

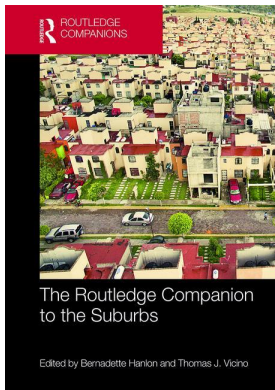
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Toward a comparative global suburbanism

Pierre Hamel and Roger Keil

The dialectics of extended urbanization at a global scale

Speaking, as we will in this chapter, of comparative global suburbanism, we build predominantly on two relevant theoretical interventions. One goes back to Henri Lefebvre's observation, first articulated in the late 1960s, that humanity had entered an urban revolution or a stage of complete urbanization (2003). In this context, Lefebvre isolated a dialectic of imploding and exploding developments, one in which he contrasts urban concentration with deconcentration. He expressed this most succinctly in this oft-quoted passage:

[T]he tremendous concentration (of people, activities, wealth, goods, objects, instruments, means and thought) of urban reality and the immense explosion, the projection of numerous, disjunctive fragments (peripheries, suburbs, vacation homes, satellite towns) into space.
(Lefebvre, 2003, p. 14)

There are no easy analogies here of inner and outer cities, of dense downtowns and sprawling suburbs, of skyscrapers here and single-family homes there. As we will see below, sub/urban forms and functions come in wildly different shapes and intensities, but among the exploding antithesis of the imploding center, Lefebvre counts "suburbs." However, while the suburban can be understood as a part of extended urbanization overall (Monte-Mor, 2014a, 2014b), it is also a specific process that can be studied empirically and theorized conceptually. In the first instance, then, when we say "suburbs" or "suburbia," we refer to this aspect of current urbanization dynamics. Specifically, in our chapter here, we take as a starting point that suburbanization "is a combination of non-central population and economic growth with urban spatial expansion" (Ekers et al., 2012, p. 407). Suburbanism(s) refers to suburban ways of life. The definitional simplicity must not overshadow, however, the vast diversity of processes and forms we find in suburbanization and suburbanisms worldwide.

The second theoretical intervention on which we base our argument in this chapter takes its cues from the understanding that urban and suburban research needs to develop new "geographies of theory" (Roy, 2009), where cities and suburbs around the world can neither be studied from any privileged (i.e., normally Western) position nor be reduced to containers of socioeconomic

activities, but should be considered instead as sites of experimentation where the urban condition is both limiting and enabling (Robinson, 2006). This intervention can be roughly divided into four related aspects:

- 1) The first aspect is the very notion of new geographies of theory itself. This mode of viewing the sub/urban world suspends norms that have driven the field for more than a hundred years. From their new vantage point, sub/urban studies defy allegedly predetermined trajectories of urbanization (following in particular the modernizing thrust of Western urban theory and developmental practice), and throw this inquiry into open conceptual and empirical territory.
- 2) The second aspect here is “urbanism,” which needs liberation from a purely normative design strategy. If suburbanism is global suburbanism, it will be important to remember the conventional implications of this term that, following Sheppard et al. (2013, p. 894) “has come to refer to a distinct kind of site (the city), separable from other rural places, and taken to be a hallmark of modernism, progress, development, and the metropole – the opposite of provincialism. At the same time, urbanism is associated with a set of social ills, the dark side of development contrasted with an idyllic rural past. This dissonance implies the need for intervention – urban planning to achieve development while minimizing a social dysfunctionality.” Conventionally, this aspect of urbanism (or suburbanism) implies a naturalization of liberal democracy and capitalism, and suggests it presents “ubiquitous norms and [is] capable of overcoming the poverty, inequality, and injustice seen as so pervasive across the global South” (Sheppard et al., 2013, p. 894).

Ash Amin speaks in this context of “telescopic urbanism” that hides “the myriad hidden connections and relational doings that hold together the contemporary city as an assemblage of many types of spatial formations, from economically interdependent neighborhoods to infrastructures, flows, and organizational arrangements that course through and beyond the city” (2013, p. 484). We ultimately follow Roy here, who has proposed to understand urbanism in four dimensions. Initially, “urbanism refers to the territorial circuits of late capitalism” (2011a, p. 8). Suburban land is created in a capitalist process of the production of space. Then, Roy notes that while capital structures urban space in its image, it cannot structure it freely. Instead, “urbanism indicates a set of social struggles over urban space,” a set of claims to the right to the city and the suburb. Also, urbanism appears as a “formally constituted object, one produced through the public apparatus that we may designate as planning.” This is closest to the general usage of the term in today’s public debates. And finally, Roy argues that “urbanism is inevitably global” (2011a, p. 9), which gets us to the third aspect of this intervention.

- 3) When we talk about *global* suburbanism in this chapter, we refer to a range of interlocking registers of geographical globality, ubiquity, simultaneity – although both of those latter processes are uneven – and planetarity, harking back to Lefebvre’s idea of planetary urbanization (as recently discussed and popularized most prominently by Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid [2015]). As Stuart Elden (2014) has noted, Lefebvre viewed “the planetarization [la planétarisation] of the urban” (Lefebvre, 2014, p. 205) as a threat and the coverage of the actual earth [*terre*] with urban settlement as uneven and full of contradictions.
- 4) We have now arrived at the fourth and final aspect of this second intervention, the comparative lens. For several reasons, comparisons are required for better understanding (sub)urban processes through their diversified empirical components. From an historical perspective, the central cities and suburbs have always been interrelated. As mentioned previously, however, these links do not borrow unidirectional models. The contradictions brought on by class

relations, social inequalities and unequal access to territorial amenities involved in shaping the (sub)urban worldwide are redefined in different ways according to economical, political, and cultural settings. In that respect, defining global suburbanism means that comparison is called upon.

Global suburbanisms

What have we learned from studying global suburbanization and suburbanisms? (See Keil, 2018, p. 207, for an elaboration on this argument). Generally, this comparative research, engaging multiple sites and perspectives from across the globe, places suburbanization and suburbanisms in the mainstream of urban studies. However, it also opens up the urban periphery up to critical theory. In the first instance, this work points to the simple fact that urbanization today mostly comes in the form of peripheral extension or suburbanization. If ten billion humans eventually populate the earth, we can expect that hundreds of millions who are still on a trajectory of rural-to-urban migration and those who leave established cities for the margins – running a spectrum from forcefully displaced communities to aspirational seekers of isolation and privilege – will live in some form of suburbia. We can now make a few summary observations about this global phenomenon, whereby “global” is understood here in the double sense of generalized and worldwide. If the temptation of subsuming the variation of urban development under the dominant force of economic globalization remains strong, insistence on variations must be emphasized through the multiplicity of components, processes, cultural settings, class relationships and models of suburbanism occurring (Ong, 2011). That said, what are some general empirical trends?

- Suburbanization is a process that tends to produce sameness on site (reproducing houses and housing units in massive developments) and across sites (following international blueprints in many locations) (Easterling, 2014). Suburbanization is itself a major process of “inter-referencing” (Ong, 2011) a domain of sameness across the world (this is true for the forms, the social and class formation processes, transportation patterns, etc.).
- In this sense, the *banlieues à l'américaine* (Le Goix, 2017, p. 255) have provided a model for suburbanization worldwide. Still, the American or Anglo-Saxon model (single-family homes often in master-planned subdivisions) have always been only one among other models of suburbanization (Keil, 2017, chapters 4–6). As the lifestyle of the American model has retained its attraction for aspirational middle-classes across the world, the Global South has developed its own system of suburban inter-referencing and models of peri-urban developments and lifestyles (Bloch, 2015; Gururani and Kose, 2015; Mabin, 2013; McGee, 2013, 2015; Roy, 2015; Wu and Shen, 2015).
- Suburbanization is diverse. This may not be a big surprise given multiple trajectories of building the peripheral across the globe that have existed previously. But today, variety rules. These global processes come in all manner of shapes, forms and institutions, organized and disorganized, formal and informal, gated and squatted, and range from single-family homes to high-rise towers, including massive infrastructures, employment, and commercial zones, conservation areas and greenbelts (Keil, 2018, 2017).
- And speaking about diversity: suburbs, once imagined as bulwarks of class and racial uniformity and experienced that way by their inhabitants, are now a prime location where urban difference is present and being negotiated. Immigrant suburbs, suburbs as a place of poverty, the suburban as a location of racialized populations are now common experiences.

- There is much local history and geography of suburbanization. Yes, it is plausible to identify larger contexts such as, for example, American Fordism, neoliberalization or globalization, but the imprint of these processes will be specific to local histories and geographies, and in turn those local specificities help define the contours of these larger trends. National, regional, and local histories and geographies of suburbanization are important (see, for example, Richard Harris (1996, 2004) on Canada; also Keil et al., 2015, Keil and Addie, 2016; or Paul Knox on London's "metroburbia") (2017, pp. 12–14).
- Suburbs are, further, products of multi-scale, multi-topological processes of production and governance that involve worldwide interactions, money flows, idea transmission and aspirations in a global world. Andre Ortega (2016), for example, demonstrated that Manila's suburbanization was the product of a series of interlocking, global flows of capital, labor, and culture in a transnational chain of interdependencies that have a powerful effect on all participants beyond the actual physical building of suburban space.
- Next, suburbs are the ultimate capitalist commodity: a place of intense use value consumption (albeit realized through immense fetishization of labor practices) and at the same time a prime site for the realization of exchange values, especially in an era of financialization. Suburbanization has become the prime economic sector in many regions and countries, and has made the massive construction of housing, shopping malls and workspaces the source of both national wealth and sometimes crony capitalism (Guney et al., forthcoming).
- Relatedly, then, suburbanization today is a prime process through which "peripheral" urbanization (Caldeira, 2016) is converted to corporate, state-built and more "formal" types of settlement. The state-led processes of building huge suburban tower estates or identical gated communities with golf courses in nations such as China, Korea, Turkey, Vietnam, Brazil, and India stand out here. We have seen similar complexes emerge from the deserts of southern California and the fruit lands of Silicon Valley, where technology companies also serve as suburban builders, planners, and infrastructure providers, having turned classic residential suburbia into an elongated workbench of the world's most aggressive disruptors.
- Suburbanization is characterized by the complexities of post-suburbanization, as common perceptions of center and periphery blur and densities and morphologies are inverted. Knox (2017, p. 6) calls Outer London "at once metropolitan and suburban in character. It is, to borrow from the lexicon of urban studies, metroburban: a multimodal mixture of residential and employment settings, with a fusion of suburban and central city characteristics." The trend Knox observes here may be specific to London, but it certainly has been documented across the world from China to Europe and North America (Charmes and Keil, 2015; Le Goix, 2017; Phelps, 2015; Phelps and Wu, 2011; Sieverts, 2003).
- Physical forms of suburbanization and social processes of suburban expansion are accompanied by distinct suburbanisms that define the spread of the urban tissue (Moos and Walter-Joseph, 2017; Quinby, 2011; Walks, 2013). The dependence on the automobile persists in most suburban locations, but increasing densities and socioeconomic diversities have led to more challenges to the status quo of how one lives in the suburbs. Mobility, nutrition, work, and recreation are reassembled in and through suburban locations.
- A particularly important role is assigned to suburban infrastructures in, of, and for the suburbs (Addie, 2016; Filion and Pulver, 2018), and infrastructure blueprints have begun to

stand in for (sub)urbanization more generally (Easterling, 2014, p. 12). The infrastructures contain the DNA of the suburban form; they are the medium that contains the message of a particular form and process of urban extension (Filion, 2013).

- The production of suburban land and the diversity of suburban form are common and ubiquitous features of suburban expansion (Harris and Lehrer, 2018).
- Density deserves its own mention on this list as a category that was once considered a clear indicator of suburbanism: if it is low-density and if it is on the periphery, it must be suburban. Today, such certainties have disappeared as “debates over density and sprawl become not only sterile or semantic, but also increasingly irrelevant, for the majority urban experience” (Tonkiss, 2013, p. 43). Still, densification and intensification – often paired with the notion of compactness – are desired processes of urban planning and development. “Sprawl repair” has become one of the battle cries of climate change discourse (Dunham-Jones and Williamson, 2011; Jessen and Roost, 2015). The enthusiasm for density and compactness would not be controversial except for the complex problems facing the reality of retrofitting in an age of post-suburbanization with its myriad contradictions (Charmes and Keil, 2015; Keil, 2017).
- Suburban political ecologies now need to be understood on their own terms. A good example is the relevance of boundaries to understanding suburbanization, as they bring into focus the (real and imagined) natural environment beyond. It has long been known that the suburban was sold to its users and inhabitants as a place close to nature, while the suburbs represent a threat to sustainability and are a major source of climate change. What is new is the fact that the suburban edge is the location of innovative and potentially path-breaking suburban political ecologies such as greenbelts, conservation areas, and new forms of suburban living emerging at the city’s edge.
- Last but not least, the very terminology of suburban research has come under scrutiny, as the notion of the suburban has often been identified with a particular North American phenomenon. As Richard Harris and Charlotte Vorms (2018) have shown, there are near-endless different terms for almost equally diverse suburbanizations worldwide.

Space and spatiality in sub/urbanization processes

Suburban studies have played a crucial role in the definition of a new understanding of the urban. Suburbanization processes are contributing to the general thrust towards urbanization in diverse physical forms and social modes of organization.

However, from a sociology of science standpoint, it may seem pretentious or short-sighted to claim that the field of sub/urban studies is undergoing a paradigmatic shift, as the diverse strands involved in the field of urban research have been quite unstable and its concepts contested ever since its emergence at the end of the nineteenth century (Brenner and Schmid, 2015, p. 163). So, channeling Thomas Kuhn (1962), how can we talk of a paradigmatic shift today?

Critical sub/urban studies in both the political economy and poststructuralist traditions have brought to the fore a new grammar of spatiality with several processes: the multiplicity – and diversity – of urban forms including “new spatial arrangements” (Amin, 2007, p. 102); the exploding/implosion tensions inherent through sub/urban development (Keil, 2017); the emerging new geographies of the urban as “emplaced by heterogeneity” (Roy, 2011b, p. 309); the extension of urbanizing landscapes in connection with “intangible (virtual) and tangible aspects”

(Shields, 2015, p. 59); and the reproduction of class relations combined with recognition issues (Donald, 1999). These components have certainly contributed to highlighting the ways sub/urbanization has entered an era of the “postmetropolis” (Soja, 2000) or “post-suburbia” (Wu and Phelps, 2008). Through emphasizing the multiplicity and competing analytical discourses in the production of spatial configurations, sub/urban studies have shown us that suburbs – from their origins to their diverse typologies in connection with politics – have followed unlikely heterogeneous trajectories where class, race, and gender collide.

Sub/urban studies are thus open to one of the major social scientific challenges of our times, the search for regularities beyond the overwhelming presence of subjectivities and predominance of social constructivism. In that respect, we think that the suggestion of Charles Tilly to “build systematic knowledge of social construction into superior analysis of social processes” (2008, p. 5) must be taken seriously. This position does not seek to reconcile the competing discourses or analytical frames but instead to confront the competing discourses and ideas. Thus, the “effects” of scientific activity can gain an additional understanding of the variety of processes, practices, perspectives involved in “the constitution of the social environment” (Tilly, 2008).

Understood as a research field, global suburbanism, like the field of urban studies more generally, can be divided in a variety of ways into sub-specialized fields (history, sociology, economics, and political science). Even if these sub-fields are open to an interdisciplinary approach, they remain influenced by the methodology and normative orientations of their discipline (Bowen et al., 2010, p. 199).

Without tracing back all the stages that punctuated its history, one can recall that urban studies were initially defined as a specialized field of sociological inquiry (Perry and Harding, 2002). More importantly, sociology as a general social science converged above all with the study of the city or with what would become urban sociology. For the first European sociologists (Weber, 1966 [1921]; Simmel, 1950 [1903]), and soon after for the American sociologists of the Chicago School (Park et al., 1925), cities and especially modern metropolises were research topics of exception. This was because those metropolises were the main places where modernity was experienced. In addition, for them, before being an object of study as such, metropolises were entry points to understanding social relations, social domination, and the new importance gained by subjectivity in the modern age. The deployment of actors’ subjectivity was creating new meanings in order to cope with the sweeping changes underway with urbanization and industrialization. Today, we make the argument that suburbanization serves as a prominent process through which we can study the crisis and evolution of the modern society that was the original subject of urban studies.

The notion of space, including its substance – spatiality – has been a particularly important dimension through which these processes can be observed and analyzed. Following Doreen Massey (2005), space cannot be separated from the practices involved in its construction. Space can be defined before all as social space pointing towards the relations individuals and communities build together: “instead of being this flat surface it’s like a pincushion of a million stories” (Massey, 2013).

Consequently, space implies the recognition of multiplicity with the presence of the other – the social question – or how actors are going to live and make choices, introducing as a consequence the “geography of power.” Power relations – defining and contesting time-space relations – are thus inevitable. In the face of the historical path taken by capitalism and the Western World, especially in the neoliberal globalizing era, a new form of resistance emerged through local struggles (Massey, 2005, p. 183).

This vision of space by Massey is consistent with Lefebvre's perspective regarding the "production of space," where he insists on the Gramscian idea of hegemony for building collective action in connection with class interests (2005). From this standpoint, class hegemony – with its race, gender, colonial, and other relevant dimensions – is clearly achieved through space. Suburbanization is part of this historical production of concentrated, extended, and differential space. In post-war America, for example, the emergence of white middle-class suburbia was interpreted as a specific spatial "solution" to the over-accumulation of Fordism's problems and the simultaneous production of a landscape of white privilege excluding racialized populations from a historical process of wealth formation underlying American power differentials to this day. In more recent years, to give another example, the production of suburban space has been seen as coinciding with processes of differentiation that make some suburban areas the domain of – often gated – privilege, while others are portrayed as spaces of exclusion and control. The increasing diversity of suburban productions of space itself necessitates comparative research.

Suburbs and beyond from a critical theory approach

At its inception critical urban theory entails acknowledging the new "geographies of theory" referred to previously. Global generalizations have to face the test of heterogeneity of flux, processes, and practices manifested in particular cities. The implications for urban theory entail awareness of contradictory impulses involved in global suburbanism, where the peripheral suburban landscapes are engaged in diversified relationships of power. Suburban globality is anything but a process in the making, with multiple forms of interconnections between local actors, at times opposing promoters, on other occasions finding accommodating paths.

Beyond the fact researchers disagree about the meaning of sub/urban changes underway, a consensus is emerging concerning the main components of those changes and the fact that through diverse suburban processes, metropolitan areas everywhere are experiencing structural transformations (Hamel and Keil, 2015). Suburbanization is currently a constitutive part of regionalization and as such also subject to debates on regional governance (Keil et al., 2017; Hanlon et al., 2010). The suburbs, once thought of as the problematic Other of metropolitan unity, with self-selected, dispersed, and contrarian constituencies (Hoch, 1985), are the connective tissue of burgeoning regions that have become the operative terrain of globalized industrial, commercial, and infrastructural activities. In that, the suburbs often remain the literal dumping grounds of the social and environmental "bads" of the region, but they also come into their own with identities forged from their new demographic and economic composition (Belina and Keil, 2017).

The indeterminacy of power – consistent with the implementation of democracy, including local democracy – is deeply ingrained in the conduct of sub/urban governance. At a metropolitan or regional scale, the capacity of subordinated or excluded actors to influence resource distribution and promote increasing equality cannot be taken for granted anywhere. If greater equity defined as a renewed challenge in a post-suburban era does not necessarily undermine the fundamental democratic project as sketched by Lefebvre (2003/1970) through the "urban revolution," nonetheless the promises of regionalism have not met expectations and "the (post-)suburban re/insurgence in regional politics is not settled" (Addie and Keil, 2015, p. 17). This open-ended assessment serves as a reminder that the emergence of governance on the political agenda at a regional scale did not solve social conflicts. Coinciding with renewed questions about the nature of the state and

the recognition of its historical and cultural character (Bevir and Rhodes, 2010; Pinson, 2015), does governance distance itself from the principle of the sovereign state defined as a monolithic reality and promote openness towards non-state actors in decision-making processes?

The challenge of state sovereignty in pluralized contexts, taking into account modalities and mechanisms of suburban governance as implemented in the world outside the Global North, does not correspond with the dominant representation or the dominant implementation of state governing. Thus, the Western model of sovereignty was challenged and/or reinforced differently. In Latin America, for example, we should recall that the self-led peri-urban expansion during the first half of the twentieth century was largely implemented outside state control and policies. Afterwards, suburban development expanded under capital and/or the initiatives of land and real estate promoters – including international corporations – with state support. At the same time, “the national governments . . . tend to have a much bigger say in the governance of at least the major urban centers than those in North America or Europe” (Heinrichs and Nuijsl, 2015, p. 231).

In Asia, and especially in India, economic liberalization has influenced governance, and it is towards land politics that the failure to meet social expectations is most visible. As Shubhra Gururani and Burak Kose underline, land politics and policies are “a messy business” (2015, p. 293). Class and caste divisions remain strong, but private land developers – able to invest in local infrastructures – have the support of central and state governments (Gururani and Kose, 2015). Confronted with this alliance, slum residents are in a difficult situation.

In addition, the specificity of localities remains strong. Resistance and insurgent practices are supported and restrained simultaneously through local culture, experiencing diverse modalities of inhabiting space, reminding urban researchers that cultural appropriation cannot adequately account for slum residents’ urban creativity (Roy, 2011b). If suburbanization and suburbanism(s) can take place in “extended metropolitan regions” – where centrality is redefined along “decentred spatial flows” (Firman, 2011, p. 195) – they can also prevail beyond “metrocentric tendencies” (Bunnell and Maringanti, 2010).

What is at stake is a deeper understanding of state restructuring under sub/urban governance defined by a global suburbanism perspective. Generally, urban researchers agree that with governance, despite diversity of interests, actors share a cognitive framework. It is what explains the possibility of regulating conflicts. Bringing diversity and domination issues to the fore in considering governance goes hand in hand with a revised understanding of its repercussions on state restructuring. That issue, above all, is at stake here (Pinson, 2015). And thus far, this has been overlooked in the field of sub/urban studies. Returning to Lefebvre’s apprehension of the “plan-eterization of the urban” and its contradictions, it is necessary to include “post-colonial reading practices” (Robinson, 2016, p. 22). Such a perspective can help overcome and distance ourselves, with the agreed-upon vision of governance as a tool for regulating conflicts, and for dodging the cultural aspects and axiological content of those conflicts.

Guide to further reading

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