



New Urban Worlds: Inhabiting Dissonant Times

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2 Simone, AM and Pieterse E, *New Urban Worlds: Inhabiting Dissonant Times*, Polity:
3 Cambridge, 2017; 247 pp.: 978-0-745-69156-5, £16.99 / US\$24.95 (pbk)
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6 **Reviewed by:** William Monteith, School of Geography, Queen Mary University of London
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10 Every now and again, the emperor must be disrobed. Disciplinary debates – shaped by the
11 clothes of a thousand emperors past – become stale, and detached from the empirical realities
12 they purport to describe. Over the past two decades, AbdouMaliq Simone, among a number
13 of poststructural scholars, has dutifully disrobed the field of urban studies, preparing the
14 ground for a new vocabulary of urbanism that is better able to convey the dissonant realities
15 of emerging city life in the global South. Gone are the confident and well-worn concepts of
16 ‘gentrification’, ‘renewal’, ‘entrepreneurialism’, and ‘public space’. In their place stand an
17 array of challenging and often indeterminate notions, including those of ‘secretion’,
18 ‘resonance’ and ‘re-description’, which reflect the unfolding paradoxes of urban life in the
19 majority world.
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28 In *New Urban Worlds*, Simone is reunited with Edgar Pieterse, a long-term collaborator in
29 the project to shift the epistemological horizons of urban studies to the South. Their work,
30 along with that of Roy and Ong (2011) and Amin and Thrift (2016), contributes to a growing
31 body of relational literature on cities that rejects the existence of any single ‘overarching
32 theoretical story’ about urbanization (p. 185). This literature identifies a disconnect between
33 the *convictions* of the urban studies scholarship, and the *uncertainties* of urban life across
34 much of the world. In a field that has long been drawn to what is fixed, dominant and
35 continuous, these authors are instead drawn to phenomena that ‘leak from the frame’ (p.94).
36 What aspects of urban life go uncaptured by dominant theories; for example, of governance
37 and capital? What is the ‘surplus’ that remains after conventional (northern) frameworks have
38 been applied? And how might this surplus form the basis of alternative, generative theories of
39 urban life that are understandable to a diverse range of actors? These are important and
40 timely questions.
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50 Simone and Pieterse suggest two points of departure: *i)* to abandon the ‘disciplinary and
51 thematic stories that weigh urban studies down’ (p.197), and *ii)* to restore experimentation ‘as
52 a normative aspect of living in and running cities’ (p. x). This approach requires a willingness
53 to work with the *details* of how urban inhabitants, institutions and technologies operate
54 ‘without necessarily rushing to envelop the details in ready-made ideological or interpretive
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1 frameworks' (p. xviii). The authors illustrate this approach by distilling their long-term
2 engagements with cities in sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia into a number of
3 'conceptual interventions' that foreground the agentic struggles of urban inhabitants (p. 10).
4 These include the notions of 'resonance', which emphasises the connectivity of different
5 people and places, 'secretion', which invokes the porosity of predominant forms of power;
6 and 're-description', which foregrounds the capacity of observers to imagine alternative
7 visions of urban life.
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14 The conceptual work done by terms such as 'resonance' and 'secretion' will be familiar to
15 scholars conversant with theories of *assemblage* (McFarlane 2011) and *everyday resistance*
16 (Scott 1985). Nevertheless, they are invoked here in ways that breathe new life into urban
17 studies, by centring the insurgent, the makeshift and the provisional, chipping away at
18 teleological theories of urbanization.
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24 Re-description is what the book does best. Familiar objects of study are often re-described in
25 ways that sidestep sterile debates and open up new lines of enquiry. For example, rather than
26 objects of governance or capital, urban markets are depicted as 'story-making machines'
27 (p.185) that are understood as dangerous places insofar as they unsettle the dominance of any
28 single story (p.92). Markets therefore provide important contexts for 'witnessing how
29 economic and social realities get 'done'' amid a backdrop of simplifying and often deceptive
30 narratives (p.89). There is a critical methodological implication here. Given the limited
31 infiltration of standardised models of governance and economy in many cities in the global
32 South, a methodological reliance on associated instruments, such as elite interviews and
33 micro-economic surveys, is likely to result in a simplistic and misleading representation of
34 urban life. If you want to understand how a city works, spend some time in the market.
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44 The vision of urban life that emerges here is messy, pluralistic, paradoxical and – perhaps
45 above all – serendipitous. Simone and Pieterse call on researchers to be as experimental and
46 eclectic in our scholarship as urban inhabitants are in their everyday lives; borrowing ideas
47 and resources from different domains, and re-assembling them in ways that shed new light on
48 pressing issues. I am in full support of this project. Nevertheless, there is need to be more
49 explicit about its means and limitations in order for it to 'add up' to more than the sum of its
50 parts; in other words, for it to provide a solid epistemological grounding on which other
51 researchers are able to contribute. In this spirit, I identify three areas in need of clarification
52 and expansion.
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4 Firstly, the book has very little to say about methodology, beyond the observation that
5 methods should be ‘inventive’ and ‘experimental’ (p. 10). There is an implied ethnographic
6 instruction; for example, in the authors’ admission that research ‘is full of many tricks,
7 particularly the ethnographic variety, and we have employed many of these over the years’
8 (p. *xiv*). Yet the nature of these ‘tricks’ – and their potential contribution to an experimental
9 urban methodology – is unexplained. Similarly, important questions of positionality are
10 unaddressed. Who are the researchers of ‘new urban worlds’? What qualifies them as such?
11 And through what types of activities and relations might they generate ‘data’? To be clear,
12 the authors need not justify their choices in relation to the epistemological frameworks of
13 others – particularly given the inability of many of these frameworks to describe the contexts
14 at hand. Nevertheless, there is a need to outline a set of methodological parameters, or
15 principles, if the arguments presented here are to develop into a fully-fledged research
16 agenda.
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26 Secondly and relatedly, for a book committed to working with the ‘details’ of urban life,
27 there is a notable lack of empirical illustration. Analyses often take place at the level of
28 ‘urban Africa’ and ‘Asia’, with occasional departures to Jakarta, Kinshasa and Cape Town.
29 As a result, the cities of these two giant regions of the world tend to fold into one another,
30 unchallenged by differences of culture, politics or economy. To a certain extent, this lack of
31 empirical depth is an inevitable consequence of the book’s ambitious breadth. However, it
32 also undermines the argument at times; for example, in the absence of the subjective accounts
33 of urban inhabitants, the book arguably reproduces rather than resists ‘a politics of urban
34 knowledge [in which] the ‘majority’ has been ordered to ‘shut up’’ (p. *xiii*).
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42 Thirdly and finally, while the authors are rightly suspicious of the dominance of ‘stories’ in
43 urban studies that derive from the historical experiences of (post-)industrial cities in the
44 global North, they need not do away with all structural analysis. Although urban life in much
45 of the global South involves a great deal of experimentation, this experimentation usually
46 takes place within a social and cultural space that places limits on what can be negotiated
47 with who. Furthermore, it is it possible to observe the impact of such structures without
48 enveloping them in ‘ready-made’ ideological frameworks, or labelling them as paradigmatic
49 of a ‘Southern’ urbanism. For example, James Ferguson (2015) has recently argued that the
50 livelihood activities of young men and women in cities in Southern Africa adhere to logics of
51 (re)distribution and reciprocal obligation that have a long history in the region. In the absence
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2 of cultural and historical analysis, there is a danger of representing the inhabitants of ‘new
3 urban worlds’ as one and the same; as ‘experimenters’ without borders or pressing personal
4 concerns.
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8 Scholars of a structural persuasion are likely to be frustrated by these omissions. However,
9 there is much that is worth grappling with here. By purposefully ‘disrobing’ the field of urban
10 studies, Simone and Pieterse contribute to its survival as a responsive and a pluralistic
11 intellectual space.
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16 **References**

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