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Theorising from where? Reflections on De-centring Global (Southern) Urbanism

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One of the major contributions of the post-colonial critique of urbanism is the call for de-centring knowledge production, especially the emphasis on the need of 'theorising' from the global South so that urban processes embedded therein are not rendered simply as variants of the global North. What can we learn from this endeavour to re-assert the importance of Southern cities, and are there any limitations in our existing practices? Does the focus on a select number of Southern cities result in replicating the extant shortfalls of urban studies from the global North? Are postcolonial and neo-Marxian critique of urbanism mutually exclusive? In this short essay, while advocating the current efforts among critical scholars to give more weight to the studies of the global South, I reflect on these questions, introducing some of the latest contributions from scholars working in and on East Asia or what I refer to the Global East (Shin et al., 2016) as a deliberate attempt to interrupt the North-South binaries.

Theorising from the global South?

De-centring the production of knowledge on global urbanism involves moving away from over-reliance on Western cities (e.g, London, Chicago and Vancouver) as sources of theoretical inspiration, and treating all cities across the globe as 'ordinary cities' placed on the level-playing field (Robinson, 2006; Roy, 2009). Analytical generalisation is pursued by scholars working on the global South to challenge the existing wisdom on the urban way of life and what urbanisation means to different place and people.

While acknowledging the contributions made by the emphasis on Southern cities as new sites of theorising, I posit two shortfalls that can be observed in existing practices. First, a persistent problem is the absence of certain global regions. Critical scholars have been lamenting this absence, voicing their dissatisfaction with the way some regions are under-represented. For example, in a recent international conference on 'the frontiers of the urban' held in November 2019 at the University College London, Oren Yiftachel called for efforts to 'theoriSE', stressing the need of accumulating more work on learning from what he defines as 'global SouthEast', which covers the Middle East and Turkey. In another conference on urban geographies of post-communist states held in Kyiv in 2017, multiple sessions were organised to

probe 'theorising cities from the global East'. Here, contributors lamented the absence of former 'second world' whose post-communist transitional urban experiences were missing in the vocabularies of urban scholarship. As the session organiser later reiterated, '[t]he demise of the Second World's political project – communism – wiped the East off the global map, any distinctiveness of more than 70 years of communist rule erased. The East is too rich to be a proper part of the South, but too poor to be a part of the North. It is too powerful to be periphery, but too weak to be the centre' (Müller, 2017: 2-3). Global East is also a term I have elsewhere introduced (see Shin et al., 2016) to use East Asia as a disruptive means to "problematise the existing common practices of grouping all regions other than Western European and North American ones into the Global South" (ibid.: 456), a practice that often renders East Asia invisible. All these emergent efforts add weight to the on-going project of decolonising urban theories and decentring knowledge production, but at the same time, signal the lack of presence of certain regions from the global urban scholarship. There is still more work to be done to re-insert cities outside the West (or North Atlantic) in the global epistemological map of urban theorising.

Second, a trap researchers may often find themselves in is that researchers, willingly or unwittingly, portray a picture of the world that is divided into two binaries: global North and global South, which are increasingly limited categories that constrain analytical enquiries. For students of East Asian (and to some extent, Southeast Asian, if Singapore is considered) urban studies, there is a recurring - often imposed - dilemma as to where their region fits. As a scholar researching Asian cities, I get to hear occasional murmurs, from students who are questioned by their professors about their attempt to use South Korea as a case study to discuss development in the global South. Similarly, Hae and Song (2019: 10) also bemoan "the invisibility of East Asian societies within the dominant geographical nomenclatures of Global North and Global South". Such invisibility may perhaps stem from the understanding that East Asia's trajectory of urbanisation does not fit into the characteristics of the global South. Indeed, a study proposing 'a paradigm of Southern urbanism' summarises three distinctive characteristics of cities in the global South, but consider them to be different from cities in 'North Atlantic and Northeast Asia' (Schindler, 2017: 60). In a similar vein, other scholars may hesitate to use Singapore, Taiwan and South Korea as case studies in their research on the global North: After all, despite their status as high income countries according to the World Bank, they are 'post-colonial' and non-western, having experienced urban development trajectories dissimilar to those of Western Europe and North America. In other words, they are inadvertently in interstitial spaces, neither global North nor global South.

The rise of East Asia, to some extent, provides an opportunity to disrupt the North-South binaries, which do not capture the more complex web of spatial connectedness. If export of urban development experiences occurs from, say, South Korea to Ethiopia, is this a South-to-South mobility? For some who do not regard South Korea as part of the global South, such policy transfer gets lost in the usual categorisation of global North and South, but it may present an interesting moment of disruption to the conventional study of global urbanism and expose the increasingly limited utility of the North-South divide.

De-centring and re-centring urban studies?

Ananya Roy (2009: 820) notes succinctly that "[t]he concern is the limited sites at which theoretical production is currently theorized and with the failure of imagination and epistemology that is thus engendered. It is time to blast open theoretical geographies, to produce a new set of concepts, in the crucible of a new repertoire of cities." Here, the emergence of East Asian cities has created a niche in the global urban studies, bringing scholarly attention to this part of Asia. The rise of East Asian cities as a reference point for urban development in other cities of the global South have resulted in an increasing volume of studies on these cities in recent years (for example, Doucette and Park, 2019; Park et al., forthcoming). The contribution of studies on Chinese urbanism has been enormous in particular, not only in terms of the scholarly opportunities that were created as China began to tread the path of economic reform and rise to become one of the biggest economies in the world, but also in terms of the expanding higher education market. Indeed, as Fulong Wu (2015) has noted, "Chinese cities provide a chance to expand the geography of theories".

Re-centring urban studies by focusing on cities outside the North Atlantic is a challenging endeavour in itself. One particular problem perhaps is the hesitation among funders and publishers to be open to proposals that nominate a non-Western single site (e.g., a city or a country) from which theorising can occur. Journal editors may also favour a special issue that includes multi-site comparison instead of a collection on a single site. The experience of Jesook Song and Laam Hae who have recently edited an insightful volume, *On the Margins of Urban South Korea: Core Location as Method and Praxis*, is quite telling. In their Afterwords, itself a rare contribution that provides a detailed genealogy of the evolution of their thoughts from their seeding to the fruition, they spell out how their previous efforts to pursue a special issue, which was to treat 'urban South Korea' as a single case, were to no avail, an experience that replicates my own from some years ago. One of the reasons for journal editors to reject their special issue proposal seems to be that "research on a particular country (i.e., South Korea) was incapable of engaging in transnational analysis" (Song and Hae, 2019: 189). They found it challenging to ascertain that there is "the significance of knowledge grounded in a particular location, especially one in the non-West, because of its supposed limitations in appealing to conception of universality and certain understandings of transnationality" (ibid.). It is interesting to note how this hurdle is less of the case with China studies as can be illustrated by a number of journal special issues that have focused on China (for example, He et al., 2017; Logan, 2018; Wu and Zhang, 2020), the reasons of which may include the surge of interests in China studies as China has risen to become a powerful economy and how much academic world including publishing industry has worked hard to capture its market and readership.

Even if it is possible to use a single site from which theorising can occur, there is a risk of giving prominence to a small number of prime cities that already enjoy political, economic and cultural privilege in their host countries. In this way, some places are over-represented as sources of inspiration. For instance, a

select number of prime cities situated in India (noteworthy are Bangalore, Delhi and Mumbai), in Africa (notably Johannesburg, Cape Town and to a lesser extent, Lagos) as well as in mainland China (so-called 'first-tier' cities of Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen and Guangzhou) have risen to become key sites of academic enquiries. The rise of these economies has also helped elevate the positions of these cities, as academic markets expand rapidly in line with their trade volumes in the world economy. The same can be said for South Korea: There is a predominant focus on its capital, Seoul. The focus on a select number of prime cities means that our understandings of urban processes in their countries are largely skewed towards the few cities that frequently feature in research outputs and public debates. In other words, our discussions on urbanism in the global South and East are largely based on the optics of major prime cities of the region, and this is indeed an mirror image of the global urban studies that have largely based on a select number of global cities.[1]

Another inevitable shortcoming of such preponderance of studies on prime cities is that smaller and more regional cities are largely hidden from scrutiny, thus remaining in the epistemological blind spot despite calls for more inclusion of cities dropped 'off the map' (Robinson, 2002). Some of the megacities may also remain in the blind spot despite their sizeable population and economic influence in their national territories, due to their loose global connections and therefore remaining as 'black hole' cities (Short, 2004). Cities in the blind spot may also result from inadequate research infrastructure and institutional constraints they face, preventing lone researchers from entering the under-studied sites, and anyone who has succeeded not able to form a critical mass of scholars that would make the sites more visible in the academic world. Whatever the reasons are, places in the blind spot remain under-researched, which in turn, further contribute to their drop from the global epistemological map of what constitutes studies of global urbanism.

There are of course benefits of studying such prime cities in a rapidly urbanising world. For one thing, it provides a window of learning opportunity, as the urbanism rooted in such cities may generate further impetus of changes in the rest of the country, acting as a reference that gets emulated by those whose development lags behind. For instance, the vertical accumulation in South Korea that saw the domination of high-rise condominiums[2] stemmed from Seoul's urban development experiences (Park and Jang, 2019; Shin, 2011, 2020; Sonn and Shin, 2020). China's globalising cities in the eastern provinces such as Shanghai, Nanjing, Guangzhou and Shenzhen got 'rich' first in the midst of China's economic reform from the 1990s, thus acting as a source of aspiration for other inland cities to learn from (for example, Chen and Zhou, 2009; O'Donnell et al., 2017). Such understandings promise unveiling the nature of Korean or Chinese developmental urbanism as ideology (Park and Jang, 2019; Shin 2019; Shin and Zhao, 2018), which affects cross-regional (and more recently, transnational) mobility of corresponding urban policies

[1] I am, too, guilty of this, having used Beijing, Guangzhou and Seoul as the main sites to theorise from.

[2] According to the results of 2018 Census in South Korea, more than three fifths (61.4 per cent) of all dwellings in the country were apartments (Statistics Korea, 2019).

and urbanism (McFarlane, 2011). However, the shortfall is the absence of studies on interstitial spaces and smaller/regional cities - this limitation prevents us from adequately capturing the urban experiences of the majority populations in host countries. To this extent, studies on the Global South/East urbanism may retain a mirror image of the hegemonic global urbanism that has heavily relied upon global cities at the apex of urban hierarchies, and are prone to repeating the epistemological chauvinism that Carlos Vainer (2014: 53) warned against.[3]

Where neo-Marxian political economic perspective meets postcolonial approach

A simplistic response to address the shortfall as noted in the previous section - that is, the select few cities outside the North Atlantic as the main sites of shaping our understanding of urbanism - may entail undertaking more studies on smaller towns and cities. In this regard, the on-going studies by critical scholars are welcoming (see Bell and Jayne, 2009). But, a more profound means, I would argue, is to situate our enquiries in the web of historic conjunctures and incorporate relational perspectives on spatial connectedness in the narratives of development that cities of the global South/East have treaded. We need to practice "historical geographies of such imaginations and practices of development" (Roy, 2016: 318) in such a way that would allow us to "to move beyond the methodologies of geographic inversion and corrective inclusion" (Roy, 2018: 45). Such an exercise requires us to start from developing greater awareness that global southern cities may be connected and are capable of producing genuine materialisation of such connections "through various combinations of shared colonial histories, development strategies, trade circuits, regional integration, common challenges, investment flows, and geopolitical articulation" (Simone, 2010: 14).

While such perspectives have been central to postcolonial critique of urban studies, this is also not new to the geopolitical economic perspectives advocated by critical geographers working on and in the global East. From the late 1990s in particular, with the establishment of the 'alternative geographies' group that saw the inaugural conference in Daegu 1999, critical scholars working on urban and regional development in the global East have been wrestling with the questions of the state, capital and class relations, often from a neo-Marxian perspective that inherited progressive social and labour movement traditions in the region. More recently, noteworthy development includes efforts to de-centre the production of knowledge by incorporating local histories and multi-scalar perspectives to counter the hegemony of Western narratives of capitalism and globalisation. This is particularly pronounced in the critical scholarship that strives to overcome the 'territorial trap' (see Agnew, 1994 and Brenner, 1999) and the methodological na-

[3] In discussing the decolonisation of urban knowledge, Carlos Vainer (2014: 53) warns against the rise of "epistemological nationalism or chauvinism", that is, "the replacement of a Eurocentric, monotopic epistemology by another one – a global southern one – also mono-topic in nature, though centred instead in Latin America or elsewhere in the periphery". A similar logic can be extended to the way in which a select number of global southern cities possibly produce their own version of urbanism that gives no regard to smaller and peripheral cities.

tionalism, which gives supremacy to national actors, embedded in the dominant narratives of 'developmental state' (see Hwang, 2016; Glassman, 1999). For example, situating the South Korean economy in the Cold War geography, Glassman and Choi (2014) attribute the success of South Korean industrialisation, and that of the Korean developmental state and conglomerates, in part to the country's incorporation into the US-led military-industry complex, thus overcoming the limitations of 'national–territorial' and 'state-centric' perspectives. The collection of essays that fed into a recent edited volume entitled *Developmental Cities? Interrogating Urban Developmentalism in East Asia* (Doucette and Park, 2019) also questions the pervasive 'methodological nationalism' and 'methodological statism' in narrating the history of urbanisation in the global East, calling for more attention to how multi-scalar social forces collide in relational way to produce the particularist geographies of capital and social relations that cannot be simply confined to a national territory.

The above neo-Marxian perspective of geopolitical economy suggests that neo-Marxian and postcolonial perspectives are not mutually exclusive and to be rejected (see also Brenner, 2017). The geopolitical economic perspective also aims to disrupt the conventional narratives of globalisation that considers the developmental experience of the global South as a deviation of modernity and capitalism rooted in the West, but does this by retaining its focus on political economy and resistance politics. This is prominent in the work of aforementioned Song and Hae (2019) who have re-oriented their study to frame their discussions "in transnational and relational terms" while highlighting their "interest in frameworks that challenge Euro-American epistemologies and anglophone hegemony in the field of knowledge production" (2019: 189). Referring to the work of Buckley and Hannah (2014), Hae (2019: 84) further argues that the project undertaken as part of their edited collection is to "identify old and new forms of domination and subordination that are also connected to the broader global capitalist system, and point to the cracks, ruptures, and contradictions of systems that may open up political spaces for on-the-ground dissident politics". These perspectives are, in fact, speaking directly to what Roy (2016: 207) has reiterated: "it [postcolonial theory] allows me to undertake a political economy attentive to historical difference as a fundamental and constitutive force in the making of global urbanization. I rely on postcolonial theory to think relationally about cities".

Coda: The politics of knowledge production and praxis

I have argued in this chapter that de-centring knowledge production has the potential to run into the risk of re-centring it through the optics of prime cities, which are themselves exercising privileges in their respective country and region, thus exhibiting 'epistemological chauvinism'. In other words, studies on global southern urbanism are prone to reproducing another power dynamics within their own geography, and susceptible to becoming mere manifestations of "geographic inversion and corrective inclusion" that Roy (2018: 45) has cautioned against.

Critical enquiries into global urbanism require recognition of multi-scalar processes at work and how these processes are situated within historical conjunctures and spatial connectedness, attending to "the global historical processes through which the two are inevitably entangled" (Roy, 2018: 45). Not only an urbanising space is the site of palimpsest of historically accumulated processes that are both local and trans-local, but it is also the site of competing socio-spatial relations. As Massey (1993: 145) noted in her discussion of the locality:

> interdependence [of all places] and uniqueness [of individual places] can be understood as two sides of the same coin, in which two fundamental geographical concepts - uneven development and the identity of place - can be held in tension with each other and can each contribute to the explanation of the other.

Contesting global urbanism requires us to regard our own locality - for me, Asia and more specifically, East and Southeast Asia as Global East, but more narrowly, cities that I have thus far carried out empirical research - as a starting point of critical enquiry and an ending point of intervention as praxis, and practicing such epistemologies without 'essentialising or appropriating' the geographical region under scrutiny (Moosavi, 2020: 19). This entails the retention of a historical and relational perspective, which involves analysing urban processes under observation historically and relationally, exploring particularities without losing the grip of universality.

Furthermore, the urban scholarship needs to be more mindful of the politics of knowledge production. Radical scholarship may also be liable to some limitations such as the exclusion of the voices from outside the global North,[4] despite its attention to the project of decolonising knowledge production and demolishing the existing hierarchy that builds on social injustice. It would be vital to pursue intellectual decolonisation projects that are inclusive of radical scholars located outside the global North, and to ensure that, as Moosavi (2020) emphatically implores, such projects retain 'epistemological vigilance' while distancing from 'nativist' or 'tokenistic' decolonisation. It is also imperative to support the network of (particularly early career) scholars from the global South/East whose intellectual endeavour faces multi-layered constraints due to censorship, gendered hierarchy, seniority, and racial and ethnic inequality.

Here, I am particularly inspired by the way scholars on the margin (in the sense that they felt marginal in their pursuit of publication projects, as they confront difficulties in securing a contract for a special issue on a regional city/country) were able to challenge the postcolonial scholarship by making use of South Korea as 'core location', a concept that Song and Hae (2019) have adopted from Baik (2013) in their collective project. These core locations are sites of contestations, the examinations of which would allow

[4] For instance, a recent publication from the *Antipode* journal, *Keywords in Radical Geography: Antipode at 50*, included a wide-ranging group of critical scholars to discuss 50 keywords. While the efforts and interventions by the contributors may be informative and insightful, it comes as a surprise that almost all contributors came from academic institutions based in the global North (with one exception being a Argentina-based member of a collective).

observers to reveal the conflicting relations and processes that give rise to such contestations.[5] I would like to see that every student of critical urban studies develops their own core locations that help them practice analytical generalisation *and* pursue activism as praxis. It is valuable to be reminded of late Anne Haila's legacy: "Singapore is the protagonist of my story. It is a case and a comparison, but it also…enables me to generalise. My generalisations concern land, property and land rent" (Haila, 2016, p.xxiii). Here, the act of theorising from outside the North Atlantic or the West is not to involve a mere academic exercise of testing the applicability of concepts and ideas generated in the West.

There is much to learn from the radical scholarship from the global East and elsewhere that remains in the blind spot. As Hae and Song (2019: 11) argue, "a universal common ground of resistant struggles against unjust capitalist exploitation, dispossession, and expropriation that have erupted across different locales in the world still needs to be identified, explained, and highlighted", an endeavour that has not been attended to sufficiently by postcolonial urban studies. However, fundamentally, praxis rests upon reflection on rich narratives and particularities each locality presents, learning from those whose lives suffer from injustice and inequity. This is where the duty of care and post-research ethics kick in for critical scholars. The study of ordinary cities or global South/East urbanism is ultimately to give voice to the people in each scholar's core locations. For this, every scholar is to return to their site, in the way late Anne Haila cared for Singapore (or what Singapore did to her). After all, Karl Marx was calling for theories to change the world and the revolutionary thoughts were to be localised: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.".[6]

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[5] Hae and Song (2019: 13) further note that these core locations act as "nodal points of 'multiple historical/geographical determinations, connections, and articulations' (Hart 2006, 984)", while distancing away from privileging "the local scale and difference".

[6] Thesis XI in the *Theses on Feuerbach* by Karl Marx. URL: https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.pdf (last accessed 31 May 2020).

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