

"Global and World Cities: A View from off the Map"

from *International Journal of Urban and
Regional Research* (2002)

Jennifer Robinson

Editors' Introduction

Jennifer Robinson is a South African urbanist based in the UK, where she currently teaches in Geography at The Open University. Robinson has written a large number of articles and book chapters on colonial and postcolonial urban development, with particular reference to South African cities. Robinson's 1996 book, *The Power of Apartheid*, explored the relationship between state power and space in South African cities, and she has also written extensively on feminist theory and politics. Most recently, Robinson has published a number of influential critiques of contemporary urban theory, including the reading here, from the point of view of critical postcolonial theory.

According to Robinson, the dominant approaches to global city theory have normalized the distinctive sociospatial features and developmental trajectories of North American and Western European cities: the latter have been presented as the paradigmatic "model" in terms of which all other cities are to be interpreted, regardless of their particular locations or histories. Within such a framework, cities located "off the map" – that is, in the developing countries of the global South – are almost invariably said to be lacking the characteristics that would qualify them as genuinely "global" cities. Much like David Simon (Reading 24) and Gavin Shatkin (Reading 25), Robinson is concerned to analyze the contextually specific patterns of globally induced urban restructuring that have been unfolding in cities located outside the developed capitalist North. However, whereas Simon and Shatkin suggest various ways in which extant approaches to global city theory might be modified or expanded in order to take such cities into account, Robinson aims her critique at the epistemological core of the theory itself. For Robinson, the entire conceptual apparatus of global city theory is problematic insofar as it is grounded upon basically static, decontextualized categorizations and typologies. Without denying the importance of global economic inequalities or the global urban hierarchy, Robinson suggests that a significant conceptual reorientation is required to grasp the distinctiveness of cities in the developing world. To this end, Robinson proposes a number of methodological innovations. First, the question of a city's "relevance" to the global economy needs to be explored not only with reference to its role as a basing point for transnational corporate activities, but also on the basis of a broader range of possible global-local linkages (see also Reading 25 by Shatkin). Second, based on work by Amin and Graham (1997) among others, Robinson mobilizes the notion of the "ordinary city," which she views as a conceptual basis on which diverse forms of urbanism, and the broad range of connections that link cities to global processes, might be more adequately appreciated and theorized. Robinson concludes her critique by underscoring its policy implications. For Robinson, the goal of becoming a global city is seriously unrealistic for most urban centers

in the developing world. Other models of "successful" urban development are required, she argues, so that policy makers might harness the socioeconomic potential of developing cities while also alleviating their most pressing social, infrastructural and environmental problems.



There are a large number of cities around the world which do not register on intellectual maps that chart the rise and fall of global and world cities. They don't fall into either of these categories, and they probably never will – but many managers of these cities would like them to. Some of these cities find themselves interpreted instead through the lens of developmentalism, an approach which broadly understands these places to be lacking in the qualities of city-ness, and which is concerned to improve capacities of governance, service provision and productivity. Such an approach supports some of the more alarmist responses to mega-cities, which are more commonly identified in poorer countries. But for many smaller cities, even the category mega-city is irrelevant. My concerns in this chapter extend beyond the poor fit of these popular categories, though. I would like to suggest that these widely circulating approaches to contemporary urbanization – global and world cities, together with the persistent use of the category "third-world city" – impose substantial limitations on imagining or planning the futures of cities around the world.

One of the consequences of the unreflexive use of these categories is that understandings of city-ness have come to rest on the (usually unstated) experiences of a relatively small group of (mostly western) cities, and cities outside of the West are assessed in terms of this pre-given standard of (world) city-ness, or urban economic dynamism. This chapter explores the extent to which more recent global and world city approaches, although enthusiastic about tracking transnational processes, have nonetheless reproduced this longstanding division within urban studies [...]

I do this by reflecting on some fashionable approaches to cities from a position off their maps. Of course, the cities I am concerned with are most emphatically on the map of a broad range of diverse global political, economic and cultural connections, but this is frequently discounted and certainly never explored within these theoretical

approaches. There is a need to construct an alternative urban theory which reflects the experiences of a much wider range of cities. This will involve disrupting the narrow vision of a (still) somewhat imperialist approach to cities, which has been reinforced by the strident economism in accounts of global and world cities. Elements of urban theory have become transfixed with the apparent success and dynamism of certain stylish sectors of the global economy, despite (and perhaps because of) their circumscribed geographical purchase and most unappealing consequences. These studies have been valuable, and offer great insight into the limited part of the world and economy that they study. My suggestion, though, is that these insights could be incorporated in a broader and less ambitious approach to cities around the world, an approach without categories and more inclusive of the diversity of experience in ordinary cities [...]

GLOBAL AND WORLD CITIES

In considering the dynamics of the world economy in relation to cities, a structural analysis of a small range of economic processes with a certain "global" reach has tended to crowd out an attentiveness within urban studies to the place and effect of individual cities and the diversity of wider connections which shape them (King 1995). Although status within the world city hierarchy has traditionally been based on a range of criteria, including national standing, location of state and interstate agencies and cultural functions, the primary determination of status in this framework is economic. The world cities approach assumes that cities occupy similar placings with similar capacity to progress up or fall down the ranks. The country categorizations of core, periphery and semi-periphery in world-systems theory have been transferred to the analysis of cities, and overlain on an extant but outdated vocabulary of categorizations (such as first/third world) within the field of

urb
of
ide
hier
div
liter
out
sibl
bein
whi
wor
and
citi

A
whe
drop
stud
restr
tain
olog
asse
on
view
econ
min
the
emp
ited
boxe
place

T
hypo
the
claim
econ
anoth
it sh
of tr
migh

FILL
CITI

[...]
and r
set of
increa
ativel
is the

urban studies. On this basis, from the dizzy heights of the diagrammer, certain significant cities are identified, labelled, processed and placed in a hierarchy, with very little attentiveness to the diverse experiences of that city, or even to extant literature about that place. The danger here is that out-of-date, unsuitable or unreliable data, and possibly a lack of familiarity with some of the regions being considered, can lead to the production of maps which are simply inaccurate. These images of the world (of important) cities have been used again and again to illustrate the perspective of world cities theorists.

A view of the world of cities thus emerges where millions of people and hundreds of cities are dropped off the map of much research in urban studies, to service one particular and very restricted view of significance or (ir)relevance to certain sections of the global economy. This methodology also reveals an analytical tension between assessing the characteristics and potential of cities on the basis of the processes which matter as viewed from within their diverse dynamic social and economic worlds, or on the basis of criteria determined by the external theoretical construct of the world or global economy. Although aiming to emphasize connections and not attributes, a limited range of cities still end up categorized in boxes or in diagrammatic maps, and assigned a place in relation to *a priori* analytical hierarchies.

The discursive effectiveness of the global city hypothesis depends on the pithy identification of the "global city" – a category of cities which are claimed to be powerful in terms of the global economy. If the global city were labelled as just another example of an industrial district (perhaps it should rather be called: new industrial districts of transnational management and control), it might not have attracted the attention it did.

FILLING IN THE VOIDS: OFF THE WORLD CITIES MAP

[...] I certainly appreciate that the focus of global and more recent world cities work is on a limited set of economic activities, which are assuming an increasingly transnational form, and in which relatively few cities can hope to participate. But it is the leap from this very restricted and clearly

defined economic analysis, to claims regarding the success and power of these few cities, their overall categorization on this restricted basis, and the implied broader structural irrelevance of all other cities, which is of concern. These theoretical claims and categorizing moves are both inaccurate and harmful to the fortunes of cities defined "off the map."

The "end of the third world" is perhaps an accurate assessment of changes over the last three to four decades in places like Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea and even Malaysia, and the appearance of these major urban centers in rosters of first- and second-order global cities reflects this. But in parts of the world where global cities have not been identified – the "voids" of world and global city approaches – the experience of many countries and cities has been much more uneven. For many, the 1980s and 1990s have been long decades of little growth and growing inequality. It is, however, inaccurate to caricature even the poorest regions as excluded from the global economy or doomed to occupy a slow zone of the world economy.

It is hard to disagree that some countries and cities have lost many of the trading and investment links that characterized an earlier era of global economic relations. A country like Zambia, for example, now one of the most heavily indebted nations in the world, and certainly one of the poorest, has seen the value of its primary export, copper, plummet on the world market since the 1970s. Its position within an older international division of labor is no longer economically viable, and it has yet to find a successful path for future economic growth. En route it has suffered the consequences of one of the World Bank/IMF's most ruthless Structural Adjustment Programmes. However, Zambia is also one of the most urbanized countries on the African continent, and its capital city, Lusaka, is a testimony to the modernist dreams of both the former colonial powers and the post-independence government. Today, with over 70 per cent of the population in Lusaka dependent on earnings from the informal sector, the once bright economic and social future of this city must feel itself like a dream.

Lusaka is certainly not a player in the new global economy. But copper is still exported, as are agricultural goods, and despite the huge lack

of foreign currency (and sometimes because of it) all sorts of links and connections to the global economy persist. From the World Bank, to aid agencies, international political organizations, and trade in secondhand clothing and other goods and services, Lusaka is still constituted and reproduced through its relations with other parts of the country, other cities, and other parts of the region and globe. The city continues to perform its functions of national and regional centrality in relation to political and financial services, and operates as a significant market (and occasionally production site) for goods and services from across the country and the world.

It is one thing, though, to agree that global links are changing, some are being cut, and that power relations, inequalities and poverty shape the quality of those links. It is quite another to suggest that poor cities and countries are irrelevant to the global economy. When looked at from the point of view of these places which are allegedly "off the map," the global economy is of enormous significance in shaping the fortunes of cities around the world. For many poor, "structurally irrelevant" cities, the significance of flows of ideas, practices and resources beyond and into the city concerned from around the world stands in stark contrast to these claims of irrelevance [see Reading 25 by Shatkin].

And to pursue a more polemical line, mineral resources crucial to the global economy are drawn from some of the poorest countries of the world, where financiers and transnational firms negotiate with warlords, corrupt governments and local armies to keep profits, production and exports flowing. Widening the compass of analysis might help to encourage a more critical edge to the global and world cities literature. Moreover, it is precisely through avoiding "risky" investments (and pursuing vastly exploitative and violent forms of extraction instead) in the poorest countries and cities in the world that the western financial "mode of production" is able to aim to secure the stable shareholder returns which maintain post-Fordist finance-based economies. To the extent that they are absent from this aspect of the global economy, these places may well be central to sustaining it [...]

Most importantly, the particular "global economy" which is being used as the ground and

foundation for identifying both place in hierarchy and relevant social and economic processes, is only one of many forms of global and transnational economic connection. The criteria for global significance might well look very different were the map-makers to relocate themselves and review significant transnational networks in a place like Jakarta, or Kuala Lumpur, where ties to Islamic forms of global economic and political activity might result in a very different list of powerful cities. Similarly, the transnational activities of agencies like the World Bank and the IMF who drive the circulation of knowledge (World Bank 2000) and the disciplining power to recover old bank and continuing bi-lateral and multi-lateral debt from the poorest countries in the world would draw another crucial graph of global financial and economic connections shaping (or devastating) city life [...]

ORDINARY CITIES

A diverse range of links with places around the world are a persistent feature of cities. They can work for or against cities everywhere and are constantly being negotiated and renegotiated. To aim to be a "global city" in the formulaic sense may well be the ruin of most cities. Policy-makers need to be offered alternative ways of imagining cities, their differences and their possible futures – neither seeking a global status nor simply reducing the problem of improving city life to the promotion of "development." In developmentalist perspectives cities in poor countries are often seen as non-cities, as lacking in city-ness, as objects of (western) intervention. Ordinary cities, on the other hand, are understood to be diverse, creative, modern and distinctive, with the possibility to imagine (within the not inconsiderable constraints of contestations and uneven power relations) their own futures and distinctive forms of city-ness (Amin and Graham 1997).

Categorizing cities and carving up the realm of urban studies has had substantial effects on how cities around the world are understood and has played a role in limiting the scope of imagination about possible futures for cities. This is as true for cities declared "global" as for those which have fallen off the map of urban studies. The global cities

hypothesis
London
drawing
well-p
unskill
workfo
two ex
employ
in the
alleged
also be
multipl
which
on to
condit
across

A r
more
world;
creativ
catego
within
becaus
envisio
gloom;
the co
creativ

Fro
approa
do not
caught
develo
alizatio
range
ist init
structur
the co
mentar
certain
attenti
resour
turn to
ment c
urban
about
limits
its rele
twenty
city" a
ground

hypothesis has described cities like New York and London as "dual cities," with the global functions drawing in not only a highly professional and well-paid skilled labor force, but also relying on an unskilled, very poorly-paid and often immigrant workforce to service the global companies. These two extremes by no means capture the range of employment opportunities or social circumstances in these cities. It is possible that these cities, allegedly at the top of the global hierarchy, could also benefit from being imagined as "ordinary." The multiplicity of economic, social and cultural networks which make up these cities could then be drawn on to imagine possible paths to improving living conditions and enhancing economic growth across the whole city.

A more cosmopolitan urban theory might be more accurate or helpful in understanding the world; it might also be more resourceful and creative in its output. But interrogating these categorizations of cities and theoretical divisions within urban studies matters primarily, I think, because they limit our potential to contribute to envisioning possible city futures. And given the gloomy prognoses for growth in poor cities within the context of the contemporary global economy, creative thinking is certainly needed!

From the viewpoint of global and world cities approaches, poor localities, and many cities which do not qualify for global or world city status, are caught within a very limited set of views of urban development: between finding a way to fit into globalization, emulating the apparent successes of a small range of cities; and embarking on developmentalist initiatives to redress poverty, maintain infrastructure and ensure basic service delivery. Neither the costly imperative to go global, nor developmentalist interventions which build towards a certain vision of city-ness and which focus attention on the failures of cities, are very rich resources for city planners and managers who turn to scholars for analytical insight and assessment of experiences elsewhere. It is my opinion that urban studies needs to decolonize its imagination about city-ness, and about the possibilities for and limits to what cities can become, if it is to sustain its relevance to the key urban challenges of the twenty-first century. My suggestion is that "ordinary-city" approaches offer a potentially more fertile ground for meeting these challenges.

THE POLICY IMPERATIVE: THE POLITICAL CASE FOR ORDINARY CITIES

If cities are not to remain inconsequential, marginalized and impoverished, or to trade economic growth for expansion in population, the hierarchies and categories of extant urban theory implicitly encourage them to aim for the top! Global city as a concept becomes a regulating fiction. It offers an authorized image of city success (so people can buy into it) which also establishes an end point of development for ambitious cities. There are demands, from Istanbul to Mumbai, to be global. But, calculated attempts at world or global city formation can have devastating consequences for most people in the city, especially the poorest, in terms of service provision, equality of access and redistribution (Robins and Askoy 1996; Firman 1999). Global and world city approaches encourage an emphasis on promoting economic relations with a global reach, and prioritizing certain prominent sectors of the global economy for development and investment. Alternatively, the policy advice is for cities to assume and work towards achieving their allocated "place" within the hierarchy of world cities.

Most cities in poorer countries would find it hard to reasonably aspire to offering a home for the global economy's command and control functions. More feasible for many poorer cities is to focus on some of the other "global functions" that Sassen (1994) associates with global cities. These include promoting attractive "global" tourist environments, even though these have nothing of the locational dynamics of command and control global city functions. Disconnected from the concentration of arts and culture associated with employment of highly skilled professionals in global cities, the impulse to become global in purely tourist terms can place a city at the opposite end of power relations in the global economy, while substantially undermining provision of basic services to local people. In addition, Export Processing Zones may be "global" in the sense that they are "transnational spaces within a national territory" (Sassen 1994: 1), but they too involve placing the city concerned in a relatively powerless position within the global economy, which is unlikely to be the city's best option for future growth and development. These are not places from where the global economy is

controlled: they are at quite the other end of the command and control continuum of global city functions. More than that, the reasons for co-location would not involve being able to conduct face-to-face meetings to foster trust and cooperation in an innovative environment. Rather, they are to ensure participation in the relaxation of labor and environmental laws which are on offer in that prescribed area of the city. Cities and national governments often have to pay a high price to attract these kinds of activities to their territory. Valorizing "global" economic activities as a path to city success – often the conclusion of a policy reversioning of world cities theory – can have adverse consequences for local economies.

This is a familiar story, but one which scholars are more likely to blame on others – capitalists, elite urban managers – than on their own analyses, which are seldom the object of such reflection. It is when attention slips from economic process to a sloppy use of categorization that I think the most damaging effects of the world and global city hypotheses emerge. Categorizing a group of cities as "global" on the basis of these small concentrated areas of transnational management and coordination activity within them is metonymic in that it has associated entire cities with the success and power of a small area within them. In the process a valid line of analysis has reproduced a very familiar hierarchization of cities, setting certain cities at the top of the hierarchy to become the aspiration of city managers around the world. This has happened just as a burgeoning postcolonial literature became available to critique earlier categorizations of cities into western and third world, a categorization which had emphasized difference and deviation from the norm as bases for analysis and which had established certain (western) cities as the standard towards which all cities should aspire. Instead of pursuing the postcolonial critique, urban studies has replicated this earlier division by accepting the categories of world/global city as analytically robust and popularizing them in intellectual and policy circles. Global cities have become the aspiration of many cities around the world; sprawling and poor megacities the dangerous abyss into which they might fall should they lack the redeeming (civilizing) qualities of city-ness found elsewhere. This may not have been the intention of urban theorists, but

ideas have a habit of circulating beyond our control. It is my contention that urban theory should be encouraged to search for alternative formulations of city-ness which don't rest upon these categories and which draw their inspiration from a much wider range of urban contexts.

The political need for a new generation of urban theoretical initiatives is apparent. How can the overlapping and multiple networks highlighted in the ordinary city approaches be drawn on to inspire alternative models of development, which see the connections, rather than conflict, between informal and formal economies? Approaches which explore links between the diversity of economic activities in any (ordinary) city, and which emphasize the general creative potential of cities, are crucial, rather than those which encourage policy-makers to support one (global) sector to the detriment of others (see, for example, Benjamin 2000; Simone 2001).

CONCLUSION

The academic field of urban studies ought to be able to contribute its resources more effectively to the creative imagining of possible city futures around the world. One step in this direction would be to break free of the categorizing imperative, and to reconsider approaches which are at best irrelevant and at worst harmful to poor cities around the world. I have suggested that in place of world, global, mega-, Asian, African, former Socialist, European, third-world etc. cities, urban studies embark on a cosmopolitan project of understanding ordinary cities.

A second step must be to decolonize the field of urban studies. Theoretical reflections should at least be extremely clear about their limited purchase and, even better, extend the geographical range of empirical resources and scholarly insight for theorizing beyond the West and western-dominated forms of globalization. This has been initiated in a restricted form, through the transnational emphasis of global and world cities approaches, and the growing interest in globalization within a developmentalist frame. But a more cosmopolitan empirical basis for understanding what cities are, and how they function, is essential to the future relevance of the field of urban studies. In an age when most

people
popul
real p
author
fixate
partne

This
every
the sp
to com
which
resour
places
ical b
though
ence o
the fra
Consid
the div
noting
oretical
cities a
cosmop
cities
geograp
urban t
western
ible an
and pro
ileged p
to appr
intellec
the inte
manage

This
own co
views o
potentia
ative ur
politica
of urban

people now live in cities, and most of this urban population is in poor countries, irrelevance is a very real possibility for a field whose wellsprings of authorized theoretical innovation remain firmly fixated on the West and its successful satellites and partners.

This is not to insist that every study consider everywhere. But there is considerable scope for the spatial trajectories of theoretical imaginings to come closer to the spatiality of cities themselves, which are constituted on the basis of ideas, resources and practices drawn from a variety of places – not infinite, but diverse – beyond their physical borders. The conditions of incorporation, though, are crucial. Firstly, simply mobilizing evidence of difference and possibly deviation within the frame of dominant theory is not enough. Consideration needs to be given to the difference the diversity of cities makes to theory (not simply noting the difference that they are). How are theoretical approaches changed by considering different cities and different contexts, by adopting a more cosmopolitan approach? And secondly, as with cities themselves, power relations and their geographies cannot be avoided. If a cosmopolitan urban theory is to emerge, scholars in privileged western environments will need to find responsible and ethical ways to engage with, learn from and promote the ideas of intellectuals in less privileged places. This is not a call to western writers to appropriate other places for continued western intellectual advantage. It is a plea to acknowledge the intellectual creativity of scholars and urban managers in a wider range of urban contexts.

This will involve a critical analysis of the field's own complicity in propagating certain limited views of cities, and thereby undermining the potential to creatively imagine a range of alternative urban futures. It will require more cosmopolitan trajectories for the sources and resources of urban theory. Much innovative work is already

being undertaken by scholars and policy-makers around the world, who have had to grapple with the multiplicity, diversity and ordinariness of their cities for some time. Ordinary cities are themselves enabling new kinds of urban imaginaries to emerge – it is time urban studies caught up. More than that, I would suggest that as a community of scholars we have a responsibility to let cities be ordinary.

REFERENCES FROM THE READING

- Amin, A. and Graham, S. (1997) The ordinary city, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 22, 411–429.
- Benjamin, S. (2000) Governance, economic settings and poverty in Bangalore, *Environment and Urbanisation*, 12, 1, 35–56.
- Firman, T. (1999) From "Global City" to "City of Crisis": Jakarta Metropolitan Region under economic turmoil, *Habitat International*, 23, 4, 447–466.
- King, A. (1995) Re-presenting world cities: cultural theory/social practice. In P.L. Knox and P.J. Taylor (eds) *World Cities in a World-System*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 215–231.
- Robins, K. and Askoy, A. (1996) Istanbul between civilisation and discontent, *City*, 5–6, 6–33.
- Robinson, J. (1996) *The Power of Apartheid: State, Power and Space in South African Cities*. London: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Sassen, S. (1994) *Cities in a World Economy*. London: Sage.
- Simone, A. (2001) Straddling the divides: remaking associational life in the informal African city, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 25, 1, 102–117.
- World Bank (2000) *Cities in Transition: World Bank Urban and Local Government Strategy*. Washington, DC: World Bank.