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Gendering the City: The lived experience of transforming cities, urban cultures and spaces of belonging

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Abstract

Debates centred on ‘planetary urbanisation’ have raised questions over the adequacy of existing theories and epistemologies to explain the quantitative and qualitative transformations of cities. However, this theorization of the urban has met with opposition from post-colonial and feminist researchers amongst others. The comparative, empirical research in this collection, from Bolivia, India and Turkey, highlights that the city remains an important analytical and concrete framework, demarcated by contingency and cultural change through which residents must navigate. In particular we focus on the specificity of women’s lives and their capacity to problematise universalist theory, documenting their interrogation of simplistic binaries such as modern/traditional; their innovative approaches to informal settlement, housing and markets; their production of urban knowledge in order to negotiate the city; and processes and practices of mobility, experimentation, risk taking and aspiration that contest or support a myriad of urban imaginaries. Whilst not rejecting the need for theories that allow comparative perspectives on cities, our conclusions underscore the importance of recognising the multiple logics that generate city space and urban cultures, and the consequent need to parochialise the empirical basis of theories that claim to be global in outreach.

Keywords: belonging; city; culture; gender; urban studies

Introduction

Recent debates in urban studies have raised questions over the adequacy of existing theories

and epistemologies to explain the quantitative and qualitative transformations of cities globally (Brenner 2014; Brenner & Schmid, 2015; Merrifield 2013). Primarily within a Marxist and Lefebvrian framework, assuming an urbanization of society embedded in capitalist (neoliberal) modes of economic production and exchange, 'planetary urbanisation' argues for a need to 'see differently' the scale, spatialisation, and function of the city, as well as the dissolution of its boundaries. However, this theorization of the urban has met with opposition from post-colonial and feminist researchers amongst others (see, e.g. Peake 2016; Simone 2016b; Davidson & Iveson 2015; Catterall 2014; Datta 2012). Similarly, as the comparative, empirical research in this collection illustrates, we argue that the city remains an important analytical and concrete framework for understanding governance, dissent, subjectivity, and everyday practice. We explore these processes under conditions of urban and cultural change in Bolivian, Indian, and Turkish contexts, focusing on the specificity of women's lives and their capacity to interrogate binaries of tradition/modern, cooptation/coercion, and public/private that mark out the everyday experiences of the cities in which they live. This research recalls long-standing debates on the relationship between culture and economy (du Gay and Pryke 2002), and the importance of cultural dimensions such as identity, belonging and agency as central to the production of city-ness and being urban.

Our focus on both particularity and context faces criticism that it is a type of 'story telling' that provides no overarching centre for theory making (Waley 2016). Brenner and Schmid (2015: 162), for example, critique such approaches for their apparent continuation of a global North tradition of focusing on the bounded settlement of the city as the unit of analysis. However, as Roy (2016: 203) has noted, historical difference should not be misread as simply empirical variation from a universal template, arguing that '[w]hile urbanization may indeed take a global form, while capitalism is undeniably global, the universality of such

processes is another matter'. A reductionist approach to urban studies leads to the imposition of categories that fail to reflect how marginalization is experienced and understood by those who live it, compounding and perpetuating knowledge systems that are exclusionary (see also Waley 2016; Ghertner 2015; Roy 2011; Simone 2010). Instead, as Sheppard et al. (2013: 896) argue, 'differentiation emerges at every scale, shaped by how residents of any place, living prosperously or precariously, are differently positioned within and through translocal processes'.

Recent studies provide new impetus for the field of inquiry in which grounded, comparative work, such as that included in this collection, can be conducted. Bunnell et al (2012) propose Asia as a point from which urban theory can be developed, asking, for example, what if Mumbai had been positioned by Soja (cf 1989) as the centre of postmodern urbanism rather than Los Angeles. Noting that Asia 'remains a relatively untapped region for [global] urban theory production' (Bunnell et al 2012: 2791), they recognise Asian cities as 'exporters' of urban policy knowledge: for example, Kuala Lumpur as an inspiration for 'high-tech' development and Singapore as an urban planning model for Indian cities. Similarly, comparative studies of gentrification have highlighted the need to critique any universal application that flattens diverse forms of displacement, regulatory and land use regimes, that ignores changes in peri-urban areas of post-colonial cities where often violent processes of change are occurring, and that discounts urban cultures and politics marked by cultural and religious nationalism (Waley 2016; see also Lees et al 2016; Butcher 2009; Harris 2008).

These variables are definitive challenges for the cities featured in this collection. They are central to policy concerns and household decisions that are themselves framed by varied local political arrangements (Caprotti et al 2017; Maclean 2015; Varley 2013). For example, while the prevalence and power of informal economic and political structures indicate the

State's absence or withdrawal from urban areas including zones in Delhi and La Paz, in cities such as Istanbul, the State is heavily implicated in the governance of the everyday. As Aparna Parikh, (this collection), notes in her work on Mumbai, transnational corporations also have a role to play in regulating urban life.

Yet while we argue for the need to take into account Southern urban realities, including 'economic informality, multiplicity, marginality and dispersion' (Robinson & Roy 2015: 185), we do not negate the suggestion from planetary urbanization that urban boundaries have shifted, although perhaps not in the way Brenner and Schmid intended. The cities featured in these articles are not regarded as impervious, bounded settlements, but rather nodes that mediate transnational and translocal cultural processes impacting on everyday lives including: global industries; international development interventions; 'western' tropes of autonomy and beauty; and regional and historical influences. The inequalities that mark the cities in these case studies exemplify processes that Marxist urban geography seeks to highlight, but our ethnographic work makes it clear that economic structures also need to be grounded in the complexity of city life. This includes the religious, racialised and gendered identities that make up urban diversity and that also indicate the ongoing power of colonial dynamics (see Kate Maclean, this collection).

Therefore, in the contingent realities of the cities featured in this collection, it appears that it is not only neoliberalism at work, but the diverse agency and everyday practices of residents that must navigate change within cultural frameworks that are site specific and interpersonal, such as the family or the street (McGuirk and Dowling 2009). We recognize that the everyday, the ordinary, the mundane, lived experience continues to be an important area of knowledge production, and 'makes available different places and spaces from which to know' (Derickson 2015: 650; see also Buckley and Strauss 2016; Millington 2016; Peake and Rieker 2013; Robinson and Roy 2015; Bunnell et al 2012; Simone 2010). We focus on

human capacities, set in both formal and informal regimes, that have to be continually reworked and performed, negotiated and improvised (Tadiar 2016: 74). Focusing on this lived experience and seemingly unimportant acts as a way of informing urban theory highlights how the 'political possibilities of urban life lie not at the cosmic scale of the 'planetary' but in those very embodied and everyday moments in Lagos, Jakarta, or the pueblos jóvenes' (Derickson 2015: 647). As Anjaria and McFarlane (2011: 5-6) argue, it is 'diverse agents and practices that produce the city', and change must therefore be understood 'through grounded research on the politics of urban space'. This is undoubtedly a 'messier set of interventions', with uncertain objectives and outcomes, but it is an 'epistemological strategy' to 'provincialize' the urban theory that stems from cities in the Global North (Derickson 2015: 648).

Having argued for a need to focus our analysis on the ways in which everyday experience and practice inflects both urban transformation and urban theory, we further suggest that a gendered lens is imperative. We emphasise the multiple logics, histories and discourses involved in the gendered construction of urban space (Buckley and Strauss 2016), bringing the cultural into conversation with the economic and political to underpin interpretations of belonging, agency, governance and entitlement to inhabit the city. Despite the implications for urban redevelopment, policies and practices of urbanism particularly in cities in the Global South have tended to focus on women's relationship with the city through a development lens (Phadke et al., 2011; Kern, 2010; John, 2007; Dutta, 2002). Similarly, there is little theorising of the connection between imaginations of city-ness and the place of women within rapidly transforming urban spaces. Yet there are distinctive features of cities and urban discourses that impact on, and are impacted by, the understanding of gendered space use. Gendered norms and expectations not only become part of how a city is experienced but can also work to redefine visions of urban redevelopment, from revanchist

urbanism that reinvigorates masculine power to cities as spaces of feminised consumption and leisure (Kern, 2010). Peake (2016), for example, has raised with some urgency the need to expand our thinking to understand the impact on women's lives of the imbrication of gender and neoliberalism, and to this can be added the complexity of state interventions, cultural nationalism, violence and risk. Chatterjee (2012: 792) with reference to the contradictory nature of neo-liberalism in India, describes the gendered tensions which are generated within this complexity as a combination of 'consent-coercion, emancipation-subjugation, class-gender/kinship assemblages' (see Melissa Butcher, this collection). Cities are also sites of contestation and interaction between the 'traditional' and the 'modern' that particularly affect women, as several authors in this collection argue.

Key debates in feminist geography have centred on these inherent tensions in the city, demarcating it as both a site of autonomy and constraint (see Bondi & Rose, 2003, for an overview). The contexts of the cities featured in this collection, Delhi, Istanbul, La Paz and Mumbai, are enabling the generation of new biographies for women as they mediate globalization, cultural change, intergenerational disjunction and economic transformation. Presaging shifting subjectivity along with shifts in the built environment, 'traditional' expectations, identities, mobilities, practices of home-making and belonging are being challenged and renegotiated as a result of migration, new work opportunities, changing family patterns and shifting attitudes towards marriage, divorce, homosexuality and age (Butcher & Abu er Rub 2016). There are continuities in the production of cultural norms, but also examples of personal agency that can both comply with and transform them (Butcher, this collection). Our case studies highlight the strategies used to navigate the contradictory position that such binaries place women in, as they seek, as Oznur Sahin (this collection) notes, to 'participate in the city at the intersection of multiple discourses and practices of the local, national and global'.

Working with women from diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, embodying both the intersection between cultural and urban change, and the relationship between gendered use of space and the imagination of transforming cities under conditions of globalisation, articles in this Special Issue are linked by themes of cultural change, belonging, governance, agency and practice. Led by our participants, our attention has turned to their innovative approaches to informal settlement, housing and markets; the production of urban knowledge in order to negotiate the city; and processes and practices of mobility, experimentation, risk taking and aspiration, contesting or supporting a myriad of urban imaginaries. Access to urban spaces may entail their increased visibility, demarcating particular spaces of belonging, as new forms of civic engagement result in new spatial arrangements, and vice versa (Sahin, this collection). The concentration of global flows of people, goods and ideas in urban areas, accelerated by recent rapid economic growth in these particular case studies, presents possibilities to reformulate gendered notions of propriety and 'permitted' femininities. Women (re)negotiated the complex palimpsest of the city to forge social, economic and political subjectivities that represent transforming notions of womanhood. However, the celebratory tones of experimentation, aspiration and opportunity are tempered by vulnerability and risks that inflect the outcome of interactions with the city when women step outside normative expectations (see Parikh, Lucy Bernroider, this collection).

Understanding these contradictions has become the focus of work that examines 'ordinary, everyday social practice(s)' of women, contributing to the theorization of agency, its expressions and the expectations of its capacity to disrupt constraining cultural frames of reference (Parker & Dales, 2014, 164; see also Pande 2015; Curran & Breitbach 2010). The articles in this collection add to this body of work, revealing the constant negotiations and compromises made by women within everyday spaces of home, work and socializing. Both

Bernroider and Butcher, for example, describe the interplay between dislocation and emplacement that characterises women's access to the city and their struggle to make a home there. Each of the articles foregrounds practices women employ to carve out spaces of belonging under conditions of urban and cultural change. Tensions, risks and opportunities are negotiated in their everyday lives: in the way they traverse the city, decision about where to live, their interactions with strangers and family, their livelihood choices.

Strategies and struggles are marked by the multiple boundaries, dynamics and structures that continue to restrict these women, for example, maintaining traditional expectations of how a woman should behave within cultural tropes of respectability. They have to navigate the spatial and temporal boundaries of 'intense supervision and disciplinary regimes' (Bernroider), put in place by the informal and formal surveillance and 'security' provided by neighbourhoods, places of work (Parikh), or religious orthodoxy (Sahin). Finding and making a home in a city is a practical challenge in a context where a woman alone is viewed with suspicion (Bernroider). On the other hand, access to public space is marked by ambiguity and suspicion, with concomitant scrutiny from family and community in the guise of gossip and concern for propriety and reputation (Butcher). In the case of La Paz, capital wealth allows indigenous women to subvert the city's gendered and colonial boundaries, but their villainisation in the way they are portrayed in media and popular culture demonstrates the powerful influence of colonial history in marking out spaces of belonging (Maclean).

The single women who are transforming India's urban landscape with their presence on the street and in offices, the indigenous women buying into wealthy areas in La Paz, and the pious women of an Istanbul neighbourhood redesigning boundaries of public space, are reformulating ideas of what women can and should be both in practice and theoretically. The risks they face in doing so can be seen in defiance, and in markers of constraint and threat

that emerge as they move through the city, as they expand and subvert notions of identity and belonging, while also bearing the pressures of an iniquitous social and economic landscape. Placing these diverse women's experience and agency at the centre of our analysis yields a penetrating critique of universalising urban theory. These studies problematise the developmentalist assumptions that often accompany studies of gender and the city, and undermine the simplicity of modern/traditional, single/married, and pious/secular binaries. Whilst not rejecting the need for theories that allow us to place different cities in comparative perspective, our conclusions underscore the importance of recognising the multiple logics that generate city space and urban cultures around the globe, and the consequent need to parochialise the empirical basis of theories that claim to be global in outreach.

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