



Research without researchers: southern theory critique of research practices

Nipesh Palat Narayanan

Centre Urbanisation Culture Société, Institut national de la recherche scientifique (INRS),
Montreal, H2X 1E3, Canada

Correspondence: Nipesh Palat Narayanan (nipesh.palat.narayanan@inrs.ca)

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Abstract. The metropolitan rootedness of urban studies has been under critique for more than 2 decades. The call for more studies from “elsewhere” and theorization from “outside” the North Atlantic circuits of knowledge production has changed the landscape of urban theory. However, the genius loci of this urban theory still lies in the metropolis (centre of power and knowledge). One key reason for this metropolitan locatedness is the lack of attention paid to geo- and bio-politics of knowledge which separates/excludes the ontological location of the researchers from research practice. This separation/exclusion allows a research practice wherein data are produced from the field, theorization happens elsewhere, and the researcher manages this process (as objectively as possible). This schema evades the locationality of research questions/concerns, as to where they come from, and how the ontological location of the researcher produces them. This paper discusses the need to recentre the researcher to evade what allegorically becomes “research without researchers”.

1 Researcher and the field

The COVID19-related travel restrictions for the first time gave a taste, to the privileged few, of how dehumanizing crossing borders could be for the majority; citizens from a country can be refused entry/exit, and there was a constantly changing set of documents to let one pass, obliging one to put one’s body up for examination, and infantilization to an extent that one would be taught how to wash one’s hands. Nonetheless, it has been and still is the reality for the majority of those whose skin colour is not right or whose passports are not issued by the right country. The point here is to think of who or which kind of researcher can do what research. This point is not just a question of racialization or embodiment (of bodies, identities, and papers), but it touches a large gamut of aspects which can be a concern for anyone, including the most privileged researchers. The family situations, bodily capabilities, health (mental and physical), care responsibilities, financial resources, past experiences (trauma), and much more play a role in what is researched and how it is researched – beyond the contorted imaginary of a free researcher or academic freedom (cf. Gutiérrez-Aguilar et al., 2016).

Here, my own work can serve as an anecdotal example. I study the urban from different locations, namely Montreal, Florence, Delhi, and Colombo. Of course, the locations of these sites fit very well into the rubric of north–south comparison and aid my contribution to southern theory. But my selection of these four sites is coincidental, emerging from the geo- and bio-politics of knowledge production. I cannot freely choose research sites based on my theoretical needs. For example, I live in Montreal, and New York would be a very apt comparison for my interest in urban imaginaries and knowledge hegemony. However, I dare not cross the border over to the city which is less than 1.5 h by aeroplane. Instead, I chose to compare it with Delhi; travelling 18 h is less traumatic, all because of which country’s passport I hold. Again, here, let us not focus only on the disenfranchisements. I can expand the theoretical limits of my work on street food by studying processes in Mexico City, which is geographically closer to Montreal than other cities I study. I do not need a visa for Mexico, but studying processes in Mexico City would need me to update my linguistic capabilities, learn cultural intricacies, and spend long time there. At the current stage of my career (tenure track) I can choose (a privilege)

to not put myself through these efforts and rather continue to travel to Delhi, Colombo, or Florence – vastly increasing my ecological footprint. I choose Delhi, Colombo, and Florence, for I have lived in these cities, have friends, know the social codes, and navigate the public realm with ease. In both examples above, my theoretical orientation and my empirical work were subjectively and arbitrarily decided; I study what I study because it interests me and because I can; i.e. my ontological location allows/promotes it. By ontological location, I mean here the theoretical locations of my research concerns and the debates I draw/benefit from. Nonetheless, in my research outputs (mostly journal articles and book chapters), I neither discuss my ontological location nor does the format allow for this discussion (unless it is the focus of the article, such as the present one). Omission of the discussion on why it interests me or why I can study it allows for a universalization of the dominant ontology perpetrated as objective (cf. Hountondji, 2009; Alatas, 2000; Houssay-Holzschuch, 2020). That is, research concerns emanating from my ontological location become simply research concerns (elimination of the researcher). In this light, recentring of the researcher fosters two key objectives which I will discuss in the following sections: (i) de-universalization of methods and (ii) pluriversalizing urban theory.

2 Reading research practices using southern theory

Researchers are humans; their biases are well documented, and their positionalities are well formalized in the way research objectives are sought. Thus, researchers are epistemologically present in the research practices. However, ontologically, they are absent, and thus is the geo- and bio-politics of knowledge which Mignolo (2005:122) elucidated as follows:

... knowledge is geo- and bio- politically constituted. That is, geo-politics of knowledges derives from local experiences (as science derives from local experiences of Western capitalist countries) in which the geo-historical aspect accounts for the tension, negotiation, and violence in all the terrains touched by Western colonial expansion; while the bio-political accounts for the experiences, needs, angers, interests, and critical acumen of the “scientist” or critical intellectual who feels in her or his body the colonial matrix of power and translates it into conceptual analysis and arguments toward the decolonization of knowledge (that is, one of the fundamental components of the colonial matrix of power).

Mobilizing Mignolo’s (2015) argument for research practices could lead to the question: where do the research questions and concerns come from? Is it not that the research interests are personal and the concerns collectively located in the research environments (usually metropolitan)? In this

sense, what good is learning from elsewhere (the contestation of this elsewhere withstanding) if the resulting urban studies are still located in the metropolis? Mobilizing Connell’s (2011) formulation, metropolis here stands for the centre of power and knowledge. The subjective nature of research concerns, its localities, and recentring of the researchers (a human being) are important for thinking about the futures of research practices. I would like to flag here that the ontological location or metropolis are not necessarily geographical locations, like north or west, but rather a political position to highlight the multidimensional/scalar convergences of knowledge and power.

The discussions around the positionality and privileges of the researchers are not new, though; they have been limited to the data collection/production phase which for many in urban studies/geography is operationalized via fieldwork. What happens in the field (methods or even conduct of the researcher) or during the data collection phase in general is based on the research questions/concerns which are located elsewhere away from the field. This focus on the ontological location of the researcher is to critique the research practice and postulate future southern theory possibilities of research practices. Southern theory, in brief, is a study of knowledge hegemonies (Connell, 2011; Palat Narayanan, 2021).

The critiques of urban studies’ metropolitan rootedness have led to significant debates towards altering the landscape of urban theory (Patel, 2014; Montalva Barba, 2023). The core arguments have been that we should study and theorize the urban from “elsewhere” (as well). The elsewhere here has been varied and contested from the global south (Roy, 2009; Cornea, 2023) and the global east (Müller, 2020) to other cities (Véron, 2010; Pham et al., 2023) and to other practices (Ray, 2021; Bathla, 2024; Palat Narayanan and Cornea, 2024) (to name a few of the epistemic clusters). In sum, the literature maintains that metropolitan urban studies are parochial and local; so, to make it global, we should study and theorize from elsewhere(s). These pertinent attempts to dislocate metropolitan urban studies withstanding and successful the genius loci of urban theory still are based in the metropolis; i.e. the research agenda is still generated in the metropolis (Palat Narayanan, 2022; Samanta, 2021). This metropolitan locatedness is possible by discursively separating the researcher from the research conception and creating, what allegorically is the title of this paper, research without researchers. This absence allows for the universalization of research practices for it is rendered as emanating from objective theoretical frameworks. Such universalization situates research in hegemonic locations, making urban theory and studies ever more metropolitan.

A key part of what research is done arises from researcher’s subjective interests (the bio-politics of knowledge production) and privileges (the geo-politics of knowledge production). Locating the ontological location of the researcher, more than a critique of metrocentricity, is to highlight the need for a pluriversal knowledge politics; that is, one

that promotes diverse questions on what to know rather than diversity on how to know it and where to know it from.

Furthermore, questioning the ontological location of researchers allows the provincialization of research practices and the privileges on which contemporary urban research is built. Progress in urban studies (and human geography in general) often takes the suggestive tone of what should be done next (usually using the term “turn”). However, who can take these turns remains elusive. For example, the recent surge in calls for comparative urban studies is varied in positions and theoretically sound. However, it evades the question of who can do comparative studies. Just a pithy survey of researchers will make us realize that not everyone can engage in a comparative study of their choice. This realization is important for us to stop universalizing the turns (often postulated for the entire discipline), be aware of our privileges, and be inclusive about our declarations of the future course of the urban research or, to rephrase Ren (2022:1741), “humble the chest-pounding, posturing, privilege of thinking”.

3 Researcher centric subjective research practices

There is a certain advantage in producing knowledge from the metropolis for it becomes desirable, and the geo-political positioning makes it pertinent (cf. Alatas, 2000; Hountondji, 2009; Said, 1977). For example, for decades, Latin American scholars, many of whom are rooted in local struggles and indigenous communities, have been writing about (de/anti-)colonization. However, the newer writings from the metropolis is bringing, what some have called, the decolonial turn¹. The tragedy of this turn is that one can claim expertise in decolonial theory without ever engaging with the path-breaking works of those² Latin American scholars. Furthermore, the nouveau decolonial experts are located in the metropolis (a large portion in the UK, USA, and anglophone Canada), some of whom are employed by universities that have (are) directly benefited (benefiting) from European extractivism and USA’s imperialism. The experts and gatekeepers of decolonial knowledge come from the metropolis and render their knowledge as universal while eliminating thought which came before their domination. When discussed, if at all, the earlier decolonial works remain particular, arising from a specific context, whereas the metropolitan decolonial is universal and can be applied to anything anywhere. Even within this metropolitan decolonial knowledge, certain positions are off-limits; e.g. the silencing of many scholars who discuss the colonization of Palestine (Griffiths et al., 2024; Shwaikh and Gould, 2019). Critiquing this

¹Intentionally not referencing publications that make this claim to not single out some works; cf. Táiwò (2022) for a similar set of arguments discussing scholarship from and on Africa and the monocausal use of decolonization.

²Always nameless, always faceless, and always hidden.

metropolitan rootedness of knowledge production, Chatterjee (2008:291) has aptly argued:

Europe and the Americas, the only true subjects of history, have thought out on our behalf not only the script of colonial enlightenment and exploitation, but also that of our anticolonial resistance and postcolonial misery.

The above example is merely to show how the elimination of the ontological position of the researcher leads to the reinforcement of the existing dominations and hegemonies (cf. Dabashi, 2015, for more on this theme). This does not mean that a researcher from the metropolis cannot develop decolonial theory, but it does mean that the process of developing that decolonial theory cannot be universalized. That is, the realization that our research concerns are subjective and that our research practices emanate from our privileges will de-universalize research methods. Furthermore, research methods do not objectively emanate from research concerns (or theoretical goals) but depend on the ontological location of the researcher. So, future research practice will have to de-universalize and discuss methods in tandem with the researcher; i.e. there is no research method without a subjective researcher. This will also allow a more comprehensive appreciation of various research practices, most notably of the researchers who are strongly rooted in the context (cf. Smith, 1999) or those who, by living in the context, take up a long-term study (partially emanating from the geo-political and bio-political aspects of not being able to study elsewhere).

This comprehensive appreciation of various research practices has also put into question the “global” ambitions of urban theory. The parochiality of this global becomes most visible in the turns, where the research concerns of a few metropolitan researchers become the ground for labelling the shift in the discipline. In another sense, it is appropriate as the discipline tells what you need to do (a metropolitan trait). Thus, as Nigam (2020:19) has aptly phrased, it would be pertinent to highlight “who determines what the agenda of the day for theory will be”.

If research concerns are subjective, then the resulting urban theory is ontologically located in the research context of the researcher. If the ontological location which dictates “what we should know” remains rooted in the metropolis, then the parochiality of the global becomes visible. This visibility, and hopefully acknowledgement, paves the way for multiple globes, pluriversal urban theories, and research practices.

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