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Intervention Symposium—“Urban Theory from the Global South”

Doing Urban History in the Global South

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Since a little over a decade now, the Global South has emerged as a subject of serious critical inquiry. To be sure, the terminology is neither unambiguous, nor is it without its own set of complications. Yet, over time, more and more scholars have embraced it as a way to distance themselves from the brazen underpinnings of Western civilizational and developmentalist metrics. The skeptic may attribute this to a mere shift in perspective—that instead of delineating the world into the Modern West and the Languishing East, the hyperdeveloped societies of Euro-America and the underdeveloped societies of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, we are, in effect, once again envisioning the world into two distinct realities, the North and the South. But as ongoing debates have routinely reminded us, the North–South delineation does not attend to geocartographical facts as much as it opens up new lines of inquiry into the possibility of theory-building beyond the hegemony of master narratives.

The Global South then appears before us as an invitation to think, reflect, and write anew from spaces that had until recently been stuck in the “waiting room of History”. In many ways therefore, the South—as a theoretical construct, a conceptual framework, or even as a condition—reattaches itself to specific geographies in so far as those geographies can be strung together in radical historical contingencies. It is a matter of little coincidence then that the South is also shorthand for present day postcolonies that remain south of the equator. By invoking a shared colonial past—without discounting their respective historical specificities—the Global South presents before former colonies an opportunity to escape the Sisyphean curse of eternally

“catching up” to the metropole. It is in this final revocation of belatedness that we may find a rich genealogy which traces the vulnerabilities, idiosyncrasies, and precarities of the contemporary South in the very heart of the Empire. Rather than being an anachronism, such exercises afford us a critical understanding of the colonial experience in light of the articulation of Southernness today.

What I am suggesting here need not be imagined as a seamless journey back to a common source named colonialism. In fact, after challenging Eurocentric modernist tropes for their obsession with unilinear progression, such a claim would certainly be ironic. What I am proposing however is a way to open dialogue so that new histories of colonialism may illuminate moments culled from historical past which will help us map conditions of Southernness in a range of genealogical *longue durée*.

This brings me to focus on my specific intervention: I arrive at this juncture with my training in historical methodologies to simply ask, how do we do urban histories from the Global South?

In recent times, the concept of Southern Urbanism has gained tremendous momentum in the field of Urban Studies. Most significantly, it has led to a series of meditations on the urban which attend to the forms and scales in which the category is being imagined, and indeed inhabited. To be sure, Urban Studies’ preoccupation with the urban is an obvious fact. What is however less obvious is the sheer range of sites and locations that have been deployed in this grand exercise, not merely as instances of empirical peculiarities but rather as spaces wherefrom new theories of the urban may take root. Interestingly, and quite refreshingly, these formulations have helped us understand the multiform ways in which the South animates the politics of place making even as they have destabilized all extant notions of the urban as a concrete, stable category. Urban Studies has quite evidently embarked on a journey of self-exploration where each iteration of the study of the urban activates a slow meltdown of established models and big theories.

Here, Urban Studies’ commitment to interdisciplinary methodologies is noteworthy. Then again, with a field that is as eclectic and pluriversal, nothing less would do. Geographers, anthropologists, media scholars, planners, policy makers, architects, sociologists, and political

scientists have routinely enriched the field, adding more and more textures to an already complex phenomenon. However, amidst all these fascinating engagements, the historian has remained conspicuously absent. Recent calls for papers, grant applications, fellowships, and other hiring opportunities have proven that this erasure is hardly accidental. The stance points to a larger tendency that I highlighted earlier in the piece. In defining Southern Urbanism in terms of the “here” and the “now” (as against the “anywhere, everywhere” universalizing logic of Theory), Urban Studies may be attending to the urgency of recording the rhythms of the quotidian present. But in so doing, it also passes up on the chance to pursue a more rhizomatic exploration of such conditions through time.

Of course, this is not an Urban Studies “problem”—not entirely, at least. For too long urban historians limited their oeuvre to the study of cities alone. That is to say, “the urban” and “the city” emerged in these studies as coterminous categories, as if the contours of the city coincided with all notions of what it meant to be urban. Within South Asian historiography—the scholarship I am most familiar with—“the question of the city”, as Gyan Prakash (2002: 4) points out, “was refracted through the discourse of the nation”. The colonial city in the long 19th century had been the experimental ground where “modernizing tactics” of the British Raj bore fruition. Not unironically, the nationalist imagination reproduced a very similar strategy when it identified the city as the beacon of progress and development. More recent works, especially since the turn of the 21st century, have consciously moved away from such historicist tendencies, relieving the city from the burden of steering the young postcolonial nation towards Modernity. Instead, these studies have increasingly turned their attention towards the everyday politics of urban space, a move that recognizes the city as a continuous process of making and unmaking rather than an already constructed entity. Written in 2002, Prakash’s piece quite perceptively recognized this as “the urban turn” in Indian critical thinking.

20 years later, by attempting to locate urban history within the larger questions of the Global South, my intentions become two-fold. In one, I investigate how the urban, having only recently escaped the entrapment of the “national”, negotiates the scalar ambitions of the “global”. In the other, I think through the ways in which historical methodologies may offer a more granular analysis of the arrangements of Southern urban life.

In so far as the urban operates at the scale of the global, it opens up the possibility of exploring how the logic of accumulation and capital flows are tied to local actors and contexts. The concept of the “global city” then appears less like a template and focuses more on the ways the local acts upon the global without glossing over its historical differences. This is in sharp contrast to the workings of the “national-urban” where the nation’s aspirations towards building a homogeneous and unified totality compel all its constitutive and organizing elements and principles, including the urban, to assume a similar purpose.

This brings me to my final intervention—mapping Southernness on a genealogical framework. I had earlier argued that by focusing largely on “contemporary issues”, Urban Studies is missing out on the larger picture. This may be addressed by reintegrating urban history within the broader interdisciplinary parameters of urban studies. As such, it calls for a conceptual framework that recasts the urban as an historical formation.

In thinking about interdisciplinary approaches to viewing the urban, I am consciously distancing myself from a multidisciplinary style of presenting the urban through the lens of myriad disciplinary methodologies. The latter, while exhibiting the diverse range of urbanness, also limit themselves to mere displays, without investigating the processes that are at play in the development of such environments and experiences. Historical contexts, if any, are often stowed away in the footnotes of such studies as if to say, this too happened; however, it does not impact our current study in any significant manner. How do we rescue history from this tyranny of perfunctory citations? Sheetal Chhabria’s suggestion in *Making the Modern Slum* is worth noting here: “Historicizing the city rather than doing history inside the city requires tending to continuities and discontinuities in historical practices of representation” (2019: 9). Relegating historical contexts to footnotes and endnotes do just that—they do history inside the city without actually historicizing what made the city over many continuous iterations. In so doing, it often forgets that “the city” itself warrants critical scrutiny as a space (but also as a process) that was born into its current state of existence through concerted interventions.

Scholars writing from the Global South (perhaps, more emphatically than those writing on the Global South) have variously highlighted the importance of building an expansive vocabulary to facilitate this intellectual exercise. That is to say, Southern Urbanism marks an

intervention not only at the level of analysis but also on the plane of language and semantics. It signals the limits of existing language that struggles to adequately address the realities of the South; in other words, it calls for the provincialization of urban theory.

To this end, rich ethnographies from the field have illuminated the ways in which urban practices have exceeded the masterplan in a manner that cannot merely be touted as “planning failures”. Not only has global capital not chipped away at community and kinship relations but these studies show how the community has in fact reorganized and indeed reintegrated itself in these global city making initiatives. In a revised preface of *Provincializing Europe* discussing the intellectual exercise of provincialization, Dipesh Chakrabarty wrote: “The universal concepts of political modernity encounter pre-existing concepts, categories, institutions, and practices through which they get translated and configured differently” (2007: xii). Chakrabarty’s suggestion has since been adopted widely across studies to showcase how “universal” theories are in fact rooted in specific Euro-American locations. While this has significantly opened up theoretical analyses to the necessary task of appreciating historical differences, the work of translation itself has defeated the purpose of this exercise quite significantly.

By translation, I mean the literal act of translating different practices that have been functioning—both despite and alongside—the various planning and regulatory regimes. A direct translation of such transgressions often does the disservice of breaking down the complexity of such operations in familiar terms. Let me explain this through an example. During my doctoral research I came across an interesting archival entry that I hadn’t encountered earlier—the Calcutta Municipal Market, an exemplar of the colonial beautification and modernization initiative, was starting to show signs of “rot” and “decay”. The documents spoke of an old practice of salaami payment, prevalent in native bazaars, that had crept into the sanitized precincts of the modern marketplace. What then is salaami? The official document translates it as a form of bonus payment, made out by the market stall holder above and beyond the routine payment of a monthly stall rent. This translation, while simplifying the process in the familiar idiom of rents and bonuses, also effaced the implications of a “bazaar ritual” impinging upon the cold detachment of “impersonal market relations”. Salaami in translation thus became an anomaly that had to be weeded out rather than an essential process that was fast folding itself

into modern market transactions. Such simplistic explanations may have been key to colonial meaning-making endeavors but to reproduce that logic in our own works could be quite detrimental.

Scrambling to articulate differences in the language of the master may yet be our Achilles heel. As we develop new theories to make sense of our everyday realities, we need to exercise the fierceness of an astute proofreader who checks for coherence but never once overextends herself to fit the current narrative in existing genres. We need not always bring in episodes from the colonial past to enliven our urban narratives but curating a glossary of “pre-existing concepts, categories, institutions, and practices” aside from new ones, may well be the forte of an historian.

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