Urban Geopolitics

In the last decade a new wave of urban research has emerged, putting comparative perspectives back on the urban studies agenda. However, this research is frequently based on similar case studies on a few selected cities in America and Europe and all too often focus on the abstract city level with marginal attention given to particular local contexts.

Moving away from loosely defined urban theories and contexts, this book argues it is time to start learning from and compare across different ‘contested cities’. It questions the long-standing Euro-centric academic knowledge production that is prevalent in urban studies and planning research. This book brings together a diverse range of international case studies from Latin America, South and South East Asia, Eastern Europe, Africa and the Middle East to offer an in-depth understanding of the worldwide contested nature of cities in a wide range of local contexts. It suggests an urban ontology that moves beyond the urban ‘West’ and ‘North’ as well as adding a comparative-relational understanding of the contested nature that ‘Southern’ cities are developing.

This timely contribution is essential reading for those working in the fields of human geography, urban studies, planning, politics, area studies and sociology.

Jonathan Rokem, PhD, is Marie Skłodowska-Curie Research Fellow at the Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London (UCL), UK. His research interests and publications focus on spatial and social critical analysis of cities and regions.

Camillo Boano, PhD, is Senior Lecturer at the Bartlett Development Planning Unit and Director of the MSc in Building and Urban Design in Development, UCL, UK. He is author of The Ethics of a Potential Urbanism: Critical Encounters Between Giorgio Agamben and Architecture (2017).
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Rethinking Planning in Contested Cities
Edited by Jonathan Rokem and Camillo Boano
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and Camillo Boano
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Contributors

Apurba Kumar Podder has recently completed his PhD from the University of Cambridge. He examines how illegality as a condition informs and shapes the internal dynamics of informal growth in developing cities.

Camila Cociña is a Teaching Fellow and PhD candidate at the Bartlett Development Planning Unit, UCL. Her current research focuses on housing policies and urban inequalities in the Chilean context.

Camillo Boano, PhD, is Senior Lecturer at the Bartlett Development Planning Unit, UCL, and Director of the MSc in Building and Urban Design in Development. He is author of The Ethics of a Potential Urbanism: Critical Encounters Between Giorgio Agamben and Architecture (2017).

Catalina Ortiz, PhD, is Lecturer at the Bartlett Development Planning Unit, UCL. She is researching critical spatial practices intersecting urban design, land management, large-scale projects, strategic spatial planning and urban policy mobility in the Global South.

Ernesto López-Morales is Associate Professor in the University of Chile and Associate Researcher at the Centre for Social Conflict and Cohesion Studies (COES), where he focuses on land economic, gentrification, neoliberal urbanism and housing in Chile and Latin American cities.

Gruia Bădescu is a Lecturer in Human Geography at Christ Church, University of Oxford. His research interests include post-war reconstruction and coming to terms with the past.

James D. Sidaway is based at the National University of Singapore, where he is Professor of political geography. His research currently focuses on security and insecurity and the history and philosophy of geography.

Jonathan Rokem, PhD, is Marie Skłodowska-Curie Research Fellow at the Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL. His research interests and publications focus on spatial and social critical analysis of cities and regions.

Kayvan Karimi is a Senior Lecturer within UCL’s Space Syntax Laboratory and Director of Space Syntax Limited, a UCL knowledge transfer spin-off. His
main areas of research include evidence-based design and planning, organic and informal urbanism and large-scale urban systems.

Laura Vaughan is Professor of Urban Form and Society and Director of UCL’s Space Syntax Laboratory. Laura’s research addresses the inherent complexity of the urban environment both theoretically and methodologically. Her most recent book, *Suburban Urbanities*, was published by UCL Press in 2015.

Liza Rose Cirolia is a Researcher at the African Centre for Cities, University of Cape Town. Her research focuses on housing, infrastructure and land in African cities. Her current PhD research is focused on public finance in African cities.

Michael Safier is Professor Emeritus at the Development Planning Unit, UCL. He dedicated his life, research and teaching activities, and professional practice to urban planning development, specifically around the conceptualization of cosmopolitan planning.

Moriel Ram, PhD, is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Advanced Studies at UCL. His research interests are militarized geographies and urban geopolitics of faith in the Middle East and the Mediterranean.

Nimrod Luz is Associate Professor at the Sociology and Anthropology Department, Western Galilee College. His research interests include geography of religion with particular interest in minorities’ sacred sites, changing cultural landscape of the Middle East and religiosity in the mixed town of Acre.

Nurit Stadler is Associate Professor at the Sociology and Anthropology Department, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Her research interests include Israel’s Ultraorthodox community, fundamentalism, Greek Orthodox and Catholic rituals in Jerusalem.

Pawda F. Tjoa is a researcher at Publica, a London-based public realm consultancy. She recently completed her PhD at the University of Cambridge, during which she explored the connection between public space and political ideology in post-independence Jakarta.

Peter D. A. Wood is a Postdoctoral Fellow in Demography at the Federal University of Minas Gerais in Belo Horizonte, Brazil. His work focuses on migration, violence and political participation in Global South development projects.

Sadaf Sultan Khan has recently completed her PhD at the Space Syntax Laboratory, UCL. Her work focuses on the appropriation, adaptation and contestation of urban space by migrant communities.

Sara Fregonese is based at the University of Birmingham, where she is Research Fellow in urban resilience. Her research currently focuses on the urban geopolitics of civil war and terrorism and on historical-political geographies of sectarianism in the Levant.
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Foreword

Sara Fregonese

[E]ach man bears in his mind a city made only of differences, a city without figures and without form, and the individual cities fill it up.

Calvino, 1978: 34

The heterogeneous corpus of literature known as urban geopolitics has, unsurprisingly for such an interdisciplinary endeavour, encountered extended critique. At least three critical strands are particularly relevant to this book in terms of how editors and contributors respond to and surpass them – advancing but also regenerating the now more than decennial agenda of urban geopolitics.

The first critiques came mainly from established political geography scholarship (Flint, 2006; Smith, 2006). These question the risk of normalizing cities as necessary loci of war, by simply shifting – and normalizing – the scale at which geopolitics happens from the national to the urban, rather than promoting a deeper understanding of urban conflict. This has not been lost on the advocates of urban geopolitics, who have warned against the peril of crystallizing knowledge about city warfare (and the violence suffered by civilians in cities) into ‘a technoscientific discipline with its own conference series, research centres, and journals’ (Graham, 2005: 1).

The second critique queries urban geopolitics’ reliance on a handful of case studies (usually in Israel/Palestine) where militarism and warfare constitute the prism through which the urban is made sense of. Meanwhile, spaces and practices that are not a derivation of militarized conflict remain under-studied (Adey, 2013; Fregonese, 2012; Harris, 2014). This is ironic because the first mention of urban geopolitics is in Francophone scholarship within the context of power struggles in Quebec’s cities (Hulbert, 1989), far from the extreme case studies that came to dominate the sub-discipline.

The third critique tackles a disembodied and techno-centric approach to urban violence: urban geopolitics tells us all there is to know about how cities can be (re)geared for war and targeted, but also hollows out these spaces of lived experiences and feeling bodies (Harker, 2014). There currently seems to be an overload of information about dramatic events of urban violence. As I write, numerous ‘final messages’ are being posted in real time on social media by the last residents
of East Aleppo as the Syrian Army and affiliated militias move closer in December 2016. Despite this increased flux of dramatic information from cities at war, we somehow know still too little about the everyday, domestic and lived experiences and sensitivities of urban residents coping amid war, division, emergency and crisis.

This regeneration project takes stock of these critiques and tackles them not only conceptually, by bringing the everyday, the ordinary and the affective into the debate, but also by situating them within a contemporary context of global challenges, including protracted urbanized warfare and the resulting unprecedented refugee and humanitarian crises that are becoming predominantly urban.

First, this book decrystallizes urban geopolitical knowledge: it unites heterogeneous case studies and theoretical approaches under the same umbrella approach, but constantly keeps us on our toes, by seeking out the dense connections between power, space and planning at multiple scales, beyond the territorial categories of national/sub-national, foreign/domestic, state/non-state, formal/informal. The city, according to Charles Tilly, offers a ‘toolbox’ for researchers to link macro- and micro-scale dynamics. It is the continuous dialogue between the macro and the micro that this book mobilizes so well. One of the tenets of urban geopolitics has been tracing connections between macro-scale global politics and phenomena of localized violence (Graham, 2004), but this multi-scalar dialogue somehow has often faded among techno-centric analyses of mainstream urban geopolitics.

Second, the many cities, spanning four continents, in this book expand the case study range of urban geopolitics not only territorially, but also methodologically – pausing the exercise of finding similarities, and opening the ground to contrapuntal analysis and learning through distinctive differences. Taking urban geopolitics on a more intellectually refined and methodologically ambitious level, this book explores multiscale connections, along a wide range of locations, looking at the everyday and ordinary beyond the militaristic, and filling the city fabric with bodies, communities, resistances and quotidian practices.

Finally, the cities that this book takes its readers to are not only and not merely ‘strategic urban networks’ gaining some sort of geopolitical significance from their strength as financial and investment hubs (Sassen, in Knight Frank Research, 2012). Neither are they autonomous and bounded entities analysed solely through a specific range of technologies (Graham, 2016). Here, instead, are cities full of noises and bodies, their analysis resulting from in-depth ethnography, where the ordinary, not just the military, becomes geopolitical: ‘relational sites’ (Rokem and Boano, Introduction, this volume) where micro- and macro-discourses and practices are continuously reworked and contested.

Readers should not expect to contemplate these cities comfortably from afar, nor be dropped into them vertically from above. These cities ‘made of differences’ offer, instead, multiple access points from which to explore the ever-expanding range of conflicts, contestations and cultural formations shaping our global urban future.
References


