Chapter 17
In search of ordinary ‘elsewheres’ in global urbanism? On Ola Söderström’s Cities in Relations
Rachel Bok

Keywords: Comparative urbanism, postcolonial cities, neoliberal urbanism, more-than-human world, global/ordinary cities

Introduction
Palermo, Italy, is hardly an intuitive starting point for what would at first glance appear to be a comparison of the ‘Southern’ cities of Hanoi, Vietnam and Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. But it was during his journeys to this city in the 1990s that the Swiss cultural geographer Ola Söderström began to see in Palermo traces of other European cities, such as Berlin and London, before shifting his sights to the Global South to understand what a translocal, relational perspective might reveal about the variegated nature of global urban development. The result is a decade-long study spanning both continents and disciplinary terrains of urban studies; a testimony to the lived, demanding nature of transnational research. This nod to Palermo in the preface of a book about the porous worlds of Hanoi and Ouagadougou is a telling indicator of what lies in wait for readers: a glimpse into the extraordinary connections to elsewhere that cause us to see ordinary cities differently.

Ola Söderström’s Cities in Relations: Trajectories of Urban Development in Hanoi and Ouagadougou (henceforth, CiR), published in 2014, appeared after the re-emergence of calls for empirical investigations into comparative urbanism. Söderström explicitly positions CiR as a methodological intervention that seeks to advance a relational comparison of Hanoi and Ouagadougou. It revolves around the central research question of how these two globalizing cities of the South have shaped, and been shaped by, their relations with elsewhere. Söderström’s main argument is that a relational analysis of cities would require scholars to conceive of relations not merely as ‘abstract conceptions,’ but as ‘historical products,’ constructed through processes of power and grounded materially (Söderström, 2014: 3). This is
couched in a deeper argument he makes for a more expansive, grounded conceptualization of globalization, opting for the French term ‘mondialisation’ to convey the multitude of global interconnections that exceed the economic reductionism that he sees as characteristic of research on global cities and neoliberal urbanism.

This chapter critically evaluates Söderström’s methodological exposition of relational comparison. CiR is a pioneering, monograph-length study in how to practice relational comparison. This itself is a significant achievement considering that the chorus of calls for relational comparison in urban studies has markedly outstripped empirical investigations thereof (but see Cook and Ward, 2012). Indeed, CiR illustrates how comparative urbanism necessarily is a theoretical-empirical project (Nijman, 2015). More than merely method or academic technique, CiR also reflects an aspiration, aligned with certain streams of comparativism and particular ethico-political concerns, for a more ‘cosmopolitan’ urban studies (Robinson, 2011a). Still, there remain several missed opportunities in Söderström’s approach that, when examined more broadly, undercut its postcolonial agenda and reinforce the need for urban scholars to reflect more systematically on the purpose, practice, and politics of (relational) comparison.

In what follows I detail the mechanics and practicalities of Söderström’s methodology of relational comparison, discuss the wider context of the ‘renaissance’ of comparative urbanism in urban studies, and then utilize this to critically assess Söderström’s methodology: the value of using relations as the basis of comparison, the Deleuzian perspective that informs his methodological approach, and the question of his ethico-political commitments. I conclude by raising three questions surrounding the theoretical and methodological stakes of conducting relational comparison and strategies for moving this forward in urban studies.

**Doing relational comparison**

Söderström’s methodology unfolds through an exploratory yet systematic comparison of the ‘worlds of relations’ of Hanoi and Ouagadougou. For him, a relational comparison ‘takes relations, their evolution, form, intensity, and orientation as the elements of comparison’
He draws on geographical scholarship by Ash Amin, Doreen Massey and Claude Raffestin, also paying homage to Gillian Hart (2002), reiterating that a relational geography must be attentive to power, historical trajectories, interplays between relationality and territoriality, and possibilities for transformation. His relational thinking is poststructuralist and Deleuzian, set in sharp contrast to what he considers the hierarchical and neostructuralist relationality of the Globalization and World Cities research group (https://www.lboro.ac.uk/gawc/) — a hint as to what guides his choice of cities.

Hanoi and Ouagadougou are capital cities in Southeast Asia and West Africa that reflect the unevenness of the globalizing South. Söderström views them as ‘real laboratories’ for observing how transnational relations might shape urban development, primarily because these cities were ‘relation-poor’ (i.e. more isolated and marginal) at certain points in Vietnam and Burkina Faso’s histories before being ‘re-connected’ to global flows in the 1990s — hence his decision to focus on the 1990-2010 timeframe (Söderström, 2014: 2). Both are former French colonies that maintain linkages with France and experienced rapid urbanization under the privatization of land ownership and economic deregulation in the 1990s. Each city has taken a distinct trajectory of globalization (Hanoi’s more economic; Ouagadougou’s more political), with different geopolitical orientations of cross-border relations (Hanoi with its Asian neighbors; Ouagadougou with African and European cities). Söderström’s rationales for choosing Hanoi and Ouagadougou reflect a broader motivation to see from the South and challenge an Anglophone metrocentricity (Bunnell and Maringanti, 2010) that frames postcolonial cities as insignificant by conventional global city metrics.

Söderström’s attention to how their ‘elsewheres’ matter ensures that CiR is about more than (just) these two cities. There are hardly any interactions between Hanoi and Ouagadougou, at times creating the impression of two case studies stacked side-by-side, which prompts the much-needed question of what exactly it means to compare cities through their relations with elsewhere. Purposively transcending dominant themes in urban policy mobilities, Söderström emphasizes three types of urban translocal and transnational relations: urban policies, in particular public space policy for its ostensibly more progressive ethos; urban architectural
forms, investigating 16 newly-built places in each city (buildings, public space, infrastructure); and urban practices and discourses, especially their mutually constitutive relationship with city dwellers’ subjectivities. First, he compares the relations of Hanoi and Ouagadougou in terms of their type, intensity, and orientation, injecting specificity into otherwise vague invocations of relational analysis. Second, he compares the effects of these relations in different domains of urban development, pinning down the generative potential of relations. Third, he compares the timeframe of urban development in Hanoi and Ouagadougou from 1990-2010, tracing this temporality over long-term trajectories and short-term instances of policymaking to investigate past and present city relations in the making.

Söderström implements a mixed methods approach that combines quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Drawing on previous collaborative research with teams based in Hanoi and Ouagadougou, statistical data were compiled from documents produced by international organizations (e.g., World Bank, KOF Swiss Economic Institute), national statistical offices, municipal offices, and existing studies (e.g., GaWC research). Using these data, he summarizes national-level trends in Vietnam (1945-2012) and Burkina Faso (1960-2012) in the form of a more traditional comparative study. Söderström examines flows of capital (foreign direct investment, remittances, development aid); people (population dynamics, tourism, student migration); and information (Internet access and cellphone subscriptions).

In terms of qualitative methods, Söderström relies on in-depth interviews (20 in Hanoi, 18 in Ouagadougou) with professionals involved in governing urban policy and built environments, including architects, municipal and national government officials, international organization staff, researchers, activists, and artists. He also uses ‘object biography’ to trace specific changes in urban development, focusing on urban forms (and the relations constituting their creation and usage) and using actor-network theory to explore the relationship between material forms and society (drawing on Guggenheim and Söderström, 2010). To uncover sites where different dimensions of urban development come together (investments, regulations, design processes, and user experiences), based on ‘expert’ interviews he selects sixteen objects (buildings, public spaces, parks) built during 1990-2010 in each of Hanoi and Ouagadougou as
representative of change in that city. This is operationalized in two phases. First, he assesses the role of transnational relations in influencing object design, utilizing visual documentation (surveying photographs and architectural plans) and interviews with the relevant architects and their clients (30 in Hanoi, 49 in Ouagadougou). Second, he focuses on how these forms shape urban culture and subject-making, selecting eight objects in each city for which he undertook shorter interviews and participant observations with their users (73 in Hanoi, 64 in Ouagadougou). This brings a Latourian sensibility to bear on relational comparison by integrating the more-than-human world into the analysis, which Söderström sees as crucial to comprehending the co-production of knowledge in processes such as architectural design.

Comparative urbanism redux: The promise of relationality?
The current enthusiasm for comparative urbanism has generated two Special Issues in Urban Geography alone within the last decade (Nijman, 2007a; McFarlane and Robinson, 2012). A favored term to describe this surge of interest is ‘renaissance’. Kevin Ward (2008) notes that research in this subfield peaked in the 1970s and 1980s before slowing in the early 1990s, cautioning that a comparative urbanism for the 21st century would need to retain past insights while challenging the taken-for-granted conceptualization of cities as territorially bounded units. This renaissance has generated a plurality rather than a consensus on the purposes and methodologies of comparison. Examples include Nick Clarke’s (2012) actually existing comparative urbanism study of UK town-twinning partnerships; Jan Nijman’s (2007b) systematic multiple individualizing comparisons framework for understanding Miami, FL; scalar urban comparativism in Europe and North America (Glick Schiller, 2012; Boudreau et al., 2008); and Ian Cook and Ward’s (2012) relational comparison of waterfront planning in Cleveland, OH.

Current thinking owes a great deal to Jennifer Robinson’s (2011a, 2015) efforts to rework the conventions of comparison for a more ‘cosmopolitan urban studies’ (Robinson, 2006), clearly an inspiration for CiR. According to Robinson (2011b: 13), this has the potential to craft a ‘revitalized urban comparativism that is more adequate to the task of thinking through a world of cities.’ It would require reflecting more deeply on matters of methodology and
theorization, but also more expansively on the existing ways whereby scholars view, categorize, and classify cities (Gough, 2012). There is undeniably a wider postcolonial angle here: Garth Myers (2014: 104) utilizes comparative thinking to reconsider ‘the meaning of cityness and the roles, functions and shapes of urban areas, when accepted understandings for these derive from Euro-American contexts’, resonating with the sort of deconstructive relational thinking that continually questions taken-for-granted relationships between knowledge, place, and power (Roy, 2016).

In this spirit, Ward (2010) argues that comparative urbanism should focus less on searching for similarities and differences between cities and more on deploying a relational comparison ‘that uses different cities to pose questions of one another’ (ibid: 480). Following Hart’s (2002: 297) conceptualization of relational space, he conceives of urban space and politics as relational and dynamically interconnected. Proponents of relational comparison (e.g., Jacobs, 2012a; McFarlane, 2010; Robinson, 2011b) commonly invoke Ward’s (2010) framework, as does CiR. Yet Glick Schiller (2012) cautions that relational comparison runs the risk of overemphasizing horizontal networks of connection to the neglect of (hierarchical) power structures (but see Jacobs, 2012b).

Relational comparison has an obvious appeal; encouraging urban scholars to consider cities in a more open and flexible manner seems especially crucial in an age of global interconnection. Yet this begs the fundamental question of what makes a comparative methodology ‘relational’. Jane Jacobs (2012a: 412) notes that relational thinking has been operationalized in rather different ways by urban scholars, indicative of its ‘irreconcilable grammars of relationality’. Hart (2018: 372) similarly observes that different invocations of relationality in comparative urbanism can be ‘quite incommensurate’. As an example, Hart notes that whereas her approach to relational comparison is influenced by Massey, Lefebvre, and Coronil, Robinson draws on Lefebvre, Deleuze, and Althusser, whereas Roy’s is more deconstructive. Yet she argues that they share an epistemological perspective: a principled wariness of grand theoretical overtures, a processual awareness of constitutive forces, and a profound skepticism of Anglophone and Eurocentric thinking. In this wider context of debates
on relational comparison that have yet to systematically confront these differences, I return to CIR to consider what is distinctive about relational comparison, the theoretical antecedents that have influenced Söderström’s methodological framework, and how CIR falls short of its postcolonial ambitions.

**Reflecting on Cities in Relations**

Söderström (2014: 20) remarks that, with the exception of Hart’s work, the current state of relational comparison is framed largely as a theoretical critique of traditional comparativism. Given the general lack of empirical engagement, CIR is valuable because Söderström provides a concrete definition of relational comparison and a practical methodological exposition of how it can be done. CIR thus offers a primer of sorts to studying city relations for others to build upon and refine. McFarlane and Robinson (2012) suggest that scholars will need to craft new methods and approaches to comparison in order to comprehend diverse urban experiences. Yet, by deploying largely traditional methods CIR makes relational comparison appear feasible, and can thus be considered a generative ‘experiment’ in relational comparative urbanism.

Söderström counters the critiques of fluidity and vagueness that are frequently levelled at relational approaches by proposing a comparative strategy that compares city relations via registers of intensity, domain, and orientation. This is a useful starting point to think about how to differentiate relations. In ‘Transnational policy relations’ (chapter 3), he studies the role of foreign expertise in governing transnational master-planning and urban policy relations in Hanoi and Ouagadougou. He combines a longitudinal analysis of masterplans and policy documents with interviews with professionals to emphasize the historical specificity of these planning relations, particularly their postcolonial dimensions. This enables him to show that the two cities have forged qualitatively different policy relations that (continue to) shape their divergent trajectories of urban globalization and the range of historical influences at play. By documenting the variability of urban and national transitions to neoliberalism, he offers nuanced perspectives on such oft-invoked terms as globalization and neoliberal urbanism.
This methodological strategy of differentiating city relations enables Söderström to demonstrate how connections that are oriented towards different political stakes and outcomes ‘often relate one city to many others’ (ibid: 64), drawing different combinations of cities into the same frame of analysis to make them commensurable. This pushes scholars to ask which relations matter, when in the city’s development, and why this configuration of relations and cities was produced at this particular time. For Hanoi, the ‘relations that matter’ are market-centered — the sizeable property sector of Pacific Asia comes to mind — connecting it with cities in South Korea, Indonesia, and Japan. For Ouagadougou, meaningful diplomatic connections are established with North African, European, and Middle Eastern cities, culminating in the performative establishment of Ouaga 2000, a “presidential” special zone’ for partner countries to showcase these relations (ibid: 82). Yet such diplomatic linkages are at times wielded in conflicting ways by competing scales (municipal and national) of Burkina Faso’s state apparatus, leading Söderström to an analysis of how Ouagadougou’s transnational relations also constitute a multiscalar ‘battleground’ between political interests. Tracing the cleavages and fault lines of translocal urban relations pushes scholars to re-evaluate urban spatialities by bringing a diversity of urban processes into the analysis, possibly also creating radically different relationships of comparison to those of a more conventional (territorial) comparison (Robinson, 2011b).

Söderström’s approach to relationality is informed by Deleuzian thinking, which orientates his research design towards possibilities of difference, novelty, and transformation in urban life. This is framed as a critique of research in urban entrepreneurialism and neoliberal urbanism that searches principally for sameness rather than for difference. The ambition to conceptualize more-than-neoliberal policy relations influences his choice to focus on public space policy, which he regards as not typically neoliberal. Methodologically, Deleuze provides a topological perspective that involves surveying a repertoire of policy exchanges, including the actual travels of (human and more-than-human) actors and the more immaterial, imaginative circuits of circulation that might not have been part of the formal policymaking process (e.g., visits, citations). Söderström elaborates on this in Chapter 4 (‘Public space policies on the
move’), parsing the contradictions and tensions between relationality and territorially in public space policymaking in Hanoi. He develops the concept of ‘loose threads’, denoting connections that exceed formal policymaking, to understand how policies are ‘arrived at’ rather than how they ‘arrive from elsewhere’ (Robinson, 2013: 11).

Tracing loose threads unveils potential policies within these different translocal connections before the choice and black-boxing of a specific solution’ (Söderström, 2014: 97, emphasis added). He contrasts three types of translocal connections of public space policymaking: policy mobility (actual-formal); topological representations (discursive-material); and inter-referencing (discursive-imaginative). The variety of these loose threads is indicative of the range of perspectives that constitute imaginaries of public space in Hanoi—of what currently exists but also of what the city could become. This has the virtue of opening the black box of policymaking to unveil processes of negotiation, conflict, and paths not taken. Yet actual instances of power are strangely absent; this could have been addressed through interviews with users/citizens affected by the destruction of public space, not just with professionals. This neglect may derive from Söderström’s desire to avoid the search for ‘sameness’ that he thinks plagues research on neoliberal urbanism. But it also brings to mind Glick Schiller’s (2012) dissatisfaction with (Deleuzian) relational thinking for underemphasizing power hierarchies. Persistent trajectories of policymaking matter precisely because directionality can reflect power differences.

Söderström’s Deleuzian perspective has other shortcomings. First, attention to (transformative) novelty needs to be balanced with attention to stability and persistence. For example, the question of why certain ‘loose threads’ are consistently discarded may be explained by institutional constraints and long-term policymaking regimes. Second, his conception of territory is thin, stemming from a general lack of engagement with theorists of territory and/or the state; even Deleuze and Guattari’s corpus of work on (de)territorialization is strangely neglected. Söderström appears to use aspects of embeddedness and generativeness of policy relations in different domains of urban development as a proxy for territory and territoriality, claiming to ‘look more precisely at the territorial aspect of these policies by
focusing on how these relations generate the specific domain of policies for public space’ (ibid: 62). Yet McFarlane (2016: 172) notes Söderström sets up a dualism between relationality and territoriality that risks ‘undermin[ing] a nuanced sense of relationality in that it leaves us with an underspecified sense of territory as both relational and non-relational.’

Söderström explicitly situates CiR within the postcolonial critique of global cities research, in order to ‘“speak back” to mainstream urban studies’ (ibid: 175. In his concluding argument, inspired by Friedmann (2007), Söderström makes the case for an ‘assets-based politics of urban relatedness’ (ibid: 171): this would impel practitioners of urban governance to conceive of urban development strategies – and draw on intercity relations – that are more locally sensitive. Congruent with this is a politics (and ethos) of learning that would encourage practitioners to reflect more deeply on the appropriateness of models of urban growth for particular cities, as well as the careful cultivation of interurban relationships that would best suit the needs and ambitions of cities and their citizens. Söderström bemoans the destruction of Hanoi’s distinctive social assets by professionals pursuing global city dreaming, while commending Ouagadougou’s municipal strategy. In this view, Ouagadougou’s weak global economic connections offer the unexpected silver lining of shielding it from the aspirations plaguing Hanoi. Indeed, CiR ultimately advocates an approach to urban planning and translocal relationship-building that is sensitive to the needs of a city’s citizens.

It is debatable whether CiR lives up to its postcolonial ambition. Söderström’s choices of Hanoi and Ouagadougou go beyond the usual suspects of urban research and learning – while also raising Ouagadougou as a model of sorts – but the analysis falls short of a genuinely postcolonial critique with regards to the broader theory-cultures of its research design. McFarlane (2010: 737) relates this question of theory-cultures to the ethico-politics of comparison, which are ‘fundamentally about ... the epistemic and institutionalized relations of power between different scholarly and non-scholarly communities within and between different cultures of knowledge production.’ The actors and authors Söderström selects to speak for Hanoi and Ouagadougou mean that CiR reiterates existing power relations. Interview quotes largely originate from the professionals with whom most of the in-depth interviews were
conducted, and ‘experts’ also determined the sample of objects analyzed, reinforcing the elite-centric focus of policy mobility research (Bunnell and Marolt, 2014). Moreover, CiR’s aspiration to theorize back to mainstream urban studies belies its conceptual architecture of European (largely Francophone) theorists: Deleuze, Foucault, Latour, etc.

A second issue relates to who counts as a researcher. Söderström explains that CiR is a single-authored monograph because the relational comparison of Hanoi and Ouagadougou was only undertaken following initial collaborative research. In the preface he acknowledges the support of bigger, presumably diverse research teams based in Hanoi and Ouagadougou (and Palermo), likening these efforts to a ‘human science laboratory’ wherein the labors of comparison were ‘distributed across different sites and collectively constructed’ (ibid: xvi) – a telling metaphor that elides the inescapable complexities inherent to envisioning, coordinating, and undertaking comparative urbanism. Any meaningful transnational comparison necessarily entails collaborative, multicultural ventures and research networks (Myers, 2014). For a text that is so emphatic about its methodological purpose, it is oddly silent about the transnational circuits of labor that were integral to enabling this relational comparison. A relational comparison that is reflexive about matters of methodology and theory surely must reflect not just on the cases, but also on the interpersonal, power-laden relations through which researchers interact with each other to make comparison possible (e.g., divisions of labor, linguistic and cultural exchanges, reliance on local interlocuters). Questions of who gets to speak on behalf of which cities, and in what manner, are questions of participation and authorization that constitute the ‘complex cultural political economy of existing comparativism’ (Jacobs, 2012a: 910).

**Learning from Cities in Relations**

There is much to learn from CiR, not just about strategies for undertaking relational comparison, but also about advancing urban studies more broadly. As a pioneering effort that sets out a unique and feasible methodological framework, CiR is invaluable for the subfield of comparative urbanism. It also provides a fine-grained analysis of cities often considered marginal to global
urbanization: an entry point into comparing cities in ways that might do justice to their complexity and diversity.

In concluding, this methodological excavation of CiR raises several questions for urban studies with respect to advancing comparative urban research. First, what is the purpose of comparative urbanism more generally and relational comparison in particular? Should it be to destabilize and surprise, overturning taken-for-granted assumptions? This is what Benedict Anderson (2016) has long advocated in deploying comparison as a discursive strategy, not unlike Robinson’s (2011a) reflections on the politics of commensurability in comparison and Myers’ (2014) provocative argument for making unexpected comparisons. Söderström’s choice of Hanoi and Ouagadougou carries the risk that these cities will be bracketed off as ‘incomparable’ to, for example, Northern cities. This, combined with CiR’s dependence on Northern theoretical frameworks such as policy mobility and geographies of architecture, results in a comparison that may reinforce rather than unsettle existing norms of commensurability. A counter-approach would have been to undertake a more extensive multi-sited strategy that brings Hanoi and Ouagadougou directly into comparative conversation with Northern cities, thereby working across the heuristic of North-South relations.

Second, is the question of how postcolonial theory and relational comparison are related. Postcolonial thinking has reinvigorated interest in urban comparison; some of the strongest advocates of relational comparison are postcolonial scholars. Among the range of postcolonial approaches present in urban studies, CiR draws most extensively on the ordinary cities critique to revisit arguments of modernity, development, and neoliberalism. But, as Jacobs (2012a: 904) asks, ‘does comparativism somehow better serve the postcolonial imagination?’ A dialogue between postcolonial and non-postcolonial approaches to comparison might be useful in this regard.

Third, how might scholars practically integrate less visible relations of place, knowledge, and power into (relational) comparative research designs? Comparison is usually undertaken by large, multi-sited, and multicultural research teams, such as those with whom Söderström worked in Hanoi and Ouagadougou before writing CiR. These entail transnational divisions of
labor, a translational politics of exchange, and decisions about authorship, authority and language. Who was responsible for which tasks and why? How did researchers grapple with a range of local complexities while holding cities in comparison? While Söderström has little to say on this, moving forward scholars need to be more reflexive and open about how they have grappled with these complexities in methodological discussions about comparison. Trade-offs will surely be made, but these should be viewed less as impediments to research design and more as opportunities to advance methodological and theoretical conversations about comparing cities. Conceived of more expansively and ethically, comparison is not just a method(ology), but a ‘mode of thought that informs how urban theory is constituted’ (McFarlane, 2010: 31). The critical reflections provoked by comparative urbanism are advancing urban studies, but these must be accompanied by methodological expositions that are reflexive about the structural relations through which knowledge of the urban is generated.
References


