

REVIEW ESSAY

Slum as theory: the South/Asian city and globalization

Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift 2002: *Cities: Reimagining the Urban*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Mike Davis 2004(a): Planet of Slums: Urban Involution and the Informal Proletariat. *New Left Review* 26 (March-April), 5-34.

Okwui Enwezor 2003: Terminal Modernity: Rem Koolhaas' Discourse on Entropy. In V. Patteeuw (ed.), *What is OMA: Considering Rem Koolhaas and the Office for Metropolitan Architecture*. Rotterdam: NAI Publishers.

Arjun Appadurai 2000: Spectral Housing and Urban Cleansing: Notes on Millennial Mumbai. *Public Culture* 12.3, 627-51.

Arjun Appadurai 2002: Deep Democracy: Urban Governmentality and the Horizon of Politics. *Environment and Urbanization* 13.2, 23-43.

Partha Chatterjee 2004: *The Politics of the Governed*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Reimagining the urban

In their recent book, *Cities: Reimagining the Urban*, Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift offer what they characterize as a 'provisional diagram of how to understand the city'. They see this attempt as being limited, of course, by several constraints, not the least of which is the epistemological question of 'what counts as knowledge of the urban?' Along with this there are caveats to the effect that they were unable to cover issues of 'gender, race and the environment' and that it was the 'cities of the North' that they had in mind while writing the book. None of these detracts from this excellent book, but they are reminders that the universal reach of the book's title — to *reimagine the urban* — turns out to be somewhat limited after all. In a sense, this has always been reflected in the problem of the universal and the particular, which scholars of postcolonial studies confronted in the epistemological paradigms of the social sciences and humanities. It appears, however, that, with the emergence of the global as an epistemological category, we may once again need to revisit these old modernist dichotomies between universal and particular, in the context of the global career of a historical region.¹

As a social and cultural form, the modern South Asian city has been a site of theoretical anxiety and ambiguity. Whereas the experience of modernity in the West is explicitly associated with the city, in the post-colonial context liberal modernity, with its associated promises of freedom and equality, was explicitly associated with the

1 Although the review uses the term South Asia to begin with, there is an evident slide that equates South Asia with India, largely because the literature under review focuses on India since this is the literature that I am most familiar with. But it should also be noted that scholars are now beginning to rethink the relationship between India and the other countries that make up the region – Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal, and to raise questions about what the usurpation of the name 'India' from British India signifies for the self-conscious positioning of India within the region as a political experiment in liberal modernism and what effect this might have on our understanding of the region as a historical and cultural subject.

nation. And where the nation was considered the ultimate arbiter of issues of citizenship, justice and belonging, the city had, at best, an ambivalent place as a site of modernity. If there is anything normative about the imagination of the modern city in South Asia, it is a certain rejection of its specificity as a social space and its portrayal purely in relation to the exigencies of modernization and development.² In the nationalist imagination, there was an inevitable contest between a more positive apprehension of the city as an engine of modernity, modernization and development and a more negative one projecting the city as an inappropriate historical trajectory for Indian modernity.

Historian and political theorist Partha Chatterjee writes in *The Politics of the Governed* that there was never an 'organic' imagination of the desired, modern Indian city of the future and interprets Nehru's invitation to Le Corbusier to build Chandigarh as a sign of desperation and exhaustion on the part of the nationalist imagination as far as modernism/modernity in the city form was concerned. One may choose to agree or disagree with this reading but the intersections between nationalism, modernity and the city have been crucial to the recent 'urban turn'³ that both academic literature in the social sciences and humanities and non-academic literature have been taking in relation to South Asia. Apart from a vibrant literature about urban South Asia, there are also other signs marking a new self-consciousness about the city as an object of knowledge and as an object of intervention across South Asia, including the emergence of several new institutions that take specific cities (such as Mumbai, Delhi and Karachi) as their empirical bases as they attempt to intervene in contemporary *global* debates about urbanization.⁴

But, as Gyan Prakash notes (2002), one of the key analytic events, which brings about this interest in the city as an object of inquiry, is the demise of a certain kind of historicism in the study of Indian modernity. On Prakash's reading, the study of Indian modernity was informed by a historicism whose main object was to describe the unfolding of modern development within a nationalist frame. Thus, the city and urbanization are viewed as the inevitable unfolding of modern development only within that frame. However, this historicism is unable to accommodate the 'spatiality of historical processes' exemplified by the contemporary cities of South Asia. 'The city's historical geography of power, culture and society', he writes, 'resists its representation as evolution and development' within the nationalist frame. What is compelling about the 'urban turn' for Prakash is that it 'offers an opportunity to revise the history of Indian modernity, to bring into view spaces of power and difference suppressed by the historicist discourse of the nation' (Prakash, 2002: 6, emphasis added). His conclusion however, is ambivalent about exactly what *sort* of region (or, for that matter, city) is implied by the demise of this nationalist historicism.

Global cities of the South

The optics of nation and modernity undergo further transformation in new works on 'global cities of the South'. In this review, I shall be using 'global cities of the South literature' as a shorthand for a certain kind of work that takes an understanding of the 'South' as its point of departure en route to a theory of globalization.⁵ The debate

2 Here, it would be instructive to recall the debate between a so-called 'Gandhian' paradigm of development, which emphasized the village as the legitimate site of Indian modernity and therefore of modern development, and the so-called 'Nehruvian' paradigm, which emphasized the industrialization of the countryside through technological infrastructure. Even within the Nehruvian paradigm however, the city has an ambivalent place, though it is recognized as the spatial corollary to modern industrialization (see, for example, Khilnani, 1998).

3 See Prakash (2002).

4 Such institutions include the Urban Resource Centre in Karachi, Sarai in Delhi and PUKAR (Partners for Urban Knowledge, Action and Research) in Mumbai.

5 See, for example, the recent special issue of *Social Text* (81, winter 2004) on Global Cities of the South which includes a brief, programmatic introduction by Mike Davis (Davis, 2004b).

between universal and particular undergoes a similar transformation, facilitated by a re-visioning of the urban as an object of inquiry and analysis. Within this literature, we begin to see a systematic interest in the 'South' and in urban form in the development of the category of the 'global'. These works turn 'South' in order to reimagine the urban and, beyond that specific project, to analytically grasp the terrain of the global. A different kind of historicism is at work in them. The city seen from the South provides the occasion to rethink the contours of modernity in a global age. The examples I have in mind are Mike Davis's recent essay, 'Planet of Slums' and architect-urbanist Rem Koolhaas's work on Lagos.⁶ These works can be read as a means of illustrating two distinct epistemological positions that are possible while taking a 'Southern turn'.

Davis's article is an extended reading of UN-Habitat's 2003 report, *The Challenge of Slums: Global Report on Human Settlements 2003*. The report argues that slums constitute a crucial ingredient of the recent explosion in urbanization across the planet but especially in the South. Davis's own reading focuses on the emergence of a 'surplus humanity', of people cut out of the formal world economy and driven into urban slums due to the decoupling of urbanization from industrialization and development per se, as dictated by more than a decade of IMF-led structural adjustment programs. These cities of the South, rather than being engines of growth, are instead dumping grounds for this 'surplus humanity'. The slum remains the only 'fully franchised solution to the problem of warehousing the twenty-first century's surplus humanity' (p. 28).

South Asia makes a significant contribution to this planet of slums, of course. Davis observes that '[t]here may be more than quarter million slums on earth. The five great metropolises of South Asia (Karachi, Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata and Dhaka) alone contain about 15,000 distinct slum communities with a total population of more than 20 million' (p. 14).

Global cities of the South, in other words, are equated with 'gigantic concentrations of poverty' and the slum is the formal manifestation of this claim. The slum, on his reading, is also a manifestation of the informal proletariat that has emerged from over a decade of structural adjustments. Thus it is both a demographic and territorial form. However, the slum is not, of course, just a passive manifestation of 'surplus humanity', and Davis is ultimately interested in the sorts of historical subjects that might emerge from these circumstances. These subjects appear to tap into reservoirs of cultural and historical traditions of resistance. Thus, for example, he writes, '[e]verywhere the Moslem slums constitute seemingly inexhaustible reservoirs of highly disciplined desperation'. 'But', he emphasizes that 'in the last instance — and this is my principal claim — this is not a war of civilizations but an oblique clash between the American imperium and the labor-power it has expelled from the formal world economy' (Davis, 2004b: 14).

This passage from slum as population and terrain to slum as theory is made from within a particular historicist narrative that centralizes empire as the subject and object of history within which the 'global' emerges as an analytic lens and category. But this is a history that rests upon the 'city of the South' as its proxy subject. A new understanding of the global emerges by situating the spaces of these cities at the epicentre of a certain catastrophic appetite of global capital flows and turning those spaces into a new territorial principle of order.

A different theorization about the future of modernity is found in architect and urbanist Rem Koolhaas's work on non-Western cities, envisioning them as 'incubators of the future prospect of the global city' (Enwezor, 2003: 113). Koolhaas's published work on non-Western cities has focused on the new cities of China and on Lagos, but here I am primarily interested in his work on Lagos and specifically in the way in which dysfunctionality is turned into a sort of virtue insofar as it can be understood theoretically to incubate the future. The connection between dysfunctional conditions and the possibility of any sort of future seems to be at issue here. Instead of the impossibility of a future, we are offered an alternative way of reading the future and

6 See Davis (2004a) and Koolhaas (2000).

thereby redeeming the history of modernity at its terminal stages. Koolhaas refers to Lagos as an 'icon of West African urbanity . . . [that] inverts every essential characteristic of the so-called modern city' (quoted in Enwezor, 2003: 113).⁷ Yet, because Lagos is a city that still works, Koolhaas suggests that studying the city from the point of view of traditional urban systems is likely to lead only to 'anguish over its shortcomings'. Instead, he sees that the reasons for the continued functionality of Lagos and other megacities of the South as cause for revising our existing theories about the functioning of urban systems.

Koolhaas suggests that rather than viewing the conditions of dysfunctionality as *African* ways of becoming modern, it is possible to argue that 'Lagos represents a developed, extreme paradigmatic case-study of a city at the forefront of globalizing modernity. This is to say that Lagos is not catching up with us. Rather we may be catching up with Lagos'. This hyperbolic gesture, as Okwui Enwezor points out, might be, and indeed has been, interpreted as a 'celebration of the pathological . . . the unstable and the culture of make-do' (*ibid.*: 116). Koolhaas situates the Southern city's pathologies and excesses once again as proxy evidence for the 'exorbitant values of modernity and modernisation' in its globalizing moment, but always within a larger project interested in the dialectic between 'decline and return', between the 'phantasmic and destructive', which runs through modernity. All locations of the urban world are joined together as evidence for this dialectic, with the 'radiological landscapes' of the African city functioning as a counterpoint to the advanced development of the 'culture of congestion' as represented by the Asian city. In other words, these global cities of the South function as particular points in a specifically spatialized history of modernity.

In turning to these particular examples, I am attempting to sketch the broader landscape within which the 'urban turn' within South Asian studies needs to be located. This landscape is also one in which a new 'urban turn' is being taken in relation to modernity and empire. But, that said, is there something particular about the South Asian turn? Does the picture of the 'South' that emerges from this turn differ from that which emerges from the 'global South' of Davis and Koolhaas? Is there any value to pursuing that difference? In other words, we are asking, what is the relationship between the 'Southern turn' of urban literature and the 'urban turn' of South Asian literature? Ultimately, we also need to ask whether raising such a question is merely methodological. If the global cities of the South literature is concerned with establishing equivalences and with locating specificity *through* generalization, we need to ask in what manner can the general be arrived at through the pursuit of specificities. If Koolhaas's 'discourse on entropy' presents one option for doing so (and one that is decidedly not representative of the spectrum of positions out there), what are some of the others? In order to answer this question, I now turn to works coming out of the South rather than works about the South.

Deep democracy and political society

The severely dysfunctional landscapes of Southern cities described above — for which the slum serves as a shorthand⁸ — also form empirical and analytic points of departure for much of the work that takes the social and political life of South Asian cities as its subject. Among this body of work, the recent work of two authors — anthropologist Arjun Appadurai and historian and political theorist Partha Chatterjee — is interesting

7 NB, all quotations from Koolhaas' essay on Lagos (which originally appeared in *Mutations*, see Koolhaas, 2000) are taken from Enwezor (2003).

8 I am not unaware of the nomenclatural difficulties and of the representational politics of labelling that lead to the recognition of particular communities as 'slums' and the implications for urban subjectivities thus condemned under the rubric of 'slum dwelling'. There is, however a broader theoretical interest in analysing the use of the term 'slum' in a normative sense to gain visibility for certain histories and the landscapes of politics and action that they imply.

because of the evident continuities with the empirical concerns of the literature on the global cities of the South.⁹ The slum — as demographic, *legal* and territorial construct — appears as an important site in their work. While there are crucial differences in their conceptualization of the situations and sites they describe under the rubric of slum, there are nevertheless ways in which their work inverts the concerns and preoccupations of the global cities of the South literature, which suggests an alternative genealogy of the universal and the global as it emerges from a reading coming out of the specificities of the South Asian city. Specifically, in their work, we can discern a different relationship to the question of dysfunction and the future of modernity under conditions of globalization.

Despite the obvious differences in the conceptualizations of their respective projects, there is a certain sense in which Appadurai and Chatterjee's work can be read together. Working through the lens of governmentality, each author seeks to chart the emergent geographies of governance within which groups of marginalized and poor communities seek to make claims upon the state. For Chatterjee, these claims are fundamentally different from the claims of 'citizens' — whose 'political fraternity' is constantly affirmed as 'one and indivisible' through the mediation of the nation. The claims of the marginalized are advanced through their participation in patently illegal activities, violating the rules upon which civil society is founded including the transgression of property laws and so on. Illegality and informality thus tug at the normative roots of the state leading to an arena charged with the violence of and toward the governed, staged around the paternalistic welfare policies of the state designed to placate and manage populations whose civic, political and social rights are patently out of sync. Chatterjee reads new landscapes of violence and conflict as emerging from the embourgeoisement of the Indian city in the era of global capital with a return of civil society groups to the active arena of politics, making claims as fully enfranchised citizens upon the public spaces of the city.¹⁰

Appadurai's recent work, published in a series of essays in the journal *Public Culture*, takes, as its point of departure, the rhetoric and practices of a Mumbai-based, urban activist movement — with global links — of slum-dwellers and their supporters. The movement — which comprises an alliance of three distinct activist groups including the National Slum Dwellers Federation, a powerful grassroots organization — is principally concerned with 'gaining secure tenure of land, adequate and durable housing, and access to elements of urban infrastructure, notably to electricity, transport, sanitation and allied services' (Appadurai, 2002: 23). On Appadurai's reading, the claims made by this group of organized urban poor derive their efficacy from their ability to turn their life experiences and strategies of survival — patently illegal from the point of view of the state — into legitimate knowledge about surviving poverty and, furthermore, marketing that knowledge to the state and other agencies concerned with the amelioration of their situations as *precedents* in the elimination of poverty. This analysis is based on three theoretical assumptions — first, concerning the emergence of 'new forms of globally organized power and expertise within the "skin" or "casing" of existing nation-states'; second, concerning a 'crisis of redundancy' afflicting the nation-state form as different

9 In the following comments, I am mainly drawing on Appadurai (2002) and Chatterjee (2004).

10 According to Chatterjee, the embourgeoisement of the Indian metropolis is partly a result of a reclamation of the space of civil society on the part of the new, globalized middle classes (radically different in composition from the 'thrifty' middle class that withdrew from the domain of urban politics in the 1970s and the 1980s, thereby allowing the masses, whose associations belonged to political society, to reign freely over urban politics). The contemporary Indian metropolis thus enacts new dramas of contest between 'political society' — the domain populated by the vast numbers of the urban poor — and civil society groups aspiring to bourgeois lifestyles in the post-industrial, global metropolis. This vision is of course a familiar one of enclaved spaces, infrastructurally privileged and splintered from the overarching urban conditions surrounding them, inhabited by a high-spending consumerist class with a lamentably narrow cultural vision and imagination for the 'desired city of the future'.

dimensions of governance are outsourced to various agencies, both trans- and intra-national; third, concerning the 'explosive growth of nongovernment organizations of all scales and varieties'. Appadurai carefully charts the empirical landscape of the Mumbai of the 1990s (when liberalization policies were officially adopted by the Indian government). Within this landscape, the crisis of housing holds a very special place since it is precisely the point around which much of the city's psychic life is organized — indeed, Appadurai (2000) shows, through a brilliant historical ethnography of the city, how its culture is driven by housing and its lack.¹¹

Taken together, these theoretical points of entry push Appadurai to read the action of the urban activist groups as radically democratic (what he refers to as 'deep democracy') in the context of the globalization of governance.¹² Thus, the works of both authors — on the questions of the Indian city and of the urban poor as a demographic and territorial sign of that city — are preoccupied with questions of governance, violence and democratization. Indeed, much of the now canonical literature on urban South Asia (including, for example, a three-volume collection of essays by social scientists, artists, cultural theorists, planners and geographers on Bombay¹³ edited by Sujata Patel, Alice Thorner and Jim Masselos,¹⁴ and Thomas Hansen's [2001] book on postcolonial Bombay) is marked in one way or another by the increase in urban violence during the 1990s or the liberalization decade.¹⁵ Preoccupation with the tension between the city and nation as antagonistic sites of modernity, especially evident in the works on Bombay-Mumbai, gives way to attempts at understanding the new states of social and spatial emergency that have arisen during this period. The violence at the centre of this shift is everywhere in this literature — violence against persons, against minorities, against the built environment, the flexibilization of space and the spread of various territorial elements that mark the global economy permitting new kinds of speculations upon social forms.

The distortion of urban substance into a stage upon which violence is mounted in mundane and spectacular ways turns the very idea of what constitutes the 'cityness' of

11 There is no doubt that the problem of slums is the most hotly contested issue in a city in which over 60% of the population reputedly lives in substandard housing. The city's conundrum is summarized by the following observation made in a special report in the Sunday edition of a leading Indian daily — '[O]ver three decades after a slum mitigation law was enacted, and trailed by an extended joint family of plans and schemes, the city's teeming shanty towns have swollen several times over. From 1.3 million people in 1971, they now house an estimated 7 million people, a vigorous 60 per cent of Mumbaiites' (Iyer, 2005). Contrary to Davis' generalized argument about slums, observers in Mumbai assert that slums in fact attest on the one hand to the vibrancy of the city's economy and to massive failures in policy and planning on the other.

12 In this crucial regard, of course, Appadurai's analysis differs fundamentally from that of Chatterjee — where the latter sees the embourgeoisement of the Indian city as the ultimate cause of violence and conflict, for Appadurai, the conversion of violations of bourgeois civil society institutions into the currency of knowledge enables the creation of a radically democratic public, one that might ultimately become *self-governing*.

13 To clarify the slide between Bombay and Mumbai in this piece, Bombay was renamed Mumbai in 1996 when the Shiv Sena, a xenophobic, exclusionary and militantly Hindu majoritarian party assumed power of the legislature of the state of Maharashtra. Bombay, the capital of Maharashtra is also India's financial and commercial capital, and has been its 'cosmopolis of commerce', for centuries (Appadurai, 2000). This cosmopolitanism and cultural diversity has been severely compromised in recent years, particularly after the liberalization of the economy, which coincided with the rise of parties like the Shiv Sena to power and a position of control in regard to governance. The renaming of Bombay thus reflects a narrowing of the cultural imagination and a new cultural politics in the era of globalization. Thomas Hansen's book *The Wages of Violence: Naming and Identity in Post-colonial Bombay* is an ethnographic exploration of the implications of this shift.

14 See Patel and Thorner (1995a; 1995b), Patel and Masselos (2003) and Hansen (2001).

15 This increase in violence is visible both in terms of the rise in violence between groups and collectivities on the one hand as well as in terms of the destructive processes of planned, neoliberal urban restructuring via mega infrastructural projects.

the city on its head. Like the new work on the global cities of the South, in works that take the South Asian city as their subject, a new analytic framework is beginning to emerge in order to account for the empirical conditions that are engulfing the region under the banner of globalization. As the normative grounds for certainty regarding citizenship, belonging and entitlement are themselves shifting — and this shift is manifest in the perceptible increases in violence in these spaces — the nature and role of the city as a social, cultural and spatial construct is also correspondingly undergoing a shift. This is manifest as well in the increasing body of literature on the spectral and oneiric dimensions of the South Asian city and self as the limits and boundaries of the city and the region come to be questioned by transnational transactions.¹⁶

Slum as theory: nation, empire, city

The slum — as a demographic and theoretical construct — straddles the conceptual and material forms of city-making that are challenging the imaginary of the modern city. As suggested above, the distortion of urban substance into a dysfunctional stage for violence, conflict and the iniquitous distribution of resources fundamentally informs the work of all the writers discussed here. Following their work, the slum can be treated as shorthand for this distorted substance, and not merely a spatial form as it has often been understood. What I have been trying to unpack are the exact terms of the relevance of new urban forms, the ‘South’ as a category and the emergence of a new global regime (whether or not this is thought in terms of empire). Within this quest, the position we take — whether viewing the city from South Asia or viewing South Asia from the city — does seem to matter and I would like to conclude by sketching out the relevance of position of viewing.

A crucial point of difference seems to be that the work of Appadurai and Chatterjee is fundamentally concerned with the ‘production of locality’¹⁷ out of the specific conditions of South Asian urban populations. The ‘global’ in this literature is related inextricably to the boundary between democratization and violence rather than in relation to a scale of modern forms — functional or dysfunctional — as seems to be the case in the literature on the global cities of the South. The epistemological question of what counts as urban (Amin and Thrift’s original question) is here transformed to also include a dimension of questioning the nature of the ‘South’ in constructing those boundaries of the urban. What is new to the literature coming out of South Asia on the city is that there is a decisive shift in viewing South Asia from the point of view of the city rather than merely viewing the city from the point of view of South Asia (which generates, as I pointed out earlier, an image of the city as a suspect geographical and social form in the landscape of national development). The global emerges as an inevitable category from the specificity of these considerations as the conditions under which locality is carved out from global flows.

By way of conclusion, it is useful to revisit the ‘slum as theory’ and to pay attention to the theoretical underpinnings of what appear to be the politics of location. Generalizations that build on the teleology of dysfunction, for which the slum is a particular sort of shorthand, foreground a spatial history of modernity in the era of globalization but it is unclear what relation this history has to ‘evolution’ (Koolhaas). On the other hand, when the slum stands as a site of the unfolding history of empire, the historicity of its subjects can only appear in acts of resistance that seem to draw on

16 See especially the work being done in South Asian cultural studies, writings on art and experience of the city and on cinema and the city as well as in new fiction coming from writers who are located both in South Asia and in Europe and North America. These include works like Suketu Mehta’s recent book (2004) on Bombay *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found* and in the articles published in the Delhi based group Sarai’s annual readers on the city (Sarai Editorial Collective, 2001; 2002; 2003; 2004; 2005).

17 This concept is developed in Appadurai’s (1996) essay, ‘The production of locality’.

a deep well of primordial passions and attachments of a messianic stripe (Davis). The ordinary history of the everyday struggle over the norms, forms and values of modernity is buried under the weight of the national modern, a form increasingly being superseded in the era of globalization. The slum becomes an epistemological shorthand for tracking the cracks in this framework and for locating the mutations of the modern state (Appadurai and Chatterjee). 'Slum as theory' thus becomes an important point of departure precisely because it is located in the interstices of a whole range of mutations whose specificity is no longer locatable within singular frameworks. In other words, the specificity of the site itself derives from the theoretical underpinnings of what appear to be a politics of location and conceptual objects — like empire, nation and the global. Thus, the conceptual relation between the slum and other comparable theoretical objects of inquiry — notions of the future, of crisis, emergency and visibility are central to the broader histories within which the 'slum as theory' plays a specific role. Finally, this question has a bearing not only on how we understand the historicisms that inform particular theoretical positions but also the historical consciousness of the subjects positioned within these theoretical landscapes.

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