IMAGINING URBAN FUTURES

WORKING PAPER 5

Comparative urbanisms: past work and future agendas

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February 2008

Abstract: Recently there have been a number of calls from across the social sciences for a renewable of the ways in which cities are compared. These echo past pleas dating from the early 1970s, chiefly from anthropologists, political scientists and sociologists. Curiously the absence of human geographers from the early expressions of concern appears to have been repeated this time around. This is perhaps something of a surprise. While on the one hand a foundational feature of human geography might be considered to be a comparative element, on the other, there has been relatively little attention paid by those within the discipline on the methodological challenges posed by comparative studies. This article provides a sympathetic but critical review of the various literatures that have dealt with issues of comparative urban methodologies. The author argues that although providing a series of valuable insights these literatures suffer from three significant weaknesses. These are, first, a failure to move beyond an understanding of geographical scale as an epistemological and ontological given, second, a treatment of cities as bounded and closed entities and, third, an inability to break free from traditional emphasises on government systems and its overly narrow conceptualization of 'the political'. In seeking to address these issues, this article argues for an approach that is both comparable *and* relational.

Key words: comparative methods; urban studies; comparative urbanism; trans-national urbanism

Thinking without comparison is unthinkable. And, in the absence of comparison, so is all scientific thought and scientific research (Swanson 1971: 145).

Comparison is the most common and most rewarding research strategy of controlling for contextual variables and for uncovering causal patterns of explanation. For all their brilliance, single-case studies generate at best hypotheses about such causal patterns; comparative research enables one to take the analysis one step further towards scientific explanation (Pierre 2005: 449).

Comparative urbanism, as a field of inquiry, aims at developing knowledge, understanding and generalization at a level between what is true of all cities and what is true at one city at a given point in time (Nijman 2007: 1).

I Introduction

While reading newspapers, browsing the Internet, listening to the radio or watching the television it is hard to escape – although I try – the seemingly contradictory representations of my home city. I am regularly informed that Manchester is simultaneously the most dangerous, depressing, entrepreneurial and wettest city in England. It is also the most student-friendly, consumer-oriented and nightclub-tastic. And Manchester is not alone at being singled out for this sort of treatment. Other cities are also represented in seemingly contradictory ways. Whole cities labelled on the basis of a single characteristic or geographical area, compared against other cities, which are not quite so dangerous, not so depressing, not so entrepreneurial and not so wet. This comparing and ranking of cities is neither new nor unique to Britain. In the US, for example, there is a long tradition of the production of a series of city rankings against a variety of criteria, from the best place to retire to the best place to be a vegetarian

3

(McCann 2004). The same may also go for non-English speaking countries. We just don't know. The Economic Intelligence Unit (EIU) recently ranked 127 cities in terms of personal risk, infrastructure and the availability of goods and services (EIU 2005). Vancouver came out top. In the UK the growth in recent years of urban league tables and rankings and the economic and political complex around their production is quite astonishing. From rather amateurish origins, the last few decades have witnessed an institutionalizing and systematizing of the publication of urban league tables of one sort of another. Analysts and consultants – part of a new urban consultocracy (Ward 2007a) -- who oversee the production, organization and dissemination of this data have exploded in number in recent years. From being of marginal importance in the wider promotional campaigns of cities, leagues tables – their production and their announcement – have become central features in cities' increasingly slick advertising and marketing strategies, many of which are geared towards representing cities as somehow 'global' or 'world' cities. Something of an urban comparison complex is emerging, an assemblage of business representatives, government departments and networks, redevelopment professionals and think tanks. For example, what local 'buzz' ensued in Manchester when Richard Florida relatively recently came to town! A speaker at the 2005 National Competitiveness Summit, he declared 'Manchester top in a league table of the UK's most creative cities'. He even went as far as to claim 'Manchester is the UK's San Francisco' (http://admin.communicationsresearch.net/news/article/default.aspx?objid=1119). Of course, he had actually made this announcement some two years earlier. He also clearly had not heard about my home city's other claims to fame! Maybe it did not rain the two days he was in town!

While the precise specificities of each league table or ranking and what they reveal about the wider urban and regional institutional context are subject to on-going critique by academics (McCann 2004), urban leaders and practitioners seem uninterested

in such conceptual and methodological niceties and nuances. No real surprise there then! For them, and the cities they represent, what is required is to be seen to be aspiring to be a global or world city, even if ultimately this is beyond their reach (and again, assuming that there was some sort of consensus about whether it was possible to judge and agree on whether a city was a 'global' or 'world' city). This is the *real politick* in which they live, and in and through performing their activities, they reproduce. It is the aspiration that is important, to be able to be judged favourably against other cities, the more 'exotic' or 'cosmopolitan' the better. Those that govern Manchester are not really interested in being compared with Birmingham, Leeds and Sheffield. Barcelona, Boston, Frankfurt, New York, Singapore, on the other hand, is a much more attractive option.

Running through this new inter-urban urban political orthodoxy is then, perhaps not surprisingly, a strong comparative element. The emergence in recent years of a number of overlapping and intermingling international urban policy circuits and networks is just one of the reasons why asserting the need for comparative urban studies is so important at this juncture. Those who govern our cities are already making comparisons. The organisation of numbers in hierarchical order matters in all kinds of ways, from the allocation of public spending to the attraction of inward investment. Their production makes some urban futures more likely and others less so. This is an empirical reason if you like. There are two additional answers to the question, 'why compare?' The first is the uneven geographies of cultural and economic globalization that continue to implicate one city's past, present and future in another. The various globalization processes are simultaneously bringing some cities closer together *and* pushing some further apart. Comparative studies of cities are well placed to comment on the uneven causes and consequences of globalization for all cities. We might think of this as a political reason for continuing to compare cities. The second answer to 'why compare' is a theoretical one. Drawing on the early insights of Walton (1975), who

argued that 'the great majority of urban research has been incredibly parochial' and those of Abu-Lughod and Hay (1977: 3), who argued against attempts 'to formulate generalizations about 'urban life' on the basis of too small and too narrow a sample', Robinson's (2002, 2006) more recent work has maintained that there remains a need to take forward the post-colonial critiques of urban theories. This work should consider whether context-specific concepts and theories can be universalized. Its insights would 'help one become aware of the diversity of social phenomena and overcome ethnocentric assumptions about what is normal' (Pickvance 1986: 163). It would mark a departure from venturing into overseas fieldwork with 'a prefabricated set of theoretical and methodological tools' (Walton 1975: 4). Together the three together reasons I would argue make a compelling case for the future importance of comparative studies of cities.

Changes in the organisation of the urban and regional political economy of some cities have been reflected in a variety of scholar endeavours in recent years. In terms of their economies, the global and world cities approaches have tended to dominate (Robinson 2005; Smith 2001), with cities categorized according to a variety of economic criteria, the most explicit being their place in trans-national business connections (Taylor 2004). In her critical review of much of this particular literature Robinson (2002: 534) puts it thus: '[w]orld cities can be arranged hierarchically, roughly in accord with the economic power they command – competition between world cities and the impact of external shocks shape the fortunes of world cities and their position in the hierarchy. Cities can rise and fall through the hierarchy, and their position is determined by the relative balance of global, national and regional influence.' While on the one hand the global cities work has increased its geographical reach in recent years, with more and more cities added to its global register, on the other, its empirical unevenness remains, leaving many cities – and their populations— unmapped (Robinson 2002, 2005, 2006). Studies have tended to concentrate on a relatively small number of cities and their

structural position vis-à-vis a narrow range of other cities, rendering those named and visible with what we might understand as *comparative power* over those who are not. Moreover, there has perhaps not been quite as much theoretical reflection as there might have been, certainly not as much as Walton (1975) would have hoped. Case studies have been added to the list without any systematic reappraisal of the continued appropriateness of the global cities approach.

In terms of the governance of the urban and regional economies, the empirical focus has been North America and Western Europe. The geographical coverage is more extensive than that on global and world cities. This work has taken its cue from a number of ongoing processes of restructuring, most noticeably the change spatiality and scalarity of the state (Brenner 2004; Collinge 1999; Peck 2002; Swyngedouw 1997, 2000). Using and developing a range of mid-level theoretical approaches, most notably those on urban coalitions, machines and regimes which emphasise economic development and growth (Harding 1994; Logan and Molotch 1987; Stoker and Mossberger 1994; Ward 1996, 2000), this work has sought to examine the political economy of place. Even more recently, a number of studies have been produced on African, Asian and eastern and central European cities (Beal et al. 2002; Peyroux 2006; Tomlinson 1999). Despite their welcome empirical deviation from the Western empirical examples these studies have tended not to stray too far theoretically. They have continued to use US-derived urban political theories to try to explain apparently similar transformations in urban and regional governance across countries, albeit in cities and nations with very different political economic histories, pathways and trajectories. In these accounts it is a case of fitting the empirical 'cases' into the predefined theoretical explanations rather than acknowledging that in some cases the empirics might actually challenge the theory and its origins. As such, this work has run the risk of failing to acknowledge and reflect on how this growing empirical diversity might challenge those existing urban theories that have

been generated out of particular historical-geographical junctures and translated into 'universal principles'.

While much has been written about this work on the governance of cities little attention has been paid to its comparative dimension (Goodwin and MacLeod 1999; Jessop et al. 1999). My own work is no exception. Examining the changing ways in which the English cities of Birmingham, Leeds and Manchester were governed, it never really got to grips with the comparative aspect of this analysis (Ward 2000). And yet, as a means of gauging – and comparing -- the performance of individual cities and regions a number of ideal types have been generated. These classify how cities and regions 'respond' to wider processes of restructuring to form one type of coalition or regime or another. For example, the work on urban regimes has produced a host of ideal types – 'anti-growth', 'entrepreneurial', 'instrumental' and 'organic' to name but three – as a means of detailing the variety of urban pathways pursued by different cities (DiGaetano 1997; DiGaetano and Klemanski 1993a, 1993b; Stoker and Mossberger 1994; Ward 1996).

So, a comparative dimension *implicitly characterises* both these literatures – that on the economies of global and world cities on the one hand, and that on their governance on the other. According to Brenner (2004: 21) 'comparative [urban] studies' [by which he seems to mean this work] is one of only a small number of academic literatures where recent work has successfully been able to 'relate contextually specific institutional dynamics and outcomes to broader, meso-level transformations.' While he may well be correct in his assertion, and leaving aside the issue of how best to define and put boundaries around this thing called 'urban studies' (Massoti and Walton 1976; Walton 1975, 1982) -- given the attention human geographers pay to place, scale and space it is perhaps something of a surprise that we have paid so little explicit attention to *comparative* studies. Of course, there are other intellectual conversations in which human

geographers of one type or another have been noticeable by their absence (Amin and Thrift 2000; Peck 2005; Peck and Theodore 2007; Ward 2007b). And yet, comparative work appears to ask questions that are profoundly geographical. Maybe this is the problem. As Nijman (2007) notes, human geographers performing comparative studies have both to compare over time and across space. Maybe this is just too big a methodological and theoretical challenge. Or, perhaps this absence is because the comparative dimension to the discipline is omnipresent. For sure, a large amount of human geography has a comparative element running through it. From the work of Hartshorne, Ritter and Von Humbolt onwards there has been an understated but present geographical tradition of comparative scholarship. So, there is no shortage of work coursing through the veins of the sub-discipline that does not consist of comparisons in one way or another. More often than not, however, the comparative element has tended to have been unwritten, other terms having been used such as 'cross-cultural' or 'cross-national' to refer to studies. Of course geography is not alone in this regard. Other disciplines, particularly anthropology, political science and sociology have tended to use similar terms. However, human geography is alone in being the only discipline that has the theorization of space at its intellectual core. In this way it does differ from other social science subjects (Walton 1990).

In light of this paper's claim that human geographers have not systematically addressed the comparative dimension of their urban studies it is organised into three sections. In the second I unpack and discuss the variety of meanings that have been attached to the term 'comparison' in scholarly studies across the social sciences. This is a large body of material. It includes uses of the term to refer to 'gender regimes', 'housing systems', and 'welfare states' to name but three. The third section of the paper seeks to provide a critical interpretation of the scholarly endeavours of political scientists and sociologists who have produced a voluminous literature on comparative urban studies.

9

With its origins in the 1950s this continues to be a burgeoning area of intellectual effort and the work is explicit about its comparative nature. While it slowed during the 1990s, 'seen as part of the modernist project, prone to the fallacies of scientism and developmentalism' according to Nijman (2007: 1), comparative studies of cities continue to characterise the social sciences. As such, over the years this field of inquiry has produced a rich set of methodological-cum-theoretical insights into the comparative urban condition, from which human geographers involved in understated comparative urban studies might be able to draw. It is not without its limits though. In highlighting some of this work's weaknesses my purpose is to point out possible zones of connection between those working in this area and the work of human geographers. As a first step in this intellectual reconstruction process in the fourth and final section the paper turns to a second long-standing multi-disciplinary literature which has the comparison of cities are its core. Work on trans-national urbanism (Roy 2003; Smith 2001) draws on a long and rich tradition of trans-national studies. It differs from work that compares cities in that it rather than 'comparing' cities it instead uses the study of one city to pose theoretical questions of other cities. With reference to this literature the paper concludes by arguing for a *relational comparative approach* to urban studies and posing a series of questions for future work in this field.

II Comparative studies in the social sciences

Virtually all empirical social research involves comparison of some sort. Researchers compare cases to each other; they use statistical methods to construct (and adjust) quantitative comparisons; they compare cases to theoretically derived pure cases; and they compare cases' values on relevant variables to average values in order to assess covariation. Comparison provides a basis for making statements about empirical

regularities and for evaluating and interpreting cases relative to substantive and theoretical criteria. In this broad sense, comparison is central to empirical social science as it is practiced today (Ragin 1987: 1)

Across much of the social sciences, particularly anthropology, economics, political science and sociology, there is a long history and a substantial body of work on different aspects of comparative research (Armer and Grimshaw 1973; Bray et al. 2007; Ebbinghaus and Manow 2005; Ragin 1982, 1987; Smelser 1976; Streek and Thelen 2005; Tilly 1984; Walton and Masotti 1976). From 'comparative welfare states' to 'comparative political regimes', the notion of comparison has been a common method for studying a range of substantive issues. There is certainly no shortage of ways in which the term 'comparative' has been used, from sub-fields of particular disciplines (e.g. comparative urban politics in political science) to the naming of speciality groups of learned societies (e.g. British and comparative territorial politics of the UK's Political Studies Association, or Comparative Sociology in the American Sociological Association) and academic journals (e.g. Comparative European Politics). Indeed it is possible to claim that the notion of comparison is practically omnipresent in much empirical social science research (Swanson 1971). There are also a number of textbook-like academic publications on comparative methods from across the social sciences (for example see Armer and Grimshaw 1973; Bray et al. 2007; Ragin 1987). These tend to provide disciplinary overviews of ways in which notions of comparisons have been used. In answering questions such as: 'What constitutes comparison?'; 'What are the methods for performing comparative social science?'; 'What are the methodological problems and possibilities of comparative research?' the contributions tend to draw on a wide range of empirical cases on a number of substantive issues, such as education, housing and welfare. They review how the founding work in anthropology, political science and

sociology tends to have used the notion of 'comparison' in a variety of different ways (Przeworksi and Tuene 1970; Lijphart 1971).

For some, the methodological and theoretical challenges posed by comparative research are not unique to it. Swanson's (1971: 145) well-cited quote, 'thinking without comparison is unthinkable. And, in the absence of comparison, so it all scientific thought and scientific research' with which I began this paper perhaps best summarises this position. Referring specifically to sociology, Grimshaw (1973: 3) has remarked that, '[t]here are many senses in which it can be said that all good sociology is comparative-that, as a matter of fact, sociology cannot be done without making comparisons' (see also Zelditch 1971). The argument that has been made is that the issues facing comparative research are simply revealing of a series of more general challenges faced by other social scientists. For Pickvance (1995: 35), '[i]n one sense all analysis, i.e. any attempt to find causes, is comparative – even when the data concern a single case. This is because is involves a comparison between the observed situation and an imagined situation in which the suspected case is absent.' Emile Durkheim (1982), for example, believed that sociology was implicitly comparative. As such, he argued that social phenomena were unquestionably unique and representative. As he put it: '[c]omparative sociology is not a particular branch of sociology; it sociology itself, in so far as it ceases to be purely descriptive and to account for facts' (op cit: 14). Max Weber too was interested in comparative studies as a means of exploring the causes and consequences of historical diversity. Rejecting Durkheim's positivist view of a natural science of society, Weber instead emphasised qualitative methods as a means of uncovering the origins of complexity, contingency and diversity (Ragin and Zaret 1983).

Other luminaries, such as Talcott Parsons and Claude Lévi-Strauss have also identified differences and similarities between phenomena as a means of classifying societies into different 'types'. For example Parsons (1966) used the comparative

method to study the historical and social development of societies. He established the links between a series of variables to explain how their increasing interdependence led to increasingly complex societies over time. Dogan and Pelassy (1984: 171) have argued, 'almost all political or sociological theories are nourished by comparisons, be they explicit or not.' As Smelser (1976) argues, the application of general descriptive words to a situation – 'global' city or 'creative' economy - presupposes a universe of situations that are more or less 'global' or more or less 'creative'. It assume that the situation, the cities or the economies, being described lie somewhere in comparison with others cities or other economies. If this is the case then the analysis of phenomena in evidently dissimilar units, such as cities, should have no unique methodological issues. These only appear in the analysis of relatively similar 'units' because this involves comparing units that differ from one another in some respects. So the methodological challenges facing those performing comparative studies are similar to those facing all social scientists.

For others, however, comparative studies are unique. They are distinctive. Over the last fifty years a significant set of literatures have emerged across a number of disciplines on different aspects of comparative methods. As opposed to assuming that social science is intrinsically comparative, this work has instead argued for the virtues of being explicit about doing comparative research. As Grimshaw (1973: 18) puts it, 'studies in which a country [or city] is the unit of study cannot forward the search for distinctions between system-specific and universal regularities in social behaviour.' Making this argument has involved the construction of boundaries around a set of works labelled 'comparative', even if in practice the distinction with work understood as 'non-comparative' has been rather blurred. Nevertheless, there is a long and significant history of contributions that have made the case for particular set of approaches and methodologies in performing comparative anthropology, political science and sociology (for example see Grimshaw 1973; Pzeworski and Tuene 1970).

So, what is meant by 'comparison'? Perhaps not surprisingly this can be answered a number of ways. On a very basic level to compare means to examine more than one event, object, outcome or process with the view of discovering the similarities and/or differences between them. Comparative studies share a commitment to describing, explaining, and developing theories about socio-cultural phenomena as they occur in and across social units (cities, groups, regions, nations, societies, tribes). This is not about research into two or more cases. It is argued that this would not in and of itself constitute comparative research (Walton 1990; Kantor and Savitch 2005). As Pickvance (1995: 36) puts it, '[c]omparative analysis is best defined as the collection of data on two or more situations, followed by an attempt to make sense of them by use of one or more explanatory models'.

Bendix (1963: 532), in one of the earliest pieces to grapple with the methodological underpinnings of comparative social science argued that it constituted, 'an attempt to develop concepts and generalization at a level between what is true of all societies and what is true of one society at one point in time and space'. This emphasis on the general and the specific is picked up again by Grimshaw (1973: 3), who contended that the task of comparative sociology is 'to distinguish between those regularities in social behaviour that are system-specific and those are that are universal', with nations being the systems under analysis in much of the work performed in this era. Other contributions to this field have also characterised comparative work in this way. In his 1987 American Sociological Association Presidential Address Kohn (1987: 713) argued that comparative (cross-national in his case) research establishes 'the generality of findings and the validity of interpretations derived from single-nation studies.' For Ragin (1987: 5), the generality should be thought of in terms of 'macro-social' variation:

> What distinguishes comparative social science is its use of attributes of macrosocial units
> in explanatory statements. This special usage is intimately linked to the twin goals of
> comparative social science – both to explain and to interpret macrosocial variation

More recently, Keating (1991: 11) has claimed that 'comparison highlights structural and cultural differences while allowing them to be examined in terms of common criteria', while Dogan and Pelassy (1984) have argued that 'researchers seek the most stable and invariable factors amid a profusion of forms and events.' For Denters and Mossberger (2006: 553) this leads 'social scientists to use variation across systems to explain similarities and differences [within systems].'

Drawing upon this foundational work three methodological issues in particular are worth further discussion. The first issue is that of causality. For Pierre (2005: 454), 'a comparative framework … must be based on some form of theory or casual model, some stipulative statement about what causes a variation in the dependent variable.' Much comparative work has been underpinned by a simple, universal causation model that has its origins in the turn of the twentieth century work of Mills (1848). That B always follows A would be understood as a universal – anytime, anywhere – causal relationship. Multiple causation is a term that refers to a condition where two or more causes act on the particular object or phenomenon under study. So C always follows A and B, for example. For Pickvance (1986, 1995) and Ragin (1987) this is an unnecessarily narrow definition and understanding of causality. Returning to the foundational work of Mills (1848) they have both argued for a wider understanding of causality. Pickvance (1986: 176) terms this 'plural causality':

> Different cause or the same causes with different weights … act to produce a
> phenomenon in different societies or groups of societies.

It refers 'to the fact that on different occasions (places and times) different causes act' (Pickvance 1995: 37).

The second issue that characterises much of the literature and that warrants further discussion is the way in which difference and similarity have been theorized. Walton's (1973) 'standardized case comparison' approach has underpinned the majority of the studies. This restricts the cases compared to those which previous research suggests share certain similarities. This is in contrast to the performance of studies under conditions that are largely unknown. Przeworski and Teune (1970) term these two options the 'most different systems' and the 'most similar systems' approaches. The later of these draws on identifying and selecting cases that are as similar as possible in all independent aspects but in which there is variation in the independent variable' (Pierre 2005: 455). The most different systems design in contrast identifies cases that are as different as possible. According to Pickvance (1986) this distinction draws directly from J S Mills's 'Method of Agreement' and 'Method of Difference'.

The third methodological issue that characterises much of the work in this field is the ways in which the issue of equivalence is addressed. Underpinning many comparative studies is the notion of 'functional equivalence'. This looks to compare entities or units that perform the same functions, which does not necessarily mean they share the same title. So, for example, there is a long tradition in UK and US political science in exploring local government cross-nationally (Denters and Rose 2005; Wolman and Goldsmith 1992). This centres on comparing different aspects of local government in the two countries, such as budgets, functions and responsibilities. The focus has been on the comparison of internal characteristics. This research has deployed methods of formal equivalence. While these studies have not been without their insights, the work of others has revealed profound differences in what is meant by 'local government' in the two countries. The nature of the relationship to other levels of government, tax-raising

capacity and so on differs between the UK, the US and many other countries. Empirically they do not share the sets of functions even though formally they appear to fulfil the same roles. More recent work on the governance of cities, on the other hand, has turned to the functional equivalence approach, focusing less on comparing institutions like for like but instead comparing similar sets of modes and patterns of governance (Cox 1993, 1995; Cox and Mair 1991; Peck 1995; Peck and Tickell 1995; Imrie and Raco 1999; Ward 2000). This has involved acknowledging that a range of agencies and institutions are involved in the ways in which cities are governed. Business representative, community groups, grass-root agencies, housing associations all participate to different degrees in the way that cities are governed. And this wider conceptualization of who is involved in urban governance also has consequences for how we understand 'city politics', which is more than just about government. It is the everyday ways in which decisions are made around the productions of cities that are important.

According to Tilly (1984: 80) what should not be sought through comparative studies of any sort is 'complete explanations'. As he puts it 'no one should take the rules to require a search for the perfect pair of structures or processes: exquisitely matched on every variable except the purported case the supposed effect'. In fact, as Tilly (1984: 82-83) has outlined, there is some variety within the types of comparative studies that have been performed within the social science literature. Not all studies have the same intellectual rationale underpinning them. The differences stem from the nature of the relationship between observation and theory differs (Walton 1990). In his work he details four distinct comparative strategies. The first, the individualizing comparison attempts 'to contrast specific instances of a given phenomenon as a means of grasping the peculiarities of each case'. Here the focus is on a particular case study, exploring its specific characteristics. The emphasis is on 'local' details. The second, the universalizing

comparison aims 'to establish that every instance of a phenomenon follows essentially the same rule.' In performing comparative studies the emphasis is on establishing general rules – regularities and similarities between places. An example would be those studies exploring the common entrepreneurial policies and practices pursued by many industrialized cities over the last two decades. The third strategy, the variation-finding comparison, seeks to 'establish a principle of variation in the character or intensity of a phenomenon by examining systematic difference amongst instances.' In these studies either the most similar or the most different approach can be used to compare two or more cases of a particular process to understand why difference or similarity persists. In example of this work the focus might be on ways in which the apparent entrepreneurial orthodoxy in economic development is played out differently in different cities. The fourth and final comparative approach is the encompassing strategy. This approach 'places different instances at various locations within the same system, on the way to explaining their characteristics as a function of the varying relationships to the system as a whole.' The emphasis here in on system-wide laws with an acknowledgement that different cases are incorporated into the system in different ways and with different consequences.

For Tilly (1984: 15) no one of the four strategies is intrinsically 'better' than the others. All have something to reveal about the world that is being studied. And, despite being grounded in his work in historical sociology, this paper argues that this schema has far wider applicability. The explicit detailing of the different methodological strategies available for comparative studies opens up a way of distinguishing between different ways of studying cities and regions amongst existing work that has attended to the comparative dimension of studying contemporary urbanization. It is an intellectual project that is at its very beginning (Brenner 2001a).

III Comparative urban studies

Defining comparative urban studies is not straightforward. The term constitutes an academic construction, the bringing together of aspects of a variety of approaches from across a number of social science disciplines, most noticeably political science and sociology (Abu Lughod 1975; Castells 1976; Walton 1975, 1976, 1982). Certainly the term 'comparative urban studies' would seem to be a chaotic concept, running the risk of 'lump[ing] together the unrelated and the inessential' -- in the manner implied by Sayer's (1984: 138) pioneering analysis. It is an inter-disciplinary field, taking bits of a number of disciplines and putting them under one label. Of course, one 'bit' of one discipline differs from one 'bit' of another. The comparative 'bit' of planning, the comparative 'bit' of political science and the comparative 'bit' of sociology for example. Walton's (1982) insight into the relationship between the particular elements that go in to constituting 'comparative urban studies' is illustrative:

> [C[omparative urban studies can be grouped, contrasted, and assessed on the basis of
> their (often implicit) theoretical premises – their perspectives on what is urban or on
> what is most important and characteristic about the urban setting. This fundamental
> consideration dovetails with the rational that studies usually have for engaging in
> comparative work.

In his review he outlines four ways of theorizing the city: as a market system, as a mechanism of social integration, as a centre of social pluralism and as a cause and consequence of social development. He sets out in each one the extent of comparative studies. His point is to reveal the unevenness of comparative studies across the different ways of conceiving of cities. One aspect that he rather neglects understands cities in

terms of politics and power. For Castells (1976: 295) the 'increased politicization of

urban affairs' was behind from the 1970s onwards political scientists, as well as

sociologists, leading on the production of comparative urban research. According to

Pickvance (1986: 166) this upsurge of interest also stemmed from the particular type of

theorizing that was dominant at the time. As he put it: '[t]he 1970s was a period of grand

theory when theoretically-driven models … which at best corresponded to realities in

one country, were advanced as having general applicability … Comparative analysis is a

necessary complement to such theorizing since it gives priority to testing the models over

its whole scope of application' (see also Pickvance 1995). While comparative research

has continued to be produced on the themes identified by Walton (1976) and on others,

such as housing (Pickvance 1986; 1995), it is around the issue of the politics of urban

development that most recent explicitly comparative urban research has been produced.

In the US, for example, the emphasis amongst urban studies on comparing the

political systems from one city to another has long been a feature of the country's

political science. Classic studies include Clark's (1974) *Comparative community politics* and

Schwirian's (1974) *Comparative urban structure*. In the UK, while not quite having the

prominence that it has in the US, nevertheless, a defining feature of both political science

and sociology has been an interest in the differences between governmental and political

systems from one city to another, inside and outside of the UK (although often only with

the US as the main point of comparison). Journals like the US's *Journal of Urban Affairs*

and the *Urban Affairs Review*, and its *Urban Affairs Association* (and latterly the *European*

Urban Affairs Association), with its well-attended annual conference, have provided it with

a degree of institutional legitimacy. Over the last three decades the study of comparative

urban politics by political scientists and by sociologists has continued to be an

intellectually vibrant field of inquiry, even if its popularity has waned with the emergence

of post-modern and post-structural approaches (Nijman 2007). Underscoring much of

this comparative urban politics has been then the revealing of 'common traits in urban politics of liberal democratic countries' (DiGaetano and Klemaski 1999: 13). Methodologically, this work tends to have rested on two of Tilly's (1984) four approaches, individualizing and variation-finding both of which 'emphasize contextual specificity, institutional diversity and the divergence of evolutionary pathways' (Brenner 2004: 18).

If we turn first to individualizing comparisons then the emphasis has been on highlighting specific examples of a particular phenomenon as a means of revealing the details of each case. A few examples will suffice. In Clarke's (1995: 3) study of eight US cities – Cleveland, Columbus, Dayton, Macon, Oklahoma City, Seattle, Tacoma, and Tulsa – she examined 'local political processes' in the context of '[p]rofound global economic transformation and attendant social changes.' Savitch (1988: 23) performed a comparison of three 'post-industrial' cities – New York, Paris and London. Each one was theorized as a different 'type' of governing regime, representing particular power constellations. The emphasis was on how very general trends – most noticeably the 'increase in competition between cities' brought about by globalization—played out in different places. As he put it '[i]n comparing political phenomena the focus is on process and behaviour.' His emphasis was typical of similar studies in this tradition, emphasising a 'functional equivalent' and not the particular nomenclature of the actors. Kantor, Savitch and Haddock (1997) compared the political economy of urban regimes, comparing their bargaining context, as a way of connecting local specifics to wider institutional contexts. The concern is to '[specificy] how different national and international circumstances shape regimes and their policy biases' (Kantor, Savitch and Haddock 1997: 349). Their focus was on eight cities: Detroit, Glasgow, Houston, Liverpool, Milan, Naples, New York, and Paris, reflecting a concern to examine 'the Western industrial system of advanced democracies' (op. cit. 349). Constructing a series

of different ideal-types, they sought to uncover the political economic parameters that dis/empower regimes. Building on this work, in their comparative *tour de force* Savitch and Kantor (2002: 15) ask, in light of 'globalization', 'how do cities fit into this overall picture?' They make clear the rationale for their selection of particular cities, and the analysis of their economic development trajectories over a specified period of time:

> We thought it necessary that our selection of cities mirror a reasonable degree of variation in the west. Otherwise we would be unable to test our proposition about the comparative dynamics of urban development … we also decided to focus on a time frame between 1970 and 2000. This period encompasses years in which most western cities faced similar challenges (Savith and Kantor 2002: xvi).

The emphasis was on revealing how 'urban centers experience varying impacts' (xvi). Using four variables – market conditions, intergovernmental support, popular control and local culture -- they examined the specifics of each case in the context of the overarching logic of what they label as 'globalization'. Finally, in their *Leadership and Urban Regeneration* Judd and Parkinson's (1990) case studies are located in five countries. They outline a range of differences. However, as they put it, 'despite these important differences, all five countries, and their cities, have been subject to similar economic pressures.' They outline 'systematic differences' in how those governing each of the cities 'have responded to economic stress' (ibid: 28). The cities are grouped according to how they are perceived as having responded to these common 'economic pressures'. These differences are due largely, it is argued, to leadership: as they put it, 'leadership is a crucial variable in determining how cities respond to economic change' (ibid: 28). Across all of these works the focus has been on revealing 'local' examples of the wider transformation of urban governing regimes and their strategies. Specifically, the details

of the various ways in which cities have responded to the apparent need to become more entrepreneurial and to compete more aggressively with other cities.

The second of Tilly's (1984) strategies that has characterised much of this comparative urban political research is that on variation-finding comparisons. DiGaetano and Klemanski's (1999: 27) study of Birmingham and Bristol (UK) and Boston and Detroit (US) employs this method. As they put it, 'we endeavour to explain why modes of governance vary both within and across nations.' Their choice of cases and their methodological procedures reflected their commitments and interests (Ragan and Zaret 1983). The rationale for their choices of empirical cases was explained thus:

> we … opted to research urban development politics in Detroit and Boston in the United States and Birmingham and Bristol in Great Britain because of the striking difference in social and economic characteristics displayed by each national pair.

Through the use of a 'variation finding' research strategy DiGaetano and Klemanski (1999: 27) argue that they were able to 'detect distinctive patterns of governance for each city that [could not be] accounted for wholly by external factors' (see also DiGaetano and Klemanski 1993, 1993b; DiGaetano and Strom 2003). Marcuse and van Kempen (2000: 266) outline what they understand as the 'multiple contingencies of comparative analysis.' Their overarching thesis was that there is a 'new spatial order' within cities, as a result of the process of globalization. Their emphasis is on empirical, observable differences, that is the 'the way in which the general trends … outlined become manifest.' On the basis of the different contributions to their edited collection Marcuse and van Kempen (2000: 274) are moved to conclude that 'the specter of an overwhelming tidal wave of globalization, sweeping across continents, engulfing all cities, producing a consistent pattern of polarization, exploitation and exclusion around the world, is unfounded.'

23

As Tilly (1984: 83) argued, 'all … strategies work for some purposes'. It is not that one is right or wrong, or better than the others. The relative merits of either approach depend on the intellectual task at hand. Indeed, in some studies a number of these comparative methods are used, albeit with one dominating the analysis. There are then overlaps and similarities between the different methods.

Within this body of work there has been a degree of internal critique. For example, Stoker and Mossberger (1994: 196), based on their urban regime work, have argued:

Prior cross-national research has expanded the scope of urban studies, but more conceptual and theoretical rigour is necessary if comparison is to advance beyond the description of 'unique' cases and into the realm of explanation

According to DiGaetano and Strom (2003: 357), '[m]issing from comparative analysis of urban politics … has been a self-conscious effort to grapple with the epistemological problems of comparative urban research.' Pierre (2005: 446) has argued that despite a not insignificant intellectual history 'urbanists have been surprisingly slow in using comparison as a research strategy.' He goes on to argue against one mode of representation that is a popular way of producing comparative studies. As he puts it (ibid: 454), '[e]qually frustrating are edited volumes presenting a series of case studies that is not held together by a common comparative framework.' This sentiment is one also held by Kantor and Savitch (2005: 133), who argue that '[w]hat often stands for comparative analysis is comprised of separate chapters on a limited number of cities capped by an attempt to draw some unifying themes.' This is not an entirely new concern. Pickvance (1986: 163) was clear that 'a study is based on data relating to two or more societies is no guarantee that it is a comparative one.' Walton (1990: 248), writing

almost twenty years ago, argued about an edited book in which he had a chapter, that it consisted of a 'variety of unstructured, even opportunistic comparisons that say little about similarities and differences between the cities compared.' So within this literature on comparative urban governance there is already a degree of internal critique. Building on this, the next section of the paper presents a series of geographically-informed concerns.

IV Towards a sympathetic geographically-informed critique

In this section I want to highlight four weaknesses that pervade much of the existing comparative urban studies research. I do this having already reviewed some of this work's significant contributions and as a means of signposting some of the ways in which human geographers might become usefully involved in future cross-disciplinary debates over comparative methods. The first weakness that characterises some of this work is the way in which it has dealt with urban complexity and its simplification on one hand, and how on the other, it has dealt with 'local' context. This challenge is best summed up by Pierre (2005: 456) when he reflects that 'in comparative urban governance research, the scholar is faced with the challenge of striking the right balance between reducing complexity and uncovering the casual mechanisms on one hand, and allowing for contextual richness … on the other.' For Sellers (2002: 636) this challenge is in danger of holding back the insights this work can generate. As he argues 'comparativists must develop analytical approaches adequate to the complexity of … wider institutional contexts.' In holding some things constant – trying to model some types of complexity and contingency out of the urban system – some of this work has proved itself incapable of dealing with the diversity of urban experiences. According to Pierre (2005: 447), 'comparison requires a robust analytical framework defining the variables to be

compared, leaving out as much 'noise' as possible'. This of course presupposes that it is both possible and desirable to separate out what constitutes 'noise'. Empirically-rich accounts of concrete and socially-situated processes that emphasize the diversity of urban experiences may actually necessitate comparing the 'noise' in one city with the 'noise' in another. Indeed the two 'noises' may be related. Such a simple distinction between noise (unimportant) and non-noise (important) seems strangely at odds with the messy urban worlds that most researchers working in this field of inquiry encounter.

This work's second weakness is the ways in which it deals with geographical scale, stemming in part from the political science background of many working in this field (Clarke 1995; Pierre 1999; Kantor et al. 1999; Savitch and Kantor 1997, 2002). Much of this literature is replete with reference to multi-level governance (MLG), taking for granted the scalar context of its own particular inquiry and treating each of the levels – nation, region and city – as ontological and epistemological givens (Cole and John 2001; Pierre 2005; Rose 2002; Sellers 2002, 2005). Within this literature there is an acknowledgement of the challenges of dealing with different geographies. For Denters and Mossberger (2005: 554-555) 'dealing with multiple levels of analysis is one of the most pressing challenges facing comparative political science.' This is about more than institutionally defined levels of analysis it is argued, by which is meant that under certain conditions 'levels' might include the neighbourhood or the metropolis. This is as near as this work gets to questioning the taken-for-granted nature of 'levels'. Little of this work has attempted to grapple with the scaled political economies of contemporary state restructuring (Brenner 2004; Peck 2002 Swyngedouw 1997, 2000). The emphasis on 'levels', treating them as fixed, is wont to ignore the insights of this geographical political economic work, which argues that these concepts need to be understood relationally. For example, compare the following three quotes, the first two from those within this intellectual field:

The logic of the comparative method is that by comparing units (countries, cities, or any other units) that are most similar in some aspects, the researcher is able to control for the variables that are similar and isolate other variables as potential causes of observed differences (Denters and Mossberger 2006: 553)

Multilevel accounts are needed that can nest urban political analysis not just within the global economy but also within politics, economics and social relations at the national and regional levels (Sellers 2005: 424)

In contrast Swyngedouw (1997: 141) has argued:

Scales and their nested articulations become produced as temporary standoffs in a perpetual transformative sociospatial struggle

In a recent and interesting intellectual development Sellers (2002, 2005) has sought to move the focus away from cities as embedded in particular national contexts and instead to emphasis the inter-connections between cities. As he puts it:

In undertaking comparative, cross-national research from the standpoint of urban regions rather than from that of countries, comparative urban politics has the chance to elaborate new, multilevel forms of comparative analysis that can more effectively grasp the changing character of the nation-state and the democratic possibilities of contemporary societies (Sellers 2005: 420)

While this denaturalizing of the nation state and the emphasizing of the horizontal as well as the vertical relations is to be welcome, this development runs the risk of simply replacing one level with another. One formal level – the city – replaces another – the

27

nation – with little or no attention to explicating the processes at work in the production of the new 'urban' political scalar architecture. There remains still a tendency to think in terms of epistemological and ontological givens.

The third weakness in this literature is the treatment of cities as discrete, self-enclosed and analytically separate objects. Savitch and Kantor (2002: vii) acknowledge the variety of geographical scales bound up in the contemporary restructuring of cities but still refer to cities as 'primate' and 'secondary' cities up against one another, 'in a competitive scramble to secure economic well being.' This type of *methodological territorialism*, the 'assumption that all social relations are organized within self-enclosed, discretely bounded territorial containers' (Brenner 2004: 38), ignores that work which argues for a more open, embedded and relational conceptualization of cities (Massey 2007). It characterises the majority of political science work comparing cities. There has been little evidence as of yet of work that approaches the city as 'both a place (a site or territory) and as a series of unbounded, relatively disconnected and dispersed, perhaps sprawling activities, made in and through many different kinds of network stretching far beyond the physical extent of the city' (Robinson 2005: 763).

This literature's fourth weakness is its apparent inability to escape the intellectual moorings of government-focused studies. Despite increasing reference to governance, much of the work in this area is replete with studies of local government and of relationships between central and local government which is underscored by an assumption that government is the primary means through which to study the practising of politics. On the one hand there is a failure to appreciate the diversity of formal agencies and institutions involved in urban political decision-making. Representatives of business, civil society and labour participate in most cities' everyday politics. Government is only one of a number of different actors involved in the reproduction of cities, albeit at important one in many but not all cases. On the other hand, there is also

28

a politics beyond the formal sphere. This is a more mundane and ordinary politics perhaps but one that shapes the ways in which cities evolve, practiced by individuals and groups often beyond the gaze of formal political institutions. Studies of cities from around the world reveal how in certain circumstance this form of politics is important. The failure of the comparative urban studies mainstream to understand 'politics' in a broader and more inclusive sense is both an empirical and theoretical limit.

In the next and final section of this paper I review some of its main points as a means to sketch out one way in which to take comparative urban studies forward in light of my critique. Drawing on work produced in a cognate literature – that on trans-national urbanism – I outline a possible future research agenda, one which allows for the comparative studies of cities *and* of the relationships in which they are a constitutive element.

V Discussion and conclusion

As a tactic for post-colonial critique, a form of comparative studies that rests not on a-priori categorical and structural similarities within groups of cities but on a cosmopolitan and curious theoretical endeavour , inclusive of all kinds of cities, might stimulate and transform the divided form of urban studies (Robinson 2006: 63).

[Transnational urbanism refers to] the criss-crossing transnational circuits of communication and cross-cutting local, translocal and transnational social practices that "come together" in particular places at particular times and enter into the contested politics of place-making (Smith 2001: 5)

Since the first comparative study of cities over fifty years ago this intellectual meeting point for a range of social science disciplines has delivered a lot. It has highlighted

general patterns of urban restructuring across a range of different types of cities; it has developed and fine-tuned a range of quantitative (censuses, surveys etc.) and qualitative (socio-historical etc.) comparative techniques; it has produced a series of different types of comparative strategies; and it has revealed differences and similarities in a range of areas of policy across a wide number of cities. These are not inconsequential contributions. However, it has also not been without its problems as befits an area of study that transcends the boundaries of traditional academic disciplines. It remains a body of work that has struggled with issues of organizational identity, theoretical coherence, and methodological integrity. As Walton (1976: 301) has put it, 'the field' presents us with 'investigations of a wide variety of phenomena broached typically from a number of more or less encapsulated disciplinary orientations.' Its internal differentiation along a number of lines has sometimes but not always been reducible to disciplinary differences. Its intellectual nadir was in the 1970s. Informed and inspired by the emergence across the social sciences of Marxism as an important theoretical framework both political scientists and sociologists united around comparative grand theory. The emphasis was on patterns and regularities. Those working at the time on issues of urban political economy engaged in a number of studies of a 'cross-national comparative perspective' (Harloe 1981: 192). For Walton (1976: 302) this constituted 'the emergence on an international basis of a new school of urban social science.' Since this period the work in this intellectual vein has slowed. 'Comparative methodologies largely disappeared from view' (Nijman 2007: 1) with the emphasis on substantive issues, most particularly, the politics of urban development. Any attempt at reinvigoration has to retain the insights of earlier work while acknowledging and addressing contemporary ways of theorizing cities and urbanization.

In particular it has to overcome a central problematic. Much of the contemporary comparative literature on cities retains understandings of place, scale and

space that are rooted in the past. If there is a movement away from understanding cities

as bounded and discrete units and geographical scales as fixed and pre-given is it still

possible to perform comparative studies of cities? Put another way, what might a

comparative urbanism look like for the twenty first century?   A sustained engagement by

geographers would be the first of its kind. In the past they have not participated in the

development of the field of study (for an exception see Berry 1981). However the

insights generated in the discipline and the current attention to issues of 'space' by

anthropologists, political scientists and sociologist marks an unheralded intellectual

window of opportunity (see for example Gieryn 2000; Low 1999).   I think there are at

least four elements to this more geographically-informed approach to comparative

urbanism (Table 1).

First, work in the future must be informed by past work on comparative urban

studies. For all its faults it still consists of a rich set of insights into how best to perform

comparative studies of cities. 'Comparative urbanism must be practiced in a conscious

manner' (Nijman 2007: 3), and while in principle most of us would probably not find

much to argue about with this statement, actually delivering on it is far from

straightforward. As this paper has detailed there are well-established techniques amongst

particular sub-areas of political science and sociology which provide a starting point for

any future methodological developments. Tilly's (1984) categorizing of different types

of comparative strategies has usefully been developed in the context of urban studies,

first by Walton (1990) and more recently by Brenner (2001a). This demands at the very

least that all those involved in comparative studies of cities - hopefully including human

geographers -- take the time to acknowledge which particular strategy they have adopted

and why. Historicizing current comparative studies of cities is necessary.

Second, future empirical studies must be attuned to the challenges of 'theorizing

back'. While past comparative studies have produced a wealth of empirical findings there

has been little attempt to reflect on what these might mean for existing methods and theories. New empirical findings have led to the creation of new ideal-types in the case of some work rather than attending 'to the difference the diversity of cities makes to theory' (Robinson 2002: 549). She picks up on a point made over thirty years ago, when Abu-Lughod and Hay (1977: 3-4) argue that their book can 'serve those whose immediate concerns are with American cities … After stretching their focus beyond the United States [they] may return to American cities with a new understanding of the basic and underlying processes of urban life.' This is more than a matter of empirical detail. It is a matter of theoretical reflection, of 'theorizing back', a necessity in light of the wider insights generated by post-colonial critiques of the geographically uneven foundations of contemporary urban scholarship.

Third, there remains still a tendency in much of the comparative urban studies literature to conceive of scale as self-evident, a pre-given platform for geographical processes. This might have been acceptable in the past. Geographers too tended to understand scale in this rather one-dimensional and simplistic manner. Not today however. In the last two decades human geographers have produced a series of dynamic theorizations to analyse the contested, and continually evolving, role of scale as 'a container, arena, scaffolding and hierarchy of sociospatial practices' (Brenner 2001b: 592). While *cartographic scale* may indeed be a fixed metric (as on a map), geographical scale is not. Rather geographical scales are *socially constructed* (Smith 1993; Swyngedouw 1997; Peck 2002). They are the product of social relations, actions and institutions and there remains important work to be done in denaturalizing received terms like national economy or urban governance to reveal the constructed (and repeatedly reconstructed) nature of such categories. Future work on comparative urbanisms needs to understand scale in this way.

Fourth, there is a systemic weakness in this literature in the way much of it conceives of cities. How best to theorize 'the city' and 'the urban' has been raised before in this work (Walton 1976). The challenge for any future work on comparative urbanisms is to move away from understanding cities as discrete, self-enclosed and analytically separate objects. The next wave of comparative studies has to understand cities rather differently. Cities have to be theorized as open, embedded and relational. As Massey (1993: 145) has argued, the 'interdependence [of all places] and uniqueness [of individual places] can be understood as two sides of the same coin, in which two fundamental geographical concepts –uneven development and the identity of place– can be held in tension with each other and can each contribute to the explanation of the other.' Concretely cites are important elements of global systems and processes – most commonly, they are understood as strategic nodes within global financial networks, as central to global migration flows, as the 'laboratories' for policy formation and as arenas for the practicing of state power.

If we incorporate these suggestions then what might a reworked comparative urban studies look like? Well, Robinson (2002: 532) has argued that there is a need to move 'beyond comparative studies'. She rejects the universalism that has run through so much of Western-generated urban theory and demands that it is made more cosmopolitan. And yet, rather than constituting a post-comparative future this article argues instead that future studies have to be alive to the variety of *comparative urbanisms.* As part of this newly refined approach there is some merit in incorporating some of the insights of trans-national studies. Roy (2003: 466), for example, argues that '[u]nlike comparative methodologies, which search for similarities and differences between two mutually exclusive contexts, transnational examinations can use one site to pose questions of another.' (Nijman 2007) has argued that there is a need to look beyond the immediate theoretical circumstances of the research theme at hand and to address the

various trans-national linkages that connect different parts of cities together. This is a more relational conceptualization of comparing two sites, one which does not understand cities as bounded and closed. Smith (2001) writes about trans-national urbanism. Working through the overlapping and mutually constitutive aspects of comparative and trans-national urbanism might yield new, more improved, insights, particularly if it is allayed with the appreciation of the multiplicity of urbanisms. That is, the future of comparative studies of cities might rest on pursuing a *relational comparative approach* to urban studies.

To conclude, in this article I have argued for a comparative approach that acknowledges the territorial and relational geographies of cities. Contemporary attention to the variety of comparative urbanisms is a field of inquiry that is still in its relative infancy. While much of this work stems from outside of geography, the last couple of years have seen some work in the field of urban geography begin to redeploy comparative approaches (Boudreau et al 2007; Davis and Tajbakhsh 2005; Derudder et al 2007; Kloosterman and Lambregts 2007; Lin 2007; Nijman 2007a, 2007b; Robinson 2005, 2006; Wood 2005). Although with only limited degrees of success in terms of thinking through seriously the methodological and theoretical consequences of performing comparative studies it is to be hoped that this flurry of intellectual activity marks the beginning of something akin to a new 'comparative turn' across the social sciences, in which human geographers play their full part. Over twenty five years ago the US sociologist John Walton (1982: 34) wrote:

> In the short space of the last decade urban social science has undergone a revolution.
> Great strides are now being made in the elaboration of a new paradigm. Most of this
> work, however, is not really comparative and its geographical focus has been on the
> advanced societies of Europe and North America. Rehearsing the experience of earlier

advances, we are once again on the threshold of developments that will depend on full use of the comparative imagination.

It wasn't the first time he had made this claim. He also made it in 1975. Almost fifteen years ago the UK sociologist Chris Pickvance (1995: 39) wrote 'there has been a call for more comparative analysis [in the urban and regional studies field] for at least the last ten years.' It is probably fair to say that we remain on the same threshold as outlined by Walton (1975, 1982). It is to be hoped that over the next decade we – human geographers – involve ourselves in more explicit comparative urban studies to produce more imaginative and just understandings of the diversity of cities, for this remains both a political and a theoretical imperative.

Acknowledgements

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