

Exploring divergences in comparative research: Citizenship regimes and the spectacular cities of Central Asia and the GCC

Natalie Koch, Department of Geography, The Maxwell School, Syracuse University

Abstract: Interrogating the concept of ‘legality’ and how it relates to local citizenship regimes, this article shows how a focus on cross-regional *divergences* can offer theoretical insights into the political implications of projects that, on the surface, appear to be strikingly similar. Taking the case of apparently similar spectacular capital city development schemes in the resource-rich states of Central Asia and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), I show that there are significant differences in the underlying political geographic and political economic factors that makes them possible, as well as the political relations they sustain and produce. Like most states around the world, foreigners represent a minority of the overall population of the Central Asian states, but in the GCC, citizens are in the minority of the population in most countries. Because of this political configuration, the capital city development schemes are broadly coded as legal and legitimate in the Gulf, but illegal and corrupt in Central Asia. By honing in on these two different regions, this study shows how the state’s power to define citizenship, and thus who is entitled to its resources, is a tremendously powerful technology of government, which hinges on actively constructing a binary between the ‘legal’ and ‘illegal.’

Keywords: *GCC, Central Asia, regional studies, capital city, spectacle, comparative urbanism*

Introduction

The explosive growth of Dubai has captivated international attention over the past decade, and scholars have assiduously traced the rippling-out effect of its success to urban development agendas all around the world. Planners from small towns to large cities regularly promise to make their cities into the ‘next Dubai’ – a process explicitly framed around the world as ‘Dubaiization’ (Barthel 2010, 2014; Elsheshtawy 2010; Yigitcanlar and Bulu 2015). While treated as the epitome of *spectacular urban development*, Dubai is, of course, an exception. As with any city, Dubai’s story of rapid growth is so geographically and historically dependent, that any planner is fooling him- or herself if they think that their city might replicate the conditions of Dubai’s ascent. Naturally, these urban planners are not fools. So what explains their use of the ‘Dubai model’ of spectacular urbanism in promoting and realizing their development agendas? ‘The key,’ Pierre-Arnaud Barthel (2010, 140) has argued, is ‘to investigate the underlying territorial imagination in the development plans’ – to which I would add the need to foreground the power relations that are both produced and reproduced through the processes of ‘urban policy transfer’ (McCann 2010). So rather than asking after motives, I suggest here that the focus is better reversed to *effects*. That is, how do planners’ promotion of Dubai-inspired development schemes challenge, uphold, or reconfigure prevailing power relations?

I have been exploring these questions through honing in on ‘spectacular urbanization’ (Mohammad and Sidaway 2012) of capital cities in the resource-rich of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan alongside ostensibly similar projects in several Gulf Cooperation Council

(GCC) states. Not only do the cases in my study fit into the conventional definition of being ‘rentier states’ (deriving their revenue predominantly from resource extraction rather than taxes), but they are all nondemocratic polities – albeit permitting differing degrees of political freedom for different segments of their populations. In devising this cross-regional study, I have sought to challenge prevailing approaches to Central Asia in Anglophone academic and policy spheres, which still consider the region as *‘post-Soviet.’* These three Caspian littoral states have tremendous natural resource reserves, which have allowed them to pursue development policies more in line with their southern neighbors in the GCC, than with their former Soviet compatriots and post-communist peers elsewhere in Europe and Eurasia. There are, of course, profound differences between the resource-rich states of the GCC and Central Asia (and the regions themselves are also quite heterogeneous). But as this article illustrates, rather than an apples-and-oranges ‘problem’ to be solved with ‘better’ case selection, these *divergences* actually provide an exceptional window onto the political effects of spectacular urban development. In particular, I consider one central puzzle: *why are otherwise remarkably similar capital city development schemes broadly coded by both foreign observers and locals as legal and legitimate in the Gulf, but illegal and corrupt in Central Asia?* Seeking to explain the starkly contrasting popular interpretation of these projects, I shed light on how we might destabilize the very concept of ‘legality’ through what Garth Myers (2014) terms an ‘unexpected comparison.’

The verb ‘compare’ means to examine multiple objects, ideas, or other things to note similarities and differences. In academic practice, however, the key word ‘differences’ sometimes gets dropped and scholars can lapse into assumptions that the goal of comparative research is to search for similarities alone. This point was made clear to me in two different interpretations grant reviewers took toward funding requests for my cross-regional study. Although some reviewers found merit in the joint analysis of Central Asian and GCC capitals, a handful viewed the project as flawed insofar as it was ‘a leap between very different contexts’ and suggested that the project should instead be confined to states in the ‘post-socialist realm.’ The overall implication of this latter interpretation is that only sufficiently *‘like’* contexts should be compared. Leaving aside possible counter-arguments, I merely want to point out the narrow interpretation of comparison that arises from this critique. By suggesting that comparative work should be restricted to similar contexts, these reviewers invoke a rather political assumption of what constitutes legitimate grounds for comparison (in this case, the assumption is that post-socialist contexts are best interpreted through the political legacies of socialism). Such ‘commonsense’ assumptions are a clear illustration of how ‘the basis and form of comparison often reproduce hierarchies of judgement’ (Sidaway 2013, 993).

In contrast, I argue that as critical scholars, we should adopt a more inclusive understanding of comparison that does not immediately discount difference and disjuncture, but instead challenges traditional analytical categories on the basis of innovative juxtapositions. Social scientific research stands to benefit tremendously by carefully interrogating difference: not only is it essential to avoid the reifying tendencies that come with academic tradition, but it

may also open up innovative new lines of inquiry and theoretical insights. As James Sidaway elaborates:

something more is at stake than simply broadening the range of case studies. The point is how those seemingly universal categories, such as the urban, the state, and the economy (or even more broadly, modernity), always internalize and are constituted through global historical and geographical difference. (Sidaway 2013, 993)

In the remainder of this short article, I hope to illustrate this argument through challenging a set of interlocking universals: citizenship and legality.

Cross-regional convergences: The spectacular cities of Central Asia and the GCC

Building on recent calls in urban studies for more comparative research (e.g. Bunnell et al. 2012; Chen and Kanna 2012; Wiest 2012), my study of Central Asia and the GCC also arose out of a certain dissatisfaction with the near-automatic grouping of Central Asian states with other ‘post-communist,’ ‘post-socialist,’ or ‘post-Soviet’ polities, despite it being nearly 25 years since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Not only had I begun to notice a wide range of cross-regional convergences and flows connecting Central Asia with the GCC, but my interlocutors in Kazakhstan have long vocalized their irritation at being grouped with ‘all the other ‘stans’ – a classification they resent as a label of backwardness (Koch 2013b). Instead, elites and ordinary citizens in the region have increasingly expressed their geopolitical affinities beyond the Russian sphere of influence – toward Europe and what they deem to be the ‘modern’ Middle East (i.e. the GCC, but not Turkey, see Koch 2013c). Eventually receiving funding through a Social Sciences Research Council Postdoctoral Fellowship for Transregional Research¹, I conducted fieldwork for the study in Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Qatar, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). With an interest in nationalism and authoritarian state-making, my analytical focus was on how geopolitical identities are narrated and performed through capital cities, and what role they play in configuring state-society relations in resource-rich countries.

Framed as ‘spectacular’ cities, the projects in Abu Dhabi, Doha, Manama, Astana, Ashgabat, and Baku actually have a great deal in common. State planners have long privileged capitals to showcase their ideals and the national identity they aspire to craft for their countries, and hope to have enshrined in popular imaginaries around the globe. ‘Nationalists,’ Billig (1995, 80) reminds us, ‘live in an international world, and their ideology is itself an international ideology. Without constant observation of the world of other nations, nationalists would be unable to claim that their nations meet the universal codes of nationhood.’ In the GCC and in Central Asia, planners are intensely aware of this international context and the ‘constant observation of the world of other nations’ (Koch 2013c 2014b). They take this image project seriously for a number of reasons – among them being simple egoism mixed with the nationalist

¹ This unique fellowship was part of the organization’s ‘Inter-Asia’ program, with funds provided by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. The application solicitation explicitly called for scholars to ‘reconceptualize Asia as a dynamic and interconnected formation and to move discussions beyond the territorial fixities of area-studies research without discounting the importance of contextually grounded, place-based knowledge’ (SSRC 2014).

impulse to stimulate the citizens' pride in the state. As I have shown in my more comprehensive work on Astana, this generally seems to work, and it is indeed a central component of the leadership's ability to mobilize popular support for the strict authoritarian government (Koch 2012 2013a 2013b 2014a).

This appears to be equally true of the other case countries in my study, where citizens tend to speak of their capitals with great pride, even if they find the traffic or residential displacements distasteful. Just as their leaders do, citizens want to feel modern and to be taken seriously on the world stage, 'a recognized and respected somebody in the world who counts and is attended to' (Geertz 1973, 237). In the resource-rich states of both regions, these iconic capital city projects seem to be offering just that. From Azerbaijan to Qatar, residents have witnessed the transformation of their capitals at an unprecedented rate over the past 20 years – and the state has taken credit: 'State representatives, the visible embodiments of the invisible powers of oil money, appear on the state's stage as powerful magicians who pull social reality, from public institutions to cosmogonies, out of a hat' (Coronil 1997, 2). Rather than resulting from 'bottom-up' urbanization, the state's magicians have used resource wealth to develop their cities into internationally-acclaimed urban hubs at a spectacular speed. Indeed, the overall effect is one of spectacle. But, many have asked, is it 'real' or is it theater?

Invoking the idea of spectacle immediately raises questions about who constitute the spectators and what kind of interpretive lenses they are wearing. Viewed through decidedly Orientalist lenses, many Western observers have written off grandiose urban development agendas across Asia as farcical (e.g. Davis 2006). This reading treats local leaders' efforts to secure international attention as symptomatic of their 'inferiority complex,' mere cronyism, or the backwardness of megalomaniac despots (Koch 2012). But to fixate on the question of whether or not the world is 'really' attending to these actors and their grandiose new capitals is to miss the point. As Billig (1995, 83) emphasizes, the international context invoked by nationalist imaginaries 'itself needs to be imagined every bit as much as does the national community.'

Of course, the supposedly watchful international community is not pure fiction. It cannot be. While foreigners from around the world – whether they are consultants, entrepreneurs, developers, or day laborers – have indeed flocked to Abu Dhabi, Doha, Manama, Astana, Ashgabat, and Baku (albeit in varying degrees and from varying backgrounds), these places certainly do not have the same global name recognition as Dubai. This notwithstanding, the planners behind the development schemes in all these places are supremely skillful at projecting an image of a highly-attentive global community in awe of their newly-transformed cities (Koch 2012 2013c 2015). In producing this global imaginary, they are also positioning their cities within – and constituting – a spatial hierarchy that valorizes a certain form of urban development:

Inter-Asia inter-referencing practices are thus inseparable from and in fact constitutive of an emerging system for the judgment of urban value. Through the favorable mention, allusion, and even endorsement of another city, actors and

institutions positioning their own projects in a language of explicit comparison and ranking, thus vicariously participating in the symbolic values of particular cities. (Ong 2011, 18)

The power of these global imaginaries, I suggest, is one of the most important reasons behind these cross-regional convergences, and has inarguably buttressed local acceptance of the regimes and their development agendas in the multiple case sites of my study.

But this is not sufficient for explaining authoritarian regime popularity. Nationalism, broadly speaking, hinges on state-scale actors abstracting their own interests from those of the ‘nation.’ This process of abstraction allows citizens, without any particular cognitive dissonance, to support plans to develop the ‘nation’ – even if they do not support the elites who have captured the state and its resources (Koch 2013a, 43). But when we move beyond the *iconic image* of the capitals in nationalist imaginaries, we start to see significant divergences across the two regions in terms of how citizens and foreign observers interpret *elites motives* for materializing the spectacular city projects. While there is important intra-regional variation, the urban development schemes in the Gulf are generally understood to be legal and legitimate investments, whereas they are seen as tied to elite corruption and illegal ‘money laundering’ in Central Asia. This interpretation prevails among both locals and the international community. As I show in the remainder of this article, the discrepancy – and its far-reaching political implications – can only be explained by considering the differences between Central Asia and the Gulf states’ demographic, territorial, and political-economic configurations. The centerpiece of this analysis is the concept of citizenship and its escorts, legality and illegality.

Cross-regional divergences: Narrating legality through citizenship regimes

Citizenship, ‘as a legal category, as a claim, as an identity, as a tool in nation-building, and as an ideal,’ Lynn Staeheli (393, 2011) notes, is a contested concept in the social sciences. For the purposes of this discussion, I am interested in the most basic application of the term to designate who is legally entitled to full benefits from the state (*citizens*) and who is not (*non-citizens*, including residents of all backgrounds and entitlements). In the GCC, citizens represent a minority of the population in most countries, whereas non-citizens represent only a tiny portion of the overall populations in Central Asia (see **Table 1**).² As anywhere in the world, the state’s power to define citizenship, and thus who is entitled to its resources, is a tremendously powerful technology of government, which hinges on actively constructing a binary between ‘legal’ and ‘illegal.’

² As is always the case with statistics, these numbers mask various other social and political divides within the case countries amply explored by regional studies scholars, but given the particular focus of this discussion, only citizenship status is presented here.

Table 1. Demographics of case countries, 2013/2014 estimates. Source: CIA 2015; IOM 2015.

<i>Country</i>	<i>Total Population</i>	<i>Citizen Pop.</i>	<i>Urban Pop.</i>
Bahrain	1,314,089	45 %	88.7 %
Qatar	2,123,160	12 %	98.8 %
UAE	5,628,805	20 %	84.4 %
Azerbaijan	9,686,210	95 %	53.6 %
Kazakhstan	17,948,816	79 %	53.6 %
Turkmenistan	5,171,943	96 %	48.7 %

Resource-rich states are notoriously challenged by the issue of who is entitled to the proceeds of extraction. In academic and policy circles, there are two dominant narratives explaining the divergent political trajectories of such ‘rentier states’ – that they are either conflict-ridden because they are beset by the ‘resource curse,’ or that they are remarkably stable because of a ‘ruling bargain,’ in which citizens are said to exchange political rights for state welfare. The latter has been the prevailing narrative about the Gulf monarchies of the Arabian peninsula, which have been characterized by a great deal of stability in their postcolonial trajectories (e.g. Davidson 2011; Hertog 2010). In this framing, state elites use resource wealth to ‘buy off’ their citizens and, in so doing, effectively deter potential political challenges. While there is, of course, a degree of truth to this understanding of rentier state stability, it can easily descend into essentialism when wider questions about localized political geographies and state strength are overlooked (Ayubi 1995).

One such question is who benefits most from the state’s resource wealth, and what role they occupy in the state’s political configuration. Anywhere in the world it is impossible to reduce state-society relations to state-citizen relations – but least of all in the GCC (Gardner 2010; Vora 2013). Although variable across the region, most Gulf citizens enjoy significant privilege when contrasted with their large foreign resident populations. While the citizen/non-citizen binary can easily erase significant socio-political differentials amongst the groups, this juridical categorization nonetheless has concrete implications in that citizens are generally entitled to substantial state-sponsored welfare benefits, which might include free or subsidized education, housing, healthcare, as well as privileged access to state-sector jobs and state-mandated higher salaries than non-citizens for equivalent posts. Further, in many states in the region, foreigners are not allowed to own property. In all, these policies produce an effect whereby, on the basis of citizenship status alone, Gulf ‘nationals’ constitute a relatively elite group in the context of the region’s foreign resident-dominated states. In the resource-rich states of Central Asia, by contrast, citizens represent the majority of the state population and, on the whole, they do not enjoy such benefits as their Gulf counterparts. Rather, only a select group of economic and political elites is positioned to benefit significantly from resource rents, while the

vast majority of ‘ordinary’ citizens personally receive little in the way of direct transfers from the state (Koch 2014 2015).

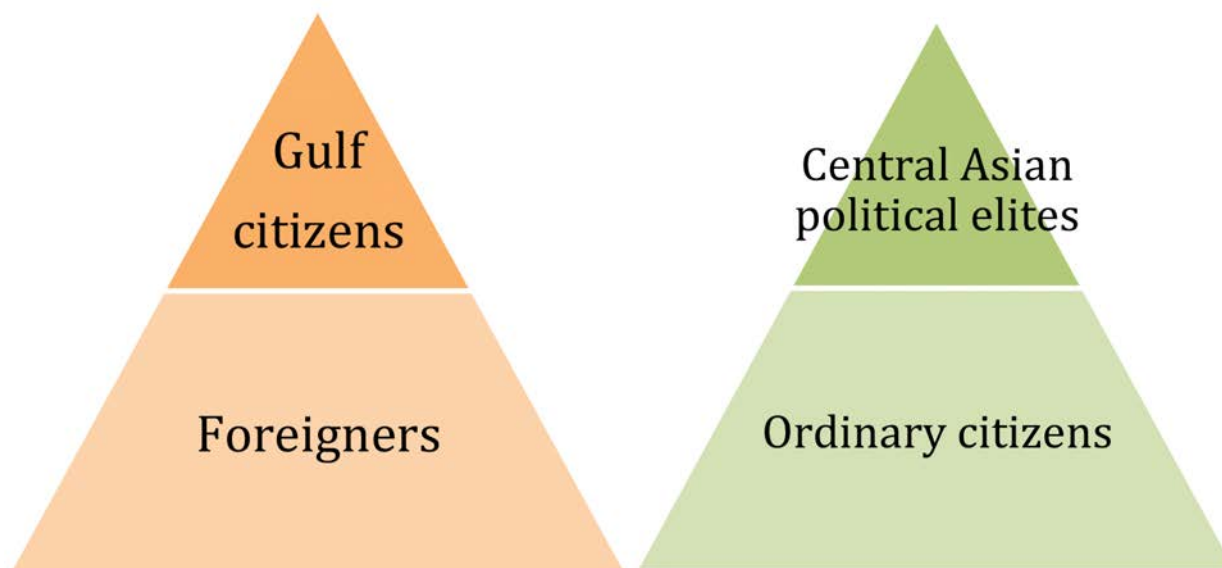


Figure 1. Political configurations and access to state-controlled goods in the GCC and Central Asia. Source: Author.

Figure 1 illustrates this issue, showing how two general groups in each region occupy roughly analogous positions with respect to access to state-controlled goods: the Gulf citizens and Central Asian political elites have wide access, while the resident foreigners in the Gulf and ordinary citizens in Central Asia do not. As with any attempt to generalize, exceptions can rapidly proliferate, however this diagram is useful for thinking through the disjuncture I noted above: despite their remarkable similarity, why are capital city projects in the Gulf widely understood to be ‘legal’ and ‘legitimate,’ whereas they are seen as ‘illegal’ and ‘corrupt’ in Central Asia? In both contexts, spectacular urban development is popularly legitimated through nationalist narratives, but it is only made possible through the states’ resource economies – and state leaders treat it as an effective means of transferring rents to supporters and potential rivals.

In Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan, one of the primary ways for the president and his inner circle to distribute patronage is through the allocation of large urban development construction contracts. However, because all citizens ostensibly have an equal right to the state’s resource rents, and because government leaders *claim* to be fairly distributing this wealth to their citizens, privileging a select group is thus understood as an illegal and corrupt practice. As such, those elites who receive large state contracts typically operate through a shell company headquartered abroad (e.g. Sembol in Kazakhstan; Polimeks in Turkmenistan; and DIA Holding in Azerbaijan). Part of this arrangement includes over-paying for the services rendered by the contractor, who seeks to maximize profits by developing the project at the lowest cost possible, cutting corners on materials, pay to laborers, and oftentimes not even completing projects once the façade is deemed acceptable. Rents achieved thus are understandably deemed ill-gotten and

corrupt by ordinary citizens in Central Asia, who suffer from the states' insufficient social welfare spending, and *because of the way they understand who is legally entitled to state resources on the basis of the official citizenship regime.*

The situation is quite different in the development of the GCC capitals. There are, of course, inequalities among Gulf nationals, but there is also a wider inclusion of these citizens in sharing the resource wealth of the state – made possible because of the states' large non-citizen population. While the overbuilding in Central Asia's spectacular new capitals is largely the result of the above-described patronage politics, state rents are distributed rather differently in the Gulf. There, foreign residents are generally barred from owning land and real estate (with some case-specific exceptions, such as specially-designated 'freehold' housing communities like the Pearl in Doha). This creates a situation that incentivizes overbuilding, frequently supplemented by large state subsidies: the minority population of citizens has the unique privilege of owning land, apartments, office spaces, etc., which they can rent out to foreign companies and workers (or, in some cases, even get a subvention if they cannot or choose not to rent it out). As a result, those with means are well-positioned to benefit from the state-promoted capital city development schemes, which both create a demand for more buildings and infrastructure, as well as more foreign workers and companies. Gulf nationals further benefit from the rapid urban development through two additional interlocking legal frameworks. The first is the *kafala* system, in place in all GCC states, which requires migrant workers have an in-country sponsor who is responsible for their visa and legal residence status. Second, corporate laws in most Gulf states also require that small businesses have at least 51 percent ownership by a citizen. This individual frequently refrains from actual business operations, creating a situation in which citizens can gain idle profits when foreigners start businesses in the country. While there is substantial nationalist anxiety in the Gulf states about the large foreign presence, citizens are nonetheless positioned to reap substantial benefits from their capital city's spectacular development: more building, more workers, and more companies means more profit. The most important point, though, is that their rents are deemed legal and appropriate *because of the way they understand who is legally entitled to state resources on the basis of the official citizenship regime.*

Conclusions

While large-scale urban development projects have long held a privileged place in resource-rich 'rentier states,' I have adopted an analytical approach that does not just search for similarities explaining the global proliferation of 'spectacular urbanization.' Rather, in this cross-regional analysis, I have shifted the analytical lens to also focus on *differences* as a way to better understand how this form of urban development is both *made possible through* and *materializes* highly-contextual power relations. This is an especially important project in our contemporary world of consultant-driven development, whereby self-proclaimed experts at McKinsey, Boston Consulting Group, and Bain advocate the free-floating 'Dubai model' of spectacular urban growth that planners can apply at will. The 'Dubai model' is, of course, a mere 'floating signifier,' but it is a remarkably powerful (if pernicious) one. It is appealing for the *very reason*

that it strips away the complexity of Dubai's historical and geographic specificity – not to mention the very question of whether its development is 'really' successful or sustainable. The 'Dubai model' thus metaphorically operates as a convenient fiction about the promise of large-scale, elitist urban development. But, like any metaphor, it can be easily adopted and adapted by individuals in positions of power to promote their unique agendas. Despite the many similarities between the spectacular urban developments in Central Asia and the Gulf, the state-society relations they sustain and materialize are quite different. By honing in on these differences, I have shown why it is that superficially similar projects are broadly coded as legal and legitimate in the Gulf and illegal and corrupt in Central Asia on the basis of two contrasting citizenship regimes.

By taking a more inclusive understanding of comparison that does not immediately discount such difference and disjuncture, this paper has argued for its potential to challenge traditional analytical categories and open up innovative lines of inquiry. In so doing, I have sought to illustrate how the state's power to define citizenship is a central technology of government that does not just *depend* on the legal/illegal binary, but actively *produces* it. This analysis compels scholars to attend to how we may unthinkingly reproduce this binary by taking hegemonic state discourses about 'corruption' at face value. Indeed, this calls into question the very notion of 'money laundering,' when we see similar patterns of elitist urban development schemes narrated as the product of legitimate markets at work in a context with a different citizenship regime. In resource-rich states, it is thus of central importance to ask who is understood to have a *legitimate* and *legal* claim to natural resource revenues – and who is excluded.

Centrally, this may entail looking beyond prevailing state-centric imaginaries of global space to see how the very same tactic (here, elitist urban development) is used by those in positions of power to produce inequality at variable scales. Sometimes this can be within states, as with social disparities within Central Asian states, and in other cases, it takes on a more regional character, as with the place of the GCC citizens vis-à-vis the wider Middle East and South Asian regions, where workers feel the brunt of the structural inequalities produced by aggressively elitist development in the Gulf. And as city and state planners are increasingly learning from one another, this will increasingly demand analytical approaches that Mohammad and Sidaway (2012, 622; after Mongia 2007) describe as aiming 'to trace genealogies of co-production.'

The first step toward such a broader conceptualization, in turns out, may need to begin with challenging academia's conventional world regional designations that might actually obscure the very workings of these structural inequalities. The point is not that we should abandon them entirely, or develop more 'accurate' regional designations, but rather that we need to be more attuned to how they are mobilized and by whom. Only with this attentiveness, together with a wider definition of 'comparison' that embraces difference, is it possible to challenge those 'hierarchies of judgement' that are so easily reproduced through the 'basis and

form of comparison' (Sidaway 2013, 993). Exploring divergences in cross-regional research, I suggest, is one such way forward.

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