

REVIEW ESSAY

Globalization, Development and Ordinary Cities: A Review Essay

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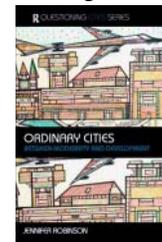
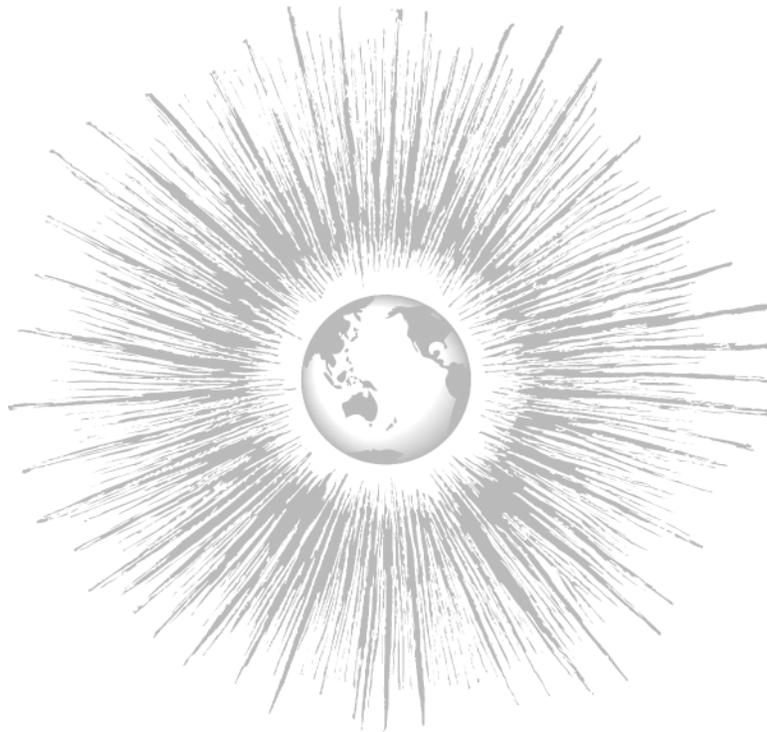
INTRODUCTION

What are the underlying spatial assumptions about the world that renders some cities exemplars of modernity and innovation, while others are cast as being behind, and worse yet, forgotten places? This is a key question that has emerged in geography and sociology, and is addressed in Jennifer Robinson's book *Ordinary Cities: Between Modernity and Development*. The purpose of this essay is two-fold in that it provides a review of Robinson's book and it also uses her text as a vehicle to interrogate the geo-politics of urban theory development. In particular, scholars have voiced concern over the manner in which "world cities" and then "global cities" have the power/knowledge effect of reifying the idea that there is one "world system" that can be measured objectively.

Interestingly, much of the critique does not dispute the ability of researchers to theorize, create constructs and develop associated measures in order to know a single world system. Rather a growing body of work in critical geography/sociology has challenged the geo-politics involved in mapping cities onto a hierarchical political-economic continuum that rank orders them, because it may perpetuate a colonial/imperial mode of understanding cities where some are modern and others are in need of development. While these scholars are diverse

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in their orientations toward knowing cities, the “spatial turn” in the social sciences has hypothesized that the very ways in which we conceive of space makes certain accounts about cities possible and manifest while others are less likely to be recognized.

This concern about urban spatial narratives revolves around a practical politics as much as it does theory building. A growing number of scholars have suggested that globalization, conceptualized as an increasing mobility of capital to flow largely unfettered by place attachment, has produced a “truth effect” of a singular axis on which to know the world. All places can be conceived as being on the same trajectory, thus theorizing urban space can be reduced to the project of creating ever more exacting measures to gauge the competition between places in their ‘globalness,’ ‘globality’ or ‘centrality.’ This underlying spatial orientation toward the world is nicely juxtaposed in the following quotes, and sets the tone for the central issues Robinson critically examines and contests. The world is being flattened.

I didn't start it and you can't stop it, except at great cost to human development and your own future. But we can manage it, for better or worse.

Thomas Friedman, *The World is Flat*, 2005:469

On the one hand globalization is represented as ineluctable—a force in the face of which we must adapt or be cast into oblivion. On the other hand some of the most powerful agencies in the world are utterly intent on its production.... How easy it is to slip into ways of thinking that repress the challenge of space; and how politically significant spatial imageries can be. ‘Globalization,’ told in this way, is like the old story of modernity. Once again it convenes spatial difference into temporal sequence, and thereby denies the possibility of multiple trajectories; the future is not held open.

Doreen Massey, *For Space*, 2005:84–87

Friedman laments that a world is being unified into one space, yet he also states as well that any alternative framework that challenges this unified object is not only incorrect but morally bankrupt in its impact. On the other hand, Massey takes an approach that there is a positive diversity of spaces in the world that cannot be known in a singular manner. She points toward the “hegemony” effect of grand global frameworks seeking to order every space on one axis.

Ordinary Cities takes as its starting point theoretical projects that are engaged in deploying a global, hierarchical way of knowing cities based on their ordering on a singular grid/axis of “modern” or “primitive” (undeveloped), “global” or “non-global” (forgotten), or core versus peripheral. These binaries shape the ways in which cities are known, and Robinson suggests that “these conceptual fields continue to ascribe innovation and dynamism—modernity—to cities in

rich countries, while imposing a catch-up fiction of modernization on the poorest” (p.2). Her aim in *Ordinary Cities* is to show how this has led to urban theorizing that is truncated by developmentalism. Developmentalism has produced a view of the West as modern by defining its “others,” cities and people who are not viewed as modern, and therefore are excluded as potential sites and authors, respectively, of significant ways of understanding the urban. She embarks on a project of “refuting these divisions within the field of the urban,” and posits a post-colonial urbanism that recognizes “difference as diversity rather than hierarchical division” (p.4).

GLOBALIZATION AND CITIES

Robinson's undertaking, in part, is to expose the politics of scale that underpin the ways in which globalization and cities have been paired in theorization. In order to provide some backdrop for this endeavor critiques of the use of the ‘global’ as an object that frames the way we know cities are covered. There has been a tendency in the urban literatures to employ a scalar imagination and discourse that treats cities as places that are ‘local’ operating in the context of hyper-flexible, global capitalist relations (Harvey 1989). This conceptual scaffolding has been deployed in the global cities literature (see Beaverstock et al. 2000; Friedmann and Wolff 1982; Friedmann 1986; Godfrey and Zhou 1999; Knox and Taylor 1995; Sassen 1991, 2002). Peter Taylor (2004) notes, this [global cities] literature has used the “central theme of globalization” as an attempt to understand cities and spatial arrangements in the context of economic restructuring and the international division of labor following the 1970s economic crisis, coupled with the rise of complex communications technology (p.21). This type of theorizing situates the primacy of market relations as the tie that binds relationally constructed places. It posits a network of relative dominance between cities that are central nodes in networks of exchange relations (i.e., constituted by flows of people, material goods, and knowledge) and those urban locales which are constituted as peripheral (Smith and Timberlake 2002).

Given this epistemological positioning, it is not surprising that cities are treated as being in competition for scarce resources, with corresponding winners and losers. The winners in urban studies are distinguished from other places based on which certain transnational economic functions occur, and these places are ascribed a status of being metaphorically large (e.g., world cities, global cities). Other places are viewed as less significant in that they could not hope to play lead roles in the unfolding drama of globalization because they simply respond to conditions which they have largely not been a part of, and, therefore are viewed as playing an insignificant role in the increasingly global division of labor. These places are literally off the intellectual map as being important sites

to gain an understanding of urbanization (morphology), urbanism (ways of life), or how globalization may be constituted of actual relations that take place “on the ground” —therefore, renders globalization processes in a less ephemeral manner (Robinson 2002).

There has been a growing critique of this way of conceptualizing urban spaces. Scholars in both the global cities tradition and elsewhere have recently acknowledged that it is important to “map” economic activities and transnational networks that operate in multiple places on the globe. Clark suggests that, “Though a limited number of ‘global cities’ have attracted considerable attention as command and control centers of the global economy, neither the forces of globalization nor their consequences are limited to these cities” (2000:465). As the social and economic networks that sustain capital flows expand and infiltrate more and more geographic areas, a growing number of cities play increasingly important roles in linking their local resources to these networks, forming what Sassen refers to as “geographies of centrality” (2002:2).

ENTER ORDINARY CITIES

In *Ordinary Cities*, Robinson recognizes the contributions made in the global cities paradigm, but, she quickly asserts her goal to abandon a piecemeal approach of simply adding new criteria so that an increasing number of cities can become important sites for understanding. Instead she takes a different path by claiming *all* cities are places that have innovative and dynamic aspects to them as well as challenges and barriers. “Ordinary cities” as a term, not only suggests that we treat all cities as ordinary, thereby breaking down the binary of innovative-imitative places, but also suggests that these distinctions are, naively or not, activating a colonial way of thinking about different parts of the world.

Specifically she maintains that rank ordering perspectives contain deep political implications as some urban places are defined as modern and others as sites that are in need of development, justifying a range of potential interventions. She adds that these ways of knowing cities, implicitly or manifestly, are many times freighted with the message that these are places that are occupied by people who are not in themselves entirely capable of creatively crafting responses to their situation. A parallel to Robinson’s assertion can be found in other urban literatures, for example, on studies of developing impoverished inner-city neighborhoods, where these places are conceptualized as needing to build the capacity and cultural practices that more successful neighborhoods already have in order to become truly modern (Fraser et al. 2003). It can also be found in the critique of modernization approaches raised by dependency and world system theorization. Notwithstanding uneven access to economic resources, whether that be

between places around the globe or in a city, a great deal of urban theorization has focused on “differences between cities that are assumed to be at different stages of advancement and has embedded hierarchical assumptions about the relations amongst cities into the analysis of cities...” (Robinson 2006:5). This is significant to Robinson due to the cultural politics embedded in such an orientation, which shape the urban development projects that cities might conceive and implement.

Ordinary Cities begins in chapter one, “Dislocating Modernity,” with a critique of the emergence of an urban perspective of mapping of modernity versus tradition. Robinson reads the Chicago School theorists [urban sociologists] as engaged in developing an understanding of the city as a site of modernity, which is known only in relation to the rural, implicitly conceived as more primitive. More generally, she asserts that this conceptualization of modernity aligns “historically specific social formations with the idea of progress” (p.14). The temporal-spatial configuration she is working against equates a “here and now” with modernity (“Western” cities) in contrast to a “there and then” designation for places that are conceived as less developed and existing in another time-space. One aspect of Robinson’s analysis that could be incorporated into studies of more resource privileged places, like a “Western” city, is the unevenness within these places and how parallel (colonial) approaches continue to be deployed in understanding this uneven development and resulting geographies of poverty within (Fraser and Kick 2004). Robinson uses much of the remaining chapter outlining ways to understand the limitations of “translating chronology into spatiality,” which conceals the diversity of spaces (co-presence of spaces) that exist in the “now,” and draws upon Walter Benjamin and others to posit a way of seeing that “insists on the co-presence and mutual interdependence of concepts of modernity and tradition” (p.28).

Chapter 2, “Re-Imaging the City Through Comparative Urbanism: on (Not) Being Blasé,” continues to build on this idea of the multiplicity of ways of urban life, emphasizing that “difference can be gathered as diversity, rather than as hierarchical ordering of incommensurability.... without any suggestions that a universal theory of urbanism is possible” (p.41). Through a review of comparative urbanism, in particular juxtaposing the accounts of urban life that stemmed from the Chicago School and the Manchester School, Robinson seeks to activate a post-colonial urban theory. Robinson effectively critiques the way the Chicago School tended to draw urban-rural distinctions, creating two separate places with ways of being, and comparing it to the urban sociology/anthropology of the Manchester School, which generally concluded that distinctions between town and country concealed much about the interconnections between them. For example, in speaking of migrants that moved to central Africa (i.e., the

Copperbelt) during the latter, mid-twentieth century scholars noted that these diverse people “associated the cities of Africa with modernity and associated urban modernity very clearly with cultural practices that had previously been considered outside the realms of urban ways of life” (p.52). She concludes that this type of comparative work on cities is an important move toward a post-colonial urbanism because it reveals positive difference.

In addition, she notes that cities are also characterized in part by the inter-urban relations that stem from trans-local networks. In this move, she explicitly recognizes that widespread “structural and economic forces, including the dynamics of imperialism, for example, or trade and international finance regimes in the contemporary period, might play an important role in placing some cities” (p.62). That said, Robinson maintains that it is important not to permit this fact from being the foundational or sole way of theorizing cities, replacing the diversity of space with linear chronology.

Chapter three, “Ways of Being Modern: Towards a Cosmopolitan Urban Studies,” furthers the theme of understanding the ways in which the built environment of cities are attributed meaning. Through an accounting of transnational circuits that have informed the building of cities in different parts of the world, Robinson shows how forms of urban modernity are borrowed and created everywhere, and that there is a sense of “creative adaptation” through the circulation of ideas and styles. In terms of elements borrowed and adapted, all cities can theoretically be conceived of in this manner wherein, “claiming the right to be modern, for cities of all kinds need not diminish awareness of the interdependence of any city on a wide range of other places and contexts, nor should it undermine attention to obvious differences in wealth, infrastructural capacity and economic power amongst cities” (p.76). What is significant is that the search for the traditional versus modern city must be jettisoned in favor of a more nuanced analysis of how cities places are constituted by modern traditions and traditional modernities.

It is during chapter four, “World Cities, or a World of Ordinary Cities,” that Robinson deals with the challenge of developing a cosmopolitan urban studies, on which is characterized by an “ordinary cities” approach. In a review of the world and global studies literatures Robinson develops, in parallel with many scholars discontented with these general approaches, a critique of viewing the world through a hierarchical lens. The issues range from the exclusion of many places around the world as insignificant players, at best, to the ascription of being “connected through subordination” to more global cities. Among the debates Robinson inserts in this chapter two in particular stand out. First, it is important to point out that cities are interconnected through a wide range of activities beyond a narrowly selected set of economic sector operations that have been

culturally given the status of making a place global. One of the, arguably perhaps, unintended consequences of the global-local binary which underpins the possibility that some places are global and others are not, is that in the name of competing to become an important global node city leaders engage in development projects that do not work. Robinson suggests, “a stronger focus on the politics of urban development initiatives, as suggested by scholars of cities off the world-cities map, would expose the range of interests that find it useful to harness the global- and world-cities analyses to their ambitions. It would also bring into view the diversity of interests which are available to contest and shape the future of cities” (p.113). Second, and as a related point, a focus on the unevenness within cities would fit well into this alternative agenda.

Chapter five, “Bringing the City Back In: Beyond Developmentalism and Globalization,” asserts the need for city-wide analyses of urban change that not only examine institutions and actors that reside at the municipal/regional levels, but also how organizations that operate throughout larger geographies—nationally and trans-nationally. In part, these would include examinations of how city development strategies are created and implemented, as well as the intersections of state, market, and societal actors and institutions that play a role in the unfolding drama of city building. These processes are significant for understanding the connection that different urban stakeholders have within a city as a locale for neoliberal policy experiments (Fraser et al. 2003). It may also be that through examining policy initiatives and their related projects activism and contestation strategies become more visible. In this chapter Robinson demonstrates what can be gained for a detailed analysis of “the politics of city visioning” in Johannesburg, South Africa. Through this case study a methodological strategy is demonstrated, which takes into consideration the specific context of the city along with the actors for different places that insert themselves into the process, including the World Bank. The point to further examine is that urban public policies are not just imposed upon cities, but that they intersect with the unique characteristics in each unique locale.

Chapter six, “City Futures: Urban Policy for Ordinary Cities,” follows up on the previous points by making the case that what is being proposed, a post-colonial urbanism, is one way of articulating an openness to multiple modernities—“Without a strong sense of the city’s potential dynamism and creativity, imaginations about urban futures are truncated, perhaps by consigning futures to the limited imagination of developmentalist interventions, or through a narrow focus on globalizing sectors of the economy” (p.142). What is at stake is believing that all cities ought to have the right to shape distinctive futures whatever power position they hold in relation to other places. This is not only extended to city leaders in the state and market sectors, but also the diversity of people that

are a part of the city. Place-specific social, political, and economic relations, along with the extended ties that shape them, bring into vision the different strategies for developing economic resources, for example, with implications that may be quite different from the competitive cities approach of creating local conditions favoring a trans-national capitalist class and small urban elite. Robinson closes the chapter by asserting that diverse economies and ordinary cities, as concepts, share the same struggle to be recognized as part of urban theory, and, as such, as alternative ways to orient toward the study of cities and their connections to a continually globalizing world.

In conclusion, *Ordinary Cities: Between Modernity and Development* provides readers with an invigorated call to develop a post-colonial urbanism that is cosmopolitan in the sense of conceiving all cities as sites of modernity. This does not diminish the stark differences between places that are differentially connected to networks across the globe, and it does not ignore the differential challenges cities face as a result of uneven development patterns and unequal resources. Yet, these differences, according to Robinson, need not be the foundation for hierarchically ordering cities and viewing more privileged places as sites of modernity and all others as evidence of that modernity through their depiction as atavistic or primitive. This path, as Robinson notes, has disadvantaging effects in multiple ways. It denies and conceals spatial diversity, while superimposing a singular trajectory upon which all places are known. It marks some people and places as in need of interventions which, in themselves, have been problematic in their imperialism. Last, it opens debate about paths toward developing equitable and just cities that take seriously the knowledge produced in all places. If cities are to be understood as multiple and diverse in their becoming, and if there is to be a politics of possibility that permits the unfolding of these imaginations, then *Ordinary Cities* represents an entrée to what it may take to actualize these goals.

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