Comparative urbanism in gentrification studies: fashion or progress?

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Introduction

It has become fashionable of late to take on board the ideas of comparative urbanism in gentrification studies (see Harris, 2008; Lees, 2012, 2014; Lees, Shin and Lopez-Morales, forthcoming a and b; Ley and Teo, forthcoming). This 'cosmopolitan turn' in gentrification studies, for want of a better description, marks a reorientation towards an emerging field of comparative urbanism that aims to move towards a truly global urban studies. The question remains, however, how much progress can realistically be made in this endeavour given that methodological discussions of how to do comparative urbanism 'scientifically' have been few and far between. Such a question is made even more important in the face of numerous academics now climbing onto the bandwagon of 'comparative urbanism'[1] without recognising its complexities and really doing no more than old style comparison, but also given an emerging backlash against comparative urbanism (see for examples, Smith, R. 2013a, 2013b; Taylor, 2013). Emerging critics take issue with the assertion from new comparative urbanists that cities from the so-called 'global South' have been neglected in urban studies, that contemporary urban studies is ethnocentric, indeed they argue that the new comparative urbanists' critiques oversimplify and misrepresent previous urban theory and studies. There are charges that a focus on ordinary cities is a provincial particularism, that ordinary cities proponents exclude certain cities whilst arguing for a 'more inclusive' global urban studies, that they confuse neo-Marxism with developmentalism and neoliberalism, and much more. This backlash is a little unpleasant (even masculinist[2], indeed urban geography remains a quite masculine sub-discipline) and I think critique can be done in a different way, even if there are useful points to be taken from it.

Comparative urbanism is in fashion – ironically it is a topic and indeed a label of great interest to journal editors (especially the International Journal of Urban and Regional Research[3], etc) and book publishers (especially Routledge – and ironically this book) because it connects well to their key marketing ideas around internationalisation and globalization. Indeed the surge of interest in comparative urbanism has been fuelled by globalization debates (Nijman, 2007). It is also inter/trans/cross/multi-disciplinary, hitting and opening up

[1] Just look at how many geography departments in the UK now market themselves as doing comparative urbanism or hosting comparative urbanists. Also at Academia.edu for a long list of academics who list themselves as doing comparative urbanism.

[2] Richard Smith's critique of Jenny Robinson reminds me of David Stoddart's attack on Mona Domosh in the early 1990s: Domosh, M. (1991) 'Toward a Feminist Historiography of Geography,' *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 16(1):95-104. Stoddart,D. (1991) Do we need a feminist historiography of geography and if we do, what should it be? *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 16(4):484-487.

[3] See http://www.ijurr.org/details/article/6080981/Introduction_to_a_Virtual_Issue_on_Comparative_Urbanism.html

different and wider markets of readership. The number of courses marketed around comparative urbanism is also on the rise, attracting international and cosmopolitan (middle class) students. But is this progress? And how useful is it for gentrification studies? Surely any critical questioning of the value of comparative urbanism for gentrification studies (and indeed other social sciences and humanities bodies of work on the urban) must be located in relation to the *new* possibilities it offers for the social scientific evaluation of cities and urbanism? Key to this is recognising that comparative urbanism is not simply comparing cities beyond the usual suspects, it is not simply about comparing Global North cities with Global South cities or vice versa, it is not simply comparison – for me like for other comparative urbanists like Ananya Roy, Jenny Robinson, Sue Parnell, Colin McFarlane, etc, it is about looking outside of the usual suspects in order to destabilise the 'truths' of Northern theory (and indeed Southern theory), it is about destabilizing dominant procedures around comparability. It is not easy or straightforward, it is messy and intellectually demanding.

Comparative urbanism[4]

The arguments that comparative urbanists are now making are not new, for urban studies has long argued the need to rethink the way in which urban theory has developed. The comparative urbanist argument is that urban studies is colonial, hegemonic and based on a selective number of presumed to be important cities, such as London, New York, Tokyo etc; a selectivity fuelled not least by the global cities and world cities debates that have highlighted certain cities. As Robinson (2006:13) argues in *Ordinary Cities*, contemporary urban theory has 'come to support a hierarchical analysis of cities in which some get to be creative, and others deficient, still tainted by the non-modern, placed on the side of the primitive.' McFarlane (2010) argues similarly that claims about the city as a category are too often made with implicitly the Global North in mind. Robinson (2010) argues further that urban studies makes assumptions about the incommensurability of wealthier and poorer places (cities or even neighbourhoods), assumptions which are reproduced throughout quite separate literatures. Accounts of wealthier cities are, more often, claimed to be universal, so that we witness an implicit comparativism. Robinson (2006:41), like Roy (2009), makes a plea for a postcolonial urban theory that acknowledges the potential of learning from the experiences and accounts of urban life in different cities, where 'difference can be gathered as diversity, rather than as a hierarchical ordering or incommensurability.' The study of ordinary cities does not privilege the experiences of only certain cities in analyses and assumes them to be all part of the same field of analyses. Robinson's overall aim is to bring into focus two aspects of cities by treating them as 'ordinary'.

First, she understands ordinary cities as 'unique assemblages of wider processes – they are all distinctive, in a category of one' (Robinson, 2006: 109). Second, she places ordinary cities within a world of interactions and flows: 'A vast array of networks and circulations of various spatial reach' (Robinson, 2006: 109). This implies that the urban is not determined by a specific type of city – whether 1920s Chicago or 1990s global cities like London or New York. Instead, Robinson's understanding of the urban is akin to AbdouMaliq Simone's (2010:3) understanding of 'cityness' which 'refers to the city as a thing in the making' – that we take for granted and know implicitly. 'Cityness', he argues, has been 'largely peripheral to city life' (ibid p.5): the very dimension that characterizes the city – its capacity to

[4] Some of the discussion and critique here developed out of a 2011 DAAD funded workshop in London and Berlin on comparative urbanism co-organised by Tim Butler, Loretta Lees, Talja Blokland and Isle Helbrecht. Thanks to all who attended for their input which is summarised in part here.

continuously reshape the ways in which people, places, materials, ideas, and affect are intersected – is often the very thing that is left out of the larger analytical picture. For Simone and Robinson alike, comparative urban studies faces a new challenge, albeit one that we should have been aware of much earlier, that is the hegemonic focus on cities in the global North as if they should be a model for the development of cities everywhere. Of course many of us left urban work in the Global South to development geographers/development studies, and to be fair it is hard to be a global urbanist – to know, to be an expert on, cities all over the world. Robinson asserts that if we are to take all cities as ordinary cities and move away from comparing the usual suspects with the global North and instead seek to compare processes between cities in unlikely comparisons, we would need to ask ourselves what sets of questions, what lines of theorizing and what sort of methodologies would be suitable for this task. But here, Robinson (2010) leaves the challenge to others, when she argues for a 'comparative gesture', not a real 'comparative field'.

Ward (2010) discusses how the 1970s and 1980s did produce a comparative urban studies, mainly inspired by a Marxist perspective of seeking regularities and patterns through a grand and overarching theoretical lens that provided a cross-national comparative perspective. These studies, however, Ward argues (a little unfairly I think), were hampered by an understanding of cities as bounded and discrete unities, and of geographical scales as fixed and pre-given. Indeed, in the 1970s and 1980s as part of the postmodern turn there was a turn away from comparative urbanism because it was seen to be part of the modernist project and prone to the fallacies of scientism/positivism and developmentalism. Ward argues that urban researchers need to move beyond these conceptions, the shortcomings of which not just postmodernists but also postcolonial and poststructuralist theorists have made more than clear. But he is more cautious than Robinson and Simone and asks the question as to whether a comparative urban studies can still be undertaken. For Ward the answer is a 'Yes', as long as we keep being informed by past work and theorize back from empirical accounts of various cities. How that should be done, however, still seems a rather open question, given that comparative urbanism can be said to encompass, as a field of inquiry, the aim to develop 'knowledge, understanding and generalization at a level between what is true for all cities and what is true for one city at a given point in time' (Nijman 2007: 1).

Gentrification studies and comparative urbanism

In 2012 I published a paper in *Progress in Human Geography* that asked gentrification studies to extend and rethink its earlier and longstanding work on the geography of gentrification in conversation with the new work on comparative urbanism. My concern was that there had been little to no discussion about appropriate theory to analyse gentrifications supposedly emerging in the Global South nor of how they might play out differently in the predominantly non-white cities of the Global South. I was also concerned about the rhetoric around the globalization of gentrification and 'gentrification generalized', as if a. the process had moved north to south, west to east, and b. that it was somehow the same everywhere. I wanted gentrification scholars to move away from an 'imitative urbanism' (from the idea that gentrification in the Global North has travelled to and been copied in the Global South) towards a 'cosmopolitan urbanism' (where gentrification in the Global South has a more expanded imagination). I felt that such a mind shift required a comparative imagination that could respond to this post-colonial challenge and that this would have implications for how gentrification was being conceived (questioning the usefulness and applicability of the term 'gentrification' in the Global South) and how research was to be conducted (pushing us to learn new kinds of urbanism and involving multiple translations throughout the world) (Lees, 2012). I was very taken by Bourdieu and Wacquant's (1999: 41) earlier assertion that 'the

neutralization of the historical context . . . produces an apparent universalization further abetted by the work of "theorization"' (and was concerned about this in Marxist urban theorizations of the city in gentrification studies) and also by Harris's (2008:2423) argument that rather than exporting Euro-centric understandings of gentrification to the Global South we need to learn from the 'new sharp-edged forms' of gentrification emerging in the previously peripheral cities of the Global South – 'in this way some of the more parochial assumptions, practices and language of gentrification research can be "provincialised" and re-examined (Chakrabarthy, 2000)'.

My interest in post-colonial theory was/is longstanding – my time working in geography departments in colonized places, in New Zealand and Canada in the mid-1990s, opened my eyes to the issues to hand and impacted some of my work back then[5]. My interest in urban comparison was/is also longstanding, indeed I argued that there might be an 'Atlantic Gap' between gentrification in London and New York City (see Lees, 1994) and made further comparisons with Paris (Carpenter and Lees, 1995). I was also conscious of the fact that key theories of gentrification were 'made in place', for example, the 'emancipatory city thesis' came out of Canadian cities like Toronto and Vancouver and the 'revanchist city thesis' out of New York City (see Lees, 2000). I had long been concerned with how ideas about, and theories on, gentrification travelled. These deep-seated interests of mine came to the fore again in the 2000s when like Clark (2005) and Harris (2008) I too wanted to see some dispute over the conventional truths, wisdoms, and time-space delineations of gentrification. Many were proclaiming that gentrification was now global (eg. N. Smith, 2002; Atkinson and Bridge, 2005) but the 'extent of occurrence of the phenomenon from a global historical perspective' remained largely uncharted' (Clark, 2005:260). Like Harris (2008) I wanted to see a more inclusive perspective on the geography and history of gentrification (which I argued for in Lees, 2000), but one informed by the new debates on comparative urbanism (which I subsequently argued for in Lees, 2012). I was interested in Ward's (2010) idea of a relational comparative approach, for 'stressing interconnected trajectories – how different cities are implicated in each other's past, present and future – moves us away from searching for similarities and differences between two mutually exclusive contexts and instead towards relational comparisons that use different cities to pose questions of one another'. I still like this approach.

Any decentring of gentrification studies from Global North theory needed, I thought, to be sensitive to and explore the different neoliberalisms associated with gentrifications around the world. I was already well aware of the 'on the surface' differences and similarities between gentrifications in the Global North and the Global South:

> '...the long economic expansion and globalized credit boom across urban systems of the Global North drove gentrification outward from the urban core. The leveraged real-estate frenzy set the stage for an unprecedented crash and a wave of foreclosure driven displacements across many kinds of city neighbourhoods...At the same time, transnational economic realignments and state-led redevelopment schemes transformed vast sections of the urban built environment of China, India, Brazil and elsewhere in the Global South...Contemporary urban renewal in the Global South

[5] See for example, Lees,L. and Berg,L.D. (1995) Ponga, Glass and Concrete: A Vision for Urban Socio-cultural Geography in Aotearoa/New Zealand, *New Zealand Geographer*, 51(2): 32-41; and Lees, L. (2001) Towards a Critical Geography of Architecture: the case of an ersatz colosseum, *Ecumene: A Journal of Cultural Geographies*, 8 (1): 51-86.

> dwarfs the bulldozed landscapes that enraged Anderson (1964) and, even in the US, the phrase is losing its stigma: Robert Moses...was the subject of a sympathetic, three-museum retrospective in New York in the Spring of 2007. All of these changes suggest that gentrification, displacement, and renewal have been respatialized and intensified in transnational urbanism' (Wyly et al., 2010:2604).

But I was, and still am, skeptical of the loose use and over-use of the term 'neoliberalism.' Neoliberalism at its simplest can be defined as the unleashing of the private market and the cutting back on government (public) intervention in the market (see Harvey, 2005). It is *Neo*liberal because we have supposedly moved beyond and indeed all but destroyed the Western, post-war, Keynesian social contract made up of liberal politics and philosophies that sought to control the market in different ways. But when thinking about global gentrification I wondered how much sense it made to talk of neoliberalism in nations and cities that had never experienced liberalism, in this sense, in the first place. Moreover, neoliberalism had actually begun earlier in Latin American (Global South) countries like Chile, than in the West, so the spread of global gentrification north to south via neoliberalism made little sense in this context. For me the term 'neoliberalizations' (Larner, 2003) was/is a better term, a term better attuned to the messiness of the politics, lived experiences, and actual geographies; to the different contexts. In this vein 'Global Gentrifications' is the title of an edited collection I have been working on (see Lees, Shin and Lopez-Morales, forthcoming a).

Despite being skeptical of big picture neoliberalism, I felt that sensitivity to different and similar neoliberalisms and neoliberalizations was/is important for gentrification studies, given the significant movement of capital worldwide into the secondary circuit of capital – investment in property. Part of thinking this through for me involved, as Harris (2008:2409) pointed to, mapping the 'global spread of policies and practices of gentrification' but paying close attention to the connections between the market, the state and civil society; and also the property and media elites who seem/ed to be pushing strategies of gentrification onto and up policy agendas. A turn to comparative urbanism was, I argued in the *Progress in Human Geography* paper, vital in the fight against gentrification too. The timing of my renewed interest in comparative urbanism – as the 2008 economic crisis hit and austerity agendas emerged - was an important one. I was clear that we needed to be much better attuned to the timings and intricacies of gentrifications world-wide, in the Global North where it was getting worse in some places due to the financialization of housing and was being pushed by developers in situations of austerity as the only choice out there, and in the Global South where stories about gentrification were beginning to be published in the English speaking world. In resistance, in the fight against gentrification, context and timing are paramount – you need to know the ground and time your fight well.

At the same time as I published the *Progress in Human Geography* paper, a Greek scholar, Thomas Maloutas (2012), was asking whether the use of the Anglo-American term 'gentrification' facilitates or impedes understanding of processes of urban restructuring in different contexts. Like myself he was voicing concern over the epistemological limits of current theorizations of gentrification. When gentrification is seen outside of Anglo-American cases, there is a danger, he argued, that we might equate apparently similar outcomes without paying enough attention to what could be quite different and contextually specific causes. But unfortunately he neglected to mention the heated debates in the 1990s about the contextual nature of gentrification, when a number of authors (especially Latin Americans) claimed terminological diversity for the same process, eg. embourgeoisement, aburguesamiento, elitización, urban reconquest, and so on. Like I did earlier (see Lees, 1994; 2000) Maloutas argues that we need to pay more attention to context in gentrification studies,

but at the same time he argues that 'looking for gentrification in increasingly varied contexts displaces emphasis from causal mechanisms and processes to similarities in outcomes across contexts, and leads to a loss of analytical rigour' (p. 34). He also asserts that there are three key reference points that are necessary conditions for gentrification: gentrification aesthetics, the presence of a middle-class (as a particularly well defined social segment), and post-industrialization. But given his overall thesis this makes no sense as it ties 'gentrification' to the emergence of the post-industrial city in Northern and Western contexts. In addition, gentrification aesthetics are just an effect of gentrification, and the North American or West European middle-class is an historical socio-cultural particularity not necessarily evident in the Global South or East. There are plenty of cities in the Global South that have experienced gentrification but have not experienced deindustrialization and the move to post-industrialization (see for example, He, 2007,2010, on gentrification in China; also Lees, 2014). As such, Maloutas' (2012) argument about the contextual-attachment of gentrification falls back on the Western provincialism he seeks to unpick (for a more detailed critique see Lees, Shin and Lopez-Morales, forthcoming a).

More recently, Ley and Teo (forthcoming) have explored the epistemological argument raised by Maloutas (2012), for like me they were concerned that the use of the term/concept 'gentrification' outside of Euro-America represented a 'false rupture (a severing from its source region) and false universalisation (uncritically universalizing it)'. Given that the name 'gentrification' did not seem to exist in Hong Kong they were concerned about the 'conceptual overreach' of 'gentrification' from the Anglo-American heartland to the cities of Asia Pacific and specifically Hong Kong. But they concluded that just because the word 'gentrification' is missing from public and academic discourse in Hong Kong does not mean that it is not happening: 'It is only the critical view of gentrification in Euro-America compared with the neutral or even affirmative view of urban redevelopment in Hong Kong that confounds the global symmetry'.

It is my contention that we need more gentrification studies like that by Ley and Teo (forthcoming), studies that question gentrification, the good news is that they are in the pipeline (some of which I outline in the next section)! Investigation of the different takes on gentrification globally are very important and need much more attention, for if we do not understand them properly then we cannot fight against this unjust process. Comparative urbanism allows us both to circumscribe the definition of gentrification in very different contexts, to distinguish its political valences – critical versus affirmative/neutral – and perhaps even conclude that it may not be 'unjust' everywhere (and even I concede that we do need to leave this question open) or at least in the same way. But equally we could find that it is especially unjust in certain places.

'Doing' comparative urbanism in gentrification research

Scholars need to start asking 'ordinary questions' of comparative urbanism. While discussions of comparative urbanism are exciting and stimulating, how comparative urbanism may be achieved is not so obvious, leading to dismissals of the ordinary cities agenda as merely 'gestural' (Scott and Storper, forthcoming). Some of us, in gentrification studies, have taken up the gauntlet. The move from mere discussion of comparative urbanism towards actually 'doing' it is not easy though. Thinking about concrete ideas as to how we might take forward a tangible research framework that takes Ward's point about remaining informed by previous work very seriously, especially when it comes to methodologies and research methods in comparative urbanism, is not straightforward.

The aim to decentre urban studies from the global North often implies that certain research methods, especially those usually associated with positivism in even their lightest form, are to be thrown out and replaced by what can, at best, be termed 'academic impressionism', but are certainly not by any stretch of the imagination what might be understood as 'scientific method'. I am of course not a positivist but 'academic impressionism' is not robust enough a method for me either, certainly not for researching gentrification and importantly using that research to fight this socially unjust process.

The first issue we are confronted with in doing comparative urbanism when looking at gentrification globally is that if we are not to classify cities, if we are not to compare differences in performance between cities globally because that would always imply a hierarchy, and if we are to stick to the idea that they are all a category of one, then what can we actually do? In some ways comparative urbanism is trapped in the relativism that postmodern theory was charged with in the 1980s. And it is not surprising then that scholars who have argued for a new approach to comparative urban studies concern themselves with city government, governance and the travelling of policies (aka Clark, 2012). After all, the themes and research questions that can be formulated around these do not need to reflect much on the ideas that cities are not bounded, self-enclosed objects and that scales are not self-evident; indeed their plea for relational understandings is easy to live up to because such topics are primarily about how cities are actors that communicate and connect to other places. It is, however, a little more complicated, when, for example, one has to engage with questions that constitute what many still consider to be the core of urban geography and sociology, e.g. understanding of the processes and mechanisms that produce durable urban inequalities and their spatial expressions, such as gentrification. Avoiding urban classifications seems an impossible (and indeed not always a desirable) task, what might better be avoided is cultural dualisms?

Further, I am not convinced that comparative urbanists are correct in their criticism that urban studies (in this case gentrification studies) is lacking the methodological tools for comparing 'different' cities. In the view of comparative urbanists it is either the theory that steers the construction of cases that is at fault or the methodology. And theory, more than anything else, should, most comparative urbanists would argue, guide the construction of cases. While I share Jenny Robinson and Abou-Malique Simone's excitement over diversity, which is of course typical of the urban, I am concerned that this celebration of diversity could become nothing more than endless empirical accounts of the diversity of the urban, all of which may be fascinating in their own right, but which fail to do what Ward suggests we should do, that is theorize back from empirical cases. Indeed theorizing back from empirical cases was a task that Atkinson and Bridge (2005) didn't really do in their collection on gentrification in a global context, it is, however, a process that other gentrification scholars have begun (see Lopez-Morales, 2010,2011, on Chile; and Shin, 2009, on South Korea). So, if comparative urbanism is not to deteriorate into discretionary urbanism, the task must be to think and theorize across cases. Harris (2008) began this when he looked at gentrification and public policy in London and Mumbai, and like in my own work (Lees, Shin and Lopez-Morales, forthcoming a and b) he ended up supporting Neil Smith's (2002) thesis about the increasing convergence between urban experiences in first and third world cities. And what, I ask, is wrong with that? Harris found that policy had a direct role in property speculation in both cities, that Mumbai was neoliberalizing in a similar way to London with state-sponsored gentrification and the rolling back of the state. Harris is clear though that gentrification did not simply project from heartland cities in the global north to Mumbai in the global south. There were of course transnational actors and imaginaries but it was also a product of the

desires of a powerful set of politicians and developers exploiting limited planning and land use policies in Mumbai. Harris also talks about the boomerang effect on institutions, apparatuses and techniques of power in the West even if he does not really elaborate much. Harris does not discuss methodological tools but in the work I have done with Hyun Shin and Ernesto Lopez-Morales we have had to think about how we might compare the different cities our work around the world and our international workshops in London and Santiago de Chile tapped into. After much debate we chose a grounded theory approach, an approach which operates almost in a reverse fashion from traditional social science research. Our first step was to collate as many stories (and therein data) about gentrification/or not from as wide a remit of cities, beyond the usual suspects, world-wide, as we could manage. The three of us had wide, international expertise that we pooled. Then we pulled out the key points and grouped them together into a series of concepts. We then both related them to Northern theory on gentrification, southern theories that were out there on gentrification but little known, and began to think about new theory creation or whether previous theories remained valid. Our conclusion was that to flatten the globe and its multiple urban hierarchies with an appreciation of difference hides social injustices and neglects power relations, which are very apparent in the process of gentrification (see Lees, Shin and Lopez-Morales, forthcoming a and b).

The second issue in using ideas from comparative urbanism to (re)investigate the supposed spread of gentrification globally, to unpack the idea of 'gentrification generalized', is quite simply the problematic of the classification or label of 'gentrification'. How can we study gentrification globally when a. it is a Western concept framed by Western cities, and b. without already implying that it exists globally? How can we find gentrification in places where it does not have that name? After all we do not want to impose the category of gentrification on 'other' urban processes, or do we? Lemanski (forthcoming) seems comfortable doing just that, reframing 'downward raiding' in South African slums as 'gentrification'. Researchers who find bits and pieces of processes like gentrification, rather than over-arching trends that can be comfortably categorized under existing or familiar definitions and theoretical frames, can also make contributions, and do so in our books. The discovery and interrogation of these processes that do not have the label gentrification will broaden and enrich theory, and give rise to new understandings of the urban.

A related issue is how do we select ordinary places for research without imposing gentrification on them and without running the risk of developing a new kind of parochialism? It could be argued that searching for gentrification across all comparative cases and contexts may actually play a role in the process itself, as the researcher and author brings the word into tangible reality, by applying it theoretically to a certain case. If s/he wishes for gentrification to be compared in two cities, then surely it must exist in both cases (whether it actually does or not). Fundamental questions such as these for comparative research need much more discussion and are to be welcomed. Our selection of ordinary places mattered because we were cognisant of the difficult politics to comparative urbanism and its comparative gestures. But case selection is always difficult for anyone doing urban comparison, cases are always constructed, and this requires an understanding of place and its particularities. One strategy might have been to seek out places with similar functions and use functional similarity in a context of diversity to study the urban comparatively. This means a more precise understanding of places and their peculiarities. Another way would have been to look at the urban transnationally, through mobilities, drawing on Massey's (2007) argument that cities are part of widening networks and flows, which many urbanists now do. Overlapping connections might then be the 'location' of the research, rather than simply the

selection of under-researched sites. Our strategy (see Lees, Shin and Lopez-Morales, forthcoming a) was to seek out places beyond the usual suspects and to read across these places to identify similarities and differences amongst them but also in comparison to longstanding, hegemonic, examples from the Global North. We flattened the importance of all the places into one – no city or country was any more important than another – they all became a category of one in which their differences were gathered as diversity, but we did not ignore their sameness when it was evident either. This relational comparative approach meant that the different cases from different cities around the world posed questions of each other, whether of middle class reproduction or revanchism or the use of military lands. Significantly we were able to perform the category of one methodological flattening because we used the idea of 'gentrification' as a comparator (evident or not) and we all had different linguistic skills.

The result was that none of our cities emerged as exotic or parochial, the urban (or for that matter gentrification) was not defined by a specific type of city, and doing comparative urbanism in this way highlighted new processes like the military lands in cities as wide apart as Lagos, Karachi and Taipei being offered up to gentrification. We found real evidence of exploitative processes of value extraction from the built environment in the Global South and East, processes which to date have been mostly overlooked by urban researchers working on/in the Global South and East. We also found that globally, the uneven process of value extraction has been accelerated by the faster pace of financial capital mobility invested in real estate circuits of capital around the world. This mobility, however, has not simply followed the trajectory of gentrification 'arriving' in the Global South and East from the North/West, and as such that trajectory really needs to be rethought. Importantly we were also able to collate evidence globally of 'slum-gentrification' in the face of old time Global South experts like Alan Gilbert who has asserted that there is no such thing as 'slum gentrification'[6]. Our conclusion was that there are multiple gentrifications in a pluralistic sense rather than Gentrification with a capital G. But what this means for gentrification studies we have yet to outline.

Conclusion

Comparative urbanism is in fashion but to date progress has been slow. Thus far the scholarly promise of comparative urbanism remains unfulfilled and urban studies has yet to meet the challenges set it. It will take time and it really is too soon to evaluate its progress (cr. Jayne, 2013). Gentrification scholars have been at the forefront of trying to think through and *do* comparative urbanism, injecting much needed new ideas into gentrification studies, which is refreshing as we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the term 'gentrification'[7]. Although doing comparative urbanism is much harder than discussing comparative urbanism, nevertheless, as a body of ideas it deserves deeper attention from those in urban studies and beyond. In a world in which old economic and political hierarchies are breaking down, comparative urbanism could help re-imagine cities and urban practices in new ways, perhaps pushing urban theory into new subjects or perspectives so far unrecognised, devalued or neglected. Comparative urbanism, if a little too trendy right now in certain academic circles, remains an

[6] In an interview panel at the London School of Economics 2013.

[7] Coined by Ruth Glass in 1964 in *London: Aspects of Change*, London: MacKibbon and Kee.

exciting academic invitation for comparison helps recover history. It shows that apparent similarity has different geographical origins and that similarities are not necessarily caused by global/transnational networks and mobilities. Gentrification is not generalized but has generalizations.

Like Jenny Robinson (2010) I too want to build more globally attuned understandings of the urban and as discussed in this chapter I have begun the hard work of having 'conversations' about gentrification and its multiple histories across cities worldwide (see Lees, Shin and Lopez-Morales, forthcoming, a and b). But on the flattening of the globe, gentrification scholars like myself, Hyun Shin and Ernesto Lopez-Morales are interested in somewhat different (if inter related) sorts of injustice – for Robinson it is the injustice of neglect and misrecognition of certain (southern/third world) cities, for us it is the injustice of class exploitation. It is my contention that these two injustices cannot be separated and that we need now to find a theoretical/conceptual and methodological way forward that has political punch. We do not simply want to transcend the oppression of location but of human beings being cleared out of cities world-wide, socially cleansed simply because they do not have the money, the power, or the face that fits the new urban world.

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