

Cities in a World of Cities: The Comparative Gesture

Jennifer Robinson

Abstract

Cities exist in a world of cities and thus routinely invite a comparative gesture in urban theorizing. However, for some decades urban studies have analytically divided the world of cities into, for example, wealthier and poorer, capitalist and socialist, or into different regional groupings of cities, with subsequently very little comparative research across these divides. Interest in drawing comparisons among different cities has escalated in an era of 'globalization', as economic and social activities as well as governance structures link cities together through spatially extensive flows of various kinds and intense networks of communication. Nonetheless, scholars of urban studies have been relatively reluctant to pursue the potential for international comparative research that stands at the heart of the field. Where an interest in globalization has drawn authors to explicit exercises in comparison, both the methodological resources and the prevalent intellectual and theoretical landscape have tended to limit and even undermine these initiatives. This article seeks, first, to understand why it is that in an intrinsically comparative field with an urgent contemporary need for thinking across different urban experiences, there has been relatively little comparative research, especially comparisons that stretch across the global North–South divide, or across contexts of wealthier and poorer cities. Secondly, through a review of existing strategies for comparing cities, the article considers the potential for comparative methodologies to overcome their limitations to meet growing demands for international and properly post-colonial urban studies. Finally, it proposes a new phase of comparative urban research that is experimental, but with theoretically rigorous foundations.

Introduction

The very fact that cities exist in a world of other cities means that any attempt at a general or theoretical statement about cities either depends upon or invites comparative reflection. What constitutes a city, how are cities organized, what happens in them, where are they going? — in a world of cities these and many other questions invoke a comparative gesture. The budding theorist finds herself asking of the many studies she reads from different parts of the world: are these processes the same in the city I know? Are they perhaps similar but for different reasons? Or are the issues that are being considered of limited relevance to

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pressing issues in the contexts I am familiar with? And yet, in the generalized functioning of this comparative feature of urban studies, the 'world of cities' has been analytically truncated, meaning that the experiences of many cities around the world have been ignored even as the broadest conclusions about contemporary urbanity are being drawn. I suggest that revitalizing the comparative gesture is an important requirement for an international and post-colonial approach to urban studies.

The demands for comparison are perhaps heightened in an era in which the study of 'globalization' draws more and more urbanists to consider the experiences of cities across the globe, since economic and social activities as well as governance structures in different cities are linked together through spatially extensive flows of various kinds and intense networks of communication. For urban policy, this connectedness has driven an eagerness to learn from experiences around the world with a sometimes frenzied interest in the apparently frictionless circulation of knowledge from city to city through the identification of model cities or best-practice initiatives, for example. But while international urban policy might at times seem prepared to compare almost anything with anywhere in order to apply the best available ideas, scholars in the field of urban studies generally have been extraordinarily reluctant to pursue the potential for comparativism that stands at the heart of the field (Pierre, 2005). And even where an interest in globalization draws authors to explicit exercises in comparison, both the methodological resources and the prevalent intellectual and theoretical landscape limit and undermine these initiatives. As a result, promising edited collections, which take care to juxtapose case studies from different parts of the world, still do so without allowing them to engage either with each other or with more general or theoretical understandings of cities. As John Walton (1990: 255–56) suggests, much more could be achieved with the wealth of international urban scholarship: 'If we set out in that vehicle, comparing cities along the way, then we must stay on board for the journey's end of comparing theoretical explanations'.

This article seeks, then, to understand why it is that in an intrinsically comparative field with an urgent contemporary need for thinking across different urban experiences, the field of urban studies offers relatively little by way of comparative research. Moreover, it will seek to explain why, when comparisons are undertaken, they are highly circumscribed in the range of cities attended to. I suggest that current practices of formal comparative urban research actively create this situation. The article reviews existing strategies for comparing cities, considering the potential for comparative methodologies to overcome these constraints to meet growing demands for an international and post-colonial approach to urban studies — urban studies conducted 'on a world scale' (Connell, 2007: 209). It proposes a new phase of comparative urban research — an experimental phase, but one with theoretically rigorous criteria for comparison. I draw on the spatiality of cities themselves, their multiplicity, diversity and connectedness, to suggest ways to recast the methodological foundations of a comparative approach to urban studies, particularly inherited assumptions about causality and what constitutes a unit of analysis.

It is my hope that such a revised approach will promote and proliferate a wide array of forms of comparative reflection, from critical engagements with international urban theory, to active learning from scholarship in different contexts, or primary research across apparently divergent urban experiences. All of these would be premised on the understanding that the 'embeddedness in multiple elsewhere' (Mbembe and Nuttall, 2004: 348) of cities has already drawn them into constantly shifting conversations with each other — and following these connections could profitably do the same for scholars of this world of cities.

Some analytical limits to the 'world' of cities

The scope of urban comparative research has been profoundly limited by certain long-standing assumptions embedded in urban theory — assumptions that propose the fundamental incommensurability of different kinds of cities. Reinforced by the strict

methodological propositions of comparative research, these assumptions have functioned to restrict comparisons primarily to cities that are already assumed to share certain specified commonalities. Elsewhere I have suggested that the divided nature of urban studies today can be traced back to two theoretical manoeuvres (Robinson, 2006). The first, and earliest, proposed a close association between (certain) cities and the experience of modernity. In 'advanced industrial', wealthier countries cities were seen as privileged sites for the invention, propagation and cultural experience of modernity — the celebration and privileging of newness and the contemporary. Cities were cast by theorists from Georg Simmel (1997) to Louis Wirth (1964) and many contemporary writers as places where the old (folk, tradition, primitive) was cast off in favour of modernization (such as de-individualization, routinization, monetization) and its associated cultural practices (individuation, blasé attitudes, disenchantment). Some cities were clearly left behind by this forward surge, most notably cities within contexts that regarded tradition as an anachronistic but present reality (especially in Africa). The 'other' of the modern city was not simply 'back then' in the past, it was also 'over there' in places where 'the primitive' might well have moved to the city, but in the process rendered those cities distinctly un-modern places. Certain modern cities, then, have been counterposed with those considered not modern, or troubled by tradition, for at least a century of urban theorizing, placing their relative incommensurability in a field of theoretical assumptions that are very deeply embedded.

The second theoretical manoeuvre that has rendered some cities incomparable with others is the much later, but perhaps more devastatingly divisive movement of developmentalism. Since some of the earlier guises of developmentalism drew on theories of modernization, accounts of urban modernity and development have reinforced one another — markers of the not-modern came to characterize an urban space in need of development. In the initial accounts of modernization theory, the (traditional) cultural practices, which had been defined as both not urban and not modern by theorists such as Park and Wirth, had to disappear if development was to occur. For urbanists the markers of being less developed, under-developed or developing cohered in urban form and structure: limited urban infrastructure, informal construction methods, lack of planning, lack of economic opportunity, informal economic activities, large population growth with limited economic growth, external dependency. On the one hand, an important plea came from writers from the 'urban South' who demanded that the distinctive features of cities there — such as their economic duality (Santos, 1979) — be accorded a different and distinctive theorization. Moreover, those presenting theories of underdevelopment insisted that the urban experience of poorer countries was intimately tied to the organization of wealth and power in wealthy countries. On the other hand, these progressive analyses, like the modernization theories before them, had the unfortunate consequence of initiating decades of urban research that assumed that the experiences of wealthy and poorer cities held little of relevance for one another (Robinson, 2006).

The intertwining of modernity and development in urban theory, then, has established a landscape in which assumptions about the incommensurability of wealthier and poorer cities are taken for granted, and reproduced it through separate literatures that find few grounds for careful and mutual comparative reflection. However, one line of connection persists, since accounts of wealthier cities are often generalized as claims to universal knowledge about all cities. And although those writing about wealthier contexts seldom reflect on the experiences of poorer cities, there is a substantial implicit comparativism in the writings of scholars of poorer cities, who frequently choose to or need to engage with these 'theories', for example, by working creatively to understand the situations they are working in, to secure publication in international journals, or to authorize their research findings for a wider audience.

A minor voice within the field of urban studies has consistently urged a broader comparativism and critiqued the often narrow geographical foundations for theoretical deliberations. This point of view has regularly been expressed by scholars working on

poorer contexts, who feel that the cities they study deserve wider consideration in theoretical analysis (e.g. Southall, 1973; Lawson and Klak, 1993; Ward, 1993). This claim echoes contemporary calls to post-colonialize knowledge production in the western academy (e.g. Chakrabarty, 2000; Connell, 2007). It involves recognizing the locatedness of much of what passes for universal theory and substantially extending the geographical and analytical scope of theorizing; in urban studies this signals the need to terminate easy claims to theorizing on the basis of the experiences of a small selection of wealthier cities (see Robinson, 2002; Mbembe and Nuttall, 2004; Simone, 2004; Roy, 2005; Robinson, 2006). In principle such a claim is easily supported — but in practice within urban studies it falls foul of assumptions regarding the incommensurability of different urban experiences that are deeply ingrained in the discipline, most notably in its assumptions regarding comparative methods.

There have certainly been moments in the history of urban studies when the call for comparative research across diverse urban contexts has been more widely expressed — and the present is one of these (see e.g. Davis, 2005; Roy, 2005; McFarlane, 2006; Nijman, 2007; Harris, 2008; Ward, 2008). Much comparative work between the 1940s and 1960s flowed from the coincidence of extended empirical testing of the social ecology paradigm, and notably of Louis Wirth's assessment of an 'urban way of life', and the rise of anthropological research on cities in poorer contexts, as urbanization proceeded in many parts of the world (Wirth, 1964; Kuper, 1965; Mitchell, 1968; Pahl, 1968). The strong engagement between Weberian and Marxist analysts drawing on the comparative experiences of socialist and (Western) capitalist contexts saw a flourishing of reflections on comparativism in the late 1970s and 1980s (e.g. Harloe, 1981; Pickvance, 1986). Castells' *The City and the Grassroots* (1983) stands as an exception during this period and is testimony to the possibility of careful international comparative research. More generally, though, as shown in the following section, formal comparative urban research came to be largely restricted to US–European comparisons in the wake of the developmentalism of the late 1960s until the publication of recent, more flexible comparative work inspired by studies of globalization. Instructively, John Walton concludes a 1981 review of comparative urban research with this comment:

In the short space of the last decade urban social science has undergone a revolution. Great strides are now being made in the elaboration of a new paradigm. Most of this work, however, is not really comparative and its geographical focus has been on the advanced countries of Europe and North America. Rehearsing the experiences of earlier advances, we are once again on the threshold of developments that will depend on full use of the comparative imagination (*ibid.*: 34).

I argue that generalizing and building on the comparative gesture in urban studies depends on countering assumptions about the incommensurability of urban experiences across different contexts and on building a case for a robust comparative methodology that can cope with the diversity of urban experiences in the world of cities. The section that follows presents a review of the current state of comparative research in urban studies, with a view to recasting comparativism in service of the analysis of the wider world of cities.

Current strategies for comparison in urban studies

Incommensurability

A range of comparative tactics are currently in use in contemporary urban studies; Table 1 offers a summary of those that are most pertinent to this discussion. However, the first category in the table is a reminder that what underpins the relative dearth of comparative research is the often unarticulated assumption that no comparison is possible across cities

Table 1 Summary of urban comparative strategies and causality assumptions

	Comparative Strategy/Basis for Selection	Causality Assumptions
Cannot compare	None	Plural and incommensurable
Individualizing	Implicit Any city Case studies not always comparative or theory-building	Historical and specific
Universalizing	Most similar or most different	Search for a general rule (universal)
Encompassing	Involvement in common systemic processes; often assumption of convergence as basis for comparison	Universal but potentially differentiated processes of incorporation into and impact of system
Variation-finding	Most similar: explain systematic variations within broadly similar contexts on basis of variables held constant or changing	Universal
	Most different	Either: search for universal causality across different contexts based on similar outcomes Or: pluralist causalities (Pickvance, 1986)

that are regarded as substantially differentiated not only by their levels of development, but also by cultural or policy context, economic system or political environment. The working assumption is that in many cases urban experiences vary too much across these criteria to warrant co-investigation. In formal terms this implies that few aspects of urban life are common across these different contexts, and that the causal processes shaping cities are so different that comparative analysis is unlikely to bear any fruit.

However, with growing assertions of convergence and connections across urban experiences in a globalized world — ranging from globalizing formal or informal economic networks to transnational networks of design, policy, culture and governance (see e.g. Marcuse and van Kempen, 2000; Smith, 2001; Sassen, 2002; King, 2004; McFarlane, 2006; Huysen, A. 2008) — the argument that there are few commonalities to explore across certain kinds of cities would be hard to support as a blanket claim. In the light of these trends, one ought to expect at least the assumption that comparison is not possible to require rigorous proof. That is, one might expect to have to demonstrate rather than simply assert *a priori* that nothing useful can be gained from comparing different urban contexts. The working assumption might then be that, given an appropriate intellectual definition and scope for a comparative research project, cities from many different contexts might well be considered alongside one another. The second argument for incommensurability is that the reasons for urban outcomes diverge significantly across different contexts. This assumes that there is nothing important to be learned when the causal processes shaping cities and the wider political-economic systems in which they are embedded vary considerably. I shall return to consider this second argument quite explicitly and join with Pickvance (1986) to argue against it, towards the end of this section. Simply put, the assumption that variation either in outcome or process across different categories of cities (developed/underdeveloped, (post)-socialist/capitalist, Asian/South American, and so on) renders these cities incommensurable is, I think, fundamentally misguided. The rest of the article will develop a counter-argument to this position in substantial detail. Although they do not explicitly outlaw such comparisons, in practice extant urban comparative methods tend to reinforce these assumptions of incommensurability. The rest of this section considers the range of existing comparative methods in turn.

Individualizing

Table 1 follows Charles Tilly's (1984) assessment of different approaches to comparative research, and Neil Brenner's (2001) careful exposition and application of this to the urban scale, while also drawing on the contributions of Lijphart (1971) and Pickvance (1986). It sets out four further conventional comparative approaches within the social sciences and for urban studies more explicitly. Brenner (2001) discusses in some detail examples of these various comparative approaches within urban studies. Perhaps the most common and valuable method for comparison in the field of urban studies is that of 'individualizing' comparison, or the detailed case study. Here the researcher seeks to explain the distinctive outcomes in one city (or more than one city) through implicit or explicit (usually qualitative) comparison with other cases that might confirm hypotheses concerning causal processes and outcomes generated in the specific case study.¹ Very often in urban studies detailed, often historical, research on one city is brought into comparative relief through careful engagement with a wider literature, either in relation to generalized statements, or theories, about urban experiences or in terms of specific other individual experiences that might throw light on the case study in question. The case-study strategy, Lijphart (1971) suggests, has the potential to be relatively unproductive for social-science research unless it consciously involves theory building, but insists that when it does, it is an important part of a broader suite of comparative methodologies. In relation to urban studies, it has been particularly productive to bring the experiences of different case-study cities into careful conversation with one another in order to reflect critically on extant theory, to raise questions about one city through attending to related dynamics in other contexts, or to point to limitations or omissions in existing accounts.

An excellent example here is Filip de Boeck's (2006) *Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City* (with photographer M.-F. Plissart). This book, a detailed and careful anthropological study of life in contemporary Kinshasa, engages neatly with wider urban theory concerning space, culture, urban form and the production of urban meaning. There is much to recommend in this study, not least the opening up of analytical perspectives that bring subjectivity and the collective production of urban meaning to the fore in assessing wider urban change. De Boeck's work demonstrates very clearly the potential for broader theoretical learning and innovative, critical reflection across cities that might seem outwardly different — cities dominated by informality, for example, as opposed to those dominated by formal economies, extensive regulation and more fixed built environments — but whose respective experiences speak across theoretical issues such as how imagination, rumour, duality and agency shape city life and futures. It is exemplary of an individualizing comparative methodology, not simply for studying cities in poor or crisis contexts, but for offering insights into the assessment and analysis of urbanity everywhere. In some ways, a close look at a city that is often (inappropriately) assumed to be a limit case of contemporary urbanism (Davis, 2006) might fit into Lijphart's 'deviant' or 'hypothesis-generating' case-study method, which he suggests can have 'great theoretical value' (1971: 692). In some ways, then, assumptions of incommensurability have prevented urban scholars from benefiting more fully from one of the potentially most theoretically generative comparative research strategies.

An individualizing approach also brings into focus some of the assumptions about causality that frame other kinds of comparative research, especially formal variation-finding techniques. Detailed historical analysis of urban processes in particular cities exposes specific political or economic outcomes as frequently path-dependent and/or multiply determined (see Ragin, 2005 and 2006, for a more general discussion of the

1 Tilly (1984: 81) expresses this as follows: 'a purely individualizing comparison treats each case as unique, taking up one instance at a time, and minimizing its common properties with other instances'. Lijphart regards the case-study method, central to urban studies, as closely connected to comparative studies, and his range of potential case-study strategies certainly overlaps with what Tilly here calls individualizing comparison.

importance of combined causal conditions in comparative methodologies). As we shall explore below when discussing variation-finding strategies, seeking variation in the relationships between a limited range of well-specified individual variables might obscure the deep historical roots of processes, suggesting that they are the product of more recent events than they actually are. Abu-Lughod's (1999) historically informed critique of the dual-city hypothesis, which comes out of global city approaches, perhaps best exemplifies this insight. And in so far as cities are routinely sites of assemblage, and hence multiplicity, urban outcomes are often best characterized as emergent from multiple overlapping and intersecting processes and events (Massey *et al.*, 1999; Massey, 2005). Contextual explanations, which speak to outcomes that are the result of the specific assemblage of diverse processes and actions, form an important part of understanding the causal processes at work in cities. On this basis we can identify many processes and phenomena that are common to different cities, albeit variously configured, or processes that stretch across more than one city leading us to attend to the connections and circulations through which cities already inhabit one other. The final section of this article explores the methodological consequences of these observations in more detail; for now I suggest that it is worth noting the potential to build from the careful methodologies of individualizing comparative analyses towards a nuanced account of causality in urban comparative research informed by the complex spatialities of cities. Such an account would draw a wide range of cities into the purview of an urban comparative project.

Encompassing

A second strategy that has been extremely important in the field of urban studies for the last two or three decades is the 'encompassing' method (Tilly, 1984), in which different cases are assumed to be part of overarching, systemic processes, such as capitalism or globalization. In this case they can be analysed as instances or units, albeit systematically differentiated, within the broader system. An excellent exposition and extension of this approach is offered by McMichael (1990), under the title 'incorporating comparison', in relation to world-systems theory — clearly of substantial relevance to urban studies given the current prominence of world- and global-city approaches. The one disadvantage of the encompassing approach in relation to building a comparative approach for a world of cities is that it assumes the systemic differentiation of units — in this case cities — on the basis of categories that are identified within the particular encompassing analysis. For urban studies, this approach therefore reinscribes *a priori* divisions and hierarchies into the world of cities, which can militate against broader comparative ambitions. For example, in underdevelopment theory, capitalism is understood to produce both development and underdevelopment jointly across different contexts, making many locations important in the investigation of world capitalist development. However, individual contexts or units of analysis are seen as substantially differentiated, with intertwined but divergent outcomes. In this approach, while the experiences of both developed and underdeveloped cities speak to the analysis of capitalism and urbanization under capitalist conditions, comparisons tend to retain an assumption of incommensurability across the differentiated cases or units of analysis. For example, Lubeck and Walton (1979) offer a discussion of the ways in which cities in developed and underdeveloped contexts are enmeshed in the wider world capitalist system, but then proceed to compare two examples of urbanization under peripheral capitalism rather than drawing any direct comparisons between these cases and cities in developed-country contexts. Together, then, differently placed cities illuminate the wider system and processes, but comparison across these different experiences has been limited and, in fact, actively discouraged by the *a priori* assumption of systemic differentiation.

McMichael (1990) develops a sophisticated account of encompassing comparison through a critical engagement with world-systems theory. Like Tilly, he is drawn to the potential that a focus on interconnections amongst cases offers for historically grounded

comparative research. But he moves beyond both Tilly and world-systems theory, observing that both assume the existence of the system within which units of analysis are located, such as a pre-given world economy or the global system of slavery. Encompassing approaches thus tend to place the comparison outside of history, either within an abstract theoretical framework, or within a historical analysis that assumes in advance the nature of the 'whole' that governs the 'parts'. There is also a tendency to assume the existence of the individual cases in advance of the study. In contrast, McMichael (1990) very usefully proposes the pursuit of a comparative strategy he terms 'incorporating comparison', in which both the individual instances ('parts') and the 'whole' are historically and mutually constituted:

Rather than using 'encompassing comparison' — a strategy that *presumes* a 'whole' that governs its 'parts' — it progressively *constructs* a whole as a methodological procedure by giving context to historical phenomena . . . The whole, therefore, does not exist independent of its parts . . . [N]either whole *nor* parts are permanent categories or units of analysis (*ibid.*: 386, emphasis in original).

Incorporating comparison opens up a wealth of potential comparative strategies for urban studies 'on a world scale' (Connell, 2007). A focus on connections, based on Tilly, suggests strong historical grounds for doing comparative work across a wide range of different contexts. Moreover, a view that systems are themselves emergent, historically forged and therefore entirely contingent opens the way for exploring an array of different kinds of connections that are not pre-determined or privileged by theory. Social, economic and cultural flows of all kinds, with varying spatial extents, thus become relevant foundations for useful comparison.

This analysis maps well onto a form of spatial thinking that is commonly referred to as 'relational' (Massey, 2005), and which is crucial to any comparative urban analysis. The territorial spatial entities that often form the foundations for comparative analysis (nations, places, cities, bodies, and so on) are understood to exist only through wider relationships or connections, and these are, in turn, generated and transformed by the territorial entities. In McMichael's (1990) approach spatially defined units of analysis, interconnected through various historical processes, and emergent wholes mutually shape one another and do not come into existence independently of each other. In Massey's (1994) terms, we would call this an open, or global, sense of place. Cities as units of comparison, thus shape, as much as they are shaped by, the wider connections that, for some, add up to a global (economic, social, cultural) system.

However, the approach needs to be pressed further than McMichael is able to do, at least partly because the assumption that units of comparison and their connections add up to a historically and analytically meaningful 'whole' cannot necessarily be sustained. The emergent form of the totality of individual territorially defined phenomena and the connections among them might sometimes form a coherent system for analysis (as global- and world-cities analysis postulates in relation to the economic processes shaping 'global' cities). But the prolific and uncertain associations created by various kinds of connections or flows and their diverse territorializations and assemblages mean that we also need to hold open the possibility of more fragmentary and limited relationships amongst individual cases, however these cases are defined; a 'system' or a 'whole' might not result from these interconnections. In addition, units of analysis can properly be thought of as historically contingent, certainly, but a spatial analysis would also encourage us to move away from a focus on specifically territorial units of comparison. The final section of this article will explore further the range of spatialities of comparison that this 'spatial thinking' open ups.

An important potential of the encompassing methodology that Tilly observes (1984: 126–27) is that it directs attention to networks and connections amongst different units within the broader system being considered, for example, the historical comparative research he was considering, transatlantic slavery, easily connects metropolitan and

colonial contexts within the same historical moment. This has certainly been important for global- and world-cities approaches, which have offered considerable opportunities for assessing urban experiences across a wide range of 'globalizing' cities. But to realize the potential of this approach we would need to move beyond the relatively narrow focus on global and world cities in a restricted range of economic processes to encompass the rich variety of transnational processes and connections shaping contemporary urban life (Smith, 2001; Simone, 2004). This would expand the range of comparable cities even further, outside of the strict focus on the global economy (Robinson, 2002). In addition, I would argue that it is very important to move beyond systemic incorporation or convergence assumptions as the grounds for comparison (in this case, cities sharing the same global economic dynamics) as this substantially constrains the global comparative project (*cf.* Dick and Rimmer, 1998; Sassen, 2002). And we would clearly need to question the reinscription of hierarchy, division and hence incommensurability within the analysis of the encompassing systems that such approaches are prone to and that once again analytically truncate the 'world' of cities considered eligible for comparative research.

More formal comparative (variation-finding) methods might offer some possibilities here, since in principle they do not require the selection of cities based on their place within any encompassing system or their relevance to overarching *a priori* analytical categories for meaningful comparison. However, as they are currently deployed, variation-finding comparisons are extremely restrictive in terms of the cases they select for comparison. In their own way they expect a measure of convergence for effective comparison, and rely on *a priori* categories to select suitable cases. There are therefore some very substantial constraints to their usefulness — as currently practiced — for advancing a more post-colonial and international urban theory. However, suitably transformed they hold out some real possibilities for re-grounding comparative methodologies for a new generation of urban theorizing.

Variation-finding

Universalizing comparative strategies (the third category in Table 1) usually seek out universal laws that are applicable to many cases, and thus are commonly quantitative and statistical exercises. I'll return to these briefly below. By contrast, variation-finding strategies can be applied to fewer case studies, using qualitative and historical methods. In Table 1 I have suggested two versions of this strategy (following Pickvance, 1986): the most prominent one used in comparative urban politics at the moment involves working with most similar cases; the other, which is seldom used, involves comparing most different cases. In my view, both strategies, specifically the latter, hold considerable potential for a broader comparative project despite their respective limitations in terms of formal method and actual implementation.

The fundamental methodological challenge of qualitative variation finding is, according to Lijphart (1971), the difficulty of having few cases and many variables. The response of most researchers to this challenge has substantially reinforced the tendency in urban studies only to think comparatively across the experiences of relatively similar cities. The assumption is that if you work with relatively similar contexts, you can more easily control the likely sources of variation. Researchers are therefore advised to select cases that are 'similar in a large number of important characteristics (variables) which one wants to treat as constants, but dissimilar as far as those variables are concerned which one wants to relate to each other' (Lijphart, 1971: 687). The difficulty of isolating sufficiently similar cases exercises him, although one suggestion appeals: to consider political units within the same region or area, such as Latin America, since, he suggests, there are more likely to be similarities than amongst randomly selected countries (*ibid.*: 689). Janet Abu-Lughod (1976) has also argued persuasively for the benefits of an embedded regional approach to comparative research.

For urban scholars this methodology of variation finding amongst most similar cases has been widely used to compare US and European cities, most notably in debates around regime theory and governance (e.g. Harding, 1994; Kantor and Savitch, 2005), but also other topics such as segregation and poverty (Wacquant, 1995) and city building (Fainstein, 2001).

An important feature of variation-finding research is that it is strongly driven by existing theory in order to identify which case studies and which variables are appropriate to consider (Denters and Mossberger, 2006). In terms of this article's concern with encouraging a more geographically wide-ranging comparativism within urban studies, this is a major embedded disadvantage of the variation-finding method. This method draws on existing knowledge, theory and observations, and advocates generating hypotheses with well-defined dependent and independent variables. Case studies are then selected in such a way as to control for variations in other potential explanatory variables. For example, with independent variables such as national-policy contexts, forms of local–central political relations, history of economic growth or decline — all of which might explain urban outcomes such as the presence, absence or specific form of urban regimes — controlling for some of these variables (most notably the level of economic development and political systems) has allowed researchers to consider the specific kinds of local political and economic circumstances that might produce particular kinds of urban regimes (see DiGaetano and Strom, 2003, for a useful review). There are two difficulties with this methodological procedure for promoting a more international approach to urban studies.

The first difficulty concerns the direct relationship between existing theory and hypothesis formation. Much urban theory is fairly parochial, with often quite locally-derived conclusions circulating as universal knowledge. As Pierre (2005: 447) observes: 'Most dominant theories in urban politics draw on — or more correctly, are abstractions of — political, economic, and social aspects of the American city'. This convention of proceeding by deductive reasoning has some very disturbing consequences. It restricts the variables or topics to be considered to those relevant to the privileged locations of theory production. Perhaps other places would make one think of exploring different issues? But since research in many contexts is not seen as contributing to the generation of theoretical knowledge (Connell, 2007), many urban phenomena and experiences must remain unexplored with this methodology. Furthermore, with the expectation of controlling for variation in key independent variables, the reliance on accounts of only certain contexts for generating hypotheses has the circular and self-reinforcing effect of limiting the range of appropriate cases that can usefully be drawn on to test hypotheses; places where key variables diverge would conventionally be considered unsuitable for comparison.

The source of a second and significant methodological problem in variation-finding approaches then concerns the formal process of isolating independent variables. Since cases are pre-selected on the basis of their suitability to test hypotheses, isolating the hypothesized causal variables in complex and dynamic cities has suggested to researchers the virtue of selecting cities with many background features in common (Pierre, 2005). Most frequently, nationally defined levels of economic development, or forms of national political systems are kept constant as variables that are assumed to be key determinants of urban outcomes, thus exposing variations in local political structure or business politics, for example, to investigation. Relatively reductionist and economic assumptions therefore conventionally govern the selection of case studies. This has the distinct disadvantage of reinforcing (or at least preventing the examination of) the idea that levels of economic development determine urban outcomes such as the consolidation or form of urban regimes or the role of business in growth coalitions when, in principle, much urban theory might seek to move beyond such economic determinism. Opportunities to learn about these local dynamics in a range of different cities are pre-emptively foreclosed. These criteria for selection persist in defining causal variables at the scale of territorial units, usually national or local. At the very least, in the light of

the discussion of encompassing comparison, this approach diverts attention from interconnections and globalizing dynamics, which might arguably be equally important in explaining local outcomes (Kantor and Savitch, 2005, make this point). More significantly, we also need to question the relevance of national-level criteria to making local comparisons, and to interrogate the assumption that the territorial unit of the city is the appropriate entity for comparative urban research. I shall explore these further in the final section of this article.

In large countries with many cities, such as the United States, this methodology has encouraged an inward-looking but clearly very productive form of comparative analysis. However, even selected efforts to reach across the Atlantic to the politically and economically not too dissimilar countries of Europe have provoked concerns about 'concept stretching' and a dependence on overly 'abstract theorizing' because of the many apparent differences between the two contexts (Denters and Mossberger, 2006: 565). Conventional wisdom states that stretching hypotheses towards more abstract analyses will undermine the ability to frame specific testable hypotheses, and introduce too many features that vary across the contexts to ensure effective control over explanatory variables. Kantor and Savitch (2005) advocate restricting the theory that is used to meso-level concepts to support careful and rigorous comparative procedures. But Denters and Mossberger suggest that a trade-off be made between rigorous comparison and more abstract theorizing. Within limits, this could enable researchers to extend the reach of comparison. I will also explore this point further in the following section. For example, higher levels of generalization — from regime building to questions of governance — could possibly illuminate aspects of urban politics, which might otherwise remain unattended to. This would be especially useful when engaging with pressing aspects of twenty-first century urbanism, such as the possibility for governance in urban contexts that are characterized by substantial informality. Alan Harding, in reviewing the potential for applying US regime analysis to UK urban development politics, suggested that governance could be 'a key conceptual tool for comparative research into urban development' (1994: 369). Research that draws on a wider range of urban contexts with a diversity of forms of governance — even more so than characterize the US–UK–European nexus — might well enrich rather than undermine processes of careful theory building.

Because it is driven by theory and draws loosely on a scientific model of causality, formal comparative urban politics has barely considered (and then only to summarily dismiss) the possibility of comparative research across wealthier and poorer contexts. Michael Harloe (1981: 185), writing in the throes of the debates over comparing capitalist and socialist contexts, observed: 'most writers seem to think that direct comparisons between advanced Western nations and emergent capitalist countries at a lower level of development are of little use'. His article reflects on some of the challenges of pursuing 'East–West' comparisons, but does not return to the possibility of making comparisons across different capitalist contexts — across cities that have, after all, shared much as a result of colonialism, neo-imperialism and cultural interactions.

Kantor and Savitch (2005), in one of the most useful interventions to date on how to extend comparative studies across a wider range of contexts, still find it possible to assume that it is appropriate to confine their investigations to advanced liberal democracies since they share important characteristics as well as common interests in the global economy, as evidenced by their coalition as the (at that time) G7 nations (*ibid.*: 148). Contrary to their rigorous arguments concerning comparative methodology, they clearly see no need to truly justify their focus on wealthier cities only. Their full reason for this approach is that 'these cities share common political and economic environments' (*ibid.*: 144), a criterion that then plays no part in their broader analysis. At the core of the most thoughtful treatment of this topic to date, then, is the far-too-easy assumption that it is appropriate to restrict comparisons to broadly similar national contexts according to their relative wealth and forms of political systems.

By contrast, a most suggestive intervention by Pickvance (1986) presents a motivation for the value of comparing 'most different' cases. His reasons for this approach remain absolutely current, notably the suggestion that comparative research is important 'to become aware of diversity and overcome ethnocentricism' (*ibid.*: 163). He continues: 'Awareness of diversity produces a sort of culture shock. It makes one aware of new and unsuspected connections' (*ibid.*: 163). Conventionally, most different cases might be compared where similar outcomes could draw one to investigate what common feature caused these, since so much else is different and therefore unlikely to explain the common outcome — another form of methodological control (Lijphart, 1971). Pickvance points out the more radical possibility of and potential in moving away from the assumption that the same causal processes are at work in the cases being compared. Instead, he argues for closer attention to assumptions of plural causality, that is, that similar outcomes might have quite different causes. For him this spoke to some deep-seated disagreements between Marxists and Weberians concerning the production of housing classes in capitalist and socialist contexts. Differentiation in the housing market may well be the result of similar processes, for example, bureaucratic administration, as Ray Pahl (1968) had been arguing. However, it might equally be the outcome of two different processes, each specific to the wider system (capitalist or socialist) in which housing was being produced: income-based class differentiation in capitalist cities, and bureaucratic and technological processes in socialist contexts, as Ivan Szelenyi (1983) had been proposing.

This latter, 'relativist' model of plural causality, Pickvance (1986: 179) points out, is seldom considered by researchers, and has remained in the shadow of comparative research that has focused on assumptions of universal causality. He observes that 'the traditional caution in urban studies towards making comparisons of very different societies reflects the . . . tacit recognition of the problems with methods based on universal models of causation' (*ibid.*: 179). So rather than assuming that there is a problem with comparing different cities *per se*, he reminds us that there are some serious flaws in the conventional assumptions concerning comparative methodology (here, specifically around the assumption of universal causality) and that there is, in fact, much to be learned across seemingly very different urban contexts.

Pickvance (*ibid.*) suggests some very specific ways in which to recast the comparative project, presenting three examples of cross-national comparative research across diverse contexts, none of which depend on assumptions of convergence across the different urban experiences. Assumptions of universal causality, what he calls 'linked sub-models', and plural causality can both be useful in undertaking intelligent and carefully constructed comparative research across cities (in his examples) in wealthier and poorer countries, industrialized and more mercantile (trade-based) economies, and capitalist and socialist contexts.

In the context of most different strategies of comparison, a glance in the direction of large-N statistical studies is instructive. As Denters and Mossberger (2006) observe, samples for statistical analysis can be constructed to maximize variance in specific variables, and random samples aim to incorporate as much variation as might be anticipated in the population at large. Such approaches typically deploy a range of tools to determine the explanatory value of an array of potential variables across sometimes widely varying cases. While there are certainly important caveats to statistical analysis of this kind, it might well be viewed as opening certain kinds of research questions to investigation across cities that are otherwise seen as incommensurable.

Overall, then, and very hopefully for any contemporary ambitions for broadening comparativism and post-colonializing urban studies, Pickvance (1986: 163) reminds us that even in cases of substantial differences in urban outcomes and processes, 'awareness of diversity through comparative studies forces one to bring theoretical assumptions into the open'. His engagement with the foundations of comparative reasoning provides a very useful springboard to consider what a rigorous comparative methodology for investigating a world of cities today might entail.

The potential of comparative research

A review of the current state of comparativism in urban studies has suggested some promising ways to extend and reinforce the broader comparative gesture embedded in the study of cities in a world of cities. While existing practices tend to constrain comparisons to very similar cities, creative intellectual engagements across a wider range of different contexts might be enhanced by exploring issues at a more abstract level (Denters and Mossberger, 2006) against a broad understanding that considering diverse urban experiences would challenge scholars to revisit extant theoretical assumptions (Pickvance, 1986). However, the pursuit of this agenda necessitates some significant shifts in methodology. For example, Pickvance (1986) suggests the need to relax assumptions of universal causality in comparative research in order to consider both similar and different causal explanations for urban outcomes. And, on the basis of an encompassing approach that places strong emphasis on historical connections between different contexts or cases (Tilly, 1984; McMichael, 1990), new, non-territorial foundations for drawing comparisons across different cities come into view.

This final section of the article will therefore draw on these insights, and on examples from the growing body of contemporary comparative urban research, to consider two specific issues that need to be addressed if we are to build a revitalized urban comparativism that is more adequate to the task of thinking through a world of cities.

First, I want to suggest that we need to recast our assumptions about the appropriate units of comparative research. Secondly, I would like to propose that the practice and understanding of urban 'theory', as well as its role in framing comparative research, needs to be reconsidered. These are only two issues on a much more substantial agenda for future exploration. For comparativism to be proliferated and enabled as a method for learning about and from a world of cities, we need to consider some thoroughgoing reformulations of the more limiting theoretical and methodological inheritances of comparative methods that I have outlined here. These inheritances include: procedural assumptions based on a scientific model of analysis, such as controlling for pre-determined independent variables; the relatively reductionist causal assumptions (economic, political) on which the identification of appropriate case studies is premised; a territorialized imagination of what constitutes a case for investigation, especially the privileging of the city-scale as the site of urban processes; the use of national-level criteria to determine the comparability of cities; and dependence on relatively parochial theory-driven hypotheses to generate research topics and to select case studies.

The development of alternative approaches to comparative research is certainly a pressing agenda for urban studies (see also Ward, 2008; McFarlane, 2010). The suggestions I explore here draw on the ways in which we think about the spatiality of the city itself, as a site of assemblage, multiplicity and connectivity, to set out some pathways towards a more international and post-structuralist comparative approach to urban studies. A spatial understanding of the processes at work in cities can draw us towards alternative maps of causality, differently constituted cases for comparison and new ways of bringing cities together within the field of vision that is comparative research. My hunch is that the process of drawing some of the spatialities of cities themselves into framing the processes of comparative reflection could stimulate a new alignment of urban theory, in tandem with a strongly provocative experimental period in which comparisons across different cities are proliferated. What is needed is an analytically nimble and possibly experimental suite of comparative methods that are capable of responding to the array of urban experiences present in the world of cities and to the challenges of doing urban studies 'at the world scale' (Connell, 2007).

Units of comparison

Neither the national scale nor the territory of the city can remain as the assumed units of comparison in urban studies. Of course, both are relevant, and for some comparative projects these units might be the most suitable for comparison, or the most relevant

criteria for selecting case studies. For example, you might want to test the hypothesis that is silently assumed in most comparative research, that cities in wealthier and poorer national contexts vary markedly along most dimensions of analysis. You might want to investigate rather than assume, then, whether relative resource levels substantially affect forms of governance in large metropolitan areas, or whether poorly resourced cities have less autonomy or democracy in the determination of local policies. In much comparative research there is a lazy and economic assumption that the relative wealth of a city's national context influences a vast array of issues. One important agenda for urban studies would be to test these assumptions and thereby place some of the extant practices of case selection in comparative research on a more rigorous footing.

For some issues, the territory of the city might be the relevant scale for analysis. If you were investigating local-government activities (policies, interventions, politics, forms of governance) it would be sensible to use more or less clearly defined local-government districts as the unit of comparison. The comparability of local-government entities across different contexts is notoriously problematic — metropolitan fragmentation versus unification, relative levels of autonomy *vis-à-vis* national government and vastly different sets of responsibilities and financing all conspire to make these kinds of comparison immensely complicated. Finding the 'functional equivalents' of urban government in different parts of the world presents a substantial challenge (Pierre, 2005: 457). But evidence suggests that there are nonetheless many occasions when research at this scale would be very valuable.

Similarly complicated, but equally valuable, is comparative research that takes the functional city as a whole as the basis for analysis. An understanding of economic regions, wider city functioning, urban spatial forms, intra-metropolitan governance structures and many other topics benefit from research at this scale (for a recent example, see Scott, 2001). The territory in question — the unit of comparison — would need to be carefully specified in relation to the issue being discussed. Thus, a comparison of large, internally differentiated and multi-nucleated cities at this scale, in both wealthier and poorer contexts, might illuminate the spatial dynamics of metropolitan economies in changing economic circumstances such as structural adjustment, liberalization and economic crisis (Rodríguez-Posé *et al.*, 2001; Rogerson and Rogerson, 1999). But the choice of this scale, or territory, for the unit of analysis would need to be carefully justified in relation to the particular study rather than assumed *a priori* as the basis for comparative thinking.

However, there are many urban processes for which neither formal administrative boundaries nor the functional regions of cities would be the relevant scale for comparison. Instead, processes that exceed a city's physical extent — circulations and flows — as well as phenomena that exist and operate at a smaller scale than the city should be the relevant units for comparison. Pierre (2005: 457) proposes that when researching local economic development as an example of urban regime behaviour, relevant units of analysis might be defined as individual development projects, or specific decision-making processes; Moulaert *et al.* (2003) provide good examples of this.

This manoeuvre opens up a vast potential for wide-ranging international comparisons. Many phenomena in cities are tied into connections and flows that stretch beyond the city's physical or territorial extent and that entrain other urban contexts into the dynamics of that city. In a further step, these connections themselves become the units of comparisons. Similarly, there are many aspects of cities that are reproduced serially across the world of cities or influenced by the same processes and actors — governance regimes are one aspect, but also phenomena such as architecture and design, detailed technologies of management, policies and political programmes. Such phenomena could be considered comparable in their own right across very different urban contexts and thus be the units of comparison — see, for example, Dick and Rimmer (1998) on American-influenced suburban design across Southeast Asia; Moulaert *et al.* (2003) who compare large-scale urban development projects across several cities; Jacobs (2005) on high-rise

residential buildings; Newman and Thornley (2005) on the governance of world cities; McNeill (2009) on global architects and Harris (2008) on gentrification.

Cities themselves therefore enmesh the project of comparativism in an array of spatialities that depart significantly from the territorial forms imagined in the current conventions of comparativism. Certainly the spatiality of city connections can ground possibilities for incorporating comparisons (McMichael, 1990). More generally, as cities are already interconnected, different ends of the connections might be brought into stronger analytical and not simply empirical relation. In this way cities such as Liverpool and Kuala Lumpur (Bunnell, 2007), Rome and Dakar (Sinatti, 2009) or Kinshasa and Paris (MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, 2000), become sites for exploring and comparing migrant experiences, the forging of local and national identities, the impact of migration on the built environment, the place of informality in economic circuits — and, in fact, the myriad connections that tie the histories and fortunes of different cities together.

Not only do the two ends of a connection come into view, though; the connections themselves might well form the focus of comparison.² The connection, then, becomes the case. One might consider how the connections forged by headquarters companies in Delhi or Hong Kong and New York with their various centres of production compare. Are different forms of economic globalization at work across different regions? Do the kinds of connections and investments developed by South African capital across Africa bear comparison with those of the Chinese? The flows that connect cities are an important unit for comparing urban processes, not simply as influences on the outcomes in places, but as important phenomena in their own right.

However, current imaginations of the spatiality of connections tend to propose mobilities with directionality, tracking from one place to another, albeit with instantaneous or disjunct temporalities which might make them incredibly hard to trace. So although connections describe routes that are circuitous and opaque, they nonetheless imply a distinct trajectory and an identifiable direction of influence. This has some disadvantages in a comparative field that has assumed a hierarchy and direction of influence from wealthier to poorer cities. To open up understandings of the links and influences amongst a world of cities, we might draw on different spatial imaginations, for example, that of circulations. Equally significant to the fate of cities, circulations — multidirectional, co-constituted and emergent mobilities — tie different cities into networks of influence and collaboration. Decentred circulations — the sense of a metropole or centre shaping outlying or peripheral places is inappropriate — reflect a globalized landscape of power that entrains many different sites and participants in productive relationships. Examples of circulations might be found in explorations of global governance, where neoliberal policies and practices, for example, circulate unpredictably, through multiple pathways of influence or adoption, to shape urban outcomes across the globe (Salskov-Iversen *et al.*, 2000; Larner and Walters, 2004; Ong, 2006). Circulations are created — they cannot be assumed — and might be made through the proliferation of collaborations, links, tracks, international or intercity institutions, an investment in the policy arena, learning from different cities or successful cases (benchmarking and best practice) and emergent discursive formations that seduce and entrain practitioners (see Saunier, 2002).

Attention to circulations would draw many different combinations of cities into the same analytical or political space and the relationships of comparison invoked would be very different from those suggested by the formal, territorializing spatial imaginations of conventional comparativism. Certainly, as Sassen's (2001) iconic account of the urban impact of economic globalization reminds us, this space of circulation is not 'smooth'; it will be punctuated by nodal points (perhaps institutional disseminators of knowledge, discourse and best practice), by the infrastructures that enable or keep ideas circulating

2 I wish to thank John Allen for introducing this idea for discussion, and other 'Politics of Comparison' workshop participants in 2007 from Durham and the Open University for stimulating discussions that helped me think through this topic generally, and this point in particular.

and by places that might assume some coordinating function in relation to particular circuits (as with the specialized nodes for the management of global economic circuits in certain cities hypothesized by Sassen). But these are urban spatialities that invite quite new, creative ways for thinking across different cities and across a different range of cities.

If you draw cities into a new array of spatial configurations through the imagination of circulations, the need to reach for spatial imaginations beyond the topographical (Amin, 2002; Allen, 2003) becomes clear. The ways in which cities inhabit one another often have less to do with relationships that can be mapped in physical space — such as flow, dispersion or location — and more to do with the experiential and imaginative ways in which places are drawn together or kept apart. Topological spatialities, according to John Allen (2008), are a very suggestive way to make sense of contemporary globalizations, more so perhaps than the language of connections or circuits. He draws on an analysis of how different forms of power operate across and through the configuration of space to explain how people and activities in distant places can be drawn ‘close’ (to certain projects or points of view, for example), or how proximate phenomena can be ‘kept at a distance’. These forms of power depend on achieving action or influence at a distance or stimulating imaginative affiliations (Allen, 2008; Barnett *et al.*, 2008). The spatiality of global economic management is less one of nodes and flows, then, than one of the seductions of ideas or the sustainability of mutual understandings generated across distances. Topological spatialities might become a comparative analytic tool for assessing the ways in which cities already inhabit each other. As Simone (2004), De Boeck and Plissart (2006) and Malaquais (2007) demonstrate, the livelihood strategies and imaginative worlds of city residents in places such as Doula and Kinshasa are entwined with other places elsewhere (such as New York and Brussels) both practically and imaginatively, in the sense that residents are always in the process of preparing to leave for an imagined elsewhere, that they already know much about other cities, or live an imaginary world that is both here and there. Within a topological imagination, making one’s way in a city commonly entrains a wide diversity of other places. Our understandings of cities would serve us better if they were able to do the same.

When the unit of comparison is not the city as such, and the criteria for determining comparability are not restricted to national-scale characteristics or stereotypical features of a city, opportunities for pursuing comparative work proliferate. Delimiting the units of comparison in a more flexible and analytically rigorous way is only one step towards opening up comparative research to a wider world of cities, though. The next section considers two aspects of the practices of theorizing cities that are also implicated in this approach: the geographies of theory production and circulation, and the implications of the spatiality of cities-as-assemblage for understandings of causality.

The geographies of urban theory

If Connell’s depiction of theory as ‘the way we speak beyond the single case’ (2007: 225) stands, then theory will probably remain an important ambition of comparative research. However, its place in comparative research needs to be addressed. Based on Connell (*ibid.*: 228), urban theory’s location needs to become more adequate to the idea of ‘sociology on a world scale’, which means that scholars need to ‘reshape the circuits through which social-science knowledge moves’. Scholarship from a wider range of contexts and language communities could be routinely considered as contributing to theoretical understandings of cities, which would enable the circuits of theory-generation to become multi-directional and outward-facing. Parochial theory, either in metropolitan or more peripheral contexts, requires de-provincializing, even as theory that falsely claims to have universal status needs to be provincialized (Chakrabarty, 2000). In the process, many different contexts and diverse urban experiences will be routinely considered crucial resources in the formulation of generalized statements and analytical conceptualizations of the contemporary urban experience.

By contrast, it is too often the case that insights into city life from around the world are either neglected — a point Harris (2008) makes in relation to studies of gentrification — or consigned to the status of exceptions, mere case studies, ‘facts’ or ‘data’, to illuminate existing theories. As part of the process of recalibrating the circuits of knowledge generation and revitalizing the comparative project, researchers will need to consider all cities as both resources and sites for theory generation and need to expose theory to interrogation based on this wider world of cities. This will make the process of theory building more fragile and uncertain, and theory itself more unstable and less secure in its claims, as evidence from diverse and even divergent urban experiences will need to be engaged with and allowed to disturb conventional accounts.

As McFarlane (2006), drawing on the work of Spivak, points out, the current hierarchies of knowledge production militate against democratic knowledge (Connell, 2007). A pressing task, therefore, is to understand and contest the embedded exclusions and limitations that prevent urban studies from operating ‘on a world scale’. Some of these hierarchies are built into inherited ways of knowing (Robinson, 2006); others are endemic to the exclusionary practices of the academy and publishing. The dismantling of these inheritances will be a long journey; and I hope that we will not tire of demanding this of ourselves, even as academic fashions change. Intellectual and practical strategies that enable the remaking and replacing of current theoretical accounts of cities are an important prerequisite for a revitalized comparativism.

However, if these changes in the practices of comparative urban research are to take place, we need to find some alternatives (or at least supplements) to the convention of generating hypotheses for comparative investigation based on more or less parochially generated theory. As Denton and Mossberger (2006) hint, the most abstract concepts offer an opportunity to incorporate the widest range of cities within comparative reflection. Abstract concepts are also the level at which urban theory is most open to a creative generation of concepts that might help us look differently at cities and their problems. The interface with philosophical thinking — where new conceptual developments could emerge from a range of different influences — might well be productive (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994).³ As a social science committed to a ‘relationship with a state of affairs or body and with the conditions of this relationship’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 22), urban studies could find in the empirical, comparative interrogation of its most abstract concepts a rich field for creative reconceptualization. An apparent danger here is the exclusionary effect of opaque and inaccessible philosophical theory itself. Theory could be seen as a site for preserving privileged access to knowledge production (Mufti, 2005); retaining openness to alterity and to diverse languages and urban experiences will involve attending to the geopolitics of the production of urban knowledge.

The second geography of urban theorizing that I wish to draw attention to concerns the implicit geographies that inform assumptions about what constitutes an explanation in formal comparative research. In urban studies, formal comparative methodologies often enact a quasi-scientific model of causal relationships and explanation. Variables are identified — some independent (causal) and some dependent (reflecting outcomes shaped by independent variables) — and it is assumed that relationships amongst these variables can be hypothesized using existing empirical and theoretical knowledge, that empirical referents for these variables can be identified and specified precisely in order to be tested

3 Deleuze and Guattari (1994) seem to suggest that, while science and philosophy both incorporate relationships with states of affairs and with concepts, these are differently configured. One example of how they capture this is: ‘Science needs only propositions and functions, whereas philosophy, for its part, does not need to invoke a lived that would give only a ghostly and extrinsic life to secondary, bloodless concepts. The philosophical concept does not refer to the lived, by way of compensation, but consists, through its own creation, in setting up an event that surveys the whole of the lived no less than every state of affairs’ (*ibid.*, 33–34).

by means of data that is then gathered using robust, reproducible methods of enquiry. While these procedures and assumptions are logical and apparently rigorous, and certainly produce interesting and generative research, they can be limiting both in terms of the kinds of processes that can be investigated and in terms of the range of forms of causality that can be explored. Nijman (2007: 5) comments that comparative urbanism needs to be reconciled with 'current theoretical developments in urban geography', and to adopt an approach that 'emphasizes understanding rather than law-like explanation'. Most significantly, perhaps, quasi-scientific understandings of causality draw our attention away from possibly the most important causal agent of urban processes, the space of the city itself. One approach to space is to think of it as a simultaneity of multiplicities or trajectories and thus historically and politically radically open to future possibilities (Massey, 2005). Certainly this resonates with the function of cities as assembling in particular places multiple social processes and phenomena (Lefebvre, 1991). In this light, the causality most strongly associated with cities is that where, following Charles Ragin's (2006) formulation, in a particular context a combination of causally relevant conditions contribute to a particular outcome. More nuanced approaches to explanation are needed to address this distinctive feature of urban research.

Case-study research on an individualizing-comparison basis offers one route to more flexible possibilities for explanation. Nonetheless such studies often implicitly reproduce the formal scientific strategies of comparison, for example, in the criteria that are used to justify selection of case studies, in the background similarities used to control for or focus attention on certain specific processes and outcomes, and in a search for directional causal relationships or, for more Marxist-influenced studies, deeper structural or analytically identified processes. Detailed historical studies are least likely to feel the need to conform to these requirements that attempt to understand the complex processes shaping a city or cities, and to place these in relation to knowledge and understanding drawn from a wider literature (see e.g. Dennis, 2008). Janet Abu-Lughod's (1999) analysis of Chicago, New York and Los Angeles, is an exceptional study in which this detailed historically grounded methodology is deployed to compare directly more than one city along a range of issues (including economic development, social dynamics and governance structures).

For some, this approach to explaining urban experiences is problematic. Pierre (2005: 449) valorizes comparative research as a path to more scientific and less idiographic research in urban politics: 'Urban politics seems to have embraced complexity and richness in context at the expense of parsimony'. He urges that comparison begin with a robust causal model (*ibid.*: 456). Sassen (2006) similarly complains that appeals to the complexity of the urban experience undermine the possibility for analytical insights. Nuanced, complex and contextual accounts of urban processes are not necessarily unanalytical — they are simply differently so from a more narrowly focused, even reductionist form of explanation. They also create important opportunities to identify the causal effects of the city-as-assemblage. Politics, experience, imagination — these are messy, nuanced, complex phenomena that are routinely characterized by overdetermination and multi-causality, not to mention secrecy and unknown (unknowable) motivations. If you are writing about spectrality, invisibility and provisionality — features of informality that seldom leave lasting traces in the physical environment of the city — you would hope to have an array of maps of explanation and causality at your disposal. This would draw you, for example, to engage with the dialectical ambivalence of psychoanalysis, the multiplicity of post-structuralism, the flat emergent ontologies of Deleuze and Guattari (1994) and indigenous accounts of doubleness and deception (see e.g. De Boeck and Plissart, 2006; Mbembe and Nuttall, 2004; Simone, 2004). The nature of theory and abstraction has been transformed since the instantiation of formal variation-finding comparative methods, and I suspect that the complex spatiality of cities, together with growing expectations to learn across a wider range of different urban contexts, will strengthen urban studies' engagement with different models of explanation and causality.

Conclusion: proliferating the comparative gesture

I have argued in this article for a revitalized and experimental international comparativism that will enable urban studies to stretch its resources for theory-building across the world of cities. To conclude, I stress some important challenges and caveats to this project. First, while I am eager to encourage all kinds of novel and unusual comparative research to compensate for years of neglect and to challenge entrenched assumptions of incommensurability, my concern to reground such an experimental comparativism in careful and rigorous procedures, albeit in ways appropriate to broadly post-structuralist analyses, stems from a caution offered by Janet Abu-Lughod — who is arguably urban studies' pre-eminent comparativist — against 'throwing "into the hopper" all cities at all times from all over to see which traits and isolated characteristics appear congruent or divergent' (1976: 21). Her concern, which is aimed mainly at an audience tempted to universalizing statistical comparative research, directs us to consider as exemplary her own detailed and responsible scholarly practices: building comparative analyses from long-term and committed accounts of urban processes in the regions she studied — North Africa and the United States. In the absence of such commitment, the danger is that a comparative urbanism equal to engaging with a wider range of cities invites a new round of imperialist appropriation of international urban experiences to service Western and other well-resourced centres of scholarship.

An alternative danger rides on the practice in other disciplinary fields in which comparativism merely signifies 'area studies' or developing-world studies or 'political science focused on other national contexts than the American case' (Pierre, 2005: 454; see also Mufti, 2005). If a widened comparative project simply re-codes the differentiation of the field of the urban space, or leads to a new round of exclusions of certain kinds of cities, it will not have achieved its call to attend to the world of cities. As Mufti (2005: 486) notes, it is important that 'nonrepressive and nonmanipulative forms of knowledge in the future in the humanities would have to be more encompassing and more comparatist, not less, than scholarship has been in the recent past'.

Finally, it is important to recall the powers and histories of comparativism in general, particularly its co-emergence with colonial practices of knowledge. As Connell (2007: 16) notes: 'Sociology displaced imperial power over the colonized into an abstract space of difference. The comparative method and grand ethnography deleted the actual practice of colonialism from the intellectual world built on the gains of empire'. In this sense, theory building within a more international approach to urban studies would need to be significantly more tentative and uncertain than at present, as it draws different contexts into conversation. In the difficult processes of mutual learning, the challenges of translation and the inevitability of misreadings could frame the project of 'planetary' thinking that McFarlane (2006), following Spivak, has advocated.

To the extent that a reinvigorated comparative project might launch itself towards an approach to urban studies at a world scale, this article has suggested that such a more interconnected field of research could draw both inspiration and method from the cities that form its objects of study. Their interconnectedness might inform our eagerness to proliferate conversations across scholarships embedded in different urban contexts at the same time as it directs us to new units of comparison. Their diversity and multiplicity might inspire us to be quick to unsettle parochially derived theoretical certainties through engagement with different cities even as we embrace more nuanced forms of explanation and method appropriate to the complexity of cities. An urban theory on a world scale could, then, potentially draw more cities into shared fields of analysis, and be characterized by multiple, frequently unsettled and hopefully unsettling conversations about the nature and the futures of cities in the world. This style of theorizing would be neither a parochial universalism nor a uniform global analytical field but a rich and fragmented array of ongoing conversations across the world of cities.

Jennifer Robinson (Jennifer.Robinson@ucl.ac.uk), Department of Geography, University College London, 26 Bedford Way, London WC1H 0AP, UK, and African Centre for Cities, University of Cape Town, Private Bag X3, Rondebosch 7701, Cape Town, South Africa.

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Résumé

Les villes existent dans un monde de villes et invitent donc normalement à un mouvement comparatif au sein de la recherche urbaine. Toutefois, depuis quelques décennies, les démarches analytiques des études urbaines ont scindé le monde des villes en, par exemple, riches et pauvres, capitalistes et socialistes, ou en d'autres regroupements par régions, ce qui s'est traduit par de rares comparaisons entre ces grandes divisions. L'intérêt pour les travaux comparatifs entre villes s'est accentué au fil de la 'mondialisation', les activités économiques et sociales ainsi que les structures de

gouvernance reliant les villes par des flux de plusieurs types et de grande envergure spatiale, et par d'actifs réseaux de communication. Pourtant, les auteurs d'études urbaines se sont montrés peu enclins à approfondir le potentiel de recherches comparatives internationales qu'offre ce domaine. Lorsqu'un intérêt pour la mondialisation a poussé certains à des exercices comparatifs détaillés, tant les ressources méthodologiques que le contexte théorique et intellectuel dominant ont plutôt limité, voire anéanti, ces initiatives. Dans un premier temps, cet article cherche à comprendre pourquoi, dans un domaine comparatif par nature où un besoin urgent appelle à une réflexion associant différentes expériences urbaines, les études comparatives sont relativement rares, notamment les comparaisons qui dépassent la division entre Nord et Sud, ou entre les villes les plus riches et les plus pauvres. Ensuite, faisant le bilan des stratégies de comparaison existantes, il envisage les méthodologies comparatives qui pourraient repousser leurs limites pour répondre aux demandes croissantes en études urbaines internationales et réellement postcoloniales. Pour finir, l'article propose une nouvelle phase expérimentale d'études urbaines comparatives, également dotée de fondements rigoureux sur le plan théorique.