

Parallel session A1

Thinking from the East(s)

Monday 11 November, 14.00 – 15.30

IAS Common Ground

Chair: **Dr Michał Murawski**, Lecturer in Critical Area Studies, School of Slavonic and East European Studies, UCL

Discussant: **Prof. Oren Yiftachel**, Chair of Urban Studies, Ben Gurion University of the Negev, Beersheba

How we theorised cities from the North and South but forgot to think with the Easts

Prof. Martin Muller, Associate Professor, Faculty of Geosciences, University of Lausanne

The paper interrogates the dualism of North and South, which has marked much recent theorising in urban studies, for its silences. It argues that current global urban theory produces an erasure of a large swathe of cities from its purview. Those cities – from Berlin to Beijing and from Teheran to Tokyo – sit uneasily between the hemispheric divide of North and South, in what could be called the global Easts: the in-between spaces of global urbanism.

The paper first shows how in Northern scholarship focusing on the rich and powerful cities of the capitalist world economy, cities of the global Easts have become nothing more than epigones involved in a catch-up race of modernisation. Additionally, the cities of the global Easts are also rendered largely invisible in the project of theorising cities from the South. Through methods of corpus linguistics, the paper shows that the geographical imagination of the South, underpinned by a postcolonial approach, revolves around cities formerly under the rule or influence of European colonial powers. This imagination frays, however, in the convoluted urbanscapes of the global Easts, often situated beyond the influence of European colonial powers, where countries have been colonisers and colonies (and cities have been colonial centres and peripheries) – sometimes both. Often, these are also cities that are neither particularly poor nor particularly rich, therefore defying easy classification into a rich North and a poor South.

To bring about urban futures where cities anywhere have an equal seat at the table, we need to move beyond hemispheric thinking in urban theory. It proposes neither a Southern nor an Eastern urban theory, but a worlding of urban theory through a triple move: first, expanding our geographical imagination; second, diversifying our theoretical repertoire; and third, equilibrating the skewed geopolitics of urban knowledge production.

Comparison in the Cold War: Thinking the Third World Through the Second World

Dr Łukasz Stanek, Lecturer, Architecture / Manchester Urban Institute, The University of Manchester

Urban knowledge production in hegemonic Western centres has been characterised in the wake of the Cold War by a double bind: the calls for a diversification of this knowledge beyond normative Western concepts have been paralleled by a systematic erasure of such diversity as it actually existed in the second half of 20th century. This paper draws from my current research on exchanges between the ‘Second’ and the ‘Third’ worlds in order to focus on the comparative practices in urban research and design in Cold War Accra, Lagos, Baghdad, Abu Dhabi and Kuwait City. While decolonisation allowed for an opening of these cities towards architectural and planning expertise beyond the former colonial centres, the Cold War led to a competition between providers of such expertise. Contrary to the entrenched vision of the globe neatly divided into the ‘socialist’ and ‘capitalist’ halves, these cities became places where technologies, blueprints, concepts, methodologies and epistemic frameworks were compared, tested, appropriated and advanced. These comparative practices included thinking Accra through Tashkent by applying the lessons of Soviet modernisation of the Central Asian Republic to the conditions of Kwame Nkrumah’s Ghana; and thinking Baghdad through Warsaw by claiming the relevance of the reconstruction of the Polish capital for the urbanisation process under the Ba’ath party. While these comparative practices were devaluated as ‘ideological’ after the end of the Cold War, I will argue that they continue to differentiate the urbanisation processes in many places in West Africa, the Middle East and Eastern Europe.

Underresearched and undertheorized: on the (lack of) academic investigation of Central Asian cities

Prof. Elena Trubina, Professor of Social Theory, Ural Federal University

While Central Asia, as a region, has been investigated (Laruelle 2013, 2018), there are only a few books and articles examining its cities (Bissenova 2012, Laszczkowski 2012, Koch 2018 on Astana, Nasridinov 2007 and Schröder 2011 on Bishkek). I demonstrate that specific epistemological procedures prompt the ‘lumping’ of cities into regions, and that this coexists with the reproduction of visions of the world as made up of developed and developing countries, with Central Asia justifiably understood as belonging to the latter. Research into the specifics of life in Central Asian cities has thus far remained in the shadow of research on the region as a whole. Scholars working in Central Asia, who have in the past conducted important and painstaking, if conceptually limited, work, increasingly face research funding pressures. As a result, regionally informed scholarship remains unenlightened by new conceptual developments in urban studies. The calls to start theorising from the Global East (including Central Asia) need, then, to be thought about together with the simple facts of a lack of studies about contemporary life in the cities in the region, and of the scholars (both based in the region and outside) remaining marginal to wider debates.