

29 October 2015
4.00 pm – 6.00 pm
IRS, Erkner



Invitation
to the 7th IRS International Lecture
on Society and Space

Social Sciences “at the world scale”: Comparisons, connections, cities

Jennifer Robinson, University College London

Abstract

Based on her critical reading of the limited geographical origins and inspirations of many canonical sociological theories, Raewyn Connell has argued for the practices of sociology to be transformed to enable the production of theory “at the world scale” (Southern Theory, Polity Press, 2007). In a related move, within urban studies there has been a significant increase in research which seeks to draw conceptual insights across a much wider variety of urban contexts than in recent decades. Inspired by the rapid and dynamic urbanisation of areas which have been quite removed from theoretical innovation, notably China and Africa, there is a search for both methodological and theoretical innovations which can support a more global urban studies.

This presentation will chart the impacts which initiatives to internationalise social sciences might have in the realms of theory and method. What, for example, might it mean to approach social theorisation from the starting point of China, rather than Europe or the US? Or to see “In an African mirror”, as Gareth Austin has proposed? In urban studies, this has meant a growing attention to the informality of social relationships of all kinds, for example; and a search to recast comparative methods to shake off the inherited methodological nationalism (and city-ism) which has limited the potential to compare social processes and outcomes across different kinds of social and political contexts. The presentation will consider (a) how comparison can be reconfigured to play an important role in reshaping social theory “at the world scale”, and (b) how new grounds for composing comparisons across diverse contexts might contribute to theoretical innovation in the conventional heartlands of social theory. Examples will be drawn from the analysis of urban politics and governance, posing the question as to how London might be cast as a “theory destination”, in which a wide range of “varieties of governance” coexist, providing strong grounds for comparison with other contexts, including those previously considered incommensurable, such as China and Africa.

Discussant: Prof. Dr. Talja Blokland (HU Berlin)



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Vita

Jennifer Robinson is Professor of Human Geography at University College London, and Visiting Professor at the African Centre for Cities, University of Cape Town. She has also worked at the University of Kwa-Zulu-Natal, Durban, the LSE (London) and the Open University. Her book, *Ordinary Cities* (Routledge, 2006) developed a post-colonial critique of urban studies, arguing for urban theorising which draws on the experiences of a wider range of cities around the globe. This project has been taken forward in her call to reinvent comparative urbanism for global urban studies in her recent, *Cities in a world of cities* article in *IJURR* and *Thinking Cities through Elsewhere*, in *Progress in Human Geography*. Current projects include exploring transnational aspects of Johannesburg and London’s policy making processes and collaborative and community-based research comparing governance of large scale urban developments in London, Johannesburg and Shanghai (with Phil Harrison and Fulong Wu). She has also published extensively on the history and contemporary politics of South African cities, including *The Power of Apartheid* (Butterworth-Heinemann, 1996).

We kindly ask all participants to register [here](#). Thank you very much.



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