



Ghosts, ruins, monsters: urban geography in times of crisis

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Published: 15 August 2024

1 Introduction

All that you touch you change. All that you change
changes you. (Octavia E. Butler in *Parable of the
Sower*, 1993)

Ghosts of bodies that inhabit urban natures. Territorial ruins left in the wake of socio-environmental disasters. Monstrous urban infrastructure megaprojects fed by toxic extractivism. Urban geography finds itself in times of crisis. How can researchers deal with cities experiencing multiple crises, ranging from war and conflicts to debt and austerity as well as climate change and loss of biodiversity? The anthology *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* (Tsing et al., 2017) puts forward a bold proposal: to engage in entangled histories, situated narratives, and thick descriptions that offer urgent critical and creative tools for collaborative survival in critical times. The book posits that pursuing this methodology will also allow scholars to be touched by their research and, as a result, induced to consider and imagine new possibilities, akin to the initial quotation by the science fiction author Octavia E. Butler. In the same vein, it is crucial to ask what kind of planetary futures can we imagine collectively? What futures are we living in the present, and on what past futures can we build?

In a recent dialogue event organized by the Decolonial Cities Collective, I was invited to reflect on these questions. In particular, we, the participants, were encouraged to discuss how decolonial approaches change conceptions of (social–environmental) justice and “the good city”. I revisit that question in this contribution because it opens up important ways to think about urban geography in times of crisis by shifting the focus away from dystopic imaginaries of multiple crises that eliminate possible futures and towards more

future-oriented reflections and transformative approaches of notions particularly relevant for urban geography.

But what is the good city, and how should urban scholars frame it? Firstly, it is a utopian notion (Amin, 2006). Even if it is used in the singular, we can secondly conceptualize it to be plural – and maybe we also picture it to be inclusive and diverse. While delineating such a decolonized notion of good cities is certainly useful, it might not be enough. Previous efforts in decolonizing geographical knowledges tend to be superficial and do not entail real structural or institutional change (Noxolo, 2017), analogous to more recent shallow attempts of decolonizing higher education and academic spaces (Doharty et al., 2021; see also Ahmed, 2012; Tuck and Yang, 2012; Mahtani, 2014).

When reading the good city, we could also think of equality and the right to the city. Doing so holds its own problems because asserting equality often leads us to turn a blind eye to historical differences. Furthermore, the concept of the city must itself be problematized. Though it is often taken as universal, it is not a neutral term but rooted in Eurocentric epistemology. Many of us have a certain idea of what a city is but are unable to see the social privileges from which such ideas benefit and originate. Lisa Nakamura¹ rightly points out that unthinking something that you do not know you are thinking (the core of breaking any habit) requires a lot of effort and work. Urban researchers and students are very results driven. The idea of being reflexive and questioning privilege means pausing, digging deep to see what you have, acknowledging what it is, and recognizing what other people do not have (Pulido, 2002; Purcell, 2007; Mahtani, 2014; DiAngelo, 2018).

¹Lisa Nakamura, feminist scholar in digital studies at the University of Michigan, made this point during a panel discussion on feminism, technology, and race in 2013.

In negotiating and reflecting on the inherent tension between the normative and situated in the search for the ideal, as well as actually existing expressions of the good city, it is thus important to refer to concepts that enable urban geographers to rethink what cities are and can be. In this regard, promising decentring approaches are to collaboratively build novel comparative concepts of urbanization processes (Schmid and Streule, 2023) or to develop “non-imperial geohistorical categories” (Coronil, 1996). And such concepts and categories, I argue, could be valuable tools to critically address the privileges and othering processes that are deeply embedded in socio-spatial theory.

In the following, I firstly introduce *territorio* as an example of such a non-imperial geohistorical category and illustrate this with some projects where a socio-territorial approach was useful. Secondly, I borrow the threefold analogy from Tsing’s book and write about urban infrastructure megaprojects (monsters) that extract life from bodies (the ghosts) and territories (the ruins). To do this, I draw on urban extractivism as another example to make *territorio* work. Engaging with this decentring tool helps urban geographers discern future-oriented practices that embrace social and environmental justice. This brings me thirdly to a brief reflection of my collaborative research practice, which is, I argue, critical for decentring urban theory. Finally, I conclude by replacing the term of the good city with the notion of a good life, a concept emerging from socio-territorial struggles based on a decentred understanding of urban territory that helps to consider pluriversal future making in practice.

2 Embodied and collective: decentring urban theory and practice

To illustrate decentring urban theory and practice as sketched out in the Introduction, I draw on my long-standing experience and research in and on Mexico City. Current debates of Latin American urban geography, in which feminist, post-, and decolonial scholars push for a decentring of spatial imaginations and practice, have strongly influenced my work. For instance, João Marcelo Ehlert Maia diagnoses “a cognitive crisis concerning the city as a spatial framework for understanding Latin American territories” (Ehlert Maia, 2011: 402; see also López Sandoval et al., 2017). It is against this theoretical background that I suggest elaborating on a relational concept of urban territory (e.g. Santos, 1999; Porto-Gonçalves, 2009; Haesbaert, 2011). In *Ethnography of Urban Territories* (Streule, 2018), *territorio* proved to be a particularly apt tool for me to examine urbanization processes in Mexico City, rather than using analytical frames such as “city” or “urban space”. Another example of developing alternative socio-spatial imaginations is our *Geographica Helvetica* special issue (Schwarz and Streule, 2020), where we introduced territory as a widely discussed term in Latin American geographies and provided a platform for a wide

range of contributors analysing case studies from, for example, Medellín and Buenos Aires, through a socio-territorial lens. This special issue shows vividly how a decentred notion of urban territory – understood as a relational social product deeply shaped by unequal power relations – not only helps to scrutinize multidimensional urban transformations, but also foregrounds territorialization as a strongly contested process.²

This socio-territorial approach might also be helpful to move towards more future-oriented reflections in urban geography. Current contestations in the urban peripheries of Mexico City, for example, involve Indigenous socio-territorial movements. Many *pueblos originarios* (Indigenous communities) frame their objections against urban infrastructure megaprojects as struggles for life, territory, and water, advocating for a more responsible and accountable use of natural resources (see Cruz, 2000; Gil, 2022). Amidst increasing and interrelated global ecological challenges, understanding other ways of relating to urban territory and thus recognizing different spatialities of environmental justice are crucial for signalling alternative routes to more socially just urban futures (see Walker, 2009; Ulloa, 2017; Pulido and De Lara, 2018). If these infrastructure megaprojects are the monsters I mentioned at the beginning of this piece, then the urban territories they damage and destroy are the ruins that are haunted by extractive violence and inhabited by ghosts – that is, the sick, displaced, or murdered *cuerpos-territorios* that make the connection between embodiment and land (see also Stoler, 2008; Zaragocin and Caretta, 2021; Navarro Trujillo and Barreda Muñoz, 2022). To address these pressing and interconnected challenges of urban transformation and socio-environmental collapse in Mexico City, I suggest using and broadening the concept of urban extractivism. An expanded definition of urban extractivism allows for new perspectives by stressing colonial continuities of extractive practices and, at the same time, by using a socio-territorial perspective that invites us to rethink the entangled relations between humans and non-humans in an urban ecosystem that sustains life (Streule, 2023, 2024).

These are existential matters. *Proyectos de la muerte* [death projects], as the infrastructure megaprojects are called by the communities in the metropolitan region of Mexico City, include new airports, gas pipelines, hydro- and thermoelectric plants, and wastewater treatment plants and tunnels. They often cause *infiernos ambientales* [environmental hells], turning whole regions into *zonas de sacrificio* [sacri-

²In more recent work, we collaboratively think through *territorio* (Spanish) and *território* (Portuguese) as well as the anglophone debate on territory, territoriality, and territorialization as key to work towards a non-exceptionalist spatial theory of far-right mobilizations in a German-speaking context (Autor*innenkollektiv Terra-R, 2024). Moreover, together with Anke Schwarz I argue that a focus on the relationship between territorialization and subject formation is useful to develop a more differentiated reading of socio-territorial struggles in general (Schwarz and Streule, 2024).



Figure 1. On a November morning in 2022, the Tula thermoelectric plant north of Mexico City apparently burned high-sulfur fuel oil, contaminating the air of the Mezquital Valley. Source: Abisai Pérez Romero, whose family kindly permitted reproduction rights for the image.

ficie zones], in which people and their existing or desired land use practices are sacrificed in the name of economic growth and development and where there is substantial evidence of health issues related to environmental toxins (see *La Jornada del Campo*, 2020; Navarro Trujillo and Barreda Muñoz, 2022). Figure 1 exemplifies these trends with the Tula thermoelectric plant, one of the biggest in Mexico, which was reported to violate environmental laws that prevent emissions of deadly pollutants (Alire Garcia, 2020). When high-sulfur fuel oil is burned without contaminant-capturing filters, massive amounts of particles and gases are released into the air that scientific studies show can lead to premature death, respiratory diseases, and some cancers (see e.g. Montelongo-Reyes et al., 2015). Moreover, people who organize themselves collectively to defend their territory are threatened with their lives. Ghosts. Ruins. Monsters. This is not a regional or national problem; the role of transnational finances and cooperations operating in these areas is key. The multiple crises we are confronted with today are not new but deeply rooted in colonialism and racial capitalism of the past 500 years (Pulido and De Lara, 2018; Bechert et al., 2021).

Witnessing dispossession, violence, and extractivism in contemporary cities is an urgent call to rethink practices of empirical research. In line with Rivera Cusicanqui (2012), I consider decolonizing approaches to be more of a decentring practice than a decolonial theory or discourse. In this sense, I reflect on my own research practice that aims to decentre urban theory: a practice that builds on theory co-production, on embodied and collective research, and on everyday experience as a site of knowing and knowledge production. I

focus on approaches that critically engage with my own positionality and the situatedness of my experiences and knowledge, build bridges between different geographies of knowledge, weave networks among researchers and activists, and engage in the politics of translation by referring to debates from multiple languages. These decentring approaches also rely substantially on different media and formats to share knowledge, for instance, the podcast series entitled “alterterritorios. Encuentros contra Extractivismos y Megaproyectos” that we are working on collectively with researchers and activists from Mexico and Switzerland.³ This speaks to another set of key questions: who gets to conceptualize, narrate, and represent planetary futures, urban territories, or the good city – and for whom? And, I would like to add, in what language? And finally, what are the ethical and methodological concerns of this work? These questions serve as a helpful critical guideline for any research in urban geography.

3 Concluding remarks

To return to the main question of how decolonial approaches change conceptions of (social–environmental) justice and the good city, I argue for a decentred approach that refers to knowledges and practices beyond the Eurocentric canon, taking, for instance, the notions of *buen vivir*, *vivir bien*, and *vivir sabroso* [good life, living joyfully] as a guiding future-oriented idea that changes the approach to the good city

³The podcast is available on our website alterterritorios.net or on most podcast platforms.

fundamentally. In fact, instead of asking “What is the good city?” in the pursuit of relational social–environmental justice, we could ask “What is a good life?” (see also Ulloa, 2017). This is just one example of many horizontal concepts – others being rights of nature, commons, or the ethics of care – that have emerged from critical analyses, languages, and practices of Indigenous, Afro-descendants, and Black socio-territorial movements across Latin America (Quiceno Toro, 2016; Tzul Tzul, 2019; Márquez, 2020; Gil, 2022). Feminist approaches provide a particularly critical understanding of such other relations and how they are deeply inscribed onto the territory (Ulloa, 2016; Gómez-Barris, 2017; Cariño, 2019). Despite their differences, all these concepts share a focus on different forms of human and non-human relationships that have the potential to make our cities more inclusive and livable now and for future generations.

Though it should be of concern for all of us, I hope that these themes resonate especially among students and young researchers. Even when having a critical mind and being aware of so many possible pitfalls, obstacles, and difficulties, we should not fear making errors in this process of de-centring urban theory and practice. We inevitably make mistakes, and we are confronted with complex contradictions that are rooted in unequal power relations. We are part of this, but each of us is affected in different ways. Thus, the generic “we” I use throughout this contribution is obviously not bias-free and has to be read with reservation. However, my point here is to underline that these contradictions and limitations are not only individual; they result from structural problems and have manifold effects. Current crises in academia – such as the precarity of working conditions in the neoliberal university, for instance – are an intrinsic part of the multiple crises we are confronted with today. They have shaped the everyday research of many urban scholars worldwide, but they also shape global theory formation and are firmly inscribed on the knowledge canon of geographical research (see also Mountz et al., 2015). Present knowledge production is characterized not only, for example, by the absence of researchers from large parts of the world at international conferences, but also by the lack of these voices in international publications (see Gutiérrez and López-Nieva, 2001). This is frustrating, but collectively de-centring urban geography is still indispensable for collaborative survival in critical times and thus a valuable way to conduct future research.

Decentring urban theory and methodology aims to pluralize conceptions of justice in the city through registers such as abolition, care, indigeneity, and ecology. In my current project on urban extractivism outlined above, I aim to equally develop a pluralized understanding of the urban and ecology, listening to and learning through other knowledge(s), practices, and actions. This approach positions itself in sharp contrast to what Law (2015:130) critically coined as a “one-world world” that assumes that “there is a single object, and that it looks different because different people have different

viewpoints or different techniques for exploring it”. Instead, I am interested in how “realities are being done in practices” (Law, 2015:130; see also Mol, 2002). I examined some of these different practices of the *pueblos originarios* in Mexico City to build or expand concepts such as urban extractivism across urban realities while avoiding culturalistic and essentializing descriptions. With these brief reflections I hope that justice in the city will extend beyond mere juridical or distributive terms and be entwined with social–environmental justice to link pressing ecological and urban problems. By pluralizing concepts such as city, nature, and ecology, urban geographers move towards an understanding of the good city or the good life as an urban territory where many worlds fit.

Competing interests. The author has declared that there are no competing interests.

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Acknowledgements. This piece is dedicated to my friend, colleague, and most generous interlocutor, Abisai Pérez Romero, whose work, dreams, and commitment to social–environmental justice in Tula and the Mezquital Valley in central Mexico ended abruptly because of his very disturbing and still not fully investigated murder in February 2023.

I presented first versions of this contribution in the Decolonial Cities Dialogue in April 2023 and at the 62. Deutscher Kongress für Geographie (DKG) in September 2023. I am grateful to Tanzil Shafique, Dena Qaddumi, and Bobby Farnan, the organizers of the dialogue event, as well as to the DKG panel organizers Hanna Hilbrandt and Julie Ren for inviting me to join the conversation on urban geography in times of crisis. Many thanks to Lisa Maillard and the editors for their careful reading and critical comments on an earlier version.

Financial support. This research has been supported by the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement no. 101024446.

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