Article

The urban now: Theorising cities beyond the new

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Abstract
Urban studies has aligned cities closely with modernity, with strong implications for their conceptualisation. Through the 20th century the founding analyses of urban studies drew on a specific (western) version of urban modernity to define universal accounts of urbanity, excluding many cities from contributing to broader theorisations of the urban. In addition, urban theory has often been inspired by the modernity of cities, identifying 'the new' as the basis for distinctive approaches to understanding cities. In the wake of the move towards a more global urban studies, the extent to which traditions of thinking cities through the inherited analytical lens of urban modernity persist needs to be considered. To counter the continuing effects of theorising from the idea of modernity, or the new, the analytical device of the 'urban now' is developed from Walter Benjamin's analysis of modernity to propose new geographies of theorising the urban.

The analytical inheritances of urban modernity

Some of the earliest contributions to urban theory charted urbanity as a social form produced in the crucible of processes of historical change – modernisation – and cultural practices of innovation – modernity (Park, 1952[1914]; Simmel, 1971[1903]; Wirth, 1964). Cities themselves often have been portrayed as cultural objects valorised for their capacity for novelty and for the demands which they can place on city-dwellers to invent new ways of being (Lee, 2001; Ross, 1996). Central elements of conceptualising the urban have relied on formulations which draw strong links between the urban and the modern: the emergence of distinctive ways of being urban has been closely associated

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with the idea that the city creates new possibilities for social life. However, as postcolonial critiques have demonstrated, these core theoretical strands in urban studies are deeply problematic as analyses of the urban more generally. Not only do they owe their own origins to specific urban contexts (such as early 20th-century Chicago or late 19th century Berlin or Paris), but they also rest on their ability to cast other cities and times as 'not modern' and indeed as not-urban (Goankar, 2001; Robinson, 2006).

In alternative accounts, ways of urban life can be seen as being conservative of travelling cultural practices or indeed inventing traditions which might come to be seen as rural (James, 1999; Lewis, 1973; Mayer, 1971[1961]) – but are nonetheless urban (and modern). Moreover, the apparent absence of some of the features of western urban modernity may signify not so much a failure to achieve city-ness (Koolhaas et al., 2000) – or indeed, the first signs of a disastrous urban future for all (Davis, 2006) – but instead may be figured as a specific (Gandy, 2005) or generalisable example of the urban foundations of social and economic life (Bank, 2011; de Boeck and Plissart, 2004). Thus, an alternative formulation of urban modernity would insist on the contemporaneity of all urban dwellers and produce a conceptualisation of modernity quite distinct from historical processes of modernisation. Rather, modernity could be framed as a highly diverse feature of all cities, seen as the capacity to generate and culturally valorise 'newness' (Robinson, 2006).

Theories of urban modernity have bequeathed a complex inheritance to urban studies. They have operated to disqualify some cities from defining the realm of the urban; they also exemplify the wider and not insignificant methodological challenge of thinking cities in a world of cities – relating the specificity of individual cases of urbanity to any attempt to offer a wider theorisation of the urban. Therefore, urban modernity brings into view the more general spatiality of conceptualising cities, and here there is a very specific geography associated with mobilising the concept of the urban modern. The idea of an urban modernity proposes a generalised or widely experienced cultural formation; yet each instance of the urban modern is necessarily distinctive. In tying analyses of the urban to the conceptualisation of modernity, urban studies has relied on understandings of urbanity which have a distinctive localisation in certain (in the case of colonial-era accounts of urban modernity, western) cities, but which have been authorised to function as universal analyses for all cities. On this analysis, the challenges facing theorists of 21st-century cities include both theoretical critique (locating the inspirations for specific conceptualisations of the urban and dislocating their universalising claims) and theoretical invention (finding creative ways of thinking cities in a world of cities, which can widen sources of inspiration for theorising the urban without privileging certain forms of urbanity or modernity). To what extent does this analytical and methodological dilemma associated with the tension between localising and universalising conceptualisations of the urban – which was at the heart of 20th-century accounts of urban modernity – continue to challenge scholars today? How are new geopolitical and analytical alignments working through this tension?

In this regard a second set of inheritances from the close entwining of the urban and modernity are crucial. Analyses of urban modernity have bequeathed an imagination of the urban with developmental hierarchies, a strong sense of teleology and expectations of innovation. In this analytical frame, where the urban is closely tied to the invention of

the 'new', unexamined assumptions that some cities might be 'first' and others follow inform theoretical innovation. In the 20th-century version of this, western (advanced capitalist) societies and cities showed the way for poorer (underdeveloped or developing) countries and cities and therefore formed the basis for analytical interpretation of these cities, whether this was as catching up, deficient or incommensurable. In a more general sense, this habit of thought informs the expectation that innovations in conceptualising the urban can be informed by the identification of exceptional, new or distinctive social and physical forms, located in particular contexts. Where the urban has a privileged relationship with the new, the latest, cutting-edge developments conventionally identified with specific cities can come to stand in for theoretical insight: the new defines the frontier of urban thinking, and also brings to the fore the particular location where this is identified as paradigmatic for thinking the urban: Paris, Chicago, Los Angeles. Thus, the challenge presented by building wider theoretical insights through engagements in specific localities is reinforced as a result of the privileged association of the urban with modernity. Theoretical innovation comes to be territorialised in particular apparently novel urban contexts, privileging these places in the project of understanding and defining urbanity. This article explores below some of the ways in which contemporary global urban studies is still working in the tracks of these dual conceptual and methodological inheritances.

These continuities in urban theorising from early and mid-20th century conceptualisations of urban modernity to the present day, feature in the short debate between Beauregard (2003) and Brenner (2003) concerning the role of 'superlatives' in urban theory: by which they mean the role of stereotypes, archetypes and prototypes in building conceptualisations of the urban. A reliance on these superlatives to frame analyses of the urban emerges most distinctly in the foundational attempts to construct paradigms in urban theory through particular cities, such as the Chicago School or the Los Angeles School, but both Beauregard and Brenner identify this as framing a much more wide-ranging set of issues in critical urban analysis. Brenner (2003) very helpfully links this debate to the broader methodological challenges of theorising cities in a world of cities, whereby urbanists frequently find themselves proposing particular cities as 'stereotypes, archetypes or prototypes' for urban processes more generally. Each of these analytical tactics is potentially problematic: as he indicates, in turn, the distinctiveness (rather than sterotype), typicality (instead of archetype) or similarities (rather than prototype) of cities might be ignored through the analytical use of each of these superlatives. Of course, as Brenner rightly observes, an empirically mediated analysis which traces instances of typicality or innovation in a carefully comparative, embedded and historically specific way might well be a reasonable response to the challenges of thinking cities in a world of cities – enabling more ambitious, paradigm-building efforts through studying the particular experiences of individual cities without necessarily ascribing either novelty or typicality. However, what Brenner and Beauregard discuss as 'superlatives' carries into contemporary urban studies the spatial and teleological architecture of explanation derived from an analysis of urban modernity which places some cities, and not others, in a privileged relationship to concepts of the urban.

Since this useful interchange, these tropes have continued to inform urban studies research, with studies of cities that are portrayed, for example, as extreme cases

(archetypes): as in Mike Davis's (2006) *Planet of Slums*; or typical cases (stereotypes), perhaps here Garth Myers' (2010) *African Cities* treatment of Lusaka as postmetropolis in place of Los Angeles is an instructive effort to take cities across Africa beyond their frequent citation as exceptional or extreme cases. As he writes, 'My goal is more to suggest ways in which we might see again, to point to the multi-faceted urbanity in African contexts as of great value to global understanding of urbanism' (Myers, 2010: 7). Or, finally, prototypes: places where new forms of urbanism can be detected, prior to their wider spread (for a contemporary example, see Ong's (2011) introduction to Ananya Roy and Aihwa Ong's *Worlding Cities* collection). I want to propose that the association of cities with modernity has played a part in a continuing orientation towards theorising cities through the rubric of the 'new' or the leading edge of urbanism. Thinking cities through identifying what is new and related tropes of typicality and extremity is bound up with the inheritances of urban modernity as a frame for thinking the urban. This brings into focus the more general challenge of thinking 'cities in a world of cities': that is, the continuing and still problematic relationship between localised analyses of particular cities and their projection in the form of wider analyses of urban processes, which is the wider concern of this article.

Since the early 2000s exchange between Beauregard and Brenner, urban studies has undergone some important shifts, and in fact offers us some additional resources to address these fundamental challenges of theorising cities in a world of cities. Most importantly, there is now much stronger attention to the value of a more global perspective, whereby the great diversity of urban outcomes around the world is acknowledged more readily, as wider analyses of the urban are developed (Edensor and Jayne, 2012; Huyssen, 2008). Thus the possibility of promoting a certain restricted range of wealthier cities as exemplary of the urban is much reduced. In addition, the field has seen the growth of substantive interest in empirical processes, whereby urban practices, ideas and theories move among cities, shaping and influencing the distinctive appropriations of widely circulating ideas (McCann and Ward, 2011; Peck et al., 2009). The conceptual tensions between localisation and universalisation can be very helpfully recast in a more empirical register, attentive to the spatialities of the urban and especially the close intertwining of processes of territorialisation and interconnection in shaping cities (McCann and Ward, 2010; Massey et al., 1999). These conceptual and empirical developments afford us the opportunity to reassess conceptualising the urban in the tracks of urban modernity: the meaning of the urban 'new' can be significantly reformulated.

Indeed, in the many histories of urban modernity around the world it is the geographies of circulation and the diverse, differentiated and specific (hybrid) forms of modernity in different contexts that have been of greatest interest. Accounts of diverse modernities in cities around the world have inspired a view of modernity as a product of both specific located processes, and a range of wider circulating ideas and practices (King, 2004; Lee, 2001; Robinson, 2006). In this genre, if something is presented as new or modern – new here as opposed to there, new now as opposed to then – the critical gaze of the cultural theorist is drawn quickly to tracing the diverse sources of influence, the intertwining of now and then, here and there, which have shaped emergent new phenomena. It is clear from these studies that the 'new' is a result of complex and intertwined histories stretching across many different contexts; neglecting these has the potential to

produce a reified or territorialised image of urban modernity (the 'new'), with not-inconsequential practical effects.

As an analytical device, valorising the new potentially performs an unhelpful, de-historicising territorialisation. The configuring of a territorialised "new" that isolates an emergent form beyond its engagement with the conditions of possibility of its emergence, and with the range of interconnections that produce it – historically and geographically – is enabled by an assertion of distinctiveness which is frequently framed by forgetfulness or denial, not innocent of power relations. This might be the power of forgetting origins or connections – as in the example of New York skyscrapers in the 1920s and 1930s, where the privileged perspective from this powerful context led to a forgetfulness of the indebtedness of their designers and architects to other times and places, such as Mexico for the motifs and friezes, or renaissance Italy for the inspiration and techniques to build to these heights. By contrast, the South American architects entwined in these international circuits of design and modernity were always mindful of their connections to the metropole, ultimately undermining and dislocating their sense of inventiveness (Robinson, 2006). Certainly, analyses of the cultural meaning of modernity insist that relationships with both the past and elsewhere (both histories and spatialities) are at stake in framing something as 'new'. In relation to urban modernity, the complex ways in which pasts are woven into configurations of the modern are exemplified in Walter Benjamin's (1999) analysis of 19th-century Paris, which demonstrated how the past and often primal associations were drawn on to frame modernity.

In a different analytical register, which is gaining strength in urban studies, we could place the potentially territorialised 'new' in contrast to Deleuze's account of repetitious differentiations, which suggests that we think singularities or specific outcomes in relation to the 'virtual', the effective forces generating the universe of all possible configurations in a field. Here, the 'new' could be understood as intimately connected to many other possible (preceding and future) outcomes through their shared connections to the conditions of production of the repetitions, each only a step aside from other singularities, other potentialities of this virtuality (Deleuze, 1994). In urban studies the most succinct example of this thinking is to be found in Jane Jacobs' (2006) analysis of the globalising residential high-rise. Here, the distinctive achievement of each repetition – almost-the-same – through globalising circulations and specific assembling of diverse elements to produce each building, provides an insight into what it might mean to think with the productivity of the virtual in the sphere of the urban (Farias, 2010), as well as the (familiar) paradox at its heart. The achievement of urban modernity in the repetitive architecture of international modernism emerges from the relatively unpredictable multiplicity of circulations and manifold elements able to be assembled into each construction: buildings which are both repeated and yet produced as original objects, with an equally original yet partly repeated and interconnected set of meanings crafted locally, each time (King, 2004): 'the making of repetition – or more precisely, repeated instances in many different contexts – requires variance, different assemblages of allies in different settings' (Jacobs, 2006: 22).

With these resources (and no doubt others) to hand, the possibilities for stepping aside from the inherited ways in which urban studies has worked with the localisation–universalisation dilemmas provoked by thinking the urban in a world of cities, are

considerably expanded. Distinctive and repeated outcomes can become part of a more generalisable field of empirical urbanisation processes (Brenner and Schmid, 2011); accounts of 'newness' would inspire much more modest ontological claims, and thinking the urban could draw on a revised architecture of conceptualisation. Refusing the new as a privileged resource for theorising cities requires both historicisation and spatialisation of the conditions of production of the new: specifying the localised determinations and wider circulating influences shaping contemporary urban experiences can (dis)locate the territorialising imagination of the new inherited from accounts of urban modernity. In the spirit of theorising contemporary cities beyond the incitements of the parochial assertion of a universalising and territorialising new, we can find inspiration in Walter Benjamin's formulation of the 'now'.

The urban now

Benjamin presents the 'now' – the 'now of recognisability' (1999: 7) – as a dialectical image in which, rather than being seen as a result of a sequential (progressive) historical causality, the present is understood or brought into recognition through moments of the past which are scattered in time. To capture the sense of the now, various elements of the past, he suggests, need to be blasted out of the course of positivist history in which time is seen as continuous (or within the rubric of an abstract sense of enduring time, following Kant), and realigned in a constellation of 'now' time: a dialectics at a standstill, bringing different elements of the past and present crashing together, and in which the relations of temporality itself are immanent (Hamacher, 2005). As Benjamin suggests:

> For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: it is not progression but image, suddenly emergent. (Benjamin, 1999: 3)

In the process, elements of the past gain new meanings for the present, produce new futures for the past, and open up a space of action towards possible futures from the present. Like other critical theorists of his time – in urban studies we might consider Henri Lefebvre (Schmid, 2008) – the openness of history to political action was an important theme. For Benjamin this was a transformative view of history, and the form that he gave to the idea of the constellation of the now was aligned with his metaphor that, in the moment of 'awakening' (1999: 3), dream images find the possibility of a flash of recognition and rupture, realising their transformative potential between the dreaming and waking consciousness: 'The realization of dream elements in the course of waking up is the canon of dialectics. It is paradigmatic for the thinker and binding for the historian' (1999: 4).

In exploring the potential for imagining an urban 'now', it is helpful to reflect on aspects of Benjamin's broader philosophical project. Howard Caygill presents a reading of Benjamin's early writing on colour and philosophy which places his later work on cities and modernity in the context of his ongoing critical engagement with Kantian transcendental systems of knowledge. His search for a speculative method (informed by an

immanent reality, rather than purely transcendent or subjectively pre-given categories and judgements) is drawn out of a very early fragment on colour, which includes discussion of 'a double infinity' at play in producing meaning – 'the transcendental infinity of possible marks on a given surface (or perceptions within a given framework of possible experience) and the speculative infinity of possible bounded but infinite surfaces or frameworks of experience' (Caygill, 1998: 4). Caygill tracks this speculative method through Benjamin's writing on language, as well as on the baroque origins of the German *Trauerspiel* (mourning play). In literary criticism and urban analysis, the methodology of tracing the many afterlives of objects and phenomena (in their transformation and reworking in critique, practice, decay and re-use) reveals some among the infinity of possible interpretations of the objects. Specifically in relation to the conceptualisation of the 'now', Benjamin observes that 'The multiplicity of "histories" is closely related, if not identical, to the multiplicity of languages' (2003: 404), suggesting the infinity of possible constellations of 'now-time'.[1]

Caygill suggests that:

> Benjamin's city writings exemplify his speculative method: the city in question, whether Naples, Moscow, Berlin or Paris can only become an object of knowledge indirectly, obliquely reflected through the experience of other cities, each of which is its own infinite surface … this reflexive experience of the city is not only geographical, but also temporal. (1998: 119)

The speculative method of 'setting a particular surface (such as the experience of Paris in 1928) within a set of possible surfaces defined spatially and temporally (the experience of other cities or the same city at other times)' (1998: 119) hints at an imagination attuned to thinking across a diversity of urban experiences. Of course, the terms of thinking across difference matter and among his comparative reference points, Benjamin did entrain some particularly located tropes embedded in colonial habits of the time (Kraniauskas, 2000; Robinson, 2006). Caygill adds that although Benjamin's work did not reflect on this, this speculative method might be reinforced by the observation that '[t]he experience of a city is shot through with allusions to other cities' (1998: 119), which contemporary urban scholarship would stretch considerably to insist on a wide-ranging exteriorisation of the production of urban space.

In this light, Caygill presents Benjamin's analyses of urban modernity in Paris – mainly but also notably in Berlin, Naples and Moscow – as attempts to seek to understand modern urban experiences on their own: immanent terms as opposed to through inherited categories of philosophy. They also can be read as critiques intended to displace given or dominant meanings through critical attentiveness to alternative interpretations, and latent or coexisting possibilities – other possible futures of the past caught in the ruins of the city, other possible futures to be made now through critical engagements with modernity. Of course, there are some significant repertoires currently popular (and contested – see Brenner et al., 2011) for thinking 'possibility' in some areas of urban studies, which in their philosophical engagements are not unrelated to Benjamin's broader philosophical and critical ambitions: for example, Lefebvre's historical assessment of the possible/impossible and the recognition of Deleuze's philosophy in the actor–network inspired attention to emergence in assemblage approaches (McFarlane,

2011; Schmid, 2008). Thus Benjamin's provocation to think the 'now' provides a direct and still pertinent opening to interrogate the limitations of the new as a potentially territorialising trope, in danger of setting limits on the potential of global urban studies to think and work with the diversity of the urban by raising localised phenomena and singular temporalities to a privileged and universalising explanatory status on the basis of their novelty.

What sort of an analytic of the present might we expect from an *urban* 'now'? As in Benjamin's writings, where he is eager to understand the distinctiveness and novelty of modernity, theorising the urban 'now' certainly would be concerned with new aspects of social and cultural life in cities. However, it is alert to coexisting possibilities, such as the liberatory opportunities as well as the constraints of technology, commodities or experiences of city life, and to the co-temporality of pasts, presents and futures. The imaginative spatialisation of the dynamic of history in the dialectical image, in the material and analytical constellations realigning disparate historical events from the perspective of now, together with Benjamin's speculative method of thinking across different urbanisms, can inspire us to press more strongly to consider the actual space–time constellations framing the urban 'now'. Thus the urban 'now' would involve potentially blasting elements from cities and places distant in both time and space, with leaps of explanation and connection reaching back in time as well as across to other places, in order to constitute the immanent interpretive space–times of globalising urbanism. In such a re-crafted image of the urban 'now', interpretations of different cities are intimately connected, not least as they emerge through encounters with specific cities – singularities – and thus stand in relation to the infinity of possible urban outcomes, which are multiply interconnected through many shared circulations and mutual inhabitations.

Global urban theorising

How, then, are emerging analyses of 21st-century urbanisation shaped by the logics of the 'new' or the 'now'? I have suggested that an emphasis on theorising by identifying 'new' urban forms in particular cities tends to valorise territorialised conceptualisations of the urban, and thus forms part of wider analytical challenges posed by the localisation/ universalisation duality associated with thinking cities in a world of cities. It also provokes a methodological investment in archetypes (exceptionality) and prototypes (novelty). By contrast, the 'urban now' draws analysis towards a spatially exteriorised and historically dispersed understanding of the emergence of specific urban forms. It potentially recrafts the relationship between urban outcomes and conceptualisations of the urban by drawing attention to the multiplicity of interpretations (surfaces) of the urban, and to the deeply interconnected nature of cities in the context of global urban processes. Building a more global analysis of urbanisation is an exciting development in urban studies, but it also generates the need for significant analytical and methodological inventiveness in order to work among the great diversity of urban experiences across the globe, and to assess the analytical significance of the apparent novelty or extremities of urban experiences in some places, as well as the apparently repetitive but highly differentiated nature of globalised urbanisation. This section considers some of the strategies that scholars are adopting in response to these challenges, and draws out the tensions

between the 'new' and the 'now' evident in their work. Notable here are the territorialising effects of the 'new' (the novel, the extreme) in Asian and Southern urbanisms. The article ends by outlining the potential for reframing the geographies of theorising, inspired by the urban 'now'.

Often, the case for the urgent need to reconceptualise urban theory is driven by identifying what is 'new' in relation to the most general trends in contemporary urbanisation. This includes thinking through the consequences of shifts in global urbanisation (the physical process of the changing distribution of population) from wealthier to poorer contexts, as the population distributions in highly urbanised contexts stabilise while some contexts are seeing rapid processes of urbanisation (Parnell et al., 2010; Potts, 2009; Satterthwaite, 2007). In addition, it might include the arguable relocation of innovations in urbanism from cities in the West to cities in Asia (Roy and Ong, 2011). However, these broad trends are accompanied by the proliferation of a great diversity of urban experiences around the world. Transitions to a more fully urbanised population in some places – with the limitation that this is assessed at the national scale (Brenner and Schmid, 2011) – coexist with the stagnation and decline of formerly successful industrial cities (Le Galès, 2002). The surge of state geopolitical ambition in the styling of cities across Asia (Ong, 2011) has accompanied intense privatism and state withdrawal from shaping cities in many former authoritarian contexts (Hirt, 2011). The informal expansion of rapidly growing cities sits (sometimes literally) side-by-side with the explosion of concrete and glass in the emptied public spaces of corporate urban landscapes, and the resultant elite capture of the intrinsic capacities of many cities to engender vitality and centrality (de Boeck, 2011; Schmid, 2012). We could rehearse many more distinctive varieties of urbanism; indeed, a multiplicity of forms, trends and interpretations of the urban condition can be identified around the world.

Certainly, the analytical challenges of contemporary urban studies reflect the need to confront significant changes in the nature of global urbanisation. My concern in this article is not with the identification of trends or innovations as such – certainly, there is much that is new in the world of cities – but with how the trope of the new is mobilised in incipient scholarly imaginations of 21st-century cities, drawing on particular experiences in the service of wider explanation, or on potentially territorialising superlatives such as novelty and exceptionality to generate theoretical insight. Despite the longstanding and widely received (mostly postcolonial) critique of the conceptualisation of the urban modern, the association of urbanity with the 'new' continues to figure in the emerging field of global urbanism. Perhaps this reflects the strength of cultural associations of cities with modernity and inventiveness in many parts of the world. Certainly, it is no longer the 'new' of the cities which emerged in the advanced industrial societies of the West that is figured in theorising cities, or that which was experienced under erasure in the colonial conditions surrounding many 'modern' cities, or in the cultural investments in modernity suffused with racialised anxieties in postcolonial contexts such as South America. Rather, today's urbanists mobilise tropes of 'newness' to justify and garner support for distinctive analytical agendas in their attempts to articulate the contours of contemporary global urbanisation and, in the process, potentially reterritorialise the field of urban theorisation. Furthermore, in the search for new subject positions from

which to announce the analysis of the urban, to decentre and recentre the voice of urban analysis (Roy, 2011), temptations of asserting territorial distinctiveness have emerged, notably in relation to newly ascendant urbanisms (Asia) and the extreme challenges of marginalised urbanisms (Africa).

'New' agendas and significant challenges abound in the world of cities and are shaping emerging theoretical directions in urban studies. For example, the pressing demands of sometimes rapid urbanisation in the context of scant resources have inspired a call for a more politically committed and practically engaged approach to cities in poorer contexts (Parnell et al., 2009; Watson, 2009). It is suggested that while these cities are seldom drawn into wider urban theorisations to date, they support a distinctive engagement and commitment from various actors (states, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), donors, residents). The inspiration, then, is for analytical engagements to follow these practices: the inventiveness of city residents as well as creative policy and institutional responses to poverty and informality (Parnell and Robinson, 2012; Pieterse, 2008; Simone, 2011). Here, the territorial appeal can be made to a regionally inflected urbanism (African urbanism), or to propose a form of 'southern' urbanism (Watson, 2009) which provides a distinctive speaking position for a new subject of urban theorising (Roy, 2011).

In a different analytical direction, and from a different empirical context, the launch of distinctive styles and practices of urban design and governance onto the contemporary global stage is understood to follow the lines of emergent new forms of economic and geopolitical global hegemonies building from the Asian context. It is suggested that this has been closely linked with the circulation of prominent urban and architectural forms, as well as governance and cultural practices across the region. For example, Roy and Ong (2011) build their insightful analyses through attention to the 'inter-referencing' practices of cities in Asia. While scrupulous in their attention to the wider circulations of these practices, they also ground an analytical territorialisation based on the assertion of a distinctive new 'Asian' urbanism (Ong, 2011; Percival and Waley, 2012; Roy, 2011). Certainly, this Asia is unbounded, as Roy proposes, framed by both emergence and circulation. Following Spivak, she invites us to see Asian urbanism as produced in the multiplicity of citationary practices which mobilise Asia as a referent in many diverse worlding practices. In a more extended version of territorialisation through circulations, Simone (2011) offers analytical provocation of a 'black urbanism' based largely on his tracing of the circulating migrations of city residents and production and trade networks across African and Asian cities. Other more conventional territorialising moves can be identified: for example, Bunnell and Maranghati (2011) point out the problem of 'metrocentricity', involving building new theorisations from only the largest or most rapidly growing cities.

Many areas of urban studies remain inspired by the 'new' – distinctive, novel, emerging – features of cities. Across many thematic areas – rates of urbanisation, regionalisation of urban economies, the localisation of certain elements of the economy or the apparent rise of inequalities within cities – outstanding, extreme and novel experiences located in certain cities are pressed into the service of a wider theorisation. More generally, the universalising theoretical voice adopted to frame such parochial insights persists as a habit of theorisation, despite mounting criticism (Robinson, 2006, 2011; Roy, 2009;

see Vogel et al., 2010 on the 'global city-region'), and it is necessary to remain concerned about the ways in which particular urban experiences come to inform wider theorisations. However, my question here concerns the effects of proliferating the trope of the 'new' in what are ostensibly quite differently structured theoretical conversations about contemporary urbanism. As various projects for global urban studies are put into practice, is a continuing concern with the 'new' potentially contributing to a reterritorialisation of urban theory? Ironically, while usefully drawing attention to changing geographical and historical trends in urbanisation, as well as previously under-emphasised or unacknowledged aspects of global urbanisation, mobilising the trope of the 'new' in the service of global urbanism also carries some potential pitfalls. Aligned with an enthusiasm for putting different kinds of cities on the map of urban theory (Robinson, 2002), formulating distinctive urban insights under the sign of the new aids their localisation and potentially (re)creates mutually isolated fields of enquiry. As urban studies is benefiting from a strong upsurge of interest in generating 'new geographies' of theory (Roy, 2009) after decades of assuming the mutual incommensurability of different cities, it is useful to reflect critically on the possibility that some ways of formulating these agendas might arc the analysis of contemporary urbanisation once again into geographically divergent theoretical pathways.

On the one hand, a number of authors display an eagerness to reframe the urban as a contingent and dispersed product of circulating processes. Exemplary in this, Ong insists that:

> This art of being global ignores conventional borders of class, race, city and country. There are promiscuous borrowings, shameless juxtapositions and strategic enrolments of disparate ideas, actors and practices from many sources circulating in the developing world and beyond. We identify urban modelling, inter-referencing practices and new solidarities as the flamboyant features of worlding cities in Asia. (2011: 23)

However, the analysis shades into a series of claims to Asian 'distinctiveness', which seek to ground the specificity of 'Asian urbanism' in precisely these capacities to set new kinds of urban practices into motion:

> [D]istinctive practices of urban modelling, inter-referencing and the forming of new solidarities that collectively seem to raise an *inter*-Asian horizon of metropolitan and global aspirations … the constitution of a set of distinctive visions of the global that exist without essential reference to the West. (Ong, 2011: 5; emphasis in original)

Clearly, there is no difficulty with an empirically grounded analysis of specific intra-Asian circuits, perhaps in the spirit of Brenner's suggestion that careful comparative work might support certain claims to innovation and distinctiveness. Although it seems rather difficult to generalise the claim that urban development in different cities in Asia lacks 'western' referents – as Ong (2011) and Roy (2011) themselves insist, the global nature of many of the professional practices underlying production of the urban (McNeill, 2009), as well as the circulating nature of much urban policy in the region, seem to suggest that continuing attention to the exteriorisation of urbanisation beyond the region is

advisable. So, while putting an imagination of the urban to work which maps well on to the 'urban now' – dispersed, multiple iterations of conceptualising the urban – the temptation of the new leads even these subtle analysts to reterritorialise their account as an Asian urbanism through claims to novelty premised on the very connections that would displace such a manoeuvre.

Given the geopolitical ambition of Asian urbanism, the potential for mobilising the new to ground another form of parochial hegemonisation in the field of urban studies is strong. In relation to the persistence of an analytics of the 'new', it is interesting to note that Ong and Roy's ambitions to generalise their claims see them dismissing the continued need for a postcolonial critique on the basis of the apparently (new), *sui generis* urban productions that they identify across Asia (Ong, 2011; Roy, 2011) – a manoeuvre that seems to promote a hegemonic insistence which does not ring true with the continuing power-laden conditions of production of urban processes and their interpretations in some parts of the world. This hegemonic manoeuvre is achieved partly by dismissing emergent theorisations from a different context (in this case, cities in Africa). Ong (2011) studiously views Simone and de Boeck as focusing only on a 'subaltern' subject in their writing, in order to displace their contribution as based on a now-dated, postcolonial analytic. However, this belies these authors' consistently close attention to actors and institutions which stretch across power hierarchies and wealth distributions, as the dynamic, provisional urban worlds they describe attend to the initiatives of transnational capital, donors, traders and governments, as much as they do to the energies required to survive in some of the poorest urban settlements (de Boeck, 2011; Simone, 2011). Thus, and despite the sophisticated ontology of disparate circulations and fragmentation put to work by Roy and Ong (2011), the hubris of the new and the ambition to stake a wider purchase for analytical claims derived from specific contexts, end up reproducing some now rather familiar (and territorialising) tactics, building hegemonising theoretical assertions from localised 'invention'.

Maliq Simone's generously ethnographic analyses, influenced by an interest in tracing circulations and analytically performing the disparate, emergent forms of urban life in cities across Africa and Asia, seek in a somewhat similar vein to build a case for specificity through connections. He suggests that he wants 'to push the ways in which connections across cities in Asia and African could be envisioned … to imagine the proximity of cities from Dakar to Jakarta' (2010: 267), indicating that in doing this he draws on 'something very real, which is the long history of movements undertaken by people of African descent into a larger urban world, both in Africa and beyond' (2011: 267). However, in the process, he too seems to wish to territorialise the very messy unpredictability and diverse directionalities of these connections through producing an 'imaginary space' or 'latitude' (2011: 267) in the wake of the circulations of migrants and goods that he traces. He also mobilises the rather more complex concept of 'black urbanism' to capture the potential of thinking from the disparate diasporic spaces of these circulations, as well as from the specified and segregated production of racialised urban experiences. By contrast, Mbembe and Nuttall (2004) (and Simone himself in his earlier writing) propose a rather less territorialising approach to the embeddedness of cities in Africa in 'multiple elsewheres'.

While all of these authors have strong evidence of thinking with the 'urban now' alongside these instances of territorialising through an analytics of the 'new', it seems to

remain important to be attentive to the persistent pitfalls of the 'new', and to counter these through careful exploration of the historicity and spatiality of the urban present. On the side of historicising the present, one direction of enquiry is for urban scholars to interrogate the contemporary conditions of the possibility of speaking the urban new. Often, asserting novelty in the field of urban studies is closely entwined with identifying and imagining the new in urban practice (and vice versa). Not only do the same data present themselves to scholars as to practitioners,[2] but analyses of the words and insights of urban managers, policymakers, residents, planners and designers are often the means by which cities emerge into scholarly debate. To some extent, then, identifying and valorising the new in urban theory is intertwined with the historical function of the new in contemporary urbanisation. Since critique is immanent in the conditions of urbanisation, emerging from and a part of the production of the urban itself, can we take a critical step aside from the languages of the new with which we imagine contemporary urbanisation? The historical conditions of the urban new might include global geopolitics and inter-city competition, or policy competition in the politics of global poverty, as different discourses of intervention jostle for influence, for example, in major international development agencies.

To embed the urban new in the historical conditions of its production in particular contexts is also to insist on its spatiality. The spatiality of the city does not lend itself to a progressive or linear historicism, in which one urban outcome or one temporality (the new) can do analytical service for the urban in general. The potential of even monofunctional spaces of the city to accumulate difference, at least through the performance and experience of urban life, has long inspired analysts to think social causality and historical change quite differently, as emergent in and through the diversity of social space (Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 1994). Thus, we are drawn to the coexisting possibilities and alternative interpretations which might emerge from any given space. The inventiveness of cities is profoundly spatial, produced through the multiple and dispersed time–spaces of the city: a good match for the 'urban now'. Framing the urban through Benjamin's idea of 'now-time' indicates the need for a theoretical practice which can attend to a multiplicity of temporalities, dispersed referents and circulating practices, and which can work across a diversity of urban contexts, drawing insights into a multiplicity (an infinity?) of coexisting conceptualisations.

It is indeed an exciting and essential development that an internationalised field of debate has emerged about global urbanisation – a conversation across the world of cities. However, it is my sense that doing so on the basis of the trope of the 'new' has the potential once again to render analyses of global urban experiences in different parts of the world incommensurable with one another. Tentative calls for a 'southern' urban theory (Watson, 2009) – or the equivalent caveat, 'I am only talking about Northern cities', or for an 'Asian' urbanism or a distinctive account of 'African' cities – are set to resurrect hegemonic theoretical ambition, or run the risk of reinstating lines of disregard for thinking about urban processes across different contexts. In drawing some of these developments together here for a sympathetic critical analysis, I have sought to raise the question as to whether the trope of the 'new' might be one component of a potential reterritorialisation of the field of urban studies. The concern would be that continuing such traditions might facilitate once again an unmarked hegemonisation of a parochial urban norm, and

diminish the generative potential insights to be gained by thinking through different urban experiences.

New geographies of theorising

As a more global practice of urban studies takes shape, many challenges are emerging, not least concerning the wider geopolitics and resourcing of academic work, the languages in which debates take place (or do not), and the distinctive concerns of urbanists in different parts of the world. The rather fragmented 'community' of global urban scholars has much institution-building to do, in order for more global urban theorising to be possible (see for example, Pieterse, 2013). However there are also some conceptual challenges associated with trying to build understandings of the urban 'at the world scale', to follow Connell (2007). While these might seem relatively abstract at times (a point Pieterse also makes), they not only frame the ways in which the urban (or cities) might come into meaningful debate, but they also subtend the possibility of keeping analytical conversations alive across diverse urban and regional contexts. I have drawn out some lines of critique from some recent works in contemporary urban studies in order to point to ways in which inheritances from earlier rounds of theoretical endeavour might persist in framing contemporary analyses.

A core tension exists in urban analysis between the territorial foundations and universal scope of analytical work: when one city or case or process comes to stand for a wider theorisation of the urban. This is the classic challenge of theorising 'cities in a world of cities', and has been exemplified here with the idea of the 'new' or thinking in the tracks of urban modernity. Even in sophisticated analyses committed to exploring global flows, the temptation to territorialise insights through naming a regionally distinctive urbanism (for example, as Asian or African) emerges. Similarly, the desire to decentre analyses of the urban produces new subject positions, which cannot avoid recentring (or are eager to recentre) their interpretations, and geographical metaphors can provide an appealing and suggestive grounding for this. The subject of 'southern theory', then, emerges as aligned with a specified set of regional contexts stretching from South Korea to Zambia, but whose shared features are not completely clear, or with a critique of the geopolitics of knowledge in the colonial present (Connell, 2007), or with the purportedly leading-edge experiences of more peripheral capitalisms (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2012; Mbembe, 2012) or with the critique of exploitation and poverty wherever it is found, making of the 'global South' a highly dispersed spatial referent. Such territorialised geographical metaphors include regions, hemispheric inventions such as the global South, temporal agglomerations such as postsocialism (Stenning and Hörschelmann, 2008) or new 'latitudes' of analysis produced through arcing connections (Simone, 2011). Roy (2009) most helpfully posed the challenge of new geographies of theory for urban studies, and while presenting a regionally based account of emergent theorisations, offered this as a 'strategic essentialism'. More recently, Roy (2011) has proposed a form of multiplicity as a solution to the deep limitations of regionally bounded traditions of knowledge: for example, the multiple iterations of 'Asia', which emerge in the practices and performances of the urban.

Similarly, theorists who have drawn on the geographical referent of 'the South' to propose a critique of metropolitan theory have hedged the term with numerous caveats. Thus, although Comaroff and Comaroff premise their analysis on the virtues of an 'ex-centric' viewpoint and an assertion that the history of the present reveals itself 'more starkly in the antipodes', and thus is investigated best from that 'distinctive vantage' (2012: 7), their geographical imagination requires a 'South' which is not only dialectically entwined with the North, but tied together through the 'labrynthine capillaries' of transnational capital – with much North in the South, and much South in the North (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2012). At the end of the day, there is a sense that 'the South' cannot be 'defined *a priori* but must be understood relationally' along a range of different processes:

> It is a historical artefact, a labile signifier in a grammar of signs whose semiotic content is determined, over time, by everyday material, political and cultural processes, the dialectical products of a global world in motion. (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2012: 47)

Connell, with a stronger focus on the geographies of knowledge production as such, must also embrace a geographical vocabulary in which the overlapping and imprecise markers of north-south, first world-third world, core-periphery must suffice to indicate "the realities of global division" (p. 212), and where "To use concepts like 'periphery' is just the beginning of analysis, not the end" (p. 213). Perhaps this array of caveats and complex spatialities of analytical imagination and historical process might themselves be more promising as starting points than the idea of the global South to articulate some quite different cartographies of knowledge production that seek to "reshape the circuits through which social-scientific knowledge moves" and refit social science in both metropole and periphery for "global dialogue" (Connell, 2007, p. 227).

Thinking with the 'now', as I have proposed in this article, draws us to attend much more closely to the caveats and less prominent geographies of circulation and punctuation which surface in the impossibility of operationalising or demarcating the tenuous regionalisations of knowledge exemplified by the idea of the global South, or that are present in regionalised (African, Asian, European, post-Socialist) urbanisms. The 'urban now' directs our attention to the multiple geographies and temporalities of the urban, and to the deterritorialized exteriority shaping specific urban outcomes. Crafting an analytics of the urban which opens both cities and the new to a multiplicity of surfaces and spatialities of interpretation, the 'urban now' encourages the assumption that building more globally relevant understandings of the urban will require conversations about urbanity across the diversity of 21st-century cities and their multiple histories (Robinson, 2011). In the spirit of the 'urban now', such conversations – multiple, innumerable and not easy to anthologise or canonise – will have many starting points and circumscriptions. There could be specific places or practices which originate them, and cities or events which some conversations will not be able to encompass. Like the cities that urbanists find themselves challenged by, these geographies of theorising the urban will be hard to trace, sometimes impossible to place, tracking across and beyond the contexts and events on which they hope to have purchase, beholden to a changing constellation of concepts and experiences, crafted from a literal manifold of the urban. This

imagination – which, I argue elsewhere, fits well with a reformulated comparativism (Robinson, 2011, forthcoming 2014) – opens up the potential for a more radically decentred and reflexive subject of theorising. Losing the territorialised referents of theory inherited, for example, from the framing of urban modernity, need not signify an unmooring of the theorist of the urban, or suppose a power-laden and resource-rich planetary view from nowhere. Rather, I would hope that it might provide an opportunity for practices to emerge which rely on much more precisely specified grounds for theorising. In seeking to locate the place of critique, theorists would be able to draw on the rich spatiality of the urban to define more productive cartographies from which to launch analyses of the urban, inspired by the vital revisability of theorising from the 'now', to imagine their voices can transform theory.

Funding

Notes

1. Caygill observes: 'Following the pattern of thought established in his philosophy of colour, he regards particular languages as infinite surfaces produced by a capacity for configuring linguistic surfaces which exceeds all discrete languages' (1998: 22). Benjamin himself observes that any attempt to reduce this multiplicity (of languages) to a universal would be the philosophical equivalent of Esperanto.
2. Mike Davis' (2006) planet of slums is an excellent example of this, with his main source of data and insight – the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements report on slums – being both informant and object of critique.

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