



The academic publishing system in crises: absences in international urban studies

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1 Whose crisis is this? The lack of varied understandings of the “multi-crisis” in urban studies publications

The proliferation of narratives of “multi-crisis” (a translation of the German concept *Mehrfachkrise*), beginning with the highlighted awareness of the climate crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, the geopolitical crisis in Ukraine, the subsequent global financial crisis and the most recent the political crisis in the Middle East, has suggested a particular set of seemingly universal understandings of contemporary challenges. This understanding of the crisis, however, is largely informed by urban studies knowledge production, which is centred around the West (Mott and Cockayne, 2017; Walker and Boamah, 2019; Kong and Qian, 2019; Sharifi et al., 2023). So, when it is referred to an acute crisis situation, the following question arises: whose crisis is this? Referring to Roy’s (2005) exclamation of a “state of emergency”, this crisis situation can instead be framed as simply a continuation of previously precarious conditions in many geographical contexts. For the rapidly urbanizing African, Asian and Latin American regions, crisis not only is acute but also characterized by persistence. In world regions where the impact of climate change was first to unfold, the AIDS, malaria and Zika endemics have already shaped the consciousness of health issues, where border instability and contested governments are paired with internationally overlooked local conflicts and uprisings; the impacts of the 2008 economic crisis are often still lingering and need to be taken into account in the simultaneous processes of urban growth and socio-economic change.

This lack of varied understandings of the “multi-crisis” is exacerbated by the relative lack of urban studies publications addressing urban issues that are relevant to these areas (Kong and Qian, 2019). Although the epistemological

discussions in urban studies have started to spread their focus outside of a West-centric scope to include experiences of “Southern” urbanization and urban development issues around the globe, as I will lay out in this comment, perspectives from the “South” and the “East” and perspectives on the “South” and the “East” are still vastly underrepresented in academic publishing. The intervention will discuss these systemic disparities based on my work in projects constellations with universities in Brazil, Ethiopia, Tanzania, South Africa and Nigeria and on the board of the TRIALOG association, which publishes the *TRIALOG Journal* (<https://www.trialog-journal.de/en/>, last access: 13 August 2024).

2 Representation in international urban studies publishing

For individual researchers, choices in academic publishing are currently strongly determined by the individual rewards a publication yields. Yet, as I will argue, these choices are made within a publication system that does not prioritize research progress and knowledge production. In urban studies, just as in other fields of research, the researcher’s employability, fundability and disciplinary significance is increasingly measured in the quantity and reading metrics of their publications. These impact factors are calculated by bibliometric databases. The largest and most acclaimed are commercial services, namely Scopus, run by the Dutch publishing company Elsevier, and Web of Science, run by Clarivate Analytics (Berlin Universities Publishing, 2024). These companies generate lists of accredited publications, monitor the citations for each article and rank journals according to their performance. Journals themselves apply to the bibliometric databases for inclusion in the rankings. Overall, the British

newspaper *The Guardian* (Buranyi, 2017) has termed the academic publishing landscape a “for-profit oligopoly functioning within an otherwise heavily regulated, government-funded enterprise”. The newspaper article reports on a study conducted in 2015, in which just three companies (Elsevier, Springer and Wiley-Blackwell) accounted for half of the scientific publishing market (Larivière et al., 2015).

Perhaps due to the political awareness in urban studies, there are more notable exceptions of independent publishing in the field. Despite being criticized for its dominating position in the citation circuit by Walker and Boamah (2019), the *International Journal for Urban and Regional Research (IJURR)* (<https://www.ijurr.org>, last access: 13 August 2024) is independently owned by the IJURR Foundation. In German discourse, the *sub|urban* journal (<https://zeitschrift-suburban.de/sys/index.php/suburban>, last access: 13 August 2024) was launched by a collective of researchers and is run as a not-for-profit endeavour. Despite efforts to counter the centring of the academic publishing system in the North Atlantic region, for example with the launch of the *Urbanisation* journal (<https://ihs.co.in/research/urbanisation-journal/>, last access: 13 August 2024) in India, most of the urban studies publishing outlets are also located in the North Atlantic region (Müller, 2021). The power asymmetry is reflected in the editorial boards of geography journals, where in a global study covering 126 geography journals it was revealed that less than 5% of the 5202 editorial board members were located in Central and South America, the Middle East, and Africa combined (Hedding and Breetzke, 2021). Meanwhile, almost 80% of editorial board members were located in Europe and North America (Hedding and Breetzke, 2021). There is, hence, also a disproportional absence of scholars based in the Global South in the specific publishing bodies of the interdisciplinary field of urban studies (Watson, 2016).

This absence is also reflected in the production of content, as Sharifi et al. (2023) show in their recent bibliometric analysis, where the “Global South” is strongly underrepresented in academic journal publications in the fields of urban studies and regional and urban planning. Their analysis of Web of Science data shows that with 39% of all publications the USA holds primacy in the publishing field and is followed by the UK with 12%, China with 6%, Canada with 4.9%, Australia with 4.5%, the Netherlands with 4.4% and Germany with 3.3% (Sharifi et al., 2023). Current urban studies narratives are, hence, shaped by north-western accounts and remain largely unexamined by Eastern and Southern viewpoints (Houssay-Holzschuch, 2021). Walker and Boamah (2019) further explore the question of who is academically favoured by academic publishing in critical urban studies and describe an “uneven production of knowledge” that is prevalent in academia. Thereby, power is distributed asymmetrically in the academic networks, which has led to a reproduction of white heteromascularity (Walker and Boamah, 2019). As they further point out, these homophilic

practices have also led to the marginalization of topics that could have been brought in by a more diverse set of geographers (Walker and Boamah, 2019). Thereby, the politics of citation also underscore the power of a largely homogeneous set of researchers (Mott and Cockayne, 2017; Kong and Qian, 2019; Houssay-Holzschuch, 2021). With these biases in mind, it has been long disputed whether scientific knowledge production in the social sciences can claim universality, whether it needs to be explicit about its contextual validity and whether its established theory needs to be “provincialized” (Chakrabarty, 2007). In contrast to the approach of “provincialization” by Chakrabarty, Winkler (2018) argues that recognizing that texts are resistant to established research practice as contributions to knowledge production and including them in the discussion is the key to diversifying the research content. What remains largely undisputed is that the stark underrepresentation of entire world regions from the discourse proves to be problematic to argue for any kind of valid generalization in urban theory building (Kong and Qian, 2019). Houssay-Holzschuch (2020) therefore advocates for underscoring the aim of diversification through the acceptance of “provincialization” and loss of influence of former colonial hegemony – particularly in the French and German realm – in favour of including research from the “periphery”. However, the evidence cited by Kong and Qian (2019) underlines that the proceeding penetration of anglophone institutions by scholars with ties to Asia, Africa, Latin America and other underrepresented world regions is still waiting to be matched by a diversification of the powerful publication and citation networks within them *and* the relegation of resources to “peripheral” institutions in geographies outside of these tight citation networks.

It is this thematic and institutional gap that the *TRIALOG Journal* has been operating in while facing up to these very challenges of diversity and representation itself. Thereby it is the aim not only to include authors from different experience levels, regional affiliations, cultures and genders, but also to function as a transdisciplinary bridge between research and practice. Since its founding, all work on the journal, including writing, editing, production and distribution has been undertaken on a voluntary basis. The only recipients of pay are a professional typesetter, proofreader and IT assistant that provide their services on a contract basis. For *TRIALOG*, with its claim to speak about urban development in a “global context”, diversifying decision-making structures has become imperative. Since 2020 the *TRIALOG* association has had a mix of international and German board members who are, however, all based in Germany. Operating as an association under German law means having to prepare all documents regarding administration and finances in a German version, which requires at least part of the board members to be proficient German speakers and sets limits to the diversification process in this body. While such a mixed board is attainable, and a heterogeneous board has a legitimization in the research landscape, it still shows that it is

necessary to have more research outlets that operate under legal and language sets that are accessible to researchers in languages relevant to the local sites of research, in order to allow for more local self-determination and representation in academic discourse. With a majority of journals operating from North America and Europe, this is currently not the case. Areas where the diversification process within TRIALOG has been carried out more easily are the recruitment and selection of editorial teams for the individual thematic issues and the re-establishment of a more diverse advisory committee.

3 Challenges within the international urban studies publishing landscape

The need to close the representational gap for major world regions in urban studies coincides with major structural shifts in funding research publications. Large research fund, such as the EU with its Horizon programme, the UK Research and Innovation and the French state research funding, are making it mandatory to publish results from their funding lines open access (Houssay-Holzschuch, 2021; Gandy, 2023). For publishers this means that it is increasingly not the sale of the publications that is making money but rather the open-access fees. As an article in *El País* newspaper has reported, “Scientists paid large publishers over \$1 billion in four years to have their studies published with open access” (Ansele, 2023). The article further outlines that for every USD 1000 that the academic community spends on publishing in Elsevier, about USD 400 go to its shareholders. *Geographica Helvetica* in contrast is run by the independent publishing house Copernicus Publications as a “diamond” open access publication, meaning it charges no article processing charges or any other fees to authors or readers, thanks to full funding by the Swiss Academy of Science. An advantage of open access is that it provides an alternative to citation-based indexing. The Directory of Open Access Journals (<https://doaj.org>, last access: 13 August 2024) lists publications based on quality standards for the publication process and regular publication. In turn, the directory makes the publications searchable in their directory, which increases the visibility of the research output.

The approach to work within quantitative publication metrics and to strengthen national representation in the metrics has become state funding policy also outside of countries dominating the publication structures, such as China and South Africa. In this sense China has been quite successful, with various major journals now also including abstracts in Chinese. Also, South Africa has increased its research share in the Web of Science performance (Sharifi et al., 2023). Here, publicly funded researchers are part of an incentive policy of the South Africa’s National Research Foundation, which awards only publications in selected ranked journals. Yet, Mott and Cockayne (2017) advocate for a deliberate ap-

proach to citation and appreciation of heterogeneous scholarly work that will need further efforts on the side of the urban studies community. Addressing the representational underrepresentation therein becomes an issue of diversification within the system. However, this shift of publication funding from the reader to the author bears the risk that the fee structure will cement the current economic divide between research institutions. With researchers’ salaries as low as a few hundred US dollars in many African countries, the shift from the reader paying for access to a certain publication to the open-access models in which the researchers bear the cost to publish disadvantages researchers that lack access to resources. While the shift has made a lot of research available to African institutions online, which were previously not able to pay for subscriptions to journals, the open-access model creates a barrier to publishing for researchers in financially poorly equipped institutions that cannot pay these fees for their staff. They are left either to pay for publishing fees out of their own pocket or to use their larger network to find additional funding. This has therefore led to a second approach, in which independent not-for-profit publishers can make a difference by calculating open-access fees closer to the actual publishing cost, estimated between USD 200–1000 (Ansele, 2023). Here, it is important to actively manage who gets credit for research contributions and to find ways of creating grants and waivers for underfunded researchers.

For small, independent publishers like TRIALOG, the introduction of this model poses challenges. It requires major changes in the digital infrastructure to host the articles and changes in the funding and subscription structures on the side of the journals, which require investment and careful consideration of a viable cost distribution model that does not exclude authors from institutions in the global context. Funding for the running production (layout, print and distribution) of *TRIALOG Journal* comes from the members of the association that pay a membership fee, from advertising and, more recently, open-access fees. This funding structure has so far maintained the journal’s independent production and continued publishing despite the commercial oligopoly. Moving towards open access with increased awareness for the power imbalances in academic publishing will require substantial work input and additional funding and is an issue TRIALOG is currently discussing within its membership.

Diversification of journal content also faces obstacles when it comes to the peer-review processes that are being widely adopted as quality measures for academic publishing. With the skewed power relations in the citation and review circuits, non-established researchers from underrepresented world regions and early-career researchers face particular challenges in understanding the rules of the game and place their research work in publications with large visibility. Dismissal of non-native English speakers (Müller, 2021) makes passing peer review particularly difficult for anyone not raised with English as a native language. While edited volumes allow for co-created content, they are often not as

highly credited academically. For TRIALOG switching from an editorial co-production mode to a fully peer-review system would need some form of mentorship for practitioners and independent and early-career researchers to make it through a critical review process that does not work in their favour structurally. Setting this up would require a lot of resources, and there are not many templates to follow. TRIALOG are therefore producing a multi-section format that includes a double-blind peer-reviewed section and sections that accommodate more liberal formats which go through editorial review.

4 Moving beyond West-centric urban studies publishing institutions and formats

The reflections above show that the issues of absence of entire world regions in shaping academic discourse in urban studies can only partly be addressed within the existing publishing landscape. It is necessary to move beyond current forms of producing content and also beyond the restrictive conventions of journal articles. In discussing this, it is important to understand that the absence of world regions from the self-proclaimed “global” discourse reflected in international journals does not mean that no academic knowledge is produced in the realm of urban studies in these regions. Studying for my PhD on urbanization in Ethiopia, it was virtually impossible to obtain literature on the topic from Germany, even though I was lucky enough to be located in a city with an Ethiopian studies department. Travelling to Addis Ababa I was pleased to find a number of relevant publications in the Addis Ababa University book shop that were locally published. While it might seem plausible to try to overcome the obstacles of gate keeping and power play by placing Southern-perspective research to incorporate these knowledge sets into the international discourse, I have experienced that this also comes at the risk of co-optation. Walker and Boamah (2019) have described the issue of data extraction from the Global South to the Global North, which results from the uneven power relations discussed earlier. It also means publishing in a realm in which the framework of discourse is being set by diverging sets of interests and knowledge. While the lack of representation on editorial boards has been discussed previously, there are also limits on initiating discussions at conferences and conventions. While organizations such as the Association of European Schools of Planning (AESOP) are able to hold regular gatherings, their efforts to include Southern-centred topics does not make up for the fact that their counterpart, the Association of African Planning Schools (AAPS), is struggling to find funding for meetings. Without these opportunities to meet, discourse is hampered.

Further, certain sources of knowledge are systematically dismissed by the current publication system (Houssay-Holzschuch, 2021). Publishing institutions and formats as

such are also culturally embedded and focus on written sources and archival material evidence (Tarazona et al., 2021; Bertschi et al., 2023). Tarazona et al. (2021) describe how oral histories, insurgent practices, female narratives, etc. have often not entered the archives and are still too often dismissed as “evidence”. This way papers reflecting positions outside of colonial documentation or based on narratives of resistance are hard to produce, as these often cannot not rely on paper archive cultures and are therefore often not considered to be supported by reliable evidence. Beyond that, scientific language has often not entered into local languages, making it impossible for contingent knowledge to enter into professional and academic discourse or to discuss certain concepts in a language that can be understood by those who are affected by their impact and have, for example, non-English, non-Spanish or non-French speakers to participate as equals (Houssay-Holzschuch, 2021).

These insights point towards the need for a diversity of academic publishing formats outside of the highly standardized international conventions, to address the structural imbalances in the publishing system, to adequately describe and address the real-life contexts which are subject of urban studies publications, and to gain a nuanced account of how the current crisis situation is perceived.

5 Conclusion: towards a multi-perspective view on the crisis

When urban studies research discusses the current crisis situation, claiming that “extraordinary times” are creating a “new normal” is not incorrect. Rather, it is a very particular perspective informed by a West-centric reality that still dominates the urban studies publication outlets. In a situation in which the recent compounding of the climate crisis, health crisis, geopolitical crises and the subsequent global economic crisis coincides with the ongoing urban crisis in Latin America, Asia and Africa, it is important to acknowledge that the current international urban studies discourse and dominant narrative is largely shaped in the absence of Southern and Eastern world regions. This absence in urban studies discourse does not question the necessity of international urban studies publishing but rather underlines its importance and justifies urgency to engage with it. The intervention shows, however, that in addition to diversification efforts in existing international publishing outlets, strengthening existing and establishing additional Southern- and Eastern-based publishing institutions will be vital in publishing research that is locally relevant on the one hand and can take an equal seat in shaping international discourse on the other hand. In the light of this, the “multi-crisis” seen as a continued state of emergency, rather than an acute crisis, would likely gain prominence as an urban studies narrative and impede structural change not only in academic publishing.

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