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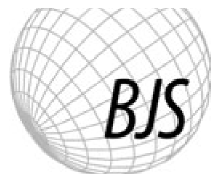

A world of cities

Jennifer Robinson

Amin, Ash and Thrift, Nigel 2002 *Cities*: *Reimagining the Urban* Cambridge: Polity Press 192pp. £50.00 (hardback) £14.99 (paperback)
Beall, Jo, Crankshaw, Owen, and Parnell, Susan 2002 *Uniting a Divided City*: *Governance and Social Exclusion in Johannesburg* London: Earthscan 200pp. £60.00 (hardback) £19.99 (paperback)
Bridge, Gary and Watson, Sophie (eds) 2002 *The Blackwell City Reader* Oxford: Blackwell Publishing 600pp. £65.00 (hardback) £19.99 (paperback)
Le Galès, Patrick 2002 *European Cities: Social Conflicts and Governance* Oxford: Oxford University Press 280pp. £60.00 (hardback) £19.99 (paperback)
Orum, Anthony M. and Chen, Xiangming 2003 *The World of Cities*: *Places in Comparative and Historical Perspective* Oxford: Blackwell Publishing 192pp. £50.00 (hardback) £14.99 (paperback)

Cities often inspire in their inhabitants and observers a certain breathless wonder. Expressions of astonishment at their diversity and busy-ness, or at audacious architectural achievements often densely packed together to produce impressive skylines, have characterized commentaries on cities for many decades, indeed centuries. The concentration of electric lights in a city landscape can still inspire viewers' enraptured attention, more than a hundred years after cities in some places first began to draw on this modern invention to turn dark night-time landscapes into what were often described as fairylands. It is perhaps this persistent ability to be amazed by cities which draws some writers to embark on what can feel like a headlong rush to capture what seems to be the newness, originality and astonishment of city life. Tie this to the popular experience of life in some of the world's richest and more powerful cities as increasingly speeded up and well connected and the result is that much contemporary urban theory emanating from western contexts retains a

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vital excitement about cities which has characterized urban sociology for more than a century. Since Simmel's (1971) classic essay on Metropolis and Mental life in 1903, the excitement of city life has invested urban theory with a certain frisson and pace.

But this has also tied urban theory closely to those kinds of cities where these elements of urbanity are most noticeable. Cities which are slowing down, with intermittent electricity or decaying physical environments, are difficult to fit into these excitable accounts of city life. Western urban theory has framed for itself a particular phantasmagoria of city-ness. These fantasies about cities – of wonder, speed, diversity, density, verticality, innovation – developed in the context of observations about certain European and American cities. They have persisted through the last urbanizing century, from Simmel through Park and Wirth, to enliven contemporary analyses of the social life, cultural politics and economic dynamism of cities. More importantly, they have profoundly coloured what we are able to think of as a city, what is admitted as city-ness. The consequence is that many places which are indeed cities are not adequately described through this set of fantasies. Rem Koolhaas and his collaborators, for example, find themselves only begrudgingly able to assign urbanity to Lagos, one of the largest cities in Africa, 'for want of a better word' (Koolhaas, et al. 2000: 652). At the moment many aspects of urban theory, it seems, are barely relevant to many poorer cities around the world.

This has not always been the case: urban sociology in the middle decades of the twentieth century produced an outpouring of comparative research on different kinds of city experiences around the world (Pahl (1968) reviews some of these). But with the rise of developmentalism, cities in poor contexts came increasingly to be seen as incommensurable with western cities, on which most urban theories depended. Whereas sociologists and anthropologists of the 1950s and 1960s drew on studies of Mexico City, Lusaka or Cairo to criticize the classical urban sociological texts of Park and Wirth, for example, after theories of underdevelopment gained prominence, even radical theorists found little to compare across the divide between cities in wealthier and poorer contexts. Cities characterized by informal sector employment, poverty, lack of housing and low economic growth rates seemed incommensurable with the cities of 'advanced industrial captialism'. Thus, as more pragmatic approaches to cities in poor contexts emerged through the latter half of the last century under the sign of development, urban sociological 'theory' retreated into its original concern with western urban experiences. For both western and 'third world' cities, this entrenched division in urban studies is damaging (see Robinson, forthcoming). It not only limits the resources available for understanding and explaining urban processes and urban societies; it also limits the resources for imagining city futures and better ways of living in cities.

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However, in the context of globalization and the growing transnationalism of urban experiences (Smith 2001), some new theoretical initiatives are emerging which hope to track across accounts of city-ness in 'advanced' and 'underdeveloped' contexts. Not that they are all self-consciously focused in regard to this ambition – and certainly they have not gone far enough. But all are responding to a significant, and increasingly unsustainable, tear or seam at the centre of early twenty-first century imaginings of cities. Here and there, small steps are being taken which could indicate some practical ways forward for the field of urban studies, still very much divided in its attentions between cities in poorer contexts and those in the wealthiest parts of the world (expanded now to include those sections of rapidly globalizing cities everywhere which are well connected through the circuits of western capital – e.g. Beaverstock, Taylor and Smith 1999). But in hoping to understand cities across a wide range of different contexts, one is quickly caught in the difficulty of either implying the possibility of 'universal' theories, relevant everywhere, or accepting the incommensurability of different kinds of urban experiences, for example between cities in wealthier and poorer contexts. Neither of these is satisfactory, of course: but the current situation, where an urban theory framed in a western context parades as universally relevant knowledge while ignoring the urban experiences of most of the world, is also unacceptable.

It is often noted, as part of efforts to astonish ourselves about cities, that today (sometime between 1990 and 2010) most people in the world live in cities; the largest cities are now in the poorest countries; and that therefore the characteristics of urbanism dominant in the world are rapidly being defined outside of the wealthiest countries. In this context, one could be forgiven for thinking that an urban sociology founded on fantasies about European cities of the early twentieth century is heading for oblivion. How, then, can urban studies keep up with the world of cities?

A first step would be to parochialize those accounts of cities which pose as universal. For many decades, accounts of cities in the West have assumed a voice which claims their theories, developed in specific contexts, as universally applicable. Louis Wirth's account of 'the' urban way of life, for example, was profoundly dependent on experiences of European and American cities – if not simply on Chicago (Hannerz 1980) – and yet it stands as a theory of city life everywhere. And here Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift have taken a relatively simple, but very significant step in their recent text boldly titled, '*Cities: Reimagining the Urban*', in stating that 'it is cities of the North which we have in mind while writing this book' (Amin and Thrift 2001: 5). This is important, as it helps to clarify that their theoretical insights are developed on the basis of the experiences of wealthy, western cities.

We don't get a lot more help from them in understanding the specificity of their analysis: and this is a problem, as their book proceeds to adopt a

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universalizing tone, assuming the relevance of their comments to cities everywhere. This is such a norm in western urban studies, though, that the many rich and interesting ideas in their book still deserve and repay attention. The 'new urbanism' which they promote has much in common with the entrenched habits of twentieth-century urbanism, in reproducing the excitement and avant garde nature of city life, and in setting out what scholarship on cities can expose about the newness of the world today, and the novelty of our thinking about this. The idea that cities are places we can turn to in order to be surprised, or to surprise ourselves, is one which lags behind the experiences of cities in many parts of the world, though. And this includes Europe.

In his book, *European Cities: Social Conflicts and Governance*, Patrick Le Galès slows the pace of enquiry down – perhaps to something more appropriately reflecting the actual pace at which life in many cities is lived. Life in cities is often repetitive and slow, reproducing long standing practices and habits, innovating in only small ways on well-tried modes of doing things, or being forced to slow down, more and more, as once well run and maintained infrastructures decay and stop, or are blown up. The slowness of Le Galès account – he starts by tracking the very long history of European cities, in an excellent and very readable first chapter – is tied to an important analytical argument. Of course things change in European cities, and globalization and Europeanization are only two of the most obvious processes causing changes in cities there. But there are many longstanding aspects of social relations, city form and political institutions which remain important and robust. Far from imagining that cities are sites of fashionable newness, both in terms of historical events and in theoretical analysis, he appreciates the ways in which these important human settlements hold together relatively stable social experiences, which also signifies the value of retaining older theoretical analyses. Rather than abandon current or older ways of thinking about society and cities in the headlong rush to be innovative and new, an appreciation of the relative coherence and integration of European cities can provide an important counterpoint to suggestions that cities are sites of fragmentation, mobility and dispersal, only fleetingly territorialized, as Amin and Thrift (2002: 77) argue.

In attending to the specificity of Europe, and never casually universalizing from this experience to all cities, Le Galès exemplifies an important moment in addressing the tear I identified at the heart of urban studies. This is, to follow Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000), to provincialize Europe – to make it stand as just another region in the world, neither exemplar nor leader in new ways of being urban. This is not to say that Le Galès avoids the wider conclusions of his study. He offers general insights on how long histories can continue to shape the urban present, and suggests ways in which some counterpoints in urban theory require more attention: the persistence of institutional arrangements, the possible emergence of relative coherence in urban societies, and the

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likelihood of globalizing economic processes being entwined with territorialized forms of economic activity and political creativity. Europeanization, for example, has provided an opportunity for a consolidation and expansion of city level government; even as the privatization of many kinds of local service delivery across Europe is leading to (quite differentiated) trends in expanding the actors involved in facilitating local infrastructure development and management. The diversity of European experiences – in which the UK is often an outlier – is clear, and should act as a caution to those of us who might be tempted to look back at Europe to find the way forward. Europe, then, provincialized and diversified, is just another place through which to think about the many different kinds of social life which coexist in cities, and to imagine possible paths for urban futures.

Another recent monograph by Beall, Crankshaw and Parnell (*Uniting a Divided City*: *Governance and Social Exclusion in Johannesburg 2002*), this time exploring South Africa's largest city, approaches similar questions of governance, social exclusion, and economic dynamics, with a view to bringing the often exceptionalist historiography of Johannesburg into conversation with wider urban analysis. This then is the opposite move from Le Galès', and is necessitated by the conventional placing of South African cities (alongside many cities in poor contexts) outside of the resources drawn upon to understand and think about city-ness in general. Here, South African cities are considered in the company of accounts of post-Fordist restructuring in many advanced countries; and in relation to the desires to overcome social exclusion and promote effective governance in the face of deep divisions in both poorer and wealthier contexts.

Beall, Crankshaw and Parnell have compiled a detailed account of a city in the midst of radical changes. These involve not only the about turn in governance resulting from the ending of apartheid in the mid-1990s, but as in Le Galès' account of European cities, changes here are also the consequence of globalization and regional economic integration. Johannesburg's economy has been growing very slowly, and experiencing a long-term trend of deindustrialization alongside the explosion of international connections, especially regional links through Africa. Many of the changes and ills in South Africa's cities have been ascribed to its particular history of racial division: the racism and search for security which saw many of the important company headquarters and finance houses join white residents in a move out of the centre city; and the profound economic inequalities which frame continuing racial segregation in the city. Refreshingly, though, Beall, Crankshaw and Parnell (2002) consider in some detail the ways in which economic restructuring (from racial Fordism – a form of Fordism limited in both production and consumption terms by race – to post-Fordism) intersects with these historically entrenched racial inequalities. Declining manufacturing employment and a rising service sector in the city produce stronger patterns of inequality, for example, and

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while these do continue to take a racialized form, Beall et al. point out, on the basis of careful data analysis, that 'Johannesburg's middle class is increasingly multiracial, and the character of social inequality is increasingly intra-racial and not inter-racial' (2002: 43). Any exceptionalism of disadvantage in South Africa's cities is rapidly disappearing.

This interaction between historical legacies of racism and more general and transnational processes of change also characterizes emerging forms of post-apartheid local government. New policy initiatives must map onto inherited inequalities in service delivery and housing in the city, and engage with the emerging diversity in community capacities for mobilization and representation, especially in relation to recent immigrant populations from other African countries. Substantial institutional transition has taken place in a context of deep fiscal crisis in local government through the late 1990s. Some of the challenges facing Johannesburg now include: how to move beyond a crippling pro/anti-privatization conflict in the city; how to manage populations – both rich and poor – tending to isolate themselves from the rest of the city in defensible spaces; how to pursue participatory governance in areas of new immigrant and transient inner city populations; how to ensure that subtle questions of access to services in formal townships are not hidden by the more obvious needs of informal settlements.

Amin and Thrift end their book *Cities* with a range of future-oriented reflections on the 'Democratic City' (Chapter 6). From the position of Johannesburg, a city which has been made democratic in very recent times, their suggestions make for interesting reading. Amin and Thirfit argue for a shift in thinking about the city and democracy: 'We want to suggest urban sites as settings for the practice of democracy through a confident citizenship, rather than as formative of a particular form of democracy as most writings on urban politics would have it.' (2002: 152–3). This is a neat move, offering a more subtle analysis of the spatiality of urban democracy than, say, those who emphasize the value of local representation or community mobilization. But the setting of Johannesburg highlights some important issues which Amin and Thrift more or less edit out of their democratic prospectus for cities. They explain, for example, that they don't outline 'ways of tackling structural inequality . . . distributional inequality. . . . or institutionalised violations of justice . . . (although) We accept that these gaps matter.' (2002: 142). Politicians, communities and academics in Johannesburg, though, have no choice but to work hard at understanding why and how these matter in their city. And its not that these are just empirical problems: they are the very stuff of theorizing urban democracy there.

Civic movements in South Africa insist that any notion of citizenship and democracy is strongly associated with basic service delivery – the frequent cry of communities mobilizing against efforts to promote privatization is that they are citizens, not clients! Amin and Thrift turn to Sen's capabilities approach

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to understand the role of democratic action around developmental goods, and helpfully stress the continuing importance of delivering basic universal services in order to enable any performance of capabilities and any democratic mobilization for redistribution in cities. But welfare-state like entitlements, which they propose, are a long way from the struggles for basic needs in many cities and don't speak to the highly uneven delivery of these minimum levels of urban services even in a relatively wealthy city like Johannesburg. Further, as sites for practicing democracy, the spatialities of cities like Johannesburg provide interesting counterpoints to those of the cities Amin and Thrift have in mind. Promoting freedom of association in cities of defensiveness and division, collective socialization in a highly fragmented social context, universal welfare rights in a neo-liberalizing state with a limited resources: these are very big practical and conceptual challenges, even for the confident new democracy of South Africa.

Are we to return, then, to the South African exceptionalism that Beall, Crankshaw and Parnell have so persuasively argued against? To accept the incommensurability of different city experiences? I think not. Their point, and mine, is rather that there are great benefits in attending to the diversity of urban experiences when theorizing about cities. If efforts to develop understandings of city life could track across different contexts, learn from a range of different kinds of cities, then the resources for understanding cities everywhere would be enlivened. The Johannesburg case, for example, suggests that any move to bracket social division, poverty and vast differences in national resources from more general theoretical accounts of urban politics is likely to have severe limitations, even in Europe. Instead, if different kinds of cities were drawn on to inspire urban theory, then interesting and persuasive accounts of what an urban democracy might entail, such as that which Amin and Thrift set out to offer, could – paradoxically – become both more relevant to the context in which they are generated, and more easily drawn on to help understand other places. Any urban theory for the twenty first century, if it is to abandon the phantasmagorias of twentieth-century European urbanism, needs to carve a difficult path between an appreciation of the world of diverse cities, and the distinctive world that is any given urban place.

Orum and Chen have, in *The World of Cities*: *Places in Comparative and Historical Perspective* (2003), compiled an undergraduate text which starts out with this dilemma. They begin by noting: 'We will rely on many specific examples of cities in this book, for instance, London and New York, Chicago and Shanghai, and we will generally assume that all these cities are very much alike. But, of course, they are not.' (2003: viii). They organize their introduction to urban theory around the idea of cities as places, something which Amin and Thrift also pick up, but rather differently. In this case Orum and Chen are concerned with cities as sites of meaning and agglomeration and as places where people live. The scope of the introduction to the idea of place in Orum

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and Chen is perhaps reasonable – cutting through the Chicago School, some key sociologists like Durkheim and Weber, a couple of geographers (Soja and Harvey), Sharon Zukin and Henri Lefebvre, which might be useful for framing a classroom discussion. But they have some very poor understandings of place, and don't always mobilize the resources they present in appropriate ways. Readers would do better to turn to Amin and Thrift for a range of ways in which cities can be thought of as sites of mobility and circulation, networks and connections. And to other recent publications from their geographer colleagues (e.g. Massey, Allen and Pile 1999) for a clear account of cities as both sites and centres of circulation, and also for a more accurate analysis of how contemporary ideas about place and meaning might be mobilized in understanding cities.

But as an exercise in bringing teaching about cities in different parts of the world into one framework, this book is very interesting. Effectively, and quite unusually, it places US cities alongside Chinese cities, and although each context is used to teach a different range of issues (inequality and segregation in the USA, globalization in China), these two chapters are well written and offer good reviews of the literature. I especially liked the example of transborder urbanization in the chapter on China. It looked at the Greater Tumen Sub-region in North-east Asia, where remote areas of North Korea, Russia and China have been linked up through infrastructural developments traversing national borders. This has facilitated extensive cross-border trade and communication and revived transnational ethnic affiliations. As they note,

> This has led some of the border cities, especially such Chinese border cities as Hunchun, which were severely underdeveloped due to their peripheral positions and lack of state support, to grow into important industrial centres with direct manufacturing ties to the global economy. (2003: 132)

They end the book on a positive note about what can be done to improve cities, through a 'reconstructive sociology' – a very good place to leave students as they puzzle about the future of cities.

If Orum and Chen offer us a glimpse of how urban studies might start to incorporate different kinds of cities into analyses of contemporary urbanization, Bridge and Watson take a similarly small, but significant, step towards reconfiguring the canon of urban studies. Their *City Reader* (Bridge and Watson 2002) offers a lively collection of writings on cities, and in my view the readings gathered together here are definitely the ones which many English language urbanists today like to read. For the classroom, it could be a very useful resource, which students would be able to return to through any urban studies course. They introduce, too, some readings which are very seldom found in readers of this kind: in a way they are consciously trying to upset the canon. As they note:

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> The Reader also intends to disrupt the hegemony of western thought and action in urban studies by including examples of nonwestern cities and non-western thinking as well as including extracts that unsettle the influence of western imaginings. (2002: xiii)

This is an excellent and unusual ambition in urban sociology. It is, though, not executed in quite the way they obviously had hoped, as the readings they have selected to achieve this aim are mostly empirical studies of places outside the west. We could have enjoyed some stronger contributions which actually did the work of engaging across the differences they identify. Were the arguments of major western theorists like Walter Benjamin, Georg Simmel or David Harvey, displaced in any way? Not really. Part V ('Reading Urban Interventions') is the strongest section in terms of trying to disturb the canon. But even here, James Holston's critique of modernism in his study of Brasilia is presented 'as illustrating some of Beauregard's arguments on the ground' (2002: 453); Anthony King is limited to a discussion of the intersections between colonialism and planning; planning is revealed as ambiguous and controlling through Yiftachel's study of Israel; Jane M. Jacob's book is extracted to illustrate how in Australia, 'Two opposing and incommensurate notions of cultural heritage . . . thus collided' (2002: 455); and Badshad and Perlman round the section and the book off with a discussion of mega cities and the transfer of best practice for solving urban problems. All of these are truly interesting papers – and very good to see in a collection like this – but the editors don't quite deliver on their promise of disturbing dominant western understandings of cities. Rather, as in so much of the literature which incorporates writing from contexts beyond the West, these chapters stand as explorations of 'difference', perhaps ironically even reinforcing the sense of the incommensurability of cities in different contexts.

The efforts of all these books signal the need and emerging desire for much stronger conversations across accounts of cities in different contexts. As mentioned above, there are important predecessors in this: during the middle years of the twentieth century the ambitions expressed by Watson and Bridge, Orum and Chen and the other authors reviewed here resonated across the field of urban studies. Collections titled World Urbanism, Urbanism in Comparative Perspective etc. were very common. But since urban sociology, and urban studies in general, has been divided by the turn to developmentalism, and by the critical theories of underdevelopment which became popular from the late 1960s, cities in wealthy and poorer contexts have come to be seen as incommensurable (for more detail see Robinson, forthcoming). It is ironic that much of this is due to a radical critique of the role of capitalist dynamics in shaping poorer cities, since it is another critical perspective – postcolonialism – which encourages urban studies to review both the hegemonization embedded

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within western theories, and the incommensurability assumed of different kinds of cities.

How exactly a revitalized, more cosmopolitan form of urban theorizing might avoid these twin legacies of twentieth-century urbanism will require considerable thought and experiment. Partly it will mean that rather than rushing headlong into the future of urban theory and simply reproducing these unfortunate divisions, we will need to consider, following Patrick Le Galès, taking a slower pace. With a backward glance over the history of urban studies, we could re-open some older footpaths (of comparative urbanism, for example) which might remind us how to track across some of the differences amongst cities which we have forgotten how to think together. And as we try to understand a world of cities, the spatiality of cities (to follow Amin and Thrift) could also inspire us. For cities are of course particular sites, or places, but they are also profoundly extroverted and mobile, made up of any number of connections and flows. If we could find ways to both locate our analyses of cities in the places we work on and in, and draw inspiration from experiences of and connections with other places, we might avoid both universalizing pretensions and incommensurable divisions. The spatiality of city life itself might offer a model for urban theory to become more cosmopolitan in its resources for thinking city-ness.

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