



Workshop Series

Dislocating Urban Studies: Rethinking Theory, Shifting Practice

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Since the turn of the Millennium, debates within critical urban studies have given rise to intellectually-rich discussions that force us to rethink *the location, theories, and practices* of the field. While attending to the fundamental question of *What is the urban?*, theorizations have expanded to reflect *where* and *how* we should come to know and understand it. In other words, what is considered worthy of attention to produce knowledge of urban processes? (cf. Robinson and Roy 2016). New approaches have sought to question not only the location of knowledge production but also to emphasize the importance of difference, identity, the everyday, more-than-human actors, and novel strategies of comparison when studying urban processes (Leitner, Sheppard, and Peck 2020). These developments are welcomed at a time when significant urban transformations are underway. However, more work needs to be done to create a field of critical urban studies that overtly engages with anti-colonial, anti-racist, anti-capitalist, and anti-patriarchal struggles worldwide, while addressing the urgent challenges of 21st century urbanisation, social inequality and environmental justice in more global ways. Furthermore, empirical examinations of the so-called Global South are becoming more relevant for understanding global processes of urbanisation, let alone debunking the biased ethnocentrism of prevailing urban studies hitherto. In this regard, a healthy renewal of the debates on im/possible comparisons across multiple scales, time frames, and social, economic, and political contexts demands a central attention. Hence, the geographical and epistemological margins of critical urban scholarship need to be explored much more in-depth in order to create openings towards what Arturo Escobar (2007) calls “worlds and knowledges otherwise.”

Dislocating Urban Studies: Rethinking Theory, Shifting Practice is a series of digital workshops that invites scholars working on/in/out of the above-mentioned margins who have carried out empirical, methodological or theoretical work that helps expand the boundaries of urban studies. Our aim is to engage in critical dialogue and explore different starting points or strategies that contribute to dislocating the centre of the field. In four workshops, we seek to:

- **Workshop 1:** Engage with forgotten or little-known anti-colonial and anti-capitalist urban concepts or theorists
- **Workshop 2:** Learn from empirical cases from “off the map” of urban studies
- **Workshop 3:** Explore methodological approaches that allow for research in understudied geographies and contribute to a global comparative urbanism
- **Workshop 4:** Challenge, revisit or rethink the usefulness of key concepts in the field (e.g. financialization, gentrification, displacement, neoliberal urbanism, right to the city).

Planned to be held in spring 2021, we invite early career scholars—PhD students (post-fieldwork), postdocs, and recently appointed faculty members—to the following workshops:

Workshop 1. A Non-Occidental West: Learning from Theories Outside the Canon

Date: 18-19 February 2021

Even though it has been several years since Jennifer Robinson's (2003) encouragement to postcolonise and “provincialize” the fields of geography and urban studies, and Ananya Roy's (2009) famous call for “new geographies of theory,” work to be done remains. In the anglophone world, scholars such as Tariq Jazeel, Helga Leitner, Colin McFarlane, Susan Parnell, and Eric Sheppard have added their voices to the need to engage with theory from the global South or the margins. Despite the slightly different starting points (e.g. subaltern, postcolonial, or decolonial), a similar aim is sought: dismantle the production of urban knowledge that is carried out through Eurocentric lenses. Theorizing this way allows us to fight “universal grammars” that see cities in the margins as anomalies of what cities in “the West” are perceived to be (Roy 2016) and to pluralize the field of urban studies through an input of a multiplicity of urban experiences (cf. Robinson and Roy 2016). However, a more global or cosmopolitan field of urban studies can only be built through an active practice. Inspired by Boaventura de Sousa Santos' (2010) concept of a “non-Occidental West”—theories or concepts that while produced in the West “were discarded, marginalized or ignored because they did not fit the political objectives of capitalism and colonialism”—this workshop seeks to explore theories or concepts outside the canon of critical urban studies, both from the West and elsewhere. Without disregarding the immense contribution of our to-go-to critical theorists (e.g. Frankfurt School), if we acknowledge that all theory (even critical urban theory) is loaded with power and embedded in context (cf. Brenner 2009):

- What forgotten or little-known urban theorists from the global North or South can help us carry out anti-colonial and anti-capitalist critique?
- What queer, feminist, postcolonial and decolonial theories or mid-range concepts can expand our understanding of the urban?
- How does one navigate Eurocentrism when using “Western” theory in global South, global East or peripheral contexts?
- What are the challenges or limitations of using theory in contexts outside their locus of enunciation? In other words, how can/should knowledge travel away from its centre of production?

Workshop 2. Places “Off the Map”: Bringing to Light the Hidden Locations of Urbanisation

Date: 18-19 March 2021

Cities that were not forged by the industrial revolution and are outside the Anglo-American and European heartland are many times under-represented and under-studied. This not only produces an asymmetry in knowledge, but also creates a situation where there is a need to present the geographies of the Global South—and we would add the Global East or other peripheries—in “more grounded, embodied and accountable ways” (Sparke 2007). However, these concerns are not only about expanding our lens of analysis to increase empirical variability (Roy 2016); advancing our knowledge about the urban outside the global North is also about changing the practice of how we create theory. Cities outside the global North need to be acknowledged as sites of theory construction and not only as locations where theory is tested (Sheppard et al 2013). Against this background, Schwarz and Streule (2016) make a strong call to “decentralize and further pluralize urban knowledge production” by engaging with studies outside the centres of what is considered “the urban.” Inspired by Robinson's (2002) call to study the places “off the map” of urban theory, this workshop seeks to continue the theoretical conversation started in the previous workshop by now focusing on empirical examples to prompt a discussion of how a more cosmopolitan and global understanding of the urban can come about. Questions we would like to address are not limited to, but include:

- What are the hidden locations of urbanisation and how does this *urban* look like?
- What are the hidden locations of urbanisation *within* the peripheries of the global North?
- How do understudied geographies contribute to the field of urban studies? In which ways do they challenge, expand or complement our understanding of the urban?
- Wary of the dangers of essentialising and exoticising, how does one create theory from empirical examples from the global South, global East or a periphery?
- What can empirical comparisons across Global-South and West-East divides contribute to the dislocation of ethnocentric narratives and the advance of critical urban scholarship?

Workshop 3. Challenging Methodologies and Methods

Date: 15-16 April 2021

Urban studies have witnessed a broad spectrum of methodological practices in critical urban scholarship, including discourse analysis, urban ethnography, case studies, comparisons and mixed methodologies. Alongside the discussion of ‘postcolonising’ urban theory, there is a need to discuss the impact of research as a system of practices that limit methodology (Patel 2014). The widespread notion of ‘best practices’ and universal models are constituted and legitimised through methodological choices (Vainer 2014). What is striking for us is the way the research on ‘off the map’ geographies is seen as an ‘urban exception’ (Parnell and Pieterse 2016) or expected to adapt Eurocentric methodologies to be read, discussed and even published. A commonality in the literature to overcome those unseen obstacles is to compare the cases of Global North and South. But the basis of such a comparison is also questioned, given the geopolitics of knowledge production (Grosfoguel 2011), which defines who provides data and who produces knowledge. Additionally, researchers also find resistance when trying to address issues on familiar geographies of urban studies using non-Eurocentric or otherwise marginalised lenses and methods. This workshop invites contributions that focus on the challenges and strategies deployed by researchers that are working with or open to start to engage with alternative ways of critical methodologies beyond West-, North- Euro-centrism. In the workshop, participants will have a chance to explore their own ideas and challenges in putting to practice their research methodologies. A set of guiding questions to address the main discussion points are as follows:

- What are the challenges and benefits of developing creative research designs beyond established methodological toolboxes (e.g. *Eurocentric* assumptions of what is considered relevant and reliable)?
- Do we need a new set of tools and methodologies to do research in conditions of informality, settings where secondary data is hard to access, places with a weak or strong (i.e. authoritarian) presence of the state, or politically volatile settings?
- If we challenge the norm that cities in the peripheries need to be compared against a case in the global North, how can we carry out South-South or South-East comparisons? How are insights learned from outside the centres important for cities in the global North as well?
- What are the possibilities and limits for comparison? Thinking about generalisation but wary of universalism, how can we determine the level of abstraction that makes comparison worthwhile? How to keep a balance between abstract theorizing and concrete research?
- Beyond the traditional methods of comparing by similarity or by difference, what are the challenges and potentialities of *relational* comparative methodologies (i.e. working horizontally seeking interconnections across cases, operationalizing inter-scalar lenses or looking at issues of temporality)?
- How do new theoretical interventions (e.g. planetary urbanization, critique of methodological *cityism*, critique of methodological nationalism, global cities/ordinary cities) work as a call for methodological innovation in our understanding of the urban? What are their challenges and limitations?

- How does a reflexive approach to comparative urbanism extend to scholars themselves? In other words, how much should a reflection of the geopolitics of knowledge production extend to the need to also increase the diversity of scholars writing from outside the centres?

Workshop 4. Revisiting the Concepts of Critical Urban Studies

Date: 17-18 May 2021

In the last decade, scholars have questioned whether there is and should be a “cohesive concept of the city” (Scott and Storper 2015) that transcends contextual difference. Scholars such as Thomas Maloutas (2018), Matthias Bernt (2016) and Ananya Roy (2009) have put under scrutiny some of the most widely used concepts in the field (e.g. gentrification, financialisation, neoliberal urbanism). This includes a major critique expressing that urban studies scholarship has been saturated by empirical studies reusing already-existing concepts, while ignoring the dialectical relationship between concrete and abstract theorisations. Recently, there is a surge of explicit and implicit discussions around ‘variegated capitalism’ and ‘variegated’ forms of commonly-used-notions, such as financialisation of housing and neoliberal urban governance (Peck and Theodore 2007; Aalbers 2017). While the so-called ‘variegated’ literature provides significant insight to different case studies, it carries the risk of avoiding a thorough engagement with middle-range concepts as well as grand theory. What seems to go amiss in this literature is a consideration of the theoretical basis formed through a broader abstract discussion. This *problematique* prompts us to propose the last workshop of this series on revisiting the concepts that are widely used in this manner. We are specifically interested in rethinking and adding to some of the most widely used middle-range concepts in urban studies, including but not limited to gentrification, segregation, financialisation, social sustainability, smart cities/digitalisation, right to the city, public space/urban commons, and informality. In particular we would like to tackle the following issues:

- In what ways is it possible to call back dialectics to revisit existing concepts in urban studies?
- How can we rework popular concepts, while keeping the wider theoretical web in which they are embedded, in sight?
- How can we go beyond using mainstream concepts as a part of ‘variegated forms’ in different geographies?
- How can we conceptualize differences not only horizontally, across borders, regions and/or levels of integration into the global economy, but also vertically within regions, nations and cities?

Submission Instructions

We invite long abstract submissions (maximum 500 words). Please include your full contact details and indicate the workshop of your choice. (In case you feel your abstract fits more than one topic, you are welcome to choose up to two workshops but please mark your first preference). Submissions should be made to dislocating.urban.studies@gmail.com no later than **13 November 2020**.

Full draft papers (between 4500 and 8000 words) will be expected around one month before each workshop to dislocating.urban.studies@gmail.com. The papers will be circulated among participants and discussed during the workshop (we plan to have discussants for each workshop). We will also allocate time to discuss possible formats and venues for publication.

Important dates

Long abstract submission: **13 November 2020**

Notification of abstract approval: **4 December 2020**

Deadline for full draft paper submissions

Workshop 1: **15 January 2021**

Workshop 2: **15 February 2021**

Workshop 3: **15 March 2021**

Workshop 4: **15 April 2021**

This event is being organised by the Institute of Urban Research (IUR), Malmö University in collaboration with Global Development Studies Discipline & HELSUS, University of Helsinki.

For more information, please consult <https://www.iuresearch.se/cfps-dislocating-urban-studies/> or send an email to: dislocating.urban.studies@gmail.com

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