of the most cited recent contributions to discussions of 'southern theory' - those of Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell (2007), and Chicago anthropologists, Jean Comaroff's and John Comaroff's more recent volume (2011).

Behind these authors based in rather wealthy countries, stand names associated with southern ideas: Aijaz Ahmad; Arjun Appadurai; Homi Bhabha; Dipesh Chakrabarty; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (see especially Spivak 1999). Then there are others whose work has been rooted in postcolonialising the world - Fredric Jameson; Achille Mbembe; Ngugi Wa Thiong'o - in work written mostly in English and sometimes in French; and a perhaps different series of literatures from Latin America mostly in any event in Portuguese and Spanish.

‘Southern theories’ proceed from the idea that ‘the south’ can produce different perspectives, concepts, arguments, from those traditional in literatures deeply embedded in western or northern experience. But beyond the idea, or claim, what is the problem that is being posed? In other words, what exactly *is it* that ‘northern or western’ theory cannot engage?

The notion of ‘the south’ evokes in general a postcolonial turn in many social disciplines, and its possible intersection with critiques of political economy – employing concepts from ‘the global neoliberal moment’, ‘time-space compression (Harvey)’ and ‘absolute real subsumption’ (Negri, Deleuze) to ‘financescapes and ethnoscapes’ (Appadurai) or ‘hybridity and difference’ (Bhabha) to ‘nostalgia for the present’ (Jameson) and ‘modernity as a Neverland’ (Latour) (Obarrio 2011).

In a useful summary – which also provides evidence of just why ‘southern theory’ appeals to scholars located in the south – Duminy (2011) notes that

Connell basically set out ... a highly political argument demanding that global knowledge flows in the social sciences be reconfigured to respect the global South as a valid source of knowledge about social action. An intimidating task, given the persistent 'extroversion' of Southern authors towards the research methodologies, validity claims and financial incentives of dominant metropolitan knowledge industries.

The core of Connell’s approach is to develop a critique of prominent figures in western sociology - choosing in particular James S. Coleman, Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu. Connell seeks to ‘tease out some of the geopolitical assumptions underlying general theory as such.’ As with much postcolonial writing, Connell tries to establish ‘what view of the world and its inhabitants is at work’ in these authors. The central argument is against claims of universality, a theme bound up in much postcolonial scholarship with a dismissal of the universalisms associated with the Enlightenment in 18th century western Europe. According to Connell, the universal categories deployed by these social theorists fails to engage the relativities of the south: for example, ‘time involves fundamental discontinuity and unintelligible succession’ (Connell 2007: 45).

Authors such as Connell or Comaroff and Comaroff do not evenly cover the entire spectrum of ‘the south’, nor claim to do so. In particular the conditions of Latin America often elude inclusion among descriptions and propositions applied to much of Asia and Africa: the complexities of difference between Latin American and African or Asian histories are legion and could not begin to be exhausted here (cf. Sheinin 2003). Approaches to dependency, development and modernity have substantial histories in Latin America itself and among those writing Latin America elsewhere (cf. Moraña et al. 2008); ‘Latin American literary and cultural studies had been practising the critique of colonialism’s impact on culture and had been criticizing Eurocentrism before Said, Spivak, or Bhabha appeared on the intellectual landscape of North-Atlantic universities’ (Salvatore 2010 333-4). One might want to extend the scope of that remark to social critique more generally. Certainly Brazilian literature (which I know weakly in relation to its massive scale, but better than other Latin American scholarship) is long replete with exploration of multiple modernities, perhaps a central feature of contemporary southern theory following in the

postcolonial (Asian and African) avenues, more than the perhaps separate origins of such discussion on the west side of the (south) Atlantic ocean (cf. Cesarino 2012).

A Latin American adoption of post-colonial perspectives perhaps closer to those of some Asian and African authors could be connected to the rise in the very recent past of indigenous and black movements in Latin American countries and cities. Challenges to internal hegemonies and authoritative theories can appear differently in these circumstances, as South African scholars presumably know well. Moreover, it has been suggested that 'South Asian scholars writing from South Asian universities have an entirely different relationship with their counterparts in Anglo-American academia' from those writing from Africa (Burke 2003). On issues of language, here we are considering primarily a literature published in English. Of course, a lot of ideas present in recent Anglo theorizing come from authors originally writing in French, well or badly translated into English, well or badly understood, for that matter 'good' or 'bad' depending on evaluations from different corners. The language consideration makes for inevitable partiality. Postcolonial studies have been rather more rare around 'francophone' parts of the former colonized world, than is the case for the 'anglophone'.¹ So one has to work provisionally and at a rather broad level of generality, mindful of the limits of most statements, and at minimum, of the huge diversity of 'the south'.

But the purpose of 'southern theory', as with all social theory, lies perhaps in the terrain of power. A deep intent of 'southern theory' is destabilisation of northern thinking - and of those who do it. That is not unusual, it parallels and intersects with feminism, generational turns, and other phenomena of academic and intellectual trades and crafts which - however significant the associated ideas may be in comprehending change in the world - purposefully set out to unseat hegemonies and in many cases the hegemonies purveying them. In the case of postcolonial writing and its partial offspring, 'urban theory from the south', the motives of the tendency do appear to lie along paths worn by Chakrabarty (2000) - the provincialising of the north Atlantic world, and the worlding of the south. This is for example the line pursued very powerfully by Mbembe in two books (2001; 2010).

Leaving aside all sorts of difficulties of position which affect the paragraphs above and indeed the rest of this paper, such as being perhaps one of Spivak's suspicious 'white boys talking post-coloniality' (1991), one can observe that southern theory has several lines of argument - here are four:

- 1 - that northern theory fails or does not apply in the south (Connell and many others)
- 2 - that the north-south axis of power can be inverted - that northern hegemonies intellectually may be challenged - that Europe may be provincialised (Chakrabarty), Africa may be worlded (Mbembe)
- 3 - that the future is outlined in the south not the north (Comaroff and Comaroff)

¹ 'Although broad in scope, postcolonial studies have almost exclusively been limited to the former British colonies in Africa and Asia. Surprisingly, works on the former French and Portuguese colonies have only recently started to appear, and studies on the American continent (both North and South) have until now been rare' (Henriksen and Ejdesgaard Jeppesen 2007).

4 – that events and ideas in the south are powerful for understanding the world as a whole and not only the south ... an extension of 3 above, but going a little further along the road.

The subsequent parts of the paper take up these lines of argument in relation to ‘cities of the south’.

‘CITIES OF THE SOUTH’ AND THEORY FOR/IN/FROM THEM

A city is a very complex and messy object to contemplate. Untold numbers of authors have tried, and try, to grapple with ‘understanding’ cities, to represent their impossible diversity and wildly varied characters within the pages of almost infinite numbers of texts.

Now for my work located in, and predicated upon the idea of, the city, it is not the south or the north *in general* which is the main object (or subject) of consideration. It is the ‘cities [that] are back in town’², indeed the cities in which most of us would claim a great deal of the action occurs. With the passage of the world and most of its territories towards urban living, the cities are where it’s happening whatever we make of the rest (this opens other lines of potential destabilization of hegemonies which I pass by for the moment, denoted by couplets such as ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ of course). As colleagues including Patrick le Gales at Sciences Po put it, ‘la question urbaine est de nouveau au cœur des sciences sociales’ (the urban question is once again at the heart of social sciences) (<http://blogs.sciences-po.fr/recherche-villes/a-propos/>). I proceed from what I could term a ‘post-Castells’ view, which is that there is something specific about the ‘urban question’, that is, that debate at least in the urban literatures is based on the proposition that the concentration of social life in the city *does* make differences to human society - that the urban question is not the same as all other social questions (cf. Castells 1977). Broadly, I think it fair to propose that the recent literatures conveying a ‘southern perspective’ *on cities* proceed from a similar supposition. What is southern theory and research contributing, then, to the urban question?

Following the general lines of ‘southern theory’ or ‘theory from the south’, a present tendency claims that ‘northern’ or ‘western’ urban theory cannot cope with explanation of *cities* in the ‘global south’, not to mention support intervention in such places (Edensor and Jayne 2012; Watson 2009). The notion is gaining currency more widely (cf. Choplin 2012). There is some ‘consensus that we need a new kind of urbanism [in the anglophone sense] to reflect the reality of cities in the 21st century’ (Parnell 2012; and gestures towards Ananya Roy 2009 and many others). Perhaps a ‘postcolonial comparative urbanism’ will help (according to McFarlane 2010, similarly to Robinson 2011a or b). The *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* published a call for contributions

to challenge head-on theories derived from the global North. Topics as varied as urban regime theory, social cohesion, neoliberalism and democracy are all ones where cities across the global South can pose fundamental challenges to

² Title of research group and seminar at Sciences Po in Paris <http://blogs.sciences-po.fr/recherche-villes/a-propos/>

theories from the global North. We look forward to a time when our urban theory is derived as much from studies rooted in Buenos Aires (or Cordoba or Mendoza) as in ones rooted in Chicago or Los Angeles.

(Seekings 2012)

A variety of notions thus populate writing about possible differences between the offerings of 'northern' or 'western' urban theory and what is going on in the cities of the south. A central case is the series of terms including the word 'modern'. The notion of an export of modernity or modernism from northern to southern cities has long been contested through notions of hybridity, multiplicity, provincialisation, subalternity and experimentation. Such a critique has been reasonably well developed in several disciplines, from architecture to anthropology, over recent decades, marked by significant contributions by authors such as Leontidou (1996).

The critique offers the view that 'The western metropolis, implicitly considered as more developed, complex, dynamic, and mature' than 'non-western' (Robinson date, cited in Edensor and Jayne 2012: page 3). The consequence has been a notion of linearity: that what has happened in cities of the north in the nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries is being reproduced in the cities of the south. Under attack along with modernization theory and its variants ('stages of growth'!) such notions are still present in a great deal of urban writing - witness many general and even sophisticated text books on cities, written and published mostly in the 'north', in which most pages are taken up by northern illustrations and ideas and 'cities of the south' are added almost as an afterthought, simply to be analysed and understood via the ideas established in the earlier pages. Even self-consciously more aware authors such as Amin and Thrift (2002) draw almost entirely on 'northern' example.

Linearity in the argument can be captured in the reproduction of titles from older works on the era of rapid northern urban growth and social change, and their application to cities in the south: not all are as direct as the purloining of Gareth Stedman-Jones's *Outcast London* (1976), as *Outcast Cape Town* (Western 1981), a book incidentally with far narrower purview than its predecessor.

The empirical passage of the majority of global city population to the south has, of course, given pause to many who seek to contemplate cities across the world as a whole. It is in part this new reality that provides for anxiety and excitement and generates audiences for texts traversing the field, with Jenny Robinson's *Ordinary Cities* (2006) as but one rather prominent example.

From this body of work, differentiated as it may be, emerges the alternative hypothesis, that cities of the south reveal something new. Even without going to the extreme of claiming a new linearity, that the future of the north or west is now visible in cities of the south, this is a powerful and appealing hypothesis. There is an obvious tension between the perspective that cities are part of a seamless whole - all are ordinary; intellectually privileging those of the north is unacceptable; cities of the south have been neglected and bypassed and that northern theory does not suffice. What is the claimed newness, or, perhaps difference (for there may be an elision here)? In 1996 Leontidou located what is different in contemporary southern cities as their 'in-between spaces'.

The issue here is more profound in other words than the notion that western cities are the subject of huge literatures and research/discussion, whilst ‘the other cities of the world remain relatively poorly understood’ (a starting point in Armelle Choplin’s 2012 very useful review of several works including Edensor and Jayne 2012). One facet of ‘southern urban theory’ might be deeper understanding of cities of the south, but not stopping there, the directions of debate multiply: towards ignoring ‘northern cities’, or more radically, claiming that northern cities may be better understood via ideas from southern cities. We may return to this second point below. The first alternative leads towards construction of strong but partial theory of urbanism, which might perhaps be exemplified in part by some of the work of AbdouMaliq Simone.

In 2010 Simone evoked some of what might be new and different, from the notions northern urban theory, ‘movements at the crossroads’. As one of a handful of very widely cited and read authors exploring the notion of newness and difference in southern cities ‘from Jakarta to Dakar’, let us contemplate how Simone provides answers to the question of what is new and different - what might be missed by older city concept from the north.

Simone has produced a quite extraordinary volume of publication in the past just-over-decade (see some of his output listed on <http://www.abdoumalisimone.com/publications.html>). His melifluous prose undoubtedly attracts. He has a craft of writing and of spinning words, of presenting qualities of ‘cityness’ that resonate with many readers. He has begun to convince audiences beyond those primarily interested in cities of the south, that his rummaging around among those who have been less visible in the urban cannon, holds a key to new questions about the city in general: for example, about what is and what is not governed, and about how things are and are not governed in the city (Le Gales and Vitale 2013).

Publicity for Simone’s 2010 book suggests that the work is about ‘how possibilities, perhaps inherent in these cities all along, are materialized through the everyday projects of residents situated in the city and the larger world in very different ways.’ In an earlier paper, he writes ‘The city is a way of keeping things open and of materializing ways of becoming something that has not existed before, but which has been possible all along’ (Simone 2008: 201).

Some components of Simone’s view could be described: movement as constant; no one set of assumptions or fixed linear trajectory applies; keeping the value of things open to new uses and sites (the same). For those interested in government, Simone re-poses the question ‘how are things governed?’ as an alternative question of ‘what is not governed? And what does that mean?’

At a much smaller scale of the everyday, the street, the house, the apparently casual grouping, ‘how peripheralized citizens create and recreate ‘a new urban sociality even under dire conditions’ through various experiments, ‘trial balloons’ and possibilities for popular culture (Simone 2010: 314-316). No question that Simone’s work has encouraged very large numbers of readers to think the city in terms of provisionality, circulation, operations, intersections, in-betweenness ...

Perhaps the global star of current southern city theory, Ananya Roy (2009) calls for 'new geographies' of imagination and epistemology in the production of urban and regional theory. She has sought to explore the production of space in select southern cities. Her recent work has developed lines of understanding the 'worlding' of cities as diverse and multiple processes. Along with Simone she portrays 'worlding' the city as involving ways of mastering contemporary techniques of governance well beyond elites, of accomplishing thus forms of 'worlding from below', and of reframing city representation through such political trends as Hindu fundamentalism (Roy 2011). She seeks to combine diverse and multiple 'worlding' actions as requiring a 'latitudinal' approach, and criticizes Simone, inter alia, for avoiding interpenetrations of such actions rather than an opposition of 'above' and 'below'.

Some of the extent to which these ideas and concepts have been taken up can be found in recent collections which are popularizing 'southern' takes on cities and indeed, ensuring that they are widely present in undergraduate and graduate classrooms. Thus Edensor and Jayne (2012) structure their collection of 'urban theory beyond the west' under headings extremely familiar from authors like Roy and Simone: de-centring the city, order/disorder, mobilities and imaginaries. Questioning of modernities is at the core of their approach. Thematics such as 'non-localism' are related to the familiar Simone tropes of improvisation, multiplication of opportunity, accessing as many networks as possible. There is a questioning of whether the city ever a place of destination as opposed to a point on journeys. From this collection one gains support for Simone's proposition, in his own contribution to the volume, that southern cities 'are no longer the subaltern' (Simone 2011). In the most detailed contributions, such as that of Dennis Rodgers (2011) in 'An illness called Managua', juxtapositions of notions like 'extraordinary' development and 'maldevelopment' emerge, putting questions of city politics in relation to larger and smaller scales into play.

At the same time it appears to me that a lot of what is being written presently ends up analyzing cities of the south very much through concepts and tools emanating from long-standing urban studies elsewhere. Within the pages of collections such as Edensor and Jayne (2012), or even Roy and Ong (2011), one searches a little fruitlessly for the promise of new concept and substantial difference in contemporary cities of the south to emerge.

For example Goldman's (2011) analysis of speculation and change in Bangalore may well introduce some terminologies familiar from authors surveyed above, but the main lines of research and argument seem to come from something else. The same seems to be true of much of what authors report in the pages of Mayaram's (2008) collection *The Other Global City* – in other words, these texts remain entirely dependent of 'northern points of reference).. It may well be that the relative neglect of cities from Istanbul to Tokyo in western literatures is an impoverishment, but that does not mean that something substantially different is introduced - rather, an empirical corrective to imbalanced attention not a serious change in thinking. Despite the claims of the book, it has not yet achieved its ambition to get beyond *both* imperial and nationalist readings of cities.

If this brief account of 'urban theory in the south' demonstrates both possibilities and limits, there is also a second line of thought on cities of the south. More radical in my

mind, it gives rise in the wider ‘southern theory’ literatures for example to the notion propounded by Comaroff and Comaroff (2011) that ‘it is Europe and America that are tending to evolve according to processes observed in Africa, and not the other way round as is typically assumed. The same may also be true for cities...’ – ‘In some respects, [southern cities] are ... even foreshadowing what might happen (for better or for worse) in – Western cities’ (Choplin 2012).

A variant of this proposition in current argument - which flows from ‘southern theory’ in general - is that ‘cities of the south’ present a space of *experimentation* that prefigures the near future of the west (or north). There is allegedly something new in the political, economic, and cultural ways in which the South anticipates the contours of the ‘Euro-American future’. For Obarrio (2012b), ‘whereas the colonies might have always been the first laboratory of modernity’, there is allegedly something new in the political, economic, and cultural ways in which the south anticipates the contours of the Euro-American future.

SCEPTICISM

Robinson (2003), following Chakrabarty (2000), appealed for acknowledgement of situatedness, echoed by Edensor and Jayne (2012: 6) in their introduction. Certainly some humility of position is in order. But the same light can be shone in other directions. We are all inserted into a limited cannon, quite apart from where we are physically situated: language is a profound limit.

Choplin (2012) points to the danger that the sociology of knowledge reveals a map of Anglophone dominance in the world of ideas - and appeals for taking francophone work more seriously (presumably one may add hispanic, lusophone, allophone, Chinese ...). Choplin goes on to warn of ‘idealis[ing] anglophone scientific output to the point of creating a new hegemonic model of thought. Aside from the question of the quality of work within different linguistic traditions (that is, assuming it is all on average equal), that seems to me an extremely valid perspective. There is usually a great deal of self-referentialism which marks many a scholarly grouping. And in that vein, some of the real difficulties of ‘southern views’ of the city may be more apparent to viewers from outside particular groupings.

Roy (2009) argues that the ‘dominant theorizations of global city-regions are rooted in the EuroAmerican experience and are *thus* unable to analyse multiple forms of metropolitan modernities’ (emphasis added). Southern theory of the city will have to go further before the logic of this connection, is developed. For we are still in the terrain of not quite being able to establish just what it is that northern/western theory cannot ‘analyse’, explain, or inform. The claimed consensus (Parnell 2012) that southern theory is what we need for exploring cities, may be a sufficient consensus for some, but may not, or not yet, stretch across the wide terrain of city studies. The risk of wholesale adoption of such perspectives may be ‘a larger set of claims that tend to obscure even while claiming to clarify’ (Aravamudan 2012).

It remains unclear exactly what city/society relationships in the hyper-diverse ‘south’ elude ideas formed in the ‘west’ or ‘north’. The idea that what has been happening in the cities of the south should now inform what is understood of the cities in the ‘north’ seems attractive – but both conceptually and empirically poorly substantiated.

The way in which cities can be related to one another claimed by from Managua by Rodgers (2012: 134) - recording, comparing and juxtaposing the urban experiences of cities worldwide - means that - 'identifying any universal dynamics in global urbanization arguably depends ... on understanding ... particular circumstances'.

Here I would note my own error in promoting South African cities as the image of the future (Mabin 1999) - even though the paper contains some of the seeds of what might need further exploration as 'urban theory from the south' - urbanization without industrialization as one seam; in itself indicating how far removed are recent Chinese urban decades, or Indian or some other ones, from those tropes.

Cautions can be sounded around the problem of models - from Chicago to LA, and then on to Miami, Atlanta and cases in the elsewhere of global urbanisms. It seems out of line then to propose that something about 'cities of the south' provides new models for cities in general, in analytical terms, as Chicago so successfully provided for so many for so long, and as various other schools have contested in many recent decades - the 'LA school' perhaps involving Michael Dear and others perhaps preeminently, but with competitors in the US, including New York from time to time, and places such as Atlanta and Miami. Key to the idea of these latter models of the city its society its geography and so on, are such elements as continuing cosmopolitanism, diversity of form and polycentricity both geographical and otherwise, and perhaps especially in the case of Miami (but others too) something special about 'key' cities and their elsewhere. As soon as I read 'Euro-America' I become suspicious about a failure to grasp the very diversity and subtlety demanded in some recent literatures.

Notably, there are lacunae in some recent claims about cities of the south: perhaps a forgetfulness about the multiple forms of social life indeed taken on by many authors on American cities - noting indeed that all is not 'formal', that governance is not complete (e.g. Devlin 2011). Recent calls for comparative research across the globe could be answered from Castells (1983) onwards, with many significant contributions such as Marcuse et al. (2011), through long standing approaches to cross-continental comparison, whatever their flaws, such as Guy Burgel's project *Villes en parallele* (Burgel and Conrado Sonderegger 2010). Indeed there are limits: where cities remain *in parallel* rather than intersecting somewhere before infinity there will be much less to learn, and identifying the possible points of contact is critical - a point made to me by Bob Beauregard. We are a long way here from the magisterial urban theory we might associate with Peter Hall and other actors authoritatively striding stages of the past.

While calling along with others for southern theory of urbanism, Pieterse (2012) also refers critically to a degree of celebration of provisionality as a problem in some of the recent literature. The lack of an adequate political economy of 'what is going on' in the often well described 'swirling circumstances' of fast changing cities is a contributor (as in Paling 2012 on Phnom Pehn).

Take Simone's statement cited above, that 'The city is a way of keeping things open and of materializing ways of becoming something that has not existed before, but which has been possible all along' (Simone 2008: 201). Whilst evocative, and not necessarily an example of the 'pretentiously opaque' style which Eagleton (1999)

found in Spivak, it remains more opaque than helpful. After all, are the kinds of social relationships and ‘operations’ explored really something we didn’t know about, after Gareth Steadman Jones and many others - including, in the South African case, Van Onselen on the complexities of making do in early Johannesburg?

New representations even when they don’t really add much in the way of new ideas, can be astonishingly powerful, at least for some. The question will remain, what have self-consciously southern city theorists done which goes beyond the northern? Deleuze and Guattari (1994) gave us striated and smooth spaces to work with, which some Latin American scholars have taken up in the city - Jáuregui 2010 on Rio for example: the formal built city with its lines and reference points as striated space, not in any way separated from the smoothness and less apparently determined of the informal city - perhaps a classic example of the ways in which most Latin American urban authors seem not at all reluctant to grasp powerful ideas from western contexts and to use them to interpret urban life in a city of the south ...

If calls for southern theory of the city reveal lacunae in considering what has ‘come from the north’, along with Aravamudan (2012) it might be remarked of some of the recent literature that

It might be more accurate to say that [it] ... is much less from the South, than it is about the South, and foregrounding its ironic advancement in relation to the North with respect to so many angles and dimensions of late capitalism. There is no shame in admitting to that. Or if it is not just about the South, then it is speaking for the South, and it is speaking on behalf of that which theorizes itself mutedly, but that particular muted situation needs [for example] the Comaroffs to provide the academic megaphone that makes that theorizing audible. Then we are more on the classic terrain of ‘they cannot represent themselves—they must be represented,’ and this is not so much about the Northern expropriation of Southern value as it is about the academic recognition, explanation, and advocacy of anthropological life-worlds. In which case, the grandstanding claim by the Comaroffs that their theory is from the South is more window-dressing than it is a new version of epistemological continentalism.

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A further problem is that a great deal of the consensual rhetoric seems to want to present *all* in the ‘north’ as bad - the oft-noted problem of post-colonial critique. Personally I am reluctant to abandon hard won rights, freedoms and ways of being which start from 1880, 1835, 1789 in ‘the north’. Purcell (2007: 204) seems reasonably measured when he writes ‘It is especially important for democrats in advanced economies to realize that even if their democratic traditions are older [a common assumption, AM], the most exciting new democratic movements are just as likely to arise in South America or Africa as they are in New York or Brussels’. But of course, the point is that the inverse is equally true.

Quite some time ago, Terry Eagleton (1999: page number), whilst praising Spivak for her contributions, noted that ‘a good deal of post-colonialism has been a kind of “exported” version of the US’s own grievous ethnic problems, and thus yet another instance of God’s Own Country, one of the most insular on earth, defining the rest of the world in terms of itself’.

In this vein, a little more caution is needed before celebrating ‘resistance societies’ which may indeed create some indigenous urbanisms, but which may also and simultaneously be ‘embedded in circulations of global finance cannot be reduced to above or below’, as Roy (date) remarks. One is reminded of the sobering thought put forward by the perhaps over mercurial Alan Sokal (2013), in the course of furious debate occasioned by his spoof attack on Spivak, that ‘epistemic relativism is suicidal for progressive political movements’ (Sokal 2000: 12).

The tendency which I discern in self-designated ‘southern’ writing is to overemphasise the income disparities and *by extension* identity and citizenship issues, of cities of the South *by comparison with* western/northern cities (e.g. Watson 2013): ‘citizenship differs from the North Atlantic variants in being differentiated, that is it is universally inclusive in membership but massively unequal in ... severe income inequalities’ (p. 87). Again the enormous variety of conditions in western-northern cities are passed over: the *banlieue* becomes homogenizing of many things - blackness, youth unemployment, circular passages particular linked to African regions – as in Simone (2011). But some months in the Parisian banlieue taught me more than anything else how multiple and diverse are their conditions: not at all to be captured simply as ‘badlands of the republic’ (Dikeç 2007). A narrow let alone a superficial series of questions will not reveal these complexities ... just as claimed by Simone in Jakarta or Dakar.

Exacerbated by the idea that these southern city studies have been ‘fine grained’ (Watson 2013: 88), or ‘deep ethnography’, whereas the evidence cited is much more frequently something that arises from following just a few lives, even if occasionally over the long term and in some detail. There’s nothing wrong with that and powerful expressions and representations can be drawn - as in literature and film - but the methods applied seem to me to reveal a degree of missing what is going on: perhaps the real meaning of Simone’s long paragraph on what to him is the mutual unintelligibility of language at tables in cafés and bars in Abidjan, as well as Bangkok, Khartoum and many other places: ‘every affective response seemed to make sense, although there was no surface evidence as to why particular feelings might come and go’ (Simone 2007: 246). How would that be different from trying to follow occasional conversation in bars, cafés, social clubs or family mealtimes in all sorts of neighbourhoods, across many social classes, in cities from Chicago to Paris, as well as Johannesburg and Rio?

If some of the energy on display in the outpouring of ‘southern’ takes could be (self) directed into exploring the variety and meanings of what is going on across cities of the north or west as well as the south, perhaps we’d find that the same human stakes would emerge. That’s certainly my sense - from what I observe in the immense variety of social life in Johannesburg, São Paulo and Paris ...

AND TO ACTION! – BASED ON THEORY FROM THE SOUTH?

The way towards answers to such questions may lie far off from the usual forms of exploration of cities and citiness. Thus Ferguson (2012: page number) suggests

Today, social assistance is being fundamentally reconfigured as a host of developing countries (from South Africa, to Brazil, to India, and beyond) have confounded the by-now standard scholarly narratives of a triumphant neoliberalism by morphing into various new kinds of welfare states. And they have not modeled these new welfare states on Northern exemplars (Sweden or what have you). Instead, they have developed new mechanisms of social assistance, and new conceptions of society, that rely less on insurance mechanisms and the pooling of risk among a population of wage-earners and more on non-contributory schemes anchored in citizenship and operating via the payment of small “cash transfers” (often to women and children). An influential recent book documents these new schemes, and celebrates their achievements, even as it registers, in its title, the fact that the new programs of direct distribution are an affront to the old rules of the development game. (The title - another deliberate provocation - is *Just Give Money to the Poor*. [Hanlon, Barrientos, and Hulme 2010]) And interestingly (for our purposes here), the sub-title reads: ‘The Development Revolution from the Global South’.

The rise of the new welfare states usefully illustrates Jean and John Comoroff’s argument about global innovation today often emerging first in the south. For the conditions to which they are a response - persistent and ‘normal’ high unemployment, growing informalization, the coexistence of mass poverty and mass democracy - no longer seem specific to a form of experience that could be cordoned off within a ‘Third World’, but instead seem almost shockingly relevant to the news of the day in places like the United States. And if existing conceptions of ‘society’ seem increasingly to have lost their critical and political force (‘that decaying monster’, as Latour has referred to ‘society’), these emergent new empirical configurations of the social may perhaps provide us with clues for thinking about how we might re-imagine ‘the social’ as object both of theory (social theory) and of politics (‘socialism’ - the meaning of which has perhaps never, in its long, contested history, been less clear). If nothing else, it does seem likely that countries like Brazil and South Africa are serving as early laboratories for social experiments likely to be of wider significance in the future, in ways that Jean and John Comoroff’s essay alerts us to.

A last arena of debate on southern theory is beginning to develop. It can be indicated broadly through citing Robinson’s and Parnell’s chapter in the *New Blackwell Companion to the City* (2011), which brings together Robinson’s familiar thoughts on ‘ordinariness’ and observations of city development strategy processes (Robinson 2008) with Parnell’s experience of ‘city development strategy’, primarily in South Africa but also in other southern cities (see also Robinson 2011 a or b). City strategy is about the future, clearly: the always unknowable but always shaped-in-the-present, made-in-the-future, without guarantees of connection between the two. Their claim is that one may reach something beyond ‘neoliberalism’ globally, by ‘embracing’ ways in which some southern city development strategies seek to do so. This is a specific variant of what may be a much larger question, up to now pretty much lacking development and exploration: how those actively applying their minds to city futures in more collective senses may confront the question: what alternative urban policies and practices might flow from the vaunted ‘southern perspectives’? There are certainly tensions and my view is that the authors cited have not bridged the divide

between developmentalism and ordinary citiness, something which Robinson (2006) has been particularly concerned to highlight in other work.

It does seem that many practitioners *read* authors such as Ananya Roy as being anti-planning, anti-design, anti-urbanism in a more Latin sense of the word (c.f. Fiori and Brandão 2010: 189-190). Yet as Meth (2010) indicates, the less formal types of authority which emerge in at least some places, often reproduces the supposed ills of the full-tilt planning systems ...

Ferguson's line of thought certainly intersects with that of Robinson and Parnell (2011). But it is contradicted by others, for example Caldeira (2011) on São Paulo - a formidable scholar to take on - who writes a great deal about the deterioration of conditions for (most?) of the poor, or excluded, or youthful, in that city of her birth and scholarship (c.f. Caldeira 2000 *City of Walls*). An close to Ferguson's assessment suggesting amelioration for many is strongly contested of course. Leading Brazilian urbanists do maintain the view that the cities continue to be fundamentally in crisis and that things are becoming more and more problematic for many. But they also provide cases of rapidly increasing complexities (cf. Teresa Caldeira's work in progress <http://www.gf.org/fellows/17172-teresa-caldeira>). For Caldeira there are 'worlds set apart' in the city (Caldeira 2011). Yet even if her view remains one of profound fractures, she agrees that things have moved on (personal conversation, São Paulo, July 2012). Some of those who provided foundational analyses in the eighties and nineties and played central roles in urban reform over several decades, also see elements of advance (Maricato 2001; 2009). These better city circumstances have come about for many reasons and I've explored them elsewhere (Mabin 2012). If São Paulo's self-representation as a global city is a 'myth' according Whittaker Ferreira (2007), it is nonetheless a confident, growing, increasingly well managed city in which some major projects at metropolitan scale have made real differences to daily life, against the backdrop of a second Brazilian economic miracle and extremely positive politics despite corruption and other continuing stakes. National social policy combined with the success of the President's party (PT) since 2003, in shifting the agenda in national and city politics and programmes since the end of the eighties, certainly has quite a bit to do with these changes, though of course not exhausting causality.

When I was asked by Guy Burgel to address *Grand Paris* 'from the south', 'vu du sud', it gave me pause. Could this mean from far away (Johannesburg for example)? Or from Algiers with its intimate connections with the pasts of French cities including Paris? Or maybe from Ivry or somewhere along Nationale 7 to the south of Paris. The key to more profound, exciting and less sectional approaches to cities will lie in much more carefully constructed comparative method. This probably does not mean McFarlane's (2010) - 'comparison not just as a method, but as a mode of thought that informs how urban theory is constituted'. On the contrary, specified points of comparison seem necessary - as hopefully exemplified in the emerging example of a Sciences Po-El Colégio de Mexico project (about which more in the seminar). This would be an 'opening up new channels of urban research and policy formation within a wider world of cities' (Harris 2012). Of course, we need east, west, north as well as south. As Peter Marcuse said of 'dual city' it's a muddy metaphor for a quartered city. What is more no quarter exists without the others, something which apartheid

unintentionally proved to its own great cost - (and with great problems down the road from division of concept practice etc) - A dual world is a very opaque and concealing metaphor - let's at least start with a quartered world and contemplate the moving imbrication of the four ... and the ways in which that recasts the city.

As I noted in opening this paper, my current work is set in my own city of birth and (perhaps) scholarship, Johannesburg, and in two cities in which I have spent substantial time with reasonable degrees of research access over recent years: São Paulo and Paris (names I use to include the 'whole' urban regions of the three). I do not claim universals from my work, but I would claim some prospect that more general points arise as I explore government, policy, planning, large scale change, megaprojects, mobility and elements of daily life in these city regions (c.f. Mabin 2012). To summarise the main frame which I've arrived at: each of these cities shows evidence of 'assemblage' (McCann 2011) and formation of policy and practice in ways which far transcend their regions. Yet local debate is carried on in ways that are relatively isolated from 'elsewhere'. More particularly I note that these contradictions have limiting effects for what I call metropolitan democracy (the phrase used by Booth and Jouve 2005).

According to Lefèvre (2010), metropolitan democracy is contradictory - 'metropolitan areas remain politically weak' and there is a 'general failure of metropolitan institution building'. Along similar lines Kübler (2012) notes that 'how these areas can be governed has been the subject of a long-running scientific and political debate ... [which] has gained a new scope. Metropolitan governance is no longer a question of local interest limited to single metropolitan areas, but increasingly relates to changes and developments in the organisation of the wider state apparatus'. The recent past seems to be characterized by attempts at 'building metropolitan government by governance' (Lefèvre 2010: 631), which means constant interaction and negotiation between institutions. By no means all such institutions represent much in the way of democratic practice - for example, the powers exercised by parastatals, public-private partnerships and purely private companies as well as apparently socially minded NGOs.

The reason why I have worked in this arena is related to the question of the 'right to the city', that resilient Lefebvre phrase heard insistently in recent years (cf. Lefebvre 1996). For me, however, the point is more that, as Tajbaksh put it in his wonderful review of urban theory over a decade ago, 'cities offer the promise of communities built around multiple spaces, supple boundaries and hybrid identities ... these resources can deepen connections between democracy, difference and social justice' (2001: page number). The difficulty is that it seems rather rare for many citizens in large city settings to realize the promise of which Tajbaksh wrote. Much of the urban cacophony in media and professional circles is about the material conditions of cities, rather more than it is about the social promise of the city and unfortunately in my view, that extends to academic literature too. 'Development' is generally not a discourse or project which places realization of this promise very high on its jargonistic 'agenda'. At the same time there are aspects of material conditions closely linked to the social 'promise' of the city. How do citizens shape these links? Or to paraphrase Marx's possibly most pithy and powerful social observation from *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, can citizens make their own history, shifting conditions which are not of their own choosing? Who shapes the conditions, and as a key issue

in urban theory, who shapes city-society relations? Is it possible that ways in which people in southern cities are finding new ways to realize the promise of the city may hold interest (if not keys) for people in the north?

I am engaged in a search to express just some of what seem to me vital features of the urban question in these times. Of course I have no illusions about exhausting the subject. My method certainly includes ‘comparison [that] might be conceived as a strategy of indirect and uncertain learning’ but perhaps because I have worked reasonably equally in three places on different continents I tend to doubt that what will make things more clear is ‘transformation in a predominantly Euro-American-orientated urban theory’ (McFarlane 2008).

In Marseille in March, I had the opportunity to stay in the midst of Euromed (*le plus grand chantier de l’europe* – largest construction site in Europe, we are told), and to walk through scenes of ‘regeneration’ in the docks - as ever running behind timetable, and landscapes of gentrification in areas like lower La Villette. Up in a different neighbourhood, the old working class one of Belle de Mai, at the recently opened La Friche, I spent some hours in the midst of the art produced by artists from the ‘deux rives’ (two shores) of the Mediterranean. The exhibition, part of Marseille-Provence Capital of European Culture 2013, is titled ‘Içi, Ailleurs’ (here, elsewhere). All of the artists address mobility and fluidity, movement, flux, as well as stasis - for example one of them named Kader Attia explores cities of the Mediterranean ... it’s impossible without the images and the context to capture what this work meant for me, let alone to predict how you would respond. But it did strike me again that in the complex world of cities, everywhere, artists working right now may be onto - could one say - ‘superior’, more far reaching ways of communicating what city life and cities are about at present. The city is always suspended as a case of ‘here’ and ‘elsewheres’, connected yet - yet ... and that is why the artists may be doing a better job than the southern theorists in ‘painting’, ‘composing’, ‘dancing’ and ‘writing’ cities into being.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I hope that this chapter’s value has been improved by responding to critique of versions at ‘Cities are back in town’, Sciences Po, Paris; at South African Contemporary History and Humanities seminar, UWC, and from participants in UWC’s ‘Cities in Transition’ project; ...; and especially from Cynthia Kros and Ruchi Chaturvedi.

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