

urban salon

From postcolonial critique to decolonizing urban studies

Thursday 6 December 2018, 17.00 – 20.00

UCL Pearson Building, Room G07, Gower Street, London WC1E 6BT (see on [UCL Maps](#))

- **Pushpa Arabindoo:** *Decolonising as an 'ontological turn': An ethnographic theorisation from Chennai*
- **Monika Streule:** *Decolonialism is a practice*
- **Catalina Ortiz:** *Mestizo Urbanism: decolonial insights for urban studies*
- **Lisa Tilley:** *Speculative Wastelands and the Contradictions of 'Use' in Jakarta*
- Chair: Jennifer Robinson

The Urban Salon, a London-wide network exploring international and comparative urban issues, is pleased to welcome you to our next event. We will hear from four urban scholars whose work is embedded in different contexts (India, Colombia, Mexico and Indonesia).

Pushpa Arabindoo, Catalina Ortiz, Monika Streule and Lisa Tilley will bring together insights from scholarship and urban experiences from these contexts to explore the challenges and openings for decolonising urban studies. (How) can the terms of knowledge production in urban studies be transformed, to support the possibility of a decolonised and global urban studies? Abstracts are below, including some suggested readings for those who are interested in exploring the topic.

We look forward to seeing you at the event. Do bring some drinks or nibbles to share after the seminar, when there will be an opportunity for informal discussion and networking.

Yours sincerely

The organisers:

Jennifer Robinson (UCL)
Monica Degen (Brunel)
Hyun Shin (LSE)
Loretta Lees (Leicester)
Pushpa Arabindoo (UCL)
Matthew Gandy (Cambridge)

The Urban Salon seminar series is committed to encouraging collaboration and networking across the different London colleges, where there are significant concentrations of urban researchers working on many different cities across the world within very close proximity. This enables us to adopt a pro-active approach to stimulating international and comparative urban research. We bring together presenters and discussants who work on different cities but share thematic interests to encourage conceptual debate across a variety of different urban contexts.

Abstracts and biographies

From postcolonial critique to decolonizing urban studies

Pushpa Arabindoo (Associate Professor in Geography & Urban Design, UCL; and currently Fellow of the Instiut d'Etudes Avancées in Paris)

Decolonising as an 'ontological turn': An ethnographic theorisation from Chennai

Is there a need to decolonise urban studies? And why? Is it because postcolonial efforts at decentering urban theory to the 'South' haven't been entirely successful in dislodging EuroAmerican forms of knowledge? What would a decolonising attempt offer instead? Something, more radical and critical, for sure, but in what way would it signal a marked shift away from postcolonial attempts at provincialising (western) urban theory. I would like to argue that against postcolonial critique's pursuit of an epistemic project, we consider a decolonial approach as an 'ontological turn', one that relies more on materiality of knowledge where my argument is not so much about hedging the decolonial as methodological but as an empirical exercise, with a greater bearing in generating 'knowledge as practice'. To illustrate this, I draw from my own ethnographic theorisations of the urban through the specificity of my research set in the Indian city of Chennai where amongst other things I have considered the challenge of an appropriate analytical vocabulary to make sense of open spaces and their drastically shrinking prospects within the urban context. I find that a European construct such as the idea of the public proves to be invested with meanings that are indicative of a not so totalising European reality, while a seemingly more 'homegrown' understanding of the commons proves to be a not so befitting category as assumed, given its problematic entanglements with concerns of nature. More importantly, there is a third crucial aspect that is often ignored in the play of open spaces, and that is the presence of the crowd, an ontological ubiquity that proves to have a more important epistemic role in the framing of open spaces.

References

- Chen, Kuan-Hsing. (2010). *Asia as method: Toward deimperialization*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Jackson, Mark (Ed.). (2018). *Coloniality, ontology, and the question of the posthuman*. Oxford and New York: Routledge.
- Radcliffe, Sarah (Ed.) (2017). Themed intervention: Decolonising Geographical knowledges. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 42(3), 329-348. [including contributions from Tariq Jazeel, Michelle Daigle and Juanita Sundberg, Pat Noxolo and Stephen Legg]
- Todd, Zoe. (2016). An indigenous feminist's take on the Ontological Turn: 'Ontology' is just another word for colonialism. *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 29(1), 4-22.

Bio

Pushpa Arabindoo is an Associate Professor in Geography & Urban Design at University College London. With an inter-disciplinary background in architecture, urban design/planning and geography, her research cuts across disciplinary boundaries in conducting ethnographic investigations of urban transformations in the Indian city of Chennai, where she has been exploring a range of issues from middle-class activism to subaltern politics of evictions and resettlement as well as ecological imaginations of water and nature in the city. She is a co-director of UCL Urban Laboratory as well as an Editor of the City Journal. She is currently a Fellow of the Institut d'Etudes Avancées in Paris for 2018-19.

Monika Streule (Visiting Fellow, Institute of Advanced Studies UCL and Faculty of Architecture, ETH Zurich)

Decolonialism is a practice

In this contribution, I take Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's call for a decolonizing practice as a starting point to explore new possibilities for collaboration and dialogic practices of knowledge production in urban studies, drawing on examples from my research experience in Mexico City. I will present some reflections on the transformative potential of decolonial thinking and doing, and put forward current critical interventions across the Social Sciences, not least within Human Geography, problematizing particularly established research methodologies, but also the ways we write, teach, learn, publish, and how we build socio-spatial theory. A focus on power relations, historical difference and uneven geographies of urbanization, I argue, radically challenges conventional ways of knowing and pushes for experimental and more collaborative practices to decentring spatial imaginations.

References

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- Rivera Cusicanqui, Silvia (2012) *Ch'ixinakax utxiwa*: A reflection on the practices and discourses of decolonization. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 111.1, 95–109.
- Schwarz, Anke and Monika Streule (2016) A transposition of territory: Decolonized perspectives in current urban research. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 40.5, 1000–1016.

Bio

Dr Monika Streule is a Senior Lecturer in Urban Studies and Senior Researcher at the Department of Architecture, ETH Zurich. She is a Social and Cultural Anthropologist with expertise in critical socio-spatial theory as well as in qualitative methods and methodologies of social sciences. Presently, she is a Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute of Advanced Studies of UCL, where she is an Associated Research Fellow at the Department of Human Geography. Her research interests are the social production of space, urbanisation processes, and qualitative, critical and reflective methods of urban studies such as ethnography and mapping. Currently she focuses on comparative urban studies and a relational understanding of territory in a post- and decolonial perspective.

Catalina Ortiz (The Bartlett Development Planning Unit, UCL)

Mestizo Urbanism: decolonial insights for urban studies

In this presentation, I explore a range of contributions of Latino American thinkers yet to be articulated in the decolonial turn in urban studies. While the project modernity/coloniality emerged in Latin America and has informed the social sciences decolonial turn, its recent effervescence in urban studies still is disjointed, preventing a renewed emancipatory understanding of the spatiality of Latin American cities. Yet, the genealogy of the constitution of the urban derives from historical and ongoing intercontinental trajectories of urban policies, people, and capital that enacted singular territorial and ethnical configurations. I argue the notion of mestizo urbanisms could capture the cultural syncretism embedded in Latin American cities' urban fabric as well as in its geopolitics of urban knowledge challenging some decolonial assumptions.

Bio

Dr Catalina Ortiz is a lecturer and Programme leader of the MSc programme in Building and Urban Design in Development at The Bartlett Development Planning Unit, UCL. She is an architect and urbanist. Catalina is interested in the negotiated co-production of cities and the political economy of urban design. She works on disentangling the ways in which the transnational flows of urban models, ideas, and tools shape the built environment and the political process of space production in global south cities.

References

- Almandoz, Arturo (2006) Urban planning and historiography in Latin America. *Progress in Planning*, Volume 65, Issue 2, Pages 75-124.
- Escobar, Arturo (2018) *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds*. Duke University Press. 312 p.
- Souza, Marcelo L. (2006) Together with the state, despite the state, against the state. Social Movements as 'Critical Urban Planning' Agents. *City*, vol. 10, n. 3., pp. 328-342.
- Vainer, C. (2014) Disseminating 'best practice'? The coloniality of urban knowledge and city models. In S. Parnell & S. Oldfield (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook on cities of the Global South*. New York: Routledge.
- Winkler, Tanja. (2017) Black Texts on White Paper: Learning to see resistant texts as an approach towards decolonising planning. *Planning Theory*, Volume: 17 (4), page(s): 588-604.

Lisa Tilley (Department of Politics, Birkbeck, University of London)

Speculative Wastelands and the Contradictions of 'Use' in Jakarta

Naturalised Lockean rationales for land appropriation have been employed around the globe to dispossess racialised communities from their land on the grounds of their lack of capacity for proper 'use' and 'improvement' (see Bhandar 2018). In the urban context, however, the ideology of 'use' is contradicted when urban poor communities who make intensely productive use of urban land are forcibly evicted only to often be replaced by speculative wastelands. This paper shares reflections from Jakarta on the contradictions of

'use', the active production of urban wastelands, and the claims made by the urban poor to both space and subjecthood in the city.

References

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- Bhandar, B. (2018) *Colonial Lives of Property: Law, Land, and Racial Regimes of Ownership*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Tilley, L., Elias, J., and Rethel, L. (forthcoming 2018) 'The Production and Contestation of Exemplary Centres in Southeast Asia'. *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*. (available at <http://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/24911/>)

Bio

Lisa Tilley is Lecturer in Politics and Leverhulme Early Career Fellow at Birkbeck, University of London. Her research is rooted in political economy and critical development studies and is focused on Southeast Asia more broadly and Indonesia in particular. Most recently she co-edited a special issue of *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* entitled 'The Production and Contestation of Exemplary Centres in Southeast Asia'. Otherwise her published work has appeared in *Sociology*, *New Political Economy*, *City* and other academic journals and edited collections. Lisa is also co-convenor of the Colonial, Postcolonial, Decolonial Working Group of the British International Studies Association (CPD-BISA) and a founding associate editor of the Global Social Theory research and teaching resource (globalsocialtheory.org).