

The Routledge Handbook on Cities of the Global South, Susan Parnell and Sophie Oldfield (eds), 2014, New York and London: Routledge, 636 pages. Hardback: £175, ISBN: 978-0-415-81865-0.

This weighty tome is the first comprehensive attempt to bring together current scholarship on cities of the global South, and as such represents an important milestone in the field of what was once termed 'development planning', and is increasingly known as global urbanism. While this is an area of growing interest which has seen some important contributions in the last several years, textbooks and readers in this area remain scarce. This edited collection, which contains 50 chapters covering urban issues across Africa, Asia and Latin America, includes some of the most authoritative voices in the field, and offers a valuable contribution to this literature.

The structure of the book is thematic, with each of the seven sections addressing a particular aspect of urban studies: theory, history, economy, politics, culture, built environment and transformation. The editors provide a brief introduction to each section, outlining the key themes but also their relevance to the work as a whole. This aspect of the book is very helpful, especially given the number of chapters, as it provides a 'roadmap' to the work. Given constraints of space and time, it is not possible to review each of the 50 chapters here. Instead, brief outlines are given for each section, with a more detailed review of two of these.

The debate about the theories and concepts deployed to demarcate this field of study constitutes the theme of the first section. This contains a tightly coherent set of chapters, each focusing on different aspects of what several authors term 'southern theory': in other words, rethinking our understanding of the world (and in this case, cities) with the south at the centre, in an attempt to capture the 'radical instability' of global South, as Roy puts it (p. 16). Roy's chapter offers a postcolonial critique of urban theory, through the concept of 'worlding' as a means of understanding the process of connection with the south at the centre. Patel's chapter extends and deepens this theme, exploring the question of whether there is (or can be) a 'south' perspective to urban studies, and giving a very clear exposition of Eurocentric social theory in support of this. This issue is also taken up by Vainer, through the lens of knowledge dissemination as a form of coloniality. Meanwhile, Robinson explores the practicalities of this undertaking, proposing comparative urban studies as a means of making the field global in its range and underpinnings.

However, the chapter which really stands out in this section is Mabin's comprehensive and incisive critique of 'southern theory', in which he asks whether current theories of informality are 'more opaque than helpful' (p. 28). Mabin suggests 'southern theory' falls short of its claims empirically, as it fails to offer 'profound and substantial research on what is going on' in urban contexts; and theoretically, as it does not offer the promised innovation. Although often inspiring and stimulating, there is, perhaps, a danger within such theoretical fields of over-abstraction, and the subsequent eclipsing of the empirical phenomena which they purport to illuminate: of only seeing 'slum as theory', as Rao (2006) puts it.

The section on 'global economic turbulence' provides a neat counterpoint to this. Referring not just to the recent occurrence of global recession, but also the inverting of the economic relationships which governed previous understandings of the global economy, the editors' introduction suggests that this reconfiguring of the economic sphere must be a central – indeed, foundational – element of reimagining urban studies. As Sheppard argues in his chapter, postcolonial urbanisation is one stage in a much longer history in which Europe was not always dominant. The chapters that follow present a diverse range of empirical realities of urban economies in the south, exploring rapid urbanisation in China (Chen); the potential of African urban policy (Buckley and Kallergis); infrastructure in African cities (Pieterse and Hyman); understandings of urban agglomeration (Bryceson); a global view of the urban informal economy (Chen and Skinner); and the digital transformation in African cities (Benner). While offering a more grounded interpretation of the issues at stake, the interconnections between these chapters are less apparent than in the first section. However, this may be inevitable, given the empirical richness therein.

Following this, a section on 'Politics, transformation and the southern city' explores how cities increasingly supersede nation states as sites for political analysis, through a focus on diverse actors and multiple, sometimes fragmented spaces. Mitlin and Patel's examination of the potential for pro-poor politics in the context of urban informality draws on Chatterjee's notion of the 'political society.' The authors' aim is to understand the clientelist relationships that prevail in the context of resource scarcity, and examine community responses to this in the case of the SDI's engagement in the co-production of knowledge through mapping and networking.

The following section, on culture and identity, aims to take a 'social lens to cities of the global south' (p.339). Cities are explored as constituted by social and cultural practices, alongside economic and political ones. For example, Yeoh and Ramdas write convincingly of the feminization of migration in Asia, taking a multi-scalar view of gender issues in the context of urbanization. The authors show how the move to the city can entail the opening up of options and agency, even as care roles are 'off-loaded' onto women lower down the chain as middle-class women pursue careers.

The last two sections, on the built environment and urban transformation respectively, perhaps have more in common with each other than with the previous sections. They share concerns with intersections between the complex physical configurations of the city and central issues such as mobility and governance. Davila's chapter on Medellin offers a critical assessment on the application of good urban governance through an analysis of infrastructural improvements. Satterthwaite offers a devastating critique of prevailing understandings of urban poverty.

In all, this collection offers a stimulating and provocative set of essays which highlight both the prosaic empirical aspects of urban development in cities of the south, as well as offering critical engagement with relatively new debates. Occasionally the chapter felt a little brief, and the diversity of themes covered by its nature makes it book which one is as likely to dip into as to read from cover to cover.

However, this also means that it offers an excellent introduction to some key themes and authors in the field, and students could use it as a springboard from which to explore other work by the same authors. This book could comfortably serve as a reader for this area. Despite being too long and diverse to form the basis of a single course, teachers will be able to dip into the book's varied chapters in support of course development.

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References

Rao, V. (2006). "Slum as theory: the South/ Asian city and globalisation." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 30(1): 225-232.