

URBAN GOVERNANCE: Innovation, Insecurity and the Power of Religion

**Tenth Berlin Roundtables on Transnationality
Social Science Research Center Berlin (WZB)/ Irmgard Coninx Foundation/
Humboldt University Berlin**

Conference at the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the WZB; 18-23 March 2009

New Global Geography

The Tenth Berlin Roundtables on Transnationality form part of a series of conferences and workshops relating to an unprecedented level of global urbanization and accelerated urban growth taking place mainly in the countries of the Global South (for more information on the Roundtable series “Urban Planet”, see: <http://www.irmgard-coninx-stiftung.de>). While in 1950, only 30 % of the world population lived in cities, the United Nations now estimate that more than half of all human beings inhabit urban environments at present. According to some predictions, this number will increase to more than 50 % of all people by 2030 (Worldwatch Institute, 2007).

Globalization entails the emergence of a new global geography that involves not just a “world city network” within which global goods and services are exchanged and whose transnational character challenges state sovereignty (Taylor, 2003). The new urban landscape also entails the rapid growth of megacities and mega-urban regions of up to 80 million inhabitants such as in the Pearl River Delta in China. The majority of these new urban agglomerations is located in Asia and in Africa and their infrastructure and living conditions for their inhabitants significantly differ from those prevailing in the metropolises of the industrialized world. Notwithstanding these developments, it is the cities of less than 5 million inhabitants that grow at the fastest rate (UN Habitat, 2006).

(Mega-) Urban agglomerations are often seen as the crosspoints of globalization and as “cities of the future” they serve as models for the future coexistence and cohabitation of human kind (Sassen, 1996). In these settings, significant economic growth and considerable creative potential exist next to alarming tendencies towards socio-economic and cultural disintegration and deprivation of large parts of the urban population. The Berlin Roundtables do neither intend to define the concept of megacities or (mega-) urban agglomerations, nor to focus on the phenomenon and consequences of the vast urban growth as such. They rather seek to foster a deepened understanding of the human relations and living conditions inside the (mega-) urban environments. The Roundtables also intend to contribute to the development of best practices to cope with the various challenges that global urbanization entails. Besides, the underlying interest of the Roundtable series on “Urban Planet” is to explore whether the described new urban spaces do not only harbour undeniable risks for unrest, violence and warfare, but also possess the potential to create new civilizing arrangements and foster the expansion of a liberal democratic ethos (Friedmann, 2002)? Can megacities and (mega-) urban agglomerations become an urban environment where all citizens have not only the right but also the chance to pursue their aspirations or are they volcanos waiting to erupt, heated up by a “sociology of protest” with an impoverished population easily managed by clientelism, populist spectacle and appeals to ethnic and religious unity (Davis, 2006)? Toward what end is the urban planet advancing?

Global urbanization and the accelerated urban growth need to be comprehended both as the physical transformation of space and as a social phenomenon. The urbanization processes entail a multitude of socio-economic, cultural and ecological consequences that have not yet been fully understood and remain under-researched. Besides severe ecological damage and destruction, the extreme population density leads to increasing social, cultural and religious tensions, possibly resulting in a worst case scenario of failing cities and urban warfare (Taw / Hoffman, 1994). Squeezing millions of people in an extremely tight space also fosters psychological strains and disorders of many inhabitants and opens up questions relating to human dignity and intimacy. Hosts of constricted and cramped people threatened by a rapidly changing urban environment might constitute fruitful grounds for expanding ideological and religious movements promising easy solutions or redemption beyond the prevailing circumstances (Appadurai, 2006; Sen, 2006). Yet, these tendencies towards disintegration and deprivation are met by plentiful chances for human innovation and flourishing resulting from increased inner- and inter-urban knowledge exchange and business relations fuelled by the concentration of capital and human resources in the urban environment (Sassen, 1991).

Global urbanization and accelerated urban growth lead to a variety of development and transformation processes taking place simultaneously and causing unintended side effects. Local developments are inter-related with and linked to global economic trends and capital flows, as well as to transnational migration and information networks. More knowledge needs to be sought about the forms, functions and patterns of interactions of these transformation processes (German Research Foundation, 2005).

The lack of understanding of these developments as well as insufficient administrative capacities lead to a serious loss of “gouvernability” in the (mega-) urban settings (Frug, 2008). Governmental and municipal administrations are hardly able to cope with the appropriate urban planning, the provision of basic services and the maintenance of public law and order. Often times, they fail to make use of the existing innovative potential, possibly rendering their regulatory efforts and programmes obsolete and negligible. As a consequence, more and more interactions and processes are undertaken in an unregulated, informal or illegal way (Tiwari, 2008) reinforcing the knowledge gap and the need for urban anthropology and other research relating to urbanization, urban growth and social relations within urban environments.

Berlin Roundtables on Transnationality

At the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the Social Science Research Center Berlin (WZB), the Berlin Roundtables on Transnationality will bring together about 50 young scholars, activists and journalists from 18 to 23 March 2009 to discuss their work submitted in the course of an international essay competition on the topic of “Urban Governance: Innovation, Insecurity and the Power of Religion”. Discussions will take place in panel discussions and three interdisciplinary and inter-related workshops chaired by Prof. Harald A. Mieg (Professor of Geography, Humboldt-University Berlin), Prof. Gunnar Folke Schuppert (Professor of Law, WZB/ Hertie School of Governance, Berlin) and Prof. José Casanova (Professor of Sociology, Georgetown University). International experts will hold accompanying evening lectures and will be available for in-depth discussion in the workshops.

The following three focal points are of special interest for the essay competition and the workshops:

Urban Innovation

The workshop chaired by Prof. Mieg will concentrate on issues relating to urban innovation and the creative potential of and in megacities and (mega-) urban regions. According to World Bank estimates, approx. 80 % of all economic growth in developing countries is produced in cities. In many (mega-) urban settings, a high concentration of skilled workers is met by a huge reservoir of a “cheap” labour force, a situation which results in increased economic dynamics and an attractive climate for national and international investments (Sassen, 1991). Bundling national potential and linking it to the global economy and information networks may lead to considerable innovations and capital accumulation. Conglomerating human and financial resources also supports the development of the urban infrastructure and institutions.

Megacities are deeply affected by ever-changing hybrid socio-cultural layers influenced by internal and transnational migration and increasing access to information networks (UN Habitat, 2006). Growing literacy, participation of women in the labour market, emerging youth cultures as well as ethnic, political and/or religious stratification result in a continuous change of identity patterns and group relations. These transformation processes tend to modernize society and possibly contribute to overcoming obsolete or discriminatory traditions and practices in the urban context.

The workshop focus shall be put on entrepreneurial and social innovation to the development of the urban organisation, activity and space. Workshop participants shall discuss the notion of “creative destruction” (Page, 1999) and analyse processes of socio-economic transformation in various urban contexts. Special emphasis shall be laid on forms of “innovation governance” such as direct government support of creative ventures or the promotion of a creative urban context by means of local participation, community-building and self-organisation (Rhodes, 1996). Moreover, forms of corporate social responsibility shall be examined and information collected on beneficial interactions between the formal and informal economy. Besides gathering and analysing empirical data on urban innovation, the workshop intends to address questions relating to the preconditions for creative change and empowerment; to the transferability of successful projects or programmes from one urban context to another; and to the relationship between urban innovation and sustainable development

Security Governance

Prof. Schuppert will chair a second workshop on security governance in situations of accelerated urban growth. The workshop’s basic premise is a lack of “governmentability” by the responsible local administrations resulting in increasing public insecurity and a lack of the rule of law. Mega-urban environments are seen as areas of limited statehood characterised by deficits in providing security and law enforcement. Municipal and government administrations as well as the local police are permeated by corruption and the judiciary is neither effective nor impartial (Stanley, 2005). Those who can afford it, move to “gated communities” and pay for their own (mostly private) security services.

At the same time, public space is dilapidating and slums are growing. At present, every sixth person on the globe has to cope with miserable and degrading living conditions, and the total number of new slum dwellers continues to increase by 25 million per year (Davis, 2006). The majority of these new inhabitants is found at the urban margins – in legal or illegal settlements, with insufficient housing, sanitation and little access to health care, education or the urban economy. The extreme income gap between rich and poor leads to socio-economic

fragmentation and disintegration and contributes to high crime rates and a general culture of fear (Body-Gendrot, 2008).

Instead of the state exercising its monopoly of legitimate force, many urban areas and relations are governed by informal power structures such as militias or drugs lords (Small Arms Survey, 2007). In many urban settings, legal pluralism is prevalent with non-effective state law on the one hand and informal rules of social and ethnic groups on the other hand (De Soto, 2000). The workshop seeks to overcome the traditional “deficit list-approach” relating to inner-urban security governance by developing a list of measures and programmes involving new forms of governance such as public-private partnerships and new actor constellations such as police cooperation with private security services that have proven to be effective in specific urban contexts and may potentially be applied to others.

The Power of Religion

The third workshop will be chaired by Prof. Casanova and will focus on the diverse roles of various religions in urban contexts. Local settings in (mega-) urban agglomerations are linked to global capital and information flows, as well as to transnational migration and information systems. Global cities serve also as nodal centers for transnational religious networks and as the site of interreligious encounters of all world religions (Meyer / Moors, 2005; Orsi, 1999). These developments entail a general modernization process and a continuous change of traditional identity patterns and group relations, as well as the disembedding of religions from their civilizational territories, and the formation of transnational networks and global imagined communities (Sen, 2006).

Social deprivation in combination with fear of prevailing modernization may lead parts of the urban population to cling onto their traditional religious backgrounds or to join new religious movements promising orientation and redemption (Norris / Inglehart, 2004). In situations of extreme deprivation religion may also serve, however, as an available resource for community building, mutual help and empowering solidarity (Appadurai, 2006). Which role any particular religion may play under diverse urban contexts is an open empirical question. It will be the task of the workshop to examine comparatively the conditions under which religions may play positive roles in urban governance, socio-cultural integration and political participation, rather than negative ones in communal conflicts, group segregation, political radicalization and national and international security.

Religions, in any case, provide discursive, institutional, and performative resources which people may use more or less creatively in response to the challenges and opportunities offered by various urban contexts (Davie, 2007). These urban contexts themselves are embedded in larger national and civilizational contexts with different regimes and models of secularism and church-state relations, broader or more limited patterns of religious pluralism as well as of majority-minority relations. Urban contexts in turn tend to be always, but especially under contemporary conditions of globalization, places of innovation where existing patterns, models and regimes are constantly being contested, readjusted, and refashioned. Transnational migrations and transnational religions in particular bring new forms of diversity which challenge radically existing models of national integration and of modern secular societies (Thomas, 2008; Ebaugh / Saltzman Chafetz, 2002). At the micro-level, urban contexts are the sites of encounter, and at times of open clash of diverse behavioural codes, moral expectations, and religious and secular sensibilities (Asad, 2003). For that very reason, cities are a perfect site to study how individuals and groups learn to adjust to one another, to tolerate diversity, and to transform their religious traditions in response to changing environments.

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