

Comparative studies in urban research*

Los estudios comparativos en el campo de la investigación urbana**

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Abstract: This paper examines the role of the comparative method in urban research, paying attention to its usefulness for theory generation and the peculiarities of comparisons between cities of different regions. In doing so, it presents a literature review that groups comparative studies in thematic areas without being rigid, aiming to identify the characteristics of these studies. It also presents reflections that emerge from the revision of comparative studies produced by one of the authors, reading them in parallel with more recent research that implements the comparative method. The conclusions point out some relevant features that influence the characteristics of comparative studies and suggest that they will continue to be important in urban research as long as they avoid deterministic or essentialist views about cities.

Keywords: comparative studies, urban studies, urban theory, Global South, Global North, Latin America.

Resumen: Este trabajo examina el papel del método comparativo en la investigación urbana, prestando atención a su utilidad en la generación de teoría, y a las particularidades de las comparaciones entre ciudades de distintas regiones. Para ello, se realiza una revisión de la literatura al respecto y se propone un agrupamiento en líneas temáticas que, sin la intención de ser muy rígido, contribuye a identificar las características de estos estudios. También se presentan reflexiones que emergen de la revisión de los estudios comparativos de una de las autoras del artículo, y de su lectura en paralelo con investigaciones más recientes que incorporan dicho método. Las conclusiones señalan algunos rasgos relevantes que influyen en las características de los estudios comparativos y sugieren que éstos seguirán siendo pertinentes en la investigación urbana mientras eviten visiones deterministas o esencialistas sobre las ciudades.

Palabras clave: estudios comparativos, estudios urbanos, teoría urbana, sur global, norte global, América Latina.

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I. Introduction

This article explores the role of comparison as a strategy and method for conducting urban research, emphasizing comparative studies' relationship to theory construction, and considering the importance of comparing cities in different regions. We propose a thematic classification that, without being rigid, explores the development of comparative studies according to their empirical and conceptual subjects of interest. We also provide descriptions and reflections based on comparative studies conducted at different times, and conclude with ideas about the scope of comparative studies for contemporary urban research.

This text contributes to urban research by presenting the results of a systematic review of a specialized bibliography, which reveals shared characteristics for grouping and classifying comparative studies. Although the main focus is on comparing Latin American cities, the text also considers comparative studies of other urban centers around the world, and points out the importance of comparing cities from different regions of the planet. This work also helps to clarify the role of comparisons, particularly between regions, in order to develop urban theory, contributing to the discussion of comparative studies in contemporary urban research.

In addition to this broad perspective on urban comparisons, we also present an analysis by looking at specific cases of comparative studies, exploring their characteristics and contributions. Therefore, we present recent and earlier works, comparing them to identify shared and unique aspects of their approaches and emphases. As such, the article includes a comparison of comparisons, thus contributing to the approach of comparative studies in urban research.

II. Urban theory and comparison

In the social sciences, comparative studies have a heuristic potential to help generate or validate theories and/or hypotheses, as well as concepts that can be used in more than one context (Sartori, 1970; Skocpol, 1984). As such, the comparison not only seeks to increase the amount of data available, but also to help build knowledge about the processes, structures, and phenomena to be observed, using the conceptual framework of various social and human sciences. Comparison has a heuristic potential, as it refreshes and generates knowledge, and has been essential for the construction of social science theories in general and urban research in particular.

Based on a dialectical relationship between theoretical and empirical approaches, comparing cities is a reflexive exercise in constructing concepts and interpreting contextualized issues. In this sense, authors such as McFarlane (2010) have argued that comparison is "a strategy for thinking," open to conceptual innovation and novelty, based on

empirical observations and intrinsically linked to the production of knowledge in urban studies. Comparison thus becomes a theoretical and methodological approach in which, rather than simply providing examples to illustrate previous analyses or arguments, hypotheses are constructed and problematized through the simultaneous observation of processes in different spatial and temporal contexts.

However, theory also helps to frame the scope of comparison. For Pickvance (1986), using data from two or more contexts does not guarantee an analytical comparison. The author argues that a comparative urban analysis is characterized by the relationship between evidence and one or more theoretical models, understood as ordered systems of concepts that make it possible to establish causal relationships between empirical phenomena.

However, theoretical models can also be tested and updated by empirical observation, especially when data from different cities is available. As a result, while recognizing the importance of different urban contexts, this difference should not prevent the formulation of hypotheses that can be used to construct new knowledge (Peck, 2015). In this sense, comparisons must also generate a problematization of how and where urban theory is produced and for what purposes (McFarlane, 2010).

III. Inter-regional comparison

Studies that compare different regions can help to add nuance to studies focusing on a single city or region, and also to refresh concepts and update explanations about urban processes in different contexts; such comparative studies produce original reflections that strengthen and update urban theory. Comparisons between cities in different regions (for example, between developing and developed countries) do not necessarily imply a dependence on the theories of core countries, as some researchers suggest. On the contrary, this approach can sometimes help to criticize explanations based on universal models of these core countries, and this kind of comparison can open up new ways of conceptualizing more local processes and help to propose innovative elements for theorizing.

In fact, comparing cities from different regions around the world increases openness and creativity in the generation of knowledge. Influenced by the postcolonial experience of Asian and African countries, more inclusive comparative research has recently been driven by democratizing the construction of concepts, abandoning general theoretical models of cities or reductionist causal explanations (McFarlane, 2010; Robinson, 2011; 2014; 2015; 2022; Simone, 2009; Ward, 2010). Such reflections underscore the importance of problematizing the conditions of comparison and the process of selecting case studies, promoting comparisons between cities of different regions that reject the centrality of the Global North as an example or paradigm. In this sense, it is important to point out that although comparisons between cities have been important in urban studies in Latin America, this strategy has been very productive in inspiring studies of cities

outside the region. In this area, authors such as Robinson (2011; 2014; 2015) have made interesting proposals by emphasizing the importance of comparing cities without basing studies on the Global North as a paradigm or model.

The momentum generated by this research has inspired comparisons that also focus on explaining empirical processes before constructing or using general concepts. However, debates have also begun on the role of theory in understanding cities from different regions and on the uniqueness or immeasurability of cities in the Global South (Leitner and Sheppard, 2020; Peck, 2015; Randolph and Storper, 2023). Moreover, it is also important to point out that comparisons must not only include cities from different regions, or diverse cities at a given time, but that it is also possible to compare a single city at different moments or different cities at more than one moment in time. Although this is not the focus of this article, studies can be found that include this type of comparison in relation to urban history (Mejía Pavony, 2000; Kenny and Madgin, 2015).

IV. Comparative urban studies: Main themes

A review of comparative urban studies of recent decades reveals main themes as analytical focus points or general trends. On the basis of these themes, we propose to group together research according to an empirical and conceptual subject of interest, acknowledging that different disciplines converge in the field of urban studies. It is important to note that such divisions cannot be studied rigidly, and that this study does not claim to be exhaustive or definitive. The classification is a research hypothesis and a tool. Finally, we should point out that a study can often belong to more than one thematic line, with analyses and connections between disciplines that show relationships between different topics.

Our proposal of main analytical focal points is based on assessments of comparative studies (Brenner, 2011; McFarlane, 2010; Robinson, 2014), while also focusing on the reflections on the results of previous urban research in Latin America (Carrión and Dammert-Guardia, 2016; Duhau, 2000; Scheingart, 2000; Unda, 1989). For the Latin American case, it is important to mention a period of Marxist-oriented urban studies, which has had a strong influence on comparative works and on the generation of urban theory, by using new analytical categories and innovative ideas of urban issues that made it possible to go beyond limited and reductive perspectives of urban development and urbanization.

It is important to note that the comparisons relate to the complex and multidimensional global and regional situations of cities. Therefore, we cannot ignore the importance of other subjects of interest that, although not explicitly addressed as part of the analytical focal points, have significant resonances and connections with them. As part of these elements, we can highlight processes associated with insecurity, food, gender inequality, and working conditions. These issues also inspire comparisons between cities, particularly by problematizing the role of public space, care work, the material conditions of daily

life, and practices observed with the concept of social reproduction (Gillespie and Hardy, 2021; Santos Ocasio and Mullings, 2021). Finally, at the current moment of addressing the ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic, they reinvigorate to some extent comparative studies in urban research.

a) Development and dependency

The first main theme we have considered relates to questions of development, urban growth, and the socio-spatial structure of cities. Comparative studies that include these subjects of interest have been approached from various angles, with some theories closely linked to the issue of modernization, and others, particularly in the case of Latin American cities, to dependency theory, or the world-systems theory, which has generated highly relevant hypotheses on Latin American urbanization (Carrión and Dammert-Guardia, 2016; Quijano, 1973). Research related to development, observed through the intersection between economic, urban, and demographic processes, have been connected at different times to analyses of globalization, the social division of space, and local government (Chávez Galindo et al., 2016; Kanto et al., 1997; Savitch and Kantor, 2002).

During the 1960s and 70s, this approach was noted for the importance acquired by hypotheses that allowed the development of typologies of cities and the understanding of development and/or dependency processes, mainly using statistical data or information from historical records. In studies linked to functionalism and modernization theories (Germani, 1976; Redfield and Singer, 1954), the city was analyzed through its links to social development and industrial processes (Friedmann, 1969). Criticism of this perspective led to comparisons that added nuance to these statements (Schteingart and Torres, 1973). Under the influence of the world-systems theory, comparative studies also focused on cities from different regions (Slater, 1978; Walton and Masotti, 1976; Walton and Lubeck, 1979). For a more thorough analysis of these examples, Walton and Lubeck (1979) produced a comparative study of cities in different regions, such as Monterrey (Mexico) and Kano (Nigeria) in order to analyze how the position of different countries in the world-system helps to elucidate the conflict between social classes in urban areas. The contribution of this type of study can be identified with the construction of comparisons that introduce critical visions to classical approaches to development, although the selection of examples and the analysis relate to the verification of hypotheses and theories. It is important to mention that Marxism, particularly under the influence of structuralism, had had a strong influence on this type of critical study of functionalism (Castells, 1988).

An example of comparative studies that address the question of development and dependency, as a reference for understanding Latin American cities can be found in the volume compiled by Schteingart (1973), which contains information on specific case studies of Latin American cities. In this collective work, studies by Castells (1973), Quijano

(1973), and Kaplan (1973), for example, analyze the relationship between the situation of countries' dependency and the consequences for cities in the region, incorporating a critical perspective on urbanization in Latin American countries and its effects on so-called dependent development. By referring to different cases, these contributions have also had an impact on dependency theory in Latin America. The work of Scheingart and Torres (1973), discussed below, is another example of the usefulness of the concept of dependent urbanization.

The analytical perspective that considers differences between cities, using concepts such as center and periphery, remains important for comparative studies and theories of cities. For example, the study by Caldeira (2017) on the case of São Paulo, complemented by examples from Mexico City and New Delhi, proposes the idea of peripheral urbanization. Moreover, reflections have been developed on the implications of urbanization dependent on the provision of services (Pirez, 2016), or on the comparison of development processes characterized by the construction of large infrastructure projects (Kanai and Schindler, 2022).

b) Social movements, conflicts, and local government

The second main theme or analytical focal point that we identified relates to the matter of urban politics, broken down into issues and processes such as social movements, urban conflicts, and the work of local government. In this theme, case studies are generally descriptive, including elements to construct theories. Rather than continuity or homogeneity, we observe a single subject of interest interpreted in different ways and with different concepts. While some research focuses on comparing urban social movements, at other times the analysis is based on public policy or governance strategies. These transformations are linked to specific problems or situations of the cities and regions being compared. In this regard, Carrión and Dammert-Guardia (2016) have noted in Latin America that citizen studies became popular in the 1990s in the context of democratization cycles, while concepts such as the right to the city and governance have acquired greater importance in the first two decades of the twenty-first century.

The study of urban social movements was initially driven by a structuralist vision of urban sociology that focused on the consequences of social contradictions manifested in cities (Borja, 1975; Castells, 1974; 1983). These analyses led to debates about the role of theory in understanding different urban conflicts or social movements in cities with different contexts (Pickvance, 1985). This focus also considers the dynamics of capitalist development, establishing a parallel with the concerns of the first main theme. In later moments, the study of urban social movements has been complemented by analyses on civic issues, democracy, and the right to the city (Meyer and Boudreau, 2012). There are also studies on socioterritorial conflicts or movements in the Latin American region

(Halvorsen et al., 2019), in the context of proposals for a plural and multiple concept of territory (Haesbaert, 2012; Haesbaert and Mason-Deese, 2019).

In the context of structural changes to the role of the state and public policy in social development, governance studies seek to understand how cities are governed at the local and regional level (DiGaetano and Strom, 2003; Le Gales and Harding, 1998; Pierre, 2005). This has led to several studies in the first two decades of the twenty-first century (Brandtner et al., 2017; Le Gales, 2002). With a particular focus on European cities, Le Gales (2002) constructs a comparative analysis that shows how the processes of globalization, and, in particular, European Union integration, create conflicts and challenges for local government. Based on concerns about how and why local governments of cities in different countries set their goals, studies of urban governance have contributed to the comparative observation of sociopolitical processes.

With regard to analyses of governance in Latin America, it is important to note that in recent years the process of urban expansion and metropolitan growth has added complexity to the conditions in which local governments operate (Dureau et al., 2015). In their discussion of this process, Trejo and Niño Amezcuita (2022) coordinated the publication of a book on the complexities of metropolitan government in the region. Analyses of the phenomenon of metropolitanization have also inspired comparative studies of cities in different regions (Dureau et al., 2002). Comparative studies of local government in Latin America are also related to decentralization and democratization (Montecinos, 2005). In relation to these studies, comparisons have also analyzed the transfer of public policies or government practices in cities in various regions (Clarke, 2012; Montero and Baiocchi, 2022; Saraiva, 2022).

c) Social division of space

The third main theme relates to the social division of space, a crosscutting subject of interest for urban studies that spans several decades, and which allows for the analysis of access to land and housing, urban poverty, sociospatial segregation, exclusion, and inequality (Ariza and de Oliveira, 2007; Portes et al., 2008; Roberts, 1996; Schteingart, 2001). These issues have been approached from a wide range of methodological approaches and theories. For example, while Ariza and de Oliveira (2007) focus on the consequences of inequalities for poverty and family dynamics in Latin American cities, Schteingart (2001) observes the effects of inequality with a focus on the social division of space and its effects on the internal organization of cities.

Government housing policies and their implications for different social groups' access to housing in Mexico have also been studied (Schteingart, 1989; Ziccardi and González, 2015). Given the relevance of social policies in this area, a connection is made to the analytical focal point of politics and local governments. To analyze the social division of space, concepts such as gentrification have sometimes been used, mainly in Anglo-Saxon

literature (Harris, 2008), but also in the case of Latin America (Delgadillo et al., 2015; Janoschka and Sequera, 2014).

Several studies on segregation in the context of Latin America have focused mainly on a quantitative approach (Ariza and Solís, 2009; Rodríguez Vignoli, 2008; Schteingart, 2001). However, qualitative comparative studies also exist (Segura, 2013), which sometimes refer to concepts such as informality in order to take into account the conditions of daily survival in cities of the Global South (Alsayyad, 1993; Roy and Alsayyad, 1993; Simone, 2001; 2009). These studies on informality make a comparative contribution that, by prioritizing the observation of struggles for survival in precarious situations, identifies common features, but also idiosyncratic dynamics through which inhabitants of cities in the Global South and continents such as Asia and Africa interact with the institutional arrangements and resources within their reach in everyday life. These studies on survival strategies and everyday practices present connections to analyses of poverty and its connection to production in the urban space (Caldeira, 2017; Roberts, 1996).

This theme includes a comparison of how urban space is produced and distributed for different social actors and power relations, as well as their everyday consequences. To this end, there are also studies on cities in regions around the world that seek to identify the similarities and differences in urban structure and local processes. This provides an analysis of housing policies, urban poverty, public space, and segregation by comparing cities such as Los Angeles and São Paulo (Caldeira, 1996), Santiago, Mexico City and London (Imilan et al., 2016), or Mexico City and Hanoi (Boudreau et al., 2016). Other interregional comparisons on these themes are explored in more detail below, comparing Mexico City and Abidjan (Schteingart, 1985), as well as Mexico City and Washington D.C. (Schteingart, 1997; 2018a; 2018b).

d) Globalization

Globalization's effects in the 1980s and 90s make it a subject of interest that inspires many comparative studies, continuing in subsequent decades. In this fourth analytical focal point, we need to distinguish two types of research: one on the local impact of these global processes, and the other on global cities. In both types, the authors prioritize case studies and data on the localization and structure of economic activities, giving priority to a general overview of cities. This research can be connected to studies on the social division of space, finance-driven development, and types of government (Savitch, 1988), or the role of cities in the world system (Knox, 1995), which are present in the other analytical focal points that we propose.

Analyses mainly focusing on the Global North have focused on explanations of the global city, building theories and definitions with comparative studies (Brenner, 2011; Sassen, 1995), or producing classifications of cities based on their role in the global economy

(Friedmann, 2002). These analyses include what McFarlane (2010) has identified as studies that identify urban paradigms with influence or relevance to different regions, provide case studies, test hypotheses, and develop concepts (Abu-Lughod, 1995; Fainstein et al., 1992). Examples of work on the global city and its characteristics, include Abu-Lughod's (1995) studies on Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles, which focused on identifying not only their shared features but also their differences, related to their historical trajectories and their political, cultural, and demographic contexts.

Comparative studies are also useful in exploring the local effects of the globalization process, particularly in Latin American cities such as Mexico City (Aguilar, 2002). Although it would be reductionist to consider all the urban transformations in the late twentieth century as a consequence of globalization, these studies help to clarify why the spatial distribution of economic activities influences labor and housing markets, migration patterns, urban growth, and government programs.

Regardless of the strategies and concepts used to compare the effects of globalization, most comparisons focus on cities from the same regions. Moreover, comparisons between cities of different regions tend to take the cities of the Global North as paradigms (Sassen, 1999). Sassen (1999) compares, for example, cities like New York, London, and Tokyo to identify shared features in their roles within the global economy, based on the hypothesis of global cities and their characteristics. However, studies of the effects of globalization have opened a window on cities in other regions and generated critiques of the paradigms of model global cities (Hill and Kim, 2000). The analysis of the local effects of global processes has made it possible to compare cities in different regions, especially in recent research on the role of international finance capital and public-private cooperation in urban renewal projects (Brill, 2022; Robinson et al., 2021; Teo, 2021). These recent studies criticize the approach of comparative urban research that assumes the Global North's paradigmatic status.

e) Cities and the environment

The interaction between the city and the environment, and the problems associated with it, has also inspired comparative studies from the 1980s to the present, which we group together as the fifth main theme. Evidence on the environmental impacts of urban growth and for environmental risks in cities is essential for the revival of this theme, which relates to aspects of the other analytical focal points. The goal of these comparisons is often linked to the design of strategies to confront urban environmental problems, with particular importance in recent years given to the effects of climate change (García Sánchez et al., 2018; Mabon and Shih, 2021).

The nature of this subject of interest invites comparisons between cities from different global regions, usually employing diverse sources of information and methodological

strategies adapted to the proposed research problem. Instead of being guided by a dominant theory, comparisons tend to be based on the study of local or regional situations, drawing on a wide range of disciplines and concepts. We have identified analyses of urban services, the consequences of cities' growth and expansion, and climate change (Aylett, 2013; Castán Broto and Bulkeley, 2013).

In terms of urban services, we can mention case studies on water policy and management (Tiburcio and Perevochtchikova, 2012), green space management and access (Baycan-Levent and Nijkamp, 2009), and the status of sanitation infrastructure (Lancione and McFarlane, 2016). The emphasis on the role of infrastructure incorporates a perspective on the outcomes of the material conditions of daily life, and has made a significant impact on comparative analyses between cities (McFarlane et al., 2017; Niranjana, 2022). This focus on infrastructure has led to studies related to other focal points and include both infrastructure construction and management as well as the everyday experience of living in cities, an area in which climate change becomes relevant. Whether they analyze infrastructure or not, comparisons on the consequences of change engage with aspects such as urban governance (Castán Broto and Bulkeley, 2013), and the patterns of resource consumption using the urban metabolism concept (Delgado Ramos et al., 2012).

The study of the relationship between the city and the environment has not only focused on infrastructure and public services, or on the consequences of climate change. Indeed, other important themes in this group relate to the environmental consequences of urban growth and the pollution of air (De Souza, 2001; Sarzynski, 2012), water (Tiburcio and Perevochtchikova, 2012), and land (Nijkamp et al., 2002). In this regard, we can refer to Schteingart y Salazar (2005), on Mexico City's environmental impact on natural areas as the capital has expanded; Lungo (2004), on urban growth in Central America; and Ojima (2007), on urban sprawl in Brazilian cities and its implications for sustainability.

V. Our comparative studies

In order to incorporate some comparative analyses in the urban studies that we have carried out at different points in our research, below we will include a summary of them as they can properly illustrate different types of experiences in the various themes and regions. After presenting the cases in question, we will include some comparisons of these works with more recent ones, in order to arrive at some conclusions about the emphases or orientations that have informed the comparisons at various moments within the Latin American region and between regions.

The first comparative analysis, carried out in the early 1970s sought to show the different characteristics of the internal structure of Latin American metropolises, in relation to the specific types of development processes in the societies of the region, with an emphasis on the relationship between general process and urban processes (Schteingart and Tor-

res, 1973). Specifically, a comparison was made of the spatial distribution of social groups, and the role of the city center in relation to the other areas, as an important element of the urban structure of three cities: Buenos Aires, Santiago, and Lima. The economic, social, and spatial conditions of these cities' respective countries—Argentina, Chile, and Peru—vary due to development and urbanization processes at different historical junctures, known as the first and second periods of metropolitanization in Latin America.

The common element in all three cases was the region-dependent urbanization, and this was related to urban growth, general economic processes, and the internal organization of the city. The conclusion was that the three cases evolved from a similar colonial model that suffered a crisis in the second half of the 1800s, as a result of economic changes in each country. The elites abandoned the historic centers and the city modernized, albeit with different levels of intensity and at different times, resulting in *a family of cases* rather than a typical model of the Latin American city. The comparative exercise ends with a discussion of a very influential hypothesis in that period, introduced by Gideon Sjöberg (1965), based on transcultural studies, rejecting the view that Latin American cities had to follow the American model of deteriorating centers and suburbanization, as they grow and develop over time.

The second comparative analysis was developed in the 1980s, in two different regions, both in the Global South: Mexico and the Côte d'Ivoire in Africa. The more limited topics focused on urban land and the production of the built environment (Schteingart, 1985). The aim was to analyze the problems of land use and appropriation, taking into account its administration by the state in order to ensure the proper settlement of the majority of the population. The premise of this comparative analysis could contribute important elements to the effects of the existence of collectively used land on urban development, within different socioeconomic contexts, different types of state participation in urban issues, in different stages of development of their respective societies. All of these discussions could help to nuance the findings of individual studies and broaden the scope of analysis.

Although it seemed unusual at first to make this comparison, its usefulness became apparent because of the well-defined thematic area: the effect of the presence of collective forms of land ownership on urban development—in other words, different levels of state participation and control in relation to the configuration of the space for different social groups. The contextual differences were linked to countries' different geographical sizes, populations, industrial development, natural resources, and the existence of different historical processes following their colonization and the length of colonial rule. In particular, the fact that the countries entered the global economic system at different times partly explains why African societies were penetrated differently by colonial rule compared to Latin American societies.

The main comparative conclusions sought to answer the question of the potential effects of collective land ownership within certain models of dependent capitalist develop-

ment, the types of state intervention in urban development, and the use of land by different social groups. Without denying the negative effects of private land ownership and the capitalist use of space in order to create a balanced and less unequal city, the comparative analysis was nevertheless useful as a means of demystifying some ideas about the need for greater state control, as in the case of Abidjan, in the shift from land's collective rural ownership to its urban use. The comparative study clearly showed that it was not so much the state's greater or lesser involvement that was important, but rather its social meaning and content, which is closely linked to broader social considerations. For example, state intervention in land management was greater in Côte d'Ivoire than in Mexico, but this helped to support the groups most directly linked to a rapid accumulation of capital (a finding consistent with the development model based on rapid accumulation rather than distribution) at the expense of large sectors of society that did not play a prominent or organized role in local society. In this way, the state's clientelist dynamic was visible in the almost total absence of popular social movements or organizations that could exert pressure on their behalf. This led us to add nuance to our conclusions about the Mexican case, our more permanent focus of study; we were more clearly critical of the approach that idealizes planning, which sees the state as a neutral agent of the common good, above and beyond the various social conflicts (Scheingart, 1985).

The third analysis that we considered relevant to include in this summary of comparative experiences took place in the 1990s and later, toward the middle of the second decade of this century. It can also be considered among the studies of other regions, although in this case between the Global North and the Global South. The comparisons were made between Mexico City and Washington D.C., capitals of two countries with different levels of development but with strong economic and social connections. In the first comparative study in 1996, the analysis focused on U.S. social policies and their most recent developments. They were of particular interest because of their strong influence on the orientation of social policies that were also attempted to be implemented in Mexico, in the context of important changes in the country, in terms of the state's intervention model and its policies (Scheingart, 1997). However, the similarities of the social program models were accompanied by the existence of important differences in their application at the level of the capital city. In Washington, greater financial resources and, to some extent, more solidly established social organizations (particularly within the African-American community), revealed more positive results in terms of the improvements for the groups served. In Mexico, on the other hand, the transformations of social programs implied, in various ways, a regression compared to those put in place during the phase of a more vigorous development of a welfare state.

The second comparative study between Mexico City and Washington focused on aspects of the urban dynamics of capital cities and their metropolitan zones, after the 2008–2009 financial crisis that hit the most disadvantaged sectors of the U.S. society and especially members of local communities (Scheingart, 2018a; 2018b). The general comparisons

between metropolitan areas include data on their origin, population, employment, and the distribution of poverty in the metropolitan area, which were different for both case studies, taking into account the suburbanization and gentrification processes in both cities. The comparisons focus on the much higher percentage of poor people in the African-American population and, therefore, in the areas of the city where these groups live.

An important conclusion to be drawn from this comparison is the prominent role of the federal government in a city where it has a powerful influence in terms of job creation and consequent urban change; the situation is very different in the much more populous Mexico City, which has a far wider range of other urban and industrial activities and services, and these are more important than federal government activities. Although comparative studies of capital cities are seen in the context of the major economic difficulties facing both countries, with a significant increase in social inequalities among ethnic and racial groups or classes, similarities and differences become readily apparent in a comparative analysis between two urban phenomena located in countries with very different levels of development. Although the comparisons show that Mexico City clearly has a higher proportion of poor people than Washington D.C., it is important to note that even in the world's largest economy, large population groups, who are not recent migrants, such as the African-American population, have not been able to escape poverty. In Washington D.C., this problem is exacerbated by poor people's displacement to the periphery, where living conditions are often more difficult.

In reflecting on the methodological aspects of the three comparative experiences, it is important to note that the first study summarized here refers to the impossibility of making very precise comparisons due to the lack of data comparability, and instead examines the direction of major urban processes that are fundamental for the purposes of the study. In the second study, the comparisons were more qualitative, taking into account the theoretical frameworks applied in Africa and Latin America, as well as the different meanings of state policies regarding land and urban development. In the case of the first comparative study between Mexico City and Washington D.C., it soon became clear that it was an exploratory study and an initial attempt at a comparative study between the countries, and especially between cities, for which few comparative analyses existed. In contrast, for the second study conducted almost twenty years later, made more precise quantitative comparisons using more information, both from research carried out by academics specializing in urban issues in the United States and from our own research on Mexico.

In other words, comparative studies have generally used our own research as a source of information, in addition to studies by other researchers, supplemented with special studies to make comparisons in places such as Lima, Abidjan, and Washington D.C at different junctures of our exploration of comparative urban studies. It is also worth pointing out that the objectives of these comparisons have always been related to the emergence of new problems of social reality, with results of our own investigative purposes, and with the more general, theoretical and empirical context of these comparative trends.

VI. Discussions and reflections on other comparative studies

We have chosen some comparative analyses to contrast the three case studies mentioned above, and others that will help us to show the type of comparisons that are currently more frequent in the comparative research agendas of different countries.

Therefore, it seemed interesting to compare our study of three Latin American metropolises during the 1970s (Scheingart and Torres, 1973), with a comparative study of five Latin American cities: Buenos Aires, Santiago, and Lima—the same subjects of our 1973 study—plus Mexico City and Bogotá (Trejo and Niño Amézquita, 2022). The authors focus on metropolitan governance, essentially in terms of urban services such as water and sanitation infrastructure, public transportation, and waste collection, basic services for the proper functioning of a metropolitan zone.

The main theme of governance found in each of the five compared cases underwent an important development in the 1990s, and was naturally absent in the context of our comparisons of the 1970s, when the theme of dependent urbanization was dominant, touching on structural aspects of development in a global context. Naturally, these considerations do not coincide with interests that are much more local than the current studies. As a result, the analyses of the teams in the different cities involved in more recent research emphasize topics such as centralism, fragmentation, dispersion, and inequality in terms of the coverage and quality of the provision of these services by the relevant institutions, in some cases referring to the need for intergovernmental integration and coordination in order to provide them. The book's final chapter, in an effort to deliver some conclusions for the five cases, refers to the governance structures in metropolitan zones, indicating their political and administrative organization, since these arrangements define the control, planning, and implementation of policies. Changes in metropolises' jurisdictional aspects are discussed, given the expansion of metropolitan areas and the progressive fragmentation of competences with the development of decentralization processes; reference is also made to the problems arising from the presence of different authorities in each one of the case studies, specially created bodies, and coordination difficulties (Trejo and Niño Amézquita, 2022).

To conclude this comparison of comparisons, it is important to highlight the different objectives of both kinds of comparisons. In the former, the aim is to analyze urban development processes in a more structural context of countries and their location in the international arena; in the latter, the objectives relate to urban planning, institutional policies that have arisen with the changes brought about by the increasing complexity of urban growth and the population's needs. In this sense, it is also important not to forget the progress made in supporting comparative research, as well as the greater knowledge of some institutional responses and processes possible today and that were undoubtedly lacking almost four decades ago in Latin America.

As a confrontation for our comparative study between a Mexican city and an African counterpart (Mexico City and Abidjan), we were interested in selecting a recent study that

compares São Paulo (Brazil) and eThekweni (South Africa), focusing on the improvement of marginalized neighborhoods in both cities (Saraiva, 2022). The study offers a quick review of the various programs for the improvement of popular or irregular neighborhoods by various international organizations at various moments in recent decades, and concludes that no comparative studies have been made on the implementation of these programs in different places. This encourages the author of the study to attempt an innovative approach of comparing those programs in the two aforesaid cities. The connection of policies is used as a methodological tool to carry out the comparison, and for long periods these policies have revealed similarities and differences between the cases analyzed.

Emphasis is placed on the connections between local and supranational considerations, precisely at the most crucial junctures when the decision-making process took place in each case study. Through an analysis of policy linkages, both cases show the relations between global circuits of urban development policies and local processes, observing the historical and political situations of each city and how these considerations influence the results obtained. These political situations and relations were researched between 2014 and 2019, reviewing the existing literature for both Brazil and for South Africa, including in-depth interviews with prominent local actors, who revealed how the institutional dynamics took shape, and the political actors for each case being compared (Saraiva, 2022).

An important common conclusion for both cities, which evolved from similar historical situations and starting points (after comparing the progress of the neighborhood improvements, taking into account the institutional and political situations that existed prior to the connection) is that in both São Paulo and in eThekweni, the consolidation of democracy continued with the development of more technocratic processes, at the expense of earlier neighborhood improvement initiatives, focused on community empowerment. However, by looking at how each case can be related to the other, the so-called linkage process reveals how similar policies produced different outcomes that should not be seen as static or permanent.

By contrasting this comparative study between cities in two similar regional contexts (Latin America-Africa) (Schteingart, 1985), we also see significant differences in terms of context, since our case does not include processes that have a common reference point of institutional programs at the international level, but instead the orientation of state intervention in regard to the non-private ownership of land, again taking into account—in the older case—the issue of more structural processes related to the orientation of state intervention in different contexts of countries' insertion into the international context.

To conclude the comparison of comparisons, we will look at one made between a city in India and one in the United Kingdom (Chennai and London) in order to identify some differences and overlaps with our comparisons of the 1990s and 2010s between Mexico and the United States (Mexico City and Washington D.C.) (Schteingart, 1997; 2018a;

2018b). Both comparisons involved cases of the Global North and Global South. In other words, the comparisons are generally of regions that are largely different due to their level of development (Niranjana, 2022).

The new comparison summarized below refers to the water supply infrastructure of these cities. It is based on the hypotheses that, according to the most prevalent literature, the infrastructure in the urban centers of the Global South is more fragmented and less complete than in the cities of the North. However, this analysis contradicts these theoretical arguments. In fact, by applying something called an experimental comparison, Niranjana (2022) tries to show a certain heterogeneity within a paradigmatic urban theory, using what he calls a “minor theory,” but which is useful to question certain predominant generalizations. In other words, with this example, by using a comparative approach to consider the specific aspects of water infrastructure in Chennai and London, the idea is to diversify thinking about cities, instead of repeating generalized considerations about the divisions between the Global North and the Global South. The comparison is considered experimental because the study deliberately chooses two urban centers of very different sizes and densities, and focuses on their respective possibilities for constructing infrastructure management processes, without developing hypotheses of similarities or differences. Instead, this research allows each city to openly pose its own questions and sociomaterial specificities. This experimental approach, based to some extent on relatively recent ideas of aforementioned English researchers such as Robinson (2011; 2015), includes a shift toward “minor records,” which are undoubtedly useful to point out cases that, albeit small in scale, help to add nuance to the generalizations that can stem from certain mainstream arguments.

Although the study highlights three prominent aspects that emerged from the comparative study, technological expertise is the most widely discussed. One cannot overlook the fact that the comparative study placed special emphasis on the use of concepts such as fragmentation, expertise, and rationality, attempting to identify them in each analysis and observing how they emerged organically in specific contexts through practice in the installation and functioning of infrastructure. The conclusion is that an experimental comparison of a city like Chennai with a city such as London leads to the discovery of different and special aspects not only in a southern city, but also in a northern one. Another finding is that comparisons should not only include more cities and greater diversification, but also the expansion of urban studies to redefine, to some extent, what we understand as urban or the plurality of urban spaces.

In our comparative studies of cities in Mexico and the United States, we show that the generally more favorable conditions in the more developed counties have produced more favorable outcomes of similar policies applied in both contexts, and that, although in a developed country like the United States large sectors of the population suffer far higher levels of poverty than the rest, there is a lower proportion of poor people, even in the case of the African-American community, than in Mexico. But we have indicated that,

at the level of social inequality, we cannot point to a clear division between a country in the Global North and one in the Global South. Instead, we find a relatively very negative situation for a developed nation, where there has been a failure to properly integrate large numbers of a population that are not recent migrants and have lived in the country for centuries. Income inequality has increased dramatically in the United States, making it one of the worst-performing developed countries in this regard.

VII. Conclusions

In this section, we present some final thoughts on the comparative studies on urban research, their reach in the construction of theory, and the role of comparisons between cities from different regions. Based on our thematic classification, and our comparisons of comparisons, we can observe some shifts and nuances in the content, goals, and types of comparison. In other words, what is compared and why it is compared varies depending on the subject and even on the period of the urban research.

In general, we observed a shift in the aim of the comparisons from the observation of paradigms, or urban models and general theories, to a predominant focus on studies of local relations and processes. In this way, the study of manifestations of a general urban theory or typology gives way to an analysis of social processes in their specific context, analyzing the connections and relationships that characterize contemporary cities (Brill, 2022; Robinson, 2022; Ward, 2010). For example, while initially the comparison would help construct a general model of the Latin American city dominated by theoretical paradigms, this was rapidly nuanced in the availability of empirical information on these cities, like a family of cases, without diminishing the importance of the role of the social and historical context of each case. This relates to a tendency in Latin American urban studies, expressed by various authors, in which case studies do not focus on cities as a whole but on specific areas, in order to observe local processes and aspects within them, as well as in-depth analyses (Carrión and Dammert-Guardia, 2016; Duhau, 2000; Schteingart, 2000).

We also observed a fundamental shift in the role of the context of the case studies and in the rationale for case study selection. Indeed, it's important to note that while comparative methods have always included case studies and analyses of local processes, we have seen a shift in the role of the context as a generator of the underlying hypotheses for the selection of cases and analysis. In this respect, this leads to comparisons based on local dynamics and can move beyond the sweeping, deterministic perspectives of cities and their historical contexts (Brill, 2022; Teo, 2021). The role of comparison in the construction of theory has been modified with the increase in studies that, instead of seeking to construct a theoretical paradigm of cities, is focused on developing minor theories, as we have observed in the comparison of comparisons.

When considering the scope of comparison in generating urban theory, we propose that comparative studies have the potential to contribute to the theoretical understanding of processes when the role of historical contexts is acknowledged, and when a dialectical relationship is assumed between conceptual and abstract approaches without resorting to essentialisms. Concepts, instead of being rejected, work to orient the research questions and observations, but a deterministic approach must be avoided as this prevents the identification of innovative aspects or nuances that arise in comparative studies. In this sense and under these conditions, interregional comparisons offer a very broad potential to develop urban theory.

It seemed important to us not only to refer to the use of broad theoretical frames of reference, or to the necessity or otherwise of recourse to global processes of the insertion of cities and countries into the more general context of international capitalist relations—to which we referred in particular when comparing some of our comparisons with more recent examples—but also to revise how these final comparisons of the text relate to research themes previously proposed.

Thus, our comparative research of three Latin American cities (Scheingart and Torres, 1973), clearly falls within the initial research area described above (“Development and dependency”), which is relevant to the 1960s and 70s, and which takes into account urban growth, as well as cities’ sociospatial structure, referring similarly to certain typologies of cities. On the other hand, the more recent comparative study of Latin American cities (Trejo and Niño Amezquita, 2022), with which we have compared our first study, is partly found in the second theme of comparative studies (“Social movements, conflicts, and local government”), particularly in the evolution of this theme toward studies of local government and governance.

For our comparative study of Mexico City and Abidjan (Scheingart, 1985), we could say that both cases have various aspects that would allow us to place them in the third research area (“Social division of space”), which appears at different times and includes important themes such as access to land, housing, and poverty. This comparison between two cities in the Global South, is compared to a very recent one between São Paulo and eThekweni, in Brazil and South Africa, respectively (Saraiva, 2022), in which the core subjects are located within the same line of research, as reference is made to neighborhood improvement, an area in which issues such as poverty, housing, and land become subjects of particular relevance.

Finally, our comparisons between different regions of the Global North and the Global South, Mexico City and Washington D.C. (Scheingart, 1997; 2018a; 2018b), are also located within the third line of research, “Social division of space”, due to its relevance to comparisons in regard to issues of poverty, housing, and spatial organization. At the same time, some components of the second thematic area are also present, in regard to conflicts and local governments and their policies. In contrast, the cities of Chennai and London, in India and the United Kingdom (Niranjana, 2022), to which we compare our

comparative studies, could be identified in the fifth research area (“Cities and the environment”), since they refer to local situations, the theme of urban services, and, more specifically, to the issue of the managing of infrastructure for these services.

In this way, we can conclude that our comparisons are located in the different research areas addressed in this work, and that the examples with which we compare our cases are sometimes to be found in the same areas of research, and sometimes in different ones. In other words, not only are there different situations in terms of the nature of general context, but there are also different study themes.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that comparisons between cities vary over time, according to the emergence of new subjects that are relevant to social reality, or according to the results of previous research. It is also worth noting that these transformations of comparisons are related to the availability of data and methods for conducting research. In fact, the information available influences the scope of the comparisons, since the research capabilities—and therefore the proposal of case studies and hypotheses—are related to the existence of relevant and accessible sources of information. Similarly, obtaining empirical information from different assumptions and problematizations is associated with the possibilities of multidisciplinary collaborations and the existence of support for comparative urban research. In fact, the growing support for urban research in general, and comparative urban research in particular, combined with the emergence of new sources of information and the development of innovative data analysis techniques, has enabled comparative analyses that include greater depth and detail in the cases compared, situations that can logically offer new insights into the theoretical aspects that emerge from these comparisons. In response to emerging social issues and changes in the research field, comparisons maintain their relevance and potential within the field of urban studies.

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