

Towards an epistemology for conjunctural inter-urban comparison

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We propose an epistemology for conjunctural inter-urban comparison, stressing the dialectical relationship between the general and the particular. We spatialise conjunctural analysis, avoiding methodological territorialism by extending the explanatory framework outwards in space to incorporate inter-territorial connections and supra-territorial scalar relations. We then provide three guiding principles for conjunctural comparison: an open starting point, a three-dimensional socio-spatial ontology and the general/particular dialectic. Illustrating this with comparative fieldwork on urban land transformations in Jakarta and Bangalore, we stress-test received theories and develop Inter-scalar Chains of Rentiership: this mid-range concept clarifies shared tendencies across the cities, particularities differentiating them and their inter-relations.

Keywords: conjunctural analysis, relational comparison, comparative urbanism, rentiership, southern urban theory, neoliberal global urbanism

JEL Classifications: R39, R14, Z10

Introduction

Questions of inter-urban comparison have received renewed interest since 2000, with two issues receiving particular attention. First, there has been critical reflection on conventions concerning norms as points of orientation for comparative research. Influentially, noting that the convention has been to compare cities everywhere against northern global cities, Jennifer Robinson has challenged this norm on the grounds that it relegates other cities to a linear and teleological model of Development whereby they are seen as off-the-map and inadequate (Robinson, 2006, 2011). This model drives aspirations of achieving such world class status, which have become a leitmotif of urban

planning across the post-colony. Against this, Robinson made the argument for taking north–south differences seriously by theorising also from cities of the post-colony, triggering the extensive debates about southern urban theory that have roiled urban studies for the past decade. Second, and in conversation with proponents of theorising through southern cities, is an emergent critique of the convention long dominating inter-urban comparison (and spatial comparison more generally), which treats cities as if they were hermetic and autonomous units of analysis, falling into the trap of methodological cityism (Angelo and Wachsmuth, 2014). This critique lies behind proposals for a relational approach to inter-urban and regional

comparison, which takes into account how the interdependencies connecting cities and regions can affect their co-evolution, differentiation and/or convergence. In this article, taking on board both of these critiques, we explore the nature and potential insights to be gained from a conjunctural approach to inter-urban comparison.

Conjunctural analysis of individual cities has recently come into fashion (Peck, 2017; Roy, 2016; Zeiderman, 2018), seeking to understand how historical trajectories at both the urban and supra-urban scale shape contemporary conditions in a particular city. Conjunctural analysis has prioritised understanding the dialectical relationship between the general and the particular, but requires spatialisation before its historical inclinations can be extended to spatial (inter-urban/regional) comparison. Thus the first goal of this article is to spatialise conjunctural analysis by extending its theoretical remit to include extra-territorial causal factors—events and processes happening in other places and at broader geographic scales.

Turning to inter-urban comparison, initial proposals for a methodology of relational inter-urban comparison have stressed the direct horizontal relations between cities (for example, McCann and Ward, 2012; Ward, 2010), as Peck (2020) also notes. Conjunctural comparison goes beyond this by also taking into account longer historical trajectories and inter-scalar relations (both bottom up and top down). The second task of this article is to advance three guiding principles of a conjunctural inter-urban comparison: an open starting point, a three-dimensional socio-spatial ontology and a dialectical relationship between the general and the particular.

To give these abstract arguments some concrete resonance, our third goal is to illustrate what it means to undertake conjunctural inter-urban comparison through an example. We draw on our comparative field-based research examining the social ecology of urban land transformations—its drivers and consequences—in

Jakarta and Bangalore to illustrate this approach.¹ Working between field observations and theories of urban land transformation, land rent and rentiership (Andreucci et al., 2017; Birch, 2020; Haila, 2015; Smith, 1982; Ward and Aalbers, 2016), we tease out shared general tendencies and particularities across Jakarta and Bangalore, developing the mid-range concept of Inter-scalar Chains of Rentiership (ICR). We suggest that ICR provides insights into the inner workings of the social ecology of land transformations (assetisation and development) and rent appropriation—a chain, shot through with unequal power relations, linking actors and institutions complexly articulated with one another across different geographical scales; a chain with the capacity to enable both urban-scale real estate development and global-scale land assetisation. This entailed a multi-method research design: ethnography, remote sensing and mapping, and statistical and historical document analysis.²

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. First, we discuss what it means to spatialise conjunctural analysis. Second, we lay out some principles for extending relational inter-urban comparison into conjunctural inter-urban comparison. Third, we draw on our comparative field-based research examining the social ecology of urban land transformations in Jakarta and Bangalore to illustrate this approach. In conclusion, we explore how a conjunctural approach to inter-urban comparison goes beyond existing approaches to conjunctural analysis and inter-urban comparison.

Spatialising conjunctural analysis

Conjunctural analysis, in both Marxist political economy and its more recent reformulation in British cultural studies, stems from the philosophical question of how general, structural tendencies relate to the particularities of empirically concrete events (Koivisto and Lahtinen, 2012). With respect to political economy, while this question can be traced back to Lenin, the

most influential thinkers have been Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser. In *The Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci was concerned to understand the particularities of, and possible interventions into, 1930s Italian politics (the rise of communism followed by fascism). He saw it as:

necessary to distinguish organic movements (relatively permanent) from movements which may be termed ‘conjunctural’ (and which appear as occasional, immediate, almost accidental).... When an historical period comes to be studied, the great importance of this distinction becomes clear. A crisis occurs, sometimes lasting for decades. This exceptional duration means that incurable structural contradictions have revealed themselves (reached maturity), and that, despite this, the political forces which are struggling to conserve and defend the existing structure itself are making every effort to cure them, within certain limits, and to overcome them. These incessant and persistent efforts (since no social formation will ever admit that it has been superseded) form the terrain of the ‘conjunctural’, and it is upon this terrain that the forces of opposition organise. (Gramsci, 1971, 399–400)

Louis Althusser developed two of his most influential philosophical notions of causality, overdetermination and structure in dominance, to make sense of the relationship between structural (primary) contradictions and conjunctural, historically particular (secondary) contradictions (Sotiris, 2014). Writing back against what he saw as Hegel’s totalising claim that structures determine particularity, Althusser conceptualised the two as dialectically inter-related: ‘secondary contradictions are essential even to the existence of the principal contradiction, that they really constitute its condition of existence, just as the principal contradiction constitutes their condition of existence’ (Althusser, 1969 [1965], 205). Overdetermination references how the elements constituting any particular

set of events—primary and secondary contradictions—are each determined by all the others. For Althusser, according to Koivisto and Lahtinen (2012, 271): ‘A conjuncture always has a “structure in dominance” and conjuncture and structure are not mutually exclusive opposites’.

Drawing closely on Gramsci, British cultural studies adapted conjunctural analysis to make sense of a surprising and disorienting conjunctural shift—at least from a socialist perspective: the replacement of Labour Party dominance in the 1960s and 1970s by Thatcherism in the 1980s. Stuart Hall is the key thinker, deploying his ‘own kind of conjunctural thinking’ (Davis, 2004, 205, see also Grossberg, 2019, 40–41). In *Policing the Crisis*, Hall et al. deploy conjunctural analysis to make sense of how the 1970s Fordist crisis in Britain came to a head in racialised debates about mugging, triggering the rise of a law-and-order state that presaged the coming to power of Thatcherism (Hall et al., 1980). This deep engagement with conjuncture—more-or-less defining cultural studies since *Policing the Crisis*—sought to make sense of and predict the evolution of a particular paradoxical spatiotemporal moment when ‘all seems to be going to hell in a handbasket’ (Grossberg, 2019, 39). This lens was subsequently turned on Thatcherism *tout court* (Hall, 1988), to make sense of Thatcher’s ability to gain support from traditional white heartlands of the British Labour Party: crafting an authoritarian populism, neoliberalising the British political economy and throwing its left into crisis. The goal of conjunctural analysis, as for Gramsci, was to understand ‘what [...] the circumstances [are] in which we now find ourselves, how did they arise, what forces are sustaining them and what forces are available to us to change them?’ (Hall, 2007, 278). Importantly, the cultural studies variant on conjunctural analysis also centred questions of culture, particularly race, as shaping these unexpected shifts.

To date, conjunctural thinking has been relentlessly historical in orientation, asking how

general structural forces are reshaped by historical particularities. Yet conjunctural analysis is pertinent for interrogating the relation between the particular and the general across space as well as time. In his hallmark 1980s critique of critical social theory's neglect of the spatial, Ed Soja argues that Henri Lefebvre sought to spatialise the conjuncture:

For Lefebvre, echoing Gramsci, 'the revolution can only take place conjuncturally, i.e. in certain class relations, an ensemble of relations into which the peasantry and the intellectual enter'...Lefebvre, however, moves on to 'spatialize the conjuncture' and thus inserts a spatial problematic into the center of revolutionary consciousness and class struggle. (Soja, 1989, 90–91, quoting Lefebvre, 1976, 95)

Essentially, Soja interprets Lefebvre's entire project of spatialising Marxist theories of capitalism as also spatialising the conjuncture (Soja does not discuss conjunctural analysis). Other than this intervention, however, little explicit attention has been paid to the *spatiotemporality* of conjuncture (Leitner et al., 2020, Chapter 2; Peck, 2020). Within cultural studies, the focus is on temporal shifts within a (national) territory that is largely taken for granted as the unit of analysis—a form of methodological territorialism (Brenner, 2004). Even though Doreen Massey worked closely with Hall on the contemporary conjuncture in *The Kilburn Manifesto*, her arguments for spatialising social theory were not taken up within the cultural studies approach to conjunctural analysis (Hall et al., 2015; Massey, 2005; Peck, 2020).

What does it mean to spatialise conjunctural analysis; what insights are generated by attending to spatiality? An initial, partial answer emerges from the realism of Andrew Sayer (1984). For him, a central feature of realism as an explanatory philosophy is teasing out how the general (necessary relations) and

the particular (contingent relations) articulate with one another. Asking what difference space makes, Sayer (1985) argues that the particular—contingent relations—takes the form of place-based characteristics, which complicate how the general—necessary (or internal, Sayer, 2000) relations—play out. From this perspective, neoliberalisation (the necessary relation) takes distinct, contingent trajectories in, say, the USA, the UK and Germany, which can be explained by their specific national economic, political and cultural features (cf. Peck, 2010).

This emphasis on place-based characteristics feels limiting, however, as it also prioritises what happens within a place or territory: restricting spatial analysis to place-based thinking (Sheppard, 1996, 2016). A more fully spatialised version of conjunctural analysis would account for relations stretching beyond the place being analysed. Indeed Gramsci (1971, 182) indicated as much: 'international relations intertwine with...internal relations of nation-states, creating new, unique and historically concrete combinations'. This would entail asking how neoliberalisation conjuncture within the UK was shaped also by neoliberalisation in the USA. It would also entail considering inter-scalar relations: how processes of Globalisation shape neoliberalisation at the national scale, but also how sub-national scale processes shape what happens at the national scale.³

More abstractly, Sheppard (2019) argues that spatialising conjunctural analysis means taking into account the socio-spatial positionality of the place being studied. Extending feminist theorisation of positionality and intersectionality, socio-spatial positionality refers to how the evolution of places co-evolves with their uneven and often asymmetric connectivities with other places and across scales, not just their internal characteristics (Massey, 1991; Sheppard, 2002). For example, the hegemonic global positionality of the USA and to a lesser extent the UK in the 1980s enabled them to enact

neoliberalisation more-or-less on their own shared terms, co-evolving with one another and positioning themselves to effectively globalise neoliberalism by 1990, through both consent and coercion ('carrot and stick').⁴

Epistemologically, conjunctural analysis shares critical social science's concern to (i) critically assess the status quo from an emancipatory ethico-political standpoint; (ii) its interdisciplinary orientation—teasing out the complex, emergent and nonlinear relations between economic, political, cultural and social, and, we would insist, biophysical processes: 'like an ever-changing spider web' (Grossberg, 2019, 52); and (iii) its scepticism of both floating abstractions and unprincipled induction (Peck, 2020).

The mutually constitutive, dialectical relationship between the general and the particular is a longstanding concern in conjunctural analysis (Althusser, 1969 [1965]). As Inch and Shepherd put it:

the different 'levels of expression' that 'come together' in a given conjuncture also have distinctive histories and crisis tendencies. When these tendencies fuse, conjunctures can enter into sometimes protracted periods of 'organic' crisis. Crises may be resolved by the restoration, reconstruction or transformation of a hegemonic settlement (Hall, 1988, 167). While they are driven by deeper historical transformations in the economy or society, they are not determined by them. (Inch and Shepherd, 2019, 5)

For urban and regional research, it is not only the general (larger-scale structural processes) that shapes the particular (local processes and events)—as in Burawoy's (1998) extended case method—but local events and processes also can shape the general (Leitner and Miller, 2007). For example, Globalisation was triggered by the national-scale neoliberal revolutions under Thatcher and Reagan. Second, all variants of

conjunctural analysis share a concern for historical trajectories of change—including the unexpected and unanticipated. Third, they seek not only to understand political conjunctures but also to intervene in order to achieve progressive ends during moments of conjunctural uncertainty, when hegemony is in question (revolution, in Althusser's and Gramsci's formulation). As Clarke (2014, 115) argues, conjunctural analysis is 'political in the sense that it was designed to reveal the possibilities and resources for progressive action...a way of focussing analytic attention on the multiplicity of forces, accumulated antagonisms, and possible lines of emergence from the conjuncture'. The aim is 'to develop a rich toolkit of concepts, histories and understandings that enable us to think through what is possible, to determine the direction of future interventions' (Grayson and Little, 2017, 73); this would include the development and deployment of mid-range concepts.

Spatialised conjunctural analysis goes one step further, however: It stretches explanatory frameworks not just backwards in time, but also outwards in space (identifying how local events are shaped by distant processes), and upwards and downwards in terms of geographical scale (whereby events at a particular scale may be shaped by both higher and lower scale processes). Importantly, spatiotemporality is conceptualised as much more than a Cartesian frame for conjunctural analysis: it is much more than stating when and where something happens. Drawing on the principles of socio-spatial theory, space and time themselves are active components in theorising the causal complexity of phenomena, processes and events—the socio-spatiotemporal dialectic (Sheppard, 2008; Soja, 1980). Spatialising conjunctural analysis also extends thinking about political intervention beyond place-based strategies attuned to local conditions, enabling it to take on board questions of political collaboration across space and of the politics of scale (Leitner et al., 2008; Routledge, 2017).

Towards a conjunctural inter-urban comparison

A key consequence of spatialising conjunctural analysis is the question of how conjunctures vary across space as well as over time: questions of spatiotemporal comparison. Inter-urban comparison has been the subject of much discussion in recent years. First are challenges to the presumption that the norms for comparison are to be found in the global North (Robinson, 2006). Second are challenges to the mainstream social science comparative presumption of methodological territorialism: that cities are isolated and thus that their comparison can be reduced to similarities and differences (Ragin, 1987). Acknowledging that cities were never isolated, a number of authors have advanced a relational approach to inter-urban comparison. As Kevin Ward argues:

Stressing interconnected trajectories—how different cities are implicated in each other’s past, present and future—moves us away from searching for similarities and differences between two mutually exclusive contexts and instead towards relational comparisons that uses different cities to pose questions of one another. (Ward, 2010, 480)

In this section, we explore how to enrich relational inter-urban comparison through conjunctural analysis: conjunctural inter-urban comparison. ‘Relationality’ is a broad-ranging term. Relational inter-urban comparative methodologies proposed by Ward and others (McCann and Ward, 2012; Peck and Theodore, 2012), examining policy mobilities, stress the horizontal connectivities between cities. Yet cities are also related ‘vertically’, through their embeddedness in processes operating at supra-urban scales: national regulatory systems, Globalisation, global heating and the like. Furthermore, cities are inherently related *spatiotemporally*, with the trajectories of some cities subsequently shaping those of others. As

discussed in the previous section, spatialised conjunctural analysis embraces all of these.

What we term ‘conjunctural inter-urban comparison’ is by no means a completely novel methodology. As Peck (2020) notes, under the label of relational comparison Gillian Hart (2002, 2016) and Philip McMichael (1990) each have undertaken inter-regional comparative research and proposed methodologies that align closely with the conjunctural approach as defined here: inter-urban comparative work that takes into account horizontal (inter-urban but also rural-urban), vertical (inter-scalar) and spatiotemporal relations. In what follows, we propose three guiding principles constituting an epistemology for conjunctural inter-urban comparison (Table 1), as an enrichment of the relational comparative scholarship that focuses primarily on contemporaneous horizontal inter-urban relations. We will also illustrate these through examples taken from our research on land transformations in Jakarta and Bangalore.

The first guiding principle of conjunctural inter-urban comparison addresses starting points and case selection: from where to theorise and which cities should be compared. Gramsci, Althusser and Hall share an interest in deploying conjunctural analysis to understand what seems atypical and unexpected given received theory: why the socialist revolution fails. In this spirit, conjunctural comparison challenges the presumption that conventional urban theory, developed with northern cities in mind, is applicable to all cities. Conjunctural inter-urban comparison is open to theorising from elsewhere, challenging the practice of taking northern cities as the norm, and taking seriously the seemingly deviant features of southern cities. In short, starting points and case selection should leave space for gleaning insights by highlighting unexpected, overlooked or marginalised positionalities.

Ethico-political commitments inevitably shape starting points and case selection (Leitner et al.,

Table 1. Guiding principles for conjunctural inter-urban comparison.

Open starting points: Starting points and case selection should leave space for gleaning insights by highlighting unexpected, overlooked or marginalised positionalities.

Three-dimensional spatiotemporal ontology: Three spatiotemporalities—horizontal connectivities, vertical inter-scalar relations and geohistorical trajectories of cities and regions—require attention, co-evolving also with the socio-spatial positionality of the places under comparative investigation.

The particular and the general are dialectically related: Interrogating the dialectical relationship between the general and particular by (i) distinguishing general tendencies—shared across places and time—from spatially and temporally specific particularities and (ii) examining their mutual constitution.

Source: Authors.

2020). In terms of starting points, our desire to study land transformations reflected our concern for the negative social justice implications for poorer local residents who find themselves displaced by real estate projects built on their land for an emergent middle class—urban land grabs. In terms of case selection, our choice of two ‘southern’ cities, located in the post-colony, reflects our shared ethico-political commitment to provincialise urban theory by thinking cities through elsewhere (Robinson, 2016). The commitment of post-colonial urban theorists to stress-test the capacity of mainstream urban theory to make sense of urban processes across the post-colony, co-producing knowledge with local scholars and practitioners, already has led to novel mid-level concepts and theoretical provocations oriented towards taking seemingly deviant conjunctures seriously. We call this taking the field seriously. The decision to specifically compare Jakarta and Bangalore was shaped by the common interests and already existing relations between geographers and sociologists working on Bangalore and Jakarta at the University of Minnesota when the project was conceived, and their relations with architects, planners and anthropologists in each city. These relations, strengthened by a shared ethico-political commitment to integrating local knowledge into the project by working with local experts, prompted this starting point for comparison.

The second guiding principle is deploying a spatiotemporal approach in order to sort out the

complex articulations of forces behind the identified shared general tendencies and particularities. Attending to time and space is crucial: not only do societal dynamics inevitably play out through time and across space, but these dynamics shape and are shaped by the spatiotemporalities through which they operate (Sheppard, 2008). Taking temporality seriously is a hallmark of conjunctural analysis, but—as noted above—spatialities have been overlooked (beyond delimiting the territory to which conjunctural analysis is applied—Italy for Gramsci, the UK for Hall). Three spatiotemporalities require attention, co-evolving also with the socio-spatial positionality of the places under comparative investigation.

- a. Horizontal connectivities and interdependencies linking cities and regions: how the character and dynamics of cities/regions reflect their positionality with respect to, and their co-evolution with, the positionality of other cities/regions;
- b. Vertical inter-scalar relations between larger and smaller geographic scales: how cities and regions are shaped by larger-scale processes and ideologies, and how what is happening locally may have broader consequences. Particularly with respect to the latter, positionality can matter in the sense that more powerfully positioned cities and regions are more likely to affect broader processes, as when the 2007–2008 global financial crisis precipitated out of the particularities of financialisation and its regulation on Wall Street and in the City of London;

- c. The geohistorical trajectory of cities and regions: how local events both echo and reproduce geohistorical processes, also from long ago and far away (for example, shaping the post-colony), and how cities and regions in turn may shape longer term and larger-scale historical trajectories (a geohistorical variation on the general/particular dialectic).

In practice, conjunctural comparison will never be neatly divisible into these three spatiotemporal aspects. Rather, we offer them as analytical distinctions for the purpose of guiding analysis. Conjunctural comparison requires that scholars work across them, recombining them in creative and insightful ways. Furthermore, it is an empirical question as to which of these spatiotemporalities may turn out to be significant in any operationalisation.

In our research, instead of pre-selecting cities with already existing connectivities linking them (as is common for relational comparative studies of, for example, inter-urban policy mobilities), we left space for spatiotemporalities to emerge and become evident from the field research. For example, we could not identify any important direct connectivities linking Jakarta and Bangalore; yet as we traced flows of capital and people, important relations with other places became visible: connecting Jakarta with Singapore, Tokyo and Beijing, and Bangalore with New York City. This reinforces how horizontal connectivities cannot be identified *a priori*, but must emerge through empirical investigation.

In order to uncover the complex relations among actors located and operating at different geographic scales, we developed a multi-scalar research design ranging from the neighbourhood, to the city, metropolitan, national and global scales. Again, the nature of these relations emerged through the empirical work, ranging from unpacking the minutiae of changes to individual parcels of land in a neighbourhood, shaped by developers, land brokers and financial institutions; to metropolitan and national-scale planning laws and land regulations, and

developers' and bankers' regional and national strategies; and to global financial practices enabling the assetisation and financialisation of land—that quintessentially immobile asset (Li, 2014). Working with the presumption that the general and the particular are relationally constituted across scales, rather than forming a nested hierarchy whereby local particularities are enframed by larger-scale generalities, we could tease out how the strategies of local land brokers not only shape local outcomes (for example, rising property values), but also make possible and shape general processes of land assetisation.

Finally, we worked to reveal how contemporary events are shaped by historical trajectories, situating current events and crises within longer- and medium-term geohistorical processes of relevance for land transformations. At the global and long-term historical scale, the contemporary nature of India and Indonesia as political economies remain influenced both by the long arm of British and Dutch colonialism and by the more recent uneven geographies of neoliberal globalisation. Both Jakarta and Bangalore are profoundly influenced by the pressure to conform to land tenure and other norms of neoliberal global urbanism, aspiring to world-class status as defined by such norms. At the same time, these historical trajectories take different modalities in different places: for example, as discussed below, the 2007–2008 global financial crisis and the 1997 Asian financial crisis had very different impacts on land transformations in Jakarta and Bangalore.

The third guiding principle is to deepen how we interrogate the dialectical relationship between the general and particular by distinguishing shared general tendencies—shared across spacetime—from spatially and temporally specific particularities. What comes into view as shared general tendencies reflects both theory and observation. Theory suggests general tendencies within which cities are embedded, such as Globalisation, neoliberal

global urbanism and finance-dominated accumulation. This lens then shapes which shared observed characteristics, relationships and trajectories, reflective of common underlying mechanisms and processes, to look for—theory-laden observation. From here, and working across places and through time, it becomes possible not only to separate the general from the particular but also to identify interdependencies between two: how they are dialectically inter-related. We illustrate this from our research in the following section.⁵

As should be obvious from this discussion, conjunctural analysis is extremely ambitious and conjunctural comparison even more so. The latter requires deep familiarity and engagement with multiple places and their geohistorical, cultural and biophysical contexts, in addition to familiarity with larger-scale processes, connectivities and path dependence. This typically exceeds the expertise and scope of any single scholar. Conjunctural comparison thus necessitates convening teams of scholars who collectively bring the necessary range of knowledge and expertise to the project, while negotiating the politics of difference that inevitably emerge within such teams.

Land transformations in Jakarta and Bangalore: shared tendencies and particularities

The goal of any spatialised conjunctural comparison, deploying the three guiding principles in [Table 1](#), is to uncover the complex articulations of forces driving urban and regional phenomena and processes.⁶ The comparison deployed in our research project begins with a spatialised conjunctural analysis of land transformations in both Jakarta and Bangalore, forming the basis for identifying shared tendencies and particularities and their inter-relations through a comparative analysis. As discussed above, spatialising conjunctural analysis means attending also to how inter-urban

and inter-scalar relations shape land transformations in each city, whereas conjunctural comparison means also incorporating inter-scalar relations and geohistorical trajectories into relational inter-urban comparison. Throughout, this requires interrogating the influence of socio-spatial positionality ([Sheppard, 2019](#)). In what follows, we first tease out shared general tendencies across the two cities, before turning to particularities and examining their inter-relations. It is important to reiterate that shared general tendencies and particularities also are not simply place-based characteristics; the conjunctural comparison deployed here takes a relational approach to identifying general tendencies and particularities by highlighting their embeddedness in inter-urban, inter-scalar and geohistorical relations.

The collaborative fieldwork in Jakarta and Bangalore generated remarkable shared tendencies in the social ecology of land transformations and associated rent appropriation across the two metropolises. But the process of identifying shared tendencies and particularities also entails theory testing and generation, operating between general theories and on-the-ground complexity by working across the cases in conversation with pre-existing theoretical claims. This may generate mid-range concepts that provide insights into the inner workings of phenomena and processes by taking both theory and the field seriously. In our case, we developed the mid-range concept of Interscalar Chains of Rentiership (ICR) which provides insights into the global and the local and the general and particular, and their inter-relations, with respect to land transformation and rent appropriation across the two metropolises.

Much of the recent literature on urban land transformations, speculation, land rent, land grabs and displacement highlights the role of capitalist property developers and domestic and multinational financial institutions: accumulation by dispossession (for example, [Andreucci et al., 2017](#); [Goldman, 2011](#);

Shatkin, 2017). Yet our research has revealed that the workings of the social ecology of land transformation are multi-layered, including a broad set of actors, institutions and practices complexly connected across multiple geographic scales—from local to global—with global and local processes and practices mutually constitutive of one another. ICR refers to how the assetisation and financialisation of land emerges from a diverse set of actors and institutions, operating at scales ranging from the global to the local, each seeking to appropriate land rent. The overall process of land assetisation is facilitated through a chain linking actors and actions at different scales, mutually dependent on and complexly articulated with one another—interdependencies that are shot through with unequal power relations. While these processes have long existed, in recent decades the linkages between the local and the global have dramatically intensified as financialisation has come to focus on mobilising land—an immobile resource—to assemble it as a global, investable, asset (Fields, 2017; Li, 2014).

In the remainder of this section, we illustrate the insights that ICR provide into land transformations and rent appropriation in Jakarta and Bangalore by working from the local to the global scale, teasing out shared tendencies and particularities also across scale.

Shared tendencies of ICR

The shared tendencies described here reflect the positional conjuncture shared by Jakarta and Bangalore—and surely with many other fast-growing metropolises across the post-colony. This conjuncture reflects their historical positionality within an era of neoliberal finance-dominated accumulation and global urbanism (Stockhammer, 2008), but also their geographical positionality, in peripheral territorial economies characterised by historically unprecedented rates of urbanisation (Sheppard, 2014), a shortage of formal employment and

surplus populations (Sanyal, 2014), and the prevalence of informality: informal settlements and livelihood strategies (McFarlane and Waibel, 2012; Roy and Alsayyad, 2004).

In both Bangalore and Jakarta, where the bulk of urban and peri-urban land is informally owned and occupied, local-scale actors operating within informal settlements are particularly critical to ICR. They are positioned to bring this land into the capitalist land market, converting it into private property and thereby making it assetisable. Developers and middle-class residents, and those financing real estate projects, create demand for more developable land and property; this is supplied through the ability of land brokers, abetted by local officials and informal political actors, to persuade residents of informal settlements to sell whatever rights they have to land, with lawyers and land agencies then converting it to freehold or leasehold title. This enables land assetisation, assembly, marketing, speculation, development and financialisation.⁷

At the national scale, legal frameworks and policies regulate who can own and invest in real estate, the financing of real estate, and land use; national developers and the real estate arms of mega-corporations initiate large real estate development projects; and domestic private and state-owned banks provide external financing when necessary. At the global scale, investors (global financial institutions, and private equity companies such as Blackstone) comb the world looking for real estate and other investment opportunities—with real estate being particularly attractive at present. This is also the scale across which discourses and practices of neoliberal global urbanism move and become normalised.

These different actors and institutions, shaping the social ecology of land transformations, transcend boundaries between the formal (governed by the capitalist rule of law) and the informal (informal land & housing markets and power brokers). They also are complexly intertwined across geographic scales, forming an inter-scalar chain that sets

land transformations in motion, activates local property markets, catalyses rapidly rising land values and fuels speculation (at all scales). This chain reaction travels downward from private global equity companies to domestic developers and banks, to local land and power brokers, the elite and middle class, and to poor residents in informal settlements—all trying to capture returns from rising land values and to cash in on rent gaps. At the same time, without the willingness of residents in informal settlements to part with their property—incentivised and facilitated by local developers, land brokers and the municipal state—informal land would remain invisible to global finance capital. In this way, the actions of local actors also facilitate larger-scale processes of land assetisation and development.

As indicated above, unequal power relations, both across scales and among different actors and institutions in place, shape the unequal capacities of various actors to engage in rentiership and appropriate/extract rent. The bulk of rent is appropriated by elite actors: developers, banks and multinational capital actively speculating on future rental incomes. Developers' expectations in Jakarta, for example, are for a 30% annual rate of return (Leitner and Sheppard, 2018), in part because they can buy informal land at well below the capitalist market price. Yet middle-class residents also invest in real estate, speculating that they can accumulate wealth, purchasing multiple properties (high-rise condominiums and apartments or houses, in formal developments or *kampung*s).

Such unequal power relations extend to residents in informal settlements, who seek to take advantage of increasing demand for housing and rising rents, with motivations ranging from day-to-day survival to wealth accumulation. Unequal power relations among informal residents enable those with the largest plots and other monetary assets to extract value and rent even as the informal settlement is being depopulated. Those holding land rights engage

in rentiership in various ways. Enticed to self-displace and sell their homes to brokers and developers, residents use some of their wind-fall gains⁸ to purchase replacement housing for themselves and/or family members in cheaper informal settlements, at times investing in rental housing as a substitute for lost wages and salaries. Others add rental units on top of existing housing or build multi-story rental properties. Members of the urban poor also find ways to engage in rentiership: in Jakarta, those granted replacement units as compensation for state-led evictions, relocated to specially built and often inconveniently located public housing projects, sub-let these units (in violation of regulations) to secure an income stream, moving back into informal settlements. While miniscule compared to the appropriation of value and rent by developers, brokers and individuals connected in various ways to the state, such rental incomes are vital for residents' livelihoods.

The result, here and elsewhere across metropolises of the post-colony, is land transformations that involve dramatic changes in the built environment: high-rise office and residential towers, industrial estates, and mixed use and integrated developments for the elite and middle classes increasingly dominate the landscape, replacing informal settlements and displacing large segments of the urban majority. These transformations are in line with neoliberal global urbanism's prescriptions for how southern megacities can and should transform themselves into world-class global cities. At the same time, these developments stimulate new informal settlements nearby, housing displaced residents and in-migrants who seek to take advantage of spillover opportunities to make money. The aggregate effect is untrammelled, unplanned urban sprawl. These transformations in the built environment are accompanied by the emergence of an urban rental economy, in the sense that urban residents from all walks of life turn to rent appropriation as a source of

wealth accumulation and income, underwriting their livelihood strategies (discussed above).

The particularities of ICR

Jakarta and Bangalore each have distinct configurations of actors (property and finance capital, state and local government) and institutions and modalities of land assembly and assetisation, as well as conjunctural differences in the timing of real estate projects and associated land transformations. These particularities are shaped by and materialise through locally and nationally specific political, economic and cultural contexts and distinct inter-scalar relations. They have both local and national aspects, reflecting inter-scalar conjunctural differences. We begin at the urban scale, examining the particularities of real estate capital, land assembly, state and local government relations and finance.

With respect to real estate capital, Jakarta (an extended metropolitan area and national capital with some 32 million inhabitants) has a national market, dominated by the property arms of nationally powerful Indonesian mega-corporations with access to extensive internal financing (some with their own banks). Bangalore, notwithstanding its status as a global ITC cluster and southern India's largest metropolis (the capital of Karnataka and a metropolitan area of 8 million inhabitants), has a regional real estate market serviced by a group of relatively small stand-alone developers (Goldman, personal communication), heavily dependent on external financing.

There are also particularities to the process of land assembly that are critical to its assetisation, an arduous process whereby land brokers with intimate local knowledge and connections seek to persuade residents (often extended families) of informal settlements to sell any land rights they hold over informal urban or agricultural land. In Bangalore much of this work is undertaken by registered master

land aggregator firms, who assemble and bank land and may enter into joint ventures with real estate developers (Gidwani and Upadhyay, 2020). In Jakarta, land assembly relies heavily on elusive informal land brokers either working independently or hired by mega-developers' land assembly departments.⁹ Land assembly depends also on local power brokers. In Bangalore the most influential officials operate at a larger geographical scale: corporators from the Municipal Corporation (BBMP) and particularly members of the Legislative Assembly of Karnataka State (MLAs). In Jakarta, these are locally elected community representatives called RT and RW, local district officials (such as the *Lurah*) and municipal officials.

Higher tiers of government also play a differentiating role in land transformations. Jakarta's positionality as the country's national capital, whose governor often aspires to the national presidency, means that the Governor of DKI Jakarta is a powerful figure, but the national government also wields considerable power over a city seen as representing the nation. In Bangalore, the mayor has little power relative to that wielded by Karnataka State elected representatives and institutions.

Land financialisation and real estate finance has become increasingly global, particularly in the current historical conjuncture when other investment opportunities are less remunerative. Yet this again has local particularities, shaped by local and national conjunctures. In Bangalore, the small size of developers means that they require external financing, and have become deeply dependent on foreign capital. This dependence was facilitated by how neoliberalisation, a nation-state policy change starting in 1991, opened up the Indian real estate market to foreign finance capital. Global finance, especially private equity companies such as the Blackstone Group, have invested heavily in land, property and rent appropriation across India. In Bangalore, Blackstone, Morgan Stanley, Citigroup and Goldman Sachs

each are invested in large real estate and infrastructure projects (Goldman, 2011, 2020). Yet this opening up also made Bangalore vulnerable to oscillations in global finance markets, which came to a head after the 2007–2008 global financial crisis. Bangalore's developers have become increasingly indebted since 2011, digging deeper holes for themselves as they accelerate urban land transformations by beginning new projects to pay off the debt on previous ones. Bangalore's developers' debts are held by international financial institutions, now investing in structured debt, who play off local conditions against their global strategies (Goldman, 2020; Goldman and Narayan, 2019).

In Indonesia and Jakarta the 2008 global financial crisis had little effect, however, because Indonesia was not closely linked into global financial markets, whereas the lingering effects of 1997 Asian financial crisis, dubbed *krismon*, continues to shape national consciousness. *Krismon* not only brought down Suharto (then president of Indonesia), followed by a democratisation and devolution of political and regulatory power known as *reformasi*, but also impacted the Jakartan real estate market. The 1997 crisis bankrupted what were at the time heavily indebted and overextended developers—deepening the national crisis by wiping out the Indonesian banks holding those debts. The real estate market did not begin to recover until after 2005 (Herlambang et al., 2019). Some stand-alone developers, traumatised by 1997, up until today are reluctant to borrow on the foreign financial market, and large corporations utilise internal financing and joint ventures. Furthermore, Indonesia retains high barriers to foreign investment in and ownership of real estate: national policies have been designed to curb excessive speculation, and international financial institutions have found it difficult to navigate the particularities of Indonesia's domestic financial market. Thus, Jakarta's real estate developers hold little foreign debt; finance for large real estate and

infrastructure projects in Jakarta relies on a variety of funding sources, from pre-sales of units (as in Bangalore), to domestic private and state-owned banks, and the bank subsidiaries of Indonesia's mega-corporations.

If, like Stuart Hall, we consider neoliberalisation as a conjunctural era—marked by a distinct break from the Cold War era of state-organised globalisation towards Globalisation—then a focus on particularities brings insight into how this has played out differently in Jakarta and Bangalore, notwithstanding the fact that they occupy a similar 'southern' positionality with respect to the global-scale conjuncture. In this case, this requires paying particular attention to inter-scalar differences in the form taken by neoliberalisation and their inter-relations. At the national scale, the neoliberal conjuncture took different forms in India and Indonesia, which for our purposes highlights India's willingness to allow large-scale foreign investment in land and property (unlike Indonesia), and the very different ways in which financial crises during this era affected the two countries (Indonesia remaining haunted by the 1997 Asian financial crisis, whereas for India it was the 2008 global financial crisis). These national-scale conjunctural differences combine with metropolitan-scale differences—as noted above, the positionality of the city within the national urban system, structure of the real estate industry, the nature of the land assembly process and national–regional–municipal government relations—to create distinct features of the neoliberalisation conjuncture at the metropolitan-scale, and thereby of land transformation and rentiership.

Thinking relationally across shared common tendencies and particularities through ICR, it becomes obvious that these are not mutually exclusive. The particular contexts and relations are crucial for the formation and conditions of existence for shared common tendencies and vice versa. The precise form this relationship

takes, however, requires further investigation, both in our collaborative research and more generally.

Conclusion

In this article, we attempt two interventions oriented towards bringing conjunctural thinking, and its concern for the dialectic of the general and the particular, to bear on urban and regional analysis. First, we spatialise the application of conjunctural analysis to a single city or region, moving beyond treating cities and regions as isolated units of analysis. This means stretching explanatory frameworks outwards in space, not just backwards in time: examining the mutual constitution of conjunctures across different places, and how conjunctures at the urban or regional scale are shaped also by broader-scale conjunctural dynamics. This means that conjunctural analysis of a city takes into account how what happens in place is shaped by what happens elsewhere, at other scales, and across time. Drawing on the principles of socio-spatial theory, space and time themselves are active components in theorising the causal complexity of phenomena, processes and events.

This then forms the basis for extending mainstream and relational comparison to what we call conjunctural inter-urban comparison, developing three guiding principles (Table 1). First, a conjunctural comparative analytic stresses the importance of being open to multiple starting points and case selection—from where to theorise and which cities to compare. Second, conjunctural inter-urban comparison deploys a trifold spatiotemporality (cf. Peck, 2020): horizontal connectivity, inter-scalar relations and geohistorical trajectories. Here, comparative analysis not only takes into account horizontal connectivities, as stressed by those practicing relational inter-urban comparison, but also incorporates attention to inter-scalar relations and geohistorical trajectories: others

have practiced this (Hart, 2016, Söderström, 2014); we propose it as a guiding principle. Whether all three spatiotemporalities are significant in any particular comparison is an empirical question, but all should be kept in view during comparative analysis. Third, a conjunctural approach to inter-urban comparison stresses the mutual constitution/dialectic of the general and the particular, whereby the general not only transforms the particular, but also particularities can shape the general. Here, inter-urban comparison involves identifying shared general tendencies on the one hand, and local particularities on the other, as the basis for examining their interrelation. This differs somewhat from the conventional comparative goal of identifying and explaining similarities and differences.

To illustrate the practice of conjunctural inter-urban comparison, we draw on our own comparative research in Jakarta and Bangalore, in collaboration with others. Our selection of these two cities of the post-colony, places from off-the-map in Robinson's terminology, reflects our ethico-political commitment to taking southern perspectives seriously, and our prior familiarity with them. In both cities, our fieldwork studying the social ecology of land transformations and rent appropriation has attended to how what happens locally is shaped by the past and by connections with other cities, as well as working across scales—from diverse individual participants to global financial markets. Stress-testing received theories by taking the field seriously brought us to formulate the mid-range concept IRC, which we deploy here to clarify shared tendencies across the cities, particularities differentiating them and their inter-relations. We arrived at this by carefully tracing practices and flows of people and money among places, across scales and history.

IRC links local practices to global markets. Land brokers cajole residents of informal

settlements to sell any tenure rights they hold, converting these as necessary to freehold or leasehold rights enabling the assetisation of informal urban land. Developers build on this land, as part of their municipal-, regional- or national-scale investment strategies. Developers' actions in turn are subject, in principle, to the regulatory and governance norms of municipal and national governments. This enables global investment capital, scanning the world for investment opportunities, to invest in and financialise these developments. While global and national finance markets provide the finance needed by municipal developers, local land brokers and residents are key actors in assetising the land. IRC provides insight into both the drivers of land transformations and the emergence of a rental economy—characterised by the ways in which urban residents from all walks of life, not just developers and financial institutions, turn to rent extraction in order to accumulate wealth or support their livelihood practices.

The particularities that we identified have both local and national aspects, reflecting distinct spatiotemporal contexts and conjunctures. At the local scale, differences in the structure of the development industry and in the nature of land brokering generate locally distinct forms of land assetisation and property development. At the national scale, differences in regulatory norms governing foreign ownership of land enhanced the ability of global financial institutions to readily invest in land and property in Bangalore, while restricting this in Jakarta. National experiences of the financial crises accompanying Globalisation were also distinct. In Jakarta, the 1997/1998 financial crisis bankrupted many smaller developers, facilitating their replacement by real estate arms of large conglomerates who continued to invest through the 2007/2008 global financial crisis. Bangalore's developers were hardly affected by the Asian financial crisis but have been devastated by increasing indebtedness since 2007/2008.

Taken together, spatialising conjunctural analysis and practicing conjunctural inter-urban and inter-regional comparison provide an epistemology that opens up urban and regional analysis to examining the dialectical relationship between the general and the particular—a central concern for theorists of the conjuncture. Doing this is by no means easy and far from complete: these are early stages in developing such an approach and, as noted above, conjunctural analysis is extremely ambitious and conjunctural comparison even more so. Yet it has vital implications. Rather than constructing the general as structural from which particularities deviate, approaching these dialectically enables analysts to see how particularities in and across cities and regions are generative of what comes to be constituted as the general. This, in turn, reminds us that local actions are important as they can have much larger-scale consequences—particularly important to recall in these times as we seek to identify emancipatory and ecologically sustainable political interventions.

Endnotes

¹ We use the term 'social ecology' to highlight how the complex interdependencies shaping human–environment relations coevolve with economic, political and social processes, attending to space, time and scale. While the term social ecology references the more than human, in this article we focus primarily on the relations among humans and societal institutions across different geographic scales and sites.

² The empirical findings reported here are based on a US National Science Foundation funded, multi-year collaborative and interdisciplinary research project on speculative urbanism undertaken by research teams of American and local scholars in Jakarta and Bangalore between 2013 and 2020. The common research design included interviews and focus groups with developers, bankers, land brokers, residents and government officials, field observations, remote sensing and document analysis.

³ We adopt Sparke's (2012) labelling of the particular neoliberal turn taken by globalisation since the 1980s as 'big-g' Globalisation.

⁴ A properly geographical approach to conjunctural analysis also should attend to materiality—to the co-constitution of societal and biophysical processes, such as the present conjunctures of global heating and COVID19—but we do not address this here.

⁵ Extending conjunctural analysis to inter-place comparison, teasing out the complex articulations of forces at work across places in terms of shared tendencies and particularities, also strengthens its capacity to inform political strategies and tactics across both space and time. It becomes possible to learn from strategies pursued elsewhere, to assess where to intervene, and to assess what is possible in different places.

⁶ Extending its application beyond the specifically social sciences, conjunctural analysis can be equally insightful for understanding more-than-human conjunctures by examining the spatiotemporal dialectic of the particular and the general in socio-natural processes.

⁷ In Jakarta, for example, whereas some *kampung* residents have freehold tenure (*hak milik*), others possess more limited tenancy rights. These include unregistered indigenous land rights (*adat*), use rights (*hak pakai*) and the right to build (*hak guna bangunan*). These can be traded formally and informally.

⁸ Portions of the funds are used also for personal consumption, education, weddings, religious expenditures, buying land in outlying villages etc.

⁹ In the pre-1997 era, President Suharto facilitated land banking by handing over large plantations to well-connected corporations and developers for real estate development, a previous conjunctural moment that remains an important component of current land banks.

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