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**The travelling adventures of urban theory
Considerations from outside the core**

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The travelling adventures of urban theory. Considerations from outside the core¹

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Abstract

The paper summarizes arguments, developed in two recent publications, about the importance of context in making sense of urban social processes like segregation and gentrification (Maloutas 2012a and 2012b). It focuses especially on tensions arising from the fact that concepts and theories used in empirical research around the urban world are usually generated at the core places of the academic division of labour and are bundled with contextual attachments that often remain implicit. It is argued that their –sometimes unwarranted– claim to universal validity is enabled by a process of *half-way decontextualization*. This process derives from the combination of the unequal power, between core and periphery, to provide broad range interpretative tools with the epistemological barriers to produce highly abstract concepts in space-related disciplines; it leads, eventually, to impose insufficiently de-contextualized concepts –therefore insufficiently general– to the periphery. The rest of the paper is a short, and somewhat autobiographic, account of working with borrowed concepts and theories and of the ways their contradictory contribution –that enables understanding, but at the same time mystifies, local processes.

Introduction: theories, concepts and their travelling

In principle concepts and theories are made to travel. The process of abstraction through which they are constituted does not only increase the visibility of what they pinpoint; it also enables comparison and generalization and leads, among other things, to overcome spatial barriers.

However, not all concepts and theories can travel with the same ease; those that are highly abstract are in general more suitable for travelling, while those at a lower level of abstraction are usually more tied to specific contextual parameters.

The specificity of space related concepts and theories

Abstraction enables travelling since it is in fact a process of de-contextualization. In space-related disciplines, like Geography, most of the time the content of spatiality cannot be relevantly reduced to a geometrical or some other form of abstract spatial dimension, like mere spatial distance. Andrew Sayer (1984: 132–6) commented extensively on the difficulty to produce meaningful theoretical constructs for geography at high levels of abstraction.

It is, nevertheless, clear that, throughout the history of space-related disciplines, several concepts and theoretical constructs have burst out of their initial contextual

¹ A shorter version of this paper was presented at the RC21 session *Urban studies and the challenge of travelling concepts and comparative method*, 2nd ISA Forum-Buenos Aires (August 1-4, 2012).

limits and have been tried in, or imposed on, different contextual realities through a process of *half-way de-contextualization*. By this term I refer to processes of abstraction and theory building that lead to concepts and theoretical constructs that are only seemingly disentangled from their attachment to specific geographic and socioeconomic contexts. The problem with this half-way process emerges when concepts that are not sufficiently abstract, and theories not sufficiently general, are treated as if they were. Half-way de-contextualization ultimately leads from contextually embedded and context dependent concepts, to notions claiming broader applicability that eventually turn to fuzzy, all embracing devices, with questionable rigor, when the importance of lingering contextual attachments is forgotten or overlooked.

The question of context

A key issue therefore for travelling concepts is context. ‘Context is all’ for Margaret Atwood in *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1986); and in Philosophy meaning is impossible outside context following Frege and Wittgenstein. These general assertions may not be especially useful in practical research terms –apart from raising awareness about the importance of context.

De-contextualization is part and parcel of the abstraction process, but this does not mean that to take context into account what we need is a more detailed description of particular settings. In his short story *Funes the Memorious* (1970: 94) Borges argues that “to think is to forget differences, generalize, make abstractions.” Taking account of context should not be a barrier to thinking since context is not accounted for by the registration of detail complexity. Context is about the relational diversity specific issues present in different types of settings, while detail is about the minute description of immediate presences.

Therefore, context should not be assumed as something fixed and constant; its content is related to the issue each time at hand. In research design terms context should be assumed to be the specific system of parameters that may lead outcomes concerning a particular issue to be importantly different from those theoretically expected within different types of settings.

In a recent book (Maloutas and Fujita, 2012) about the importance of contextual diversity in the patterning and the impact of residential segregation, we defined as major contextual parameters the ways the market, the state and civil society were imbricated in each of the 11 cities examined –therefore the importance of different welfare models or varieties of capitalism– as well as the specific and durable shape of local socio-spatial realities, that is built environments, and social relations inscribed in property patterns, urban histories and ideologies. This is a relatively extensive list, but in fact inescapable if contextual difference is to be thoroughly assessed.

Should we conclude, therefore, that inadequate abstraction in theorizing and lack of contextual awareness are the culprits for problems in the travelling of concepts and theories? Things are more complex in a world of geographically and socially uneven distribution of economic and other resources, reflected also in the world division of academic labour.

The travelling of concepts and theories in an uneven world

Concepts and theories do not travel in every possible direction and in random ways; they systematically travel much more from core to peripheral regions and in so doing they become part of the mechanisms and power relations that reproduce the geographic unevenness, not only in the academic division of labour, but in all aspects of socioeconomic activity.

The power relations, on which stands the non-randomness of conceptual travelling, are founded –first of all– on the uneven geographical distribution of academic organizations and resources; the core regions of this geographic unevenness are increasingly reduced in number and confined in the Anglophone world. The monocratic primacy of English as a publishing language and the geography of power structures, institutional relations and everyday practice in international academic publishing contribute also in the same direction. However, what reinforces mainly these centripetal tendencies are the homogenized prerequisites for academic careers around the world, epitomized by the quasi universal policies of academic excellence. Such policies respond especially to middle classes' increasing need to enhance their advantage in the process of social reproduction/mobility through education and are legitimated by their mimicry of meritocracy. The quest for the content-less objective of excellence (Readings, 1996) push academics to moth-like orbiting around the brightest institutions and journals and, by so doing, to reinforce the geography of established power relations and neglect 'ordinary' institutions and publications,² even though the latter account for the incomparably largest part of academia throughout the world.³

When context is neglected, it is difficult to escape from reproducing these power relations even when you are producing radical theory; concepts and theories that travel are to a large extent imposed agendas on the periphery, even if intensions are the best possible.

In this sense, theory is a gaze from the core and it has been part of the colonial, imperialist or otherwise dominating way of understanding, giving meaning and conquering the periphery.

When theory is imposed on the periphery, it usually assumes implicitly either an evolutionary type of relation between core and periphery (i.e. implying that the

² Policies of excellence follow the liberal credo that societal interest dictates to invest in the strongest and most promising players to maximize output. The rest may try to improve their position in this unequal game, restrain themselves to perpetually lower expectations and achievements, or perish. Content is not important in the measurement of excellence which relies on evaluations that dominant hierarchies and power relations. The growing interest for open access journals in academic publishing, leads content to become of even more marginal importance. Publishers rely less on the demand for the material they publish, which has become extremely massive and difficult to sell. They prefer to secure their income by imposing a price on authors of academic papers who need to publish in order to access academic positions and/or get promoted and, by so doing, they increase the screening power of editors and journal editorial boards that are part and parcel and at the hart of the geographically unequal power relations in academia.

³ Compare with Robinson's (2002) neglect of 'ordinary' versus world/global cities. The future may be holding much more pyramidal power structures and strictly regulated relations within the globalizing academic system if initiatives like the Harvard-MIT *edX* distance learning scheme is developed to its full potential and becomes a strong alternative for 'ordinary' higher education around the world. Huge commercial success and immense ideological control will come as collateral benefit.

periphery will experience in the future what the core has already experienced) or a relation of differential importance (i.e. that what happens at the core is much more important and affects the periphery in a catalytic way which, additionally, can be more or less deduced from experience at the core). In both cases the periphery should be systematically attentive to what happens at the core, but the reverse is not necessary.

Thus concepts and theories travel in a context of geographically uneven power relations and, as they do, they become part of the mechanisms that reproduce this geographical unevenness.

Examples of travelling concepts and theories: segregation and gentrification

I claim, therefore, that theoretical propositions and concepts in human geography and urban studies are usually bound to remain context dependent since not only their inception but also their relevance are related to the (core) contexts they derive from. Segregation or gentrification are not highly abstract constructs, like capital or surplus value, and their simple definitions and seemingly general relevance do not rid them in fact from their indelible contextual attachments.

Discussing these two concepts, I want to bring to the fore the way their contextual origins –which are usually left aside or forgotten– act as a kind of deforming lens when brought into different contextual settings.

Segregation is a concept conceived and elaborated within the intense ethno-racial division and the strong immigration waves in booming industrial US cities during the first half of the 20th century. Early Chicago School conceptualizations and subsequent approaches (*social area analysis*, *factorial ecology*) and measures (segregation indices and especially the index of dissimilarity) were tightly related to a binomial reality of clearly separated Black and White populations. The chronologically following studies on the more complex social segregation issues in Europe and elsewhere have been inclined to use these approaches and measurement tools as the general theoretical canvas against which they weaved their own explanatory attempts –even if this was often done in a critical way. The progressive blurring of the contextual origins of segregation in the process of half-way de-contextualization meant that those origins have become implicit and were carried forward affecting the ways of seeing and the interpretations within the different contexts this concept was applied in.

But why is this a problem? Segregation brings implicitly meaning that is not contained in its simple and general definition, which is “the spatial separation of two or more population groups” according to the *Dictionary of Human Geography* (Johnston et al., 1986). Such implicitly bundled meaning lies, for instance, in:

- The impression that the spatial concentration of a social group is unequivocally negative, especially if it is a group at the lower end of the social hierarchy.
- The impression that areas with an important concentration of lower social groups tend to become ghettos.
- The impression that the concentration of the poor engenders unequivocally a powerful neighborhood effect, which curtails life chances and mobility.

- The impression that the spatial concentration of the rich is not part of the problem.
- The assumption that spatial distance equals, more or less, social distance.

These impressions and assumptions are not totally unfounded, and this is why they can usually act quite persuasively as deforming lenses when applied to different contextual realities. In Southern Europe, for instance, several residential areas are easily labeled ‘ghettos’ even if their features are quite distant from real ghettos, and neighborhood effects are assumed much more important than they really are, overlooking to a large extent the more intricate relations between social and spatial distance in a context much less segregated than the one in which segregation was brought up as a concept.

Gentrification, on the other hand, was first conceptualized in a particular period of metropolitan development and was attributed to specific causal mechanisms on the supply and/or demand side. The etymology of the term reveals its contextual origins since it designates the movement of higher status groups from the periphery (gentry) to the urban core. Gentrification processes were particularly manifest in Anglo-American cities, where the movement of the elites to the periphery during the industrial development era (Fishman, 1987) created the precondition of a massive return and re-appropriation of central locations, when industry declined and inner cities started to be renovated and reappraised.

The emergence of gentrification is inscribed, therefore, within a specific conjuncture of metropolitan development and its generating mechanisms were related to specific conditions of capital investment in the built environment and to particular forms of socio-demographic change. The latter were not only features of the Anglo-American context; however, it was in that part of the world that gentrification boosted due both to the dominant type of neoliberal regulation –combining direct pro-gentrification policies with the increased commodification of housing– and to the local urban social morphology inherited through a specific path of urban development history.

The current stretching out of the spatiotemporal limits of gentrification is, therefore, a form of *half-way de-contextualization*. The features retained in its new simple definition proposed by Clark (“a change in the population of land-users such that the new users are of a higher socio-economic status than the previous users, together with an associated reinvestment of fixed capital” [2005: 258]) are neglecting the contextual attachments of gentrification. As a result we tend to bring together under the same umbrella quite different kinds of urban regeneration, often only in terms of superficial similarities rather than in terms of the content of sociospatial processes.

There are several shortcomings in this all-embracing and seemingly inter-contextual approach of gentrification. Following Atkinson, its usefulness is thus eroded as “we have tended to label too many kinds of neighborhood change as gentrification and this elasticity has reduced the bite of critical studies of its localized appearance and has diminished policy-maker interest as a result” (Atkinson, 2008: 2634).

Another important drawback of this approach is that it leads to a socio-politically restricted way of understanding urban regeneration, since it does not allow that regeneration can occur in any other way. It neither allows for different and competing objectives among the producers of urban regeneration, nor does it consider that

various injustices might be unintended. It precludes the possibility of governments acting beyond the interests of the producers of gentrification (Shaw and Porter, 2009: 5; see also Porter, 2009: 251).

On the other hand, Lees et al. (2008: xxii) defend the use of ‘gentrification’ on political grounds, i.e. to preserve the mobilizing capacity of the term due to the struggles fought under that name and in the hope that this will mitigate the gentrifying effect (of gentrification). It is clear, however, that this argument is highly contextual since almost anywhere outside most of the Anglophone world the political weight of the term is almost non-existent.

Conclusion

In this short commentary, I argue that concepts and theories are in principle made to travel, provided they are sufficiently abstract which relieves them to a large extent of contextual attachments. Space related concepts and theories are less prone to abstraction and de-contextualization, if they are to remain meaningful, useful and politically significant for local policies; but they travel all the same through a process of *half-way de-contextualization* which renders them of seemingly general validity, while they continue to carry implicitly part of their initial contextual attachments. This process of half-way de-contextualization is not a random process, but one of systematically uneven transmission, between the core of the academic division of labour and the periphery, of interpretative tools that come bundled with assumptions related to their contextual origins and are, in fact, part of the mechanisms that reproduce this unevenness.

In this spirit, I briefly referred to the shortcomings from the contextually invariable use of ‘segregation’ and ‘gentrification’ when their simplified definitions facilitate their travelling.

What can be done about this if you are at the receiving end of this relationship? Not much in terms of turning around these uneven relations, since it is impossible to systematically overcome the uneven concentration of all kinds of resources, and supersede the dominant structure of power relations. It is important, however, to constantly question the extent of the general validity of borrowed concepts and theories by empirically testing their adequacy, to insist on their inherent contextual limits and to avoid letting them lead the local research and, eventually, the local political agenda.

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