

Scalar conundrums in urban research and theory building: Situating trans-local spatial studies within multiple Asia-s

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In her 2008 work, 'Other Asias,' Gayatri Spivak calls for the erasure of disciplinary and regional boundaries that delineate or demarcate according to national, ethnic, religious or linguistic containers. Instead she underscores that humanities and social science scholars need to recognize the importance of multiplicity in what she terms 'Asia-s'. This cosmopolitan or worldly outlook calls for integrative pedagogies and analytics that challenge the reductionist logics inherent in 'area studies' or regression analyses of Nations X, Y, Z. Spivak's calls for integrative scholarship that transcends spatial fixity in Asia-s has parallels to ongoing debates about the merits and demerits of trans-local comparative studies of city-regions versus context-specific city-centric and neighbourhood-centric studies. This paper suggests that these two approaches to studying city space(s) in the global south (and Asia-s) need not be mutually exclusive or comparatively irreconcilable— particularly if ideas about scales of analysis are clearly problematized as being 'polycentric and polyvalent'.

The unabated fascination with global city rankings and circulating comparative place-making models or urban 'best practices' suggests that particular utilitarian forms of comparative urbanism — notably those KPIs and metrics driven by consultants, development firms and agencies, 'thought' leaders and public officials — have been valorized in tandem with the rise of 'global cities'. The fetishization of 'global rankings' as a form of comparative and triumphant form of translocalism continues unabated. This is despite scholarly debates about whether to (dis)engage with comparative trans-local studies; or to solely engage in context-specific 'thick local studies' of city-regions and neighbourhoods. Such debates raise paradoxical questions for comparative urban scholars who choose to be aligned with counter-hegemonic local movements and transgressive politics engaging with contentious civic, land use, environmental or infrastructural issues — and yet retain interests in broader trans-local comparative analyses, alliances and engagements.

Building upon concepts from 'assemblage urbanism' and 'g/local theory' this paper introduces the idea of 'global-local scalar toggling' as an analytic for examining both 'street level' day-to-day urban practices and politics in neighbourhoods alongside 'suite level', urban practices, where governance, programming and logistical decisions are often made. Such urban scalar toggling can serve to illustrate how centres of calculation and power remain both disengaged but also entangled in local spatial narratives. Drawing from research at distinct sites where I have previously worked (Ulaanbaatar, Hong Kong, Singapore, Taipei, Delhi and Bengaluru) I discuss the challenges of simultaneously toggling between being *grounded* (in a practical sense) and yet *global* (in a theoretical sense); and how such approaches can serve to problematize 'planetary urban' conundrums. My paper suggests that context-specific neighbourhood studies need not undermine attempts at transcending scale in comparative urban analysis. In the age of city constellations and planetary urbanism comparative ideas about knowledge, power and space remain crucial in debating designs on and for neighbourhoods (and beyond).

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