Beyond Comparison in Urban Politics and Policy Analysis

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Urbanization has dramatically transformed the dynamics of everyday life, thought, subjectivity, and power. Today there is an exigent need to develop literacies to read the urban political condition in all of its variations and vicissitudes. Yet, this task is tremendously challenging. The diversity of city types and urban lifestyles around the world, as well as the extreme unevenness of global urbanization patterns, poses obstacles for perceiving and interpreting these emergent trends. Moreover, as urban political processes intensify, their multiple and interconnected components become difficult to trace across time and space. To understand contemporary politics, we need to devise strategies adequate to these conditions. We therefore must shift the epistemological foundations of political science to understand policy and politics through a decidedly urban lens.

This article makes two main claims: first, that it is necessary to urbanize political and policy studies; and, second, that this is best achieved by moving beyond the comparative approach as it is conventionally understood. I argue that an urban political ontology, as opposed to a statist one, requires plural and relational tools of analysis and theory that can account for a variety of grounded experiences as well as common pan-urban conditions of possibility. After outlining methodological, conceptual, and ethical stakes of the urban age, this article proposes several orientations for how political science might appropriately respond to this critical juncture.[1]

URBANIZING POLITICAL ANALYSIS

Thinking through the urban is a useful heuristic for interrogating the growing significance of cities globally and for exploring a set of essential formations underlying contemporary social and spatial development. Most directly, urbanizing political and policy analysis involves paying attention to cities that have long been relegated to the margins of the discipline. Even more important, however, it entails decentering the nation-state from foundational theories, concepts, and approaches.

Drawing on the pioneering work of sociologist Louis Wirth—for whom the population size, population density, and demographic diversity of twentieth-century cities signaled a distinctive social formation—scholars have recently called for the development of distinctively *urban* tools of political analysis. From celebrity policy "gurus" including Richard Florida and Benjamin Barber, to American politics visionaries such as Clarence Stone, to political theorists such as Warren Magnusson, these authors have questioned the practice of applying national lenses to understand the global urban condition. Indeed, this diverse group effectively demonstrates how attention to urban political processes (i.e., where cities are understood to be the basic units of political life) entails a set of disciplinary practices and optics that radically challenges the status quo.

A key target of their criticism is the entrenched statism of political science with its emphasis on discrete territories, nested federal institutions, fixed political entities, formal authorities, and sovereign power (Boudreau 2016; Magnusson 2011). Like Wirth's intervention to redefine the social, urban scholars today thus assert an imperative to view politics differently. Size, density, and diversity continue to define urbanism; however, in addition to this classic triad, there are several important and interrelated features distinctive to the contemporary urban age. Notably, cities today are *dynamic*, *global*, and *contingent*. Against the static map of world politics, the urban condition is best understood as a set of multidimensional and uneven processes. Moreover, unlike the supposedly predictable play of nation-states, urban politics is full of experiments, regulatory logics, political formations, and institutional assemblages that undermine any simple trajectories or linear causations. The processes comprising cities consist of flows, relationships, and interdependencies defined by irreducibly complex global–local engagements.

An urban planet thus requires more mobile, dialectical, and unpredictable analyses than a world of nation-states. Magnusson (2011) used the phrase "seeing like a city" to capture the type of vision required to understand urban political formations today. "To see like a city," Magnusson wrote (2011, 10), "is to recognize that the static order we so often associate with the state is an illusion… We have to attune ourselves to deep uncertainty just as we do in a strange city whose ways are unknown to us." This provocative invitation to suspend our disbelief and to pay attention to a multiplicity of political authorities acting in concert opens up many generative venues for inquiry. To see like a city does not merely replace one type of polity (the state) with another (the city); rather, it seeks to escape statist blinders in order to rethink the fundamentals of political existence anywhere and what Boudreau (2016, 12) called distinctively urban "logics of action."

In the face of the decisive and comprehensive challenges of the urban age, political science in general remains sclerotic. This failure to respond is troubling both analytically

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and practically. On the one hand, by ignoring the multiple entanglements that define the urban world, we miss basic operations of contemporary power, sovereignty, democracy, citizenship, subjectivity, and belonging. On the other hand, in producing knowledge that continues to emphasize the primacy of the sovereign nation-state, we actively contribute to the dysfunctional operations of statist public policy and governance—failings that are most visible in pressing cross-border challenges such as mass migration, apocalyptic climate change, gross inequality, and widespread popular unrest.[2]

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COMPARISON IN AN URBAN WORLD

With its broad field of vision and concern for cross-context patterns, comparative politics is a promising platform from which to cultivate an urban political imagination. Although work on municipal activities is by no means *the* privileged point of entry to the political today, the study of cities has long lent itself to integrative scholarship that is attuned to complexity and indeterminacy. Indeed, historical reflexive political science scholarship about comparative urban research (Keating 1991; Pickvance 1986; Walton 1990) provides a good foundation for this endeavor. Taken alongside recent interdisciplinary debates over the value and limits of global urbanisms (Jacobs 2012; Jazeel 2019; Nijman 2007; Peck 2015; Robinson 2016; Roy 2011; Sheppard, Leitner, and Maringanti 2013), this work can help us determine how the comparative project might fit into the agenda of urbanizing political and policy work more broadly. Through this dialogue, we can reflect on and interrogate what type of comparative strategies are appropriate to the contemporary moment as well as the analytical, methodological, and political effects of these choices (see also Hart 2018).

There is much to value in recent research on comparative urban politics. This literature has been a welcome corrective to the national-level focus of much comparative work, documenting that sovereign authority is not absolute and that power operates through a range of formal and informal authorities operating at multiple overlapping scales (e.g., Brenner 2004; Davis and Tajbakhsh 2005; DiGaetano and Strom 2003; Good 2014; Pierre 2011; Savitch and Kantor 2002; Sellers 2002; Sidney 2014; Stren 2003; Weaver 2015). Recent comparative urban scholarship, at least partially, also has challenged the Euro–American focus of the discipline. A new phase of cosmopolitan urban research—found in the Comparative Urban Politics section of APSA and in *Urban Affairs Review*—has been important for elaborating new subjects beyond the formal governing elites of the global north and for highlighting a variety of geographic sites typically "left off the map" (Robinson 2002). This work thus has enabled a much deeper and more nuanced depiction of contemporary urban governance, policy making, institutional formation, norms construction, collective struggles, and practices of everyday life.

Yet, the conventional comparative approach—itself a legacy of statist thinking—nevertheless suffers from pitfalls that come into stark relief in an urban perspective. Foremost among these is the way in which comparison continues to function as an imperial apparatus for apprehending and ordering otherness, thereby reproducing a hierarchical political order. Postcolonial scholars have long demonstrated that comparative political science in the West has been a means for dividing the world into component parts, erasing the constitutive links between these bounded units, coding differences vertically, and naturalizing this organization of the world as a means of domination. In urban politics, the most obvious example of these maneuvers is in the global-city ideal and the developmentalist metrics of global-city rankings. However, this type of thinking pervades universal claims embedded in the nomothetic project of much comparative analysis. Abiding an urban perspective, any work of comparison must come to terms with the imperial implications of generalized theories as well as the extreme geographic asymmetries of power-knowledge that undergird academic production today.

In addition, to truly "see like a city," comparative scholars should continue to question their use of space, scale, and causality (Ward 2010) in explaining political phenomena. The topographical assumptions of "case studies" are a poor fit for topological operations of power (Allen 2016). Comparing cities through their national contexts (DiGaetaeno and Strom 2003; Savitch and Kantor 2002), for example, misses the fundamental embeddedness of cities in multiple global networks as well as the relationships between and among different sites. Similarly, the dogged drive to make comparison a rigorous scientific exercise (Pierre 2005), in which complexity is sacrificed to parsimony, also requires assumptions that are untenable through an urban lens. The premise that discrete and closed objects called cities exist and that these are equivalent across cases; the reduction of many power relations into vertically nested "levels" of institutional authority; and the positivist belief in the self-explanatory nature of apparent phenomenon all contravene the urban vision proposed by scholars including Magnusson and Boudreau.

Comparative politics is undoubtedly useful in urbanizing political and policy analysis, but we also must move beyond such a framework and critically reflect on its founding assumptions. The questions that arise in urbanizing comparative analysis are not insignificant. What exactly is being compared? How might we move beyond methodological localism to understand urban activities that stretch beyond any administrative or cartographic borders? In a world of competing and overlapping authorities—including, of course,

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the nation-state—how do we determine the relevant forces shaping urban outcomes in context? How do we balance the need to pay close attention to historical and geographical particularity while also identifying common generative structures? Is the observation of empirical phenomena in cities sufficient? What type of abstractions will not disfigure the objects they describe?

apparatuses to capture the varied and constantly shifting ground of urban politics. Given the lag between emerging events and inherited tools of analysis, "seeing like a city" entails ongoing theoretical renewal. Here, too, there are useful guides that combine holistic empirical description with concrete abstractions, "spiraling up and down through cases and contexts" (Peck 2017, 9). Recent urban scholarship on

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Full consideration of these concerns is beyond the scope of this commentary, but three directions for comparative research appear particularly generative. First, to urbanize political and policy analysis in Magnusson's sense, we should seek conjunctural accounts that understand cities as formed by extensive interactions (Söderström 2014; Ward 2010). In considering the ongoing dialogic connection between sites and cases, a more relational comparison also would explicitly problematize the relative positioning of cities in the context of uneven development and multiscalar relations (Peck 2017; Sheppard, Leitner, and Maringanti 2013). In addition to working laterally across supposedly isolated national contexts, this type of comparison would illuminate how places, policies, laws, conflicts, institutions, and norms are constituted with one another through power-laden practices. Through this, we thus might better understand the micropolitics that creates, makes durable, and undermines urban political orders. Debates on policy mobilities (McCann and Ward 2011) and intercity policy networks (Acuto 2013) describe the promises of this type of work.

Second, comparison should not be taken for granted as a neutral methodology but rather should itself become an object of analysis occasioned by the urban problematic. On the one hand, comparison is a driving force of urbanization and a tool of contemporary governance. Unpacking how urban stakeholders render the world comparable and operationalize comparison through, for example, laws (Hirschl 2014), para-diplomatic relations (Stren and Friendly 2019), and mobilization practices (Boudreau, Boucher, and Liguori 2009) are promising guides in this endeavor. On the other hand, comparison produces knowledge within existing circuits of power. Continued reflection on the ethics of the comparative method and the role of political science in colonial relations is necessary to overcome historical harms of comparison and to develop a political imagination that is not limited by discrete territoriality. Theorizing extended and differentiated processes without contortion poses a formidable challenge for thinking across time and space. The possibility of what Jazeel (2019, 5) called "incomparable singularities" also suggests limits to trans-historical and trans-spatial thinking.

Third, to grasp the full weight of contemporary global transformations, comparison alone is insufficient. We also must build new theories, lexicons, and other representational

"the political" (Enright and Rossi 2017; Swyngedouw 2018) and citizenship (Isin 2012) constructs provisional theories from real urban conditions. Comparison in this conceptual work is not in the service of typology but rather is used as an "interrogative technique" (Roy 2003, 466) to explore what can be gained in thinking one place with another. In this practice, it is especially important to include the global south, where urbanization is happening most rapidly and intensely.

CONCLUSION

Urbanizing analyses of politics and policy making is a difficult and unconventional proposition. Notwithstanding the limits of the comparative method, heterodox and reflexive comparisons can be essential to this undertaking. The future of urban political analysis is not merely a matter of descriptive accuracy or conceptual appropriateness. It also concerns how researchers engage in the world and imagine and build different visions of collective life. The deeply ambivalent global urban condition indicates the high stakes of this endeavor. Learning to see more clearly the reverberating crises and collaborative democratic experiments taking place in so many streets around the world takes us closer to assessing the conditions of possibility of contemporary urban governance. It thus also helps us more pragmatically to seek practices of policy making that contribute to a better urban world. ■

NOTES

1. Although political science may be well positioned to clarify the workings of contemporary urban power, it should be acknowledged that urban politics and policy are not solely the concern of political science and are best understood through interdisciplinary approaches.
2. The other contributions in this symposium, for example, effectively demonstrate the promise—both analytically and practically—of "seeing like a city" and attending to global challenges through an urban lens.

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