

## **URBAN PLANET: Collective Identities, Governance and Empowerment in Megacities**

### **New Global Landscape**

In recent decades, the world has experienced a new and unprecedented level of urbanisation. It is predicted that in the near future the particular point of no return will be reached when more than half of the world's still-growing population will live in cities, while the number of cities with more than five or ten million inhabitants continues to rise. By 2015, about 60 cities will have more than 5 million people and megacities like Mumbai, Mexico City, Shanghai, Beijing, Lagos, and Karachi are expected to reach an urban population of more than 20 million. Often, a chain of bigger and smaller cities forms a new urban landscape with populations of up to 80 million (Pearl River Delta/Hongkong) or 60 million people as in the case of the urban agglomerations along the Gulf of Guinea that extend over several national borders (Davis, 2006).

Over the last decades the human experiment in urban living has shifted from Europe and North America to Asia, Latin America and Africa. Today, it is the Global South that is testing the waters for what the future of urbanisation might look like. These recent developments demonstrate that "the perspective on the urban has gone global" (Friedmann, 2002). Cities in the developing world and in countries with emerging markets will account for 95 percent of the global urban growth. It is the Global South that is creating an image of an urban planet, which fundamentally challenges our Western - if not - Eurocentric image of 'the city'.

Despite the fact that urban growth affects each continent and each of the new urban regions in quite different ways, the major driving forces for the current wave of urbanisation are all linked to global economic trends, the surplus of an unskilled rural workforce, and to the flow of global capital and information networks. And even though some features of the new urban age resemble the urban transition in the industrializing North during the 19th and early 20th centuries, the sheer magnitude of the processes today indicates that replicating policies successfully applied in Europe and North America would presumably neither be an appropriate, nor an efficient path for the megacities of the Global South in the coming decades.

The term "megacities" – a concept as unsatisfying and unclear as it might be – is used to describe these urban agglomerations characterized by rapid growth, a new form of spatial density of population, changing infrastructure, formal and informal economies, as well as poverty, crime, and high levels of social fragmentation. Megacities may be distinguished from world cities and/or global cities, which constitute spaces of global economic and political power concentration.

### **Urban Challenges**

Massive migration – internal and transnational – into cities has led to growth rates of urban populations and their spatial concentrations not seen before in history. Most megacities become immense urban agglomerations without clear boundaries comprising areas with rural settlement features, suburbs, gated communities for the well-to-do, glamorous business centres and their cheerless counter images – urban and peri-urban slums. In fact, slums account for the lion's share of urban growth 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. 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.

While in 19th century Europe and North America the take-off of the industrial revolution structured a new demand for the labour force, nowadays many of the new city dwellers in the developing world cannot be absorbed by the regular labour market, but earn their living in the informal sector instead. In contrast to the situation prevailing in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, mass migration of the starving rural and urban poor to colonial settler societies overseas is no option at present, as the industrialized North only uses a fractional amount of the surplus labour force from the South. (Davis, 2004)

For a long time, strong states were able to mitigate the plight of their citizens by providing – though on a step by step basis and on the heels of several national and global economic crises – welfare, housing and education for its citizens. But in the 21st century, due to the unleashed force of the global economy characterized by transnational migration, illegal and informal labour markets and global capital flows, traditional state-based welfare models are eroding even in nations with flourishing economies. Current problems in the developing countries are not merely a product of urban growth rates themselves, but also originate from an immense mismatch of demographic changes, economic developments, historic legacies and the lack of institutional and administrative capacity.

This new urban landscape will without a doubt be the locus of major social transformations in the coming decades and it will be a magnifier of social conflict and cultural tensions: poverty-stricken molochs similar to those portrayed by Charles Dickens and Fjodor Dostojewski or by modern town chroniclers like Chris Abani and Meja Mwangi with their descriptions of cacophonous Lagos or of the disillusioning post-colonial Nairobi. The degree of demographic concentration and social deprivation as a consequence of a wider range of regional, national and global transformations can result in ethnic and religious tensions possibly leading to the worst case scenario of failing cities and urban warfare.

At the same time, megacities are deeply affected by ever-changing hybrid socio-cultural layers due to internal and transnational migration and increasing access to information networks. 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. Due to these circumstances, our understanding of class, gender, race and religion needs to be redefined in the urban context.

### **Berlin Roundtables on Transnationality**

Following an international essay competition on the topic of “Urban Planet: Collective Identities, Governance and Empowerment in Megacities”, the Berlin Roundtables on Transnationality will bring together about 50 young scholars, activists and journalists to discuss their work in three interdisciplinary workshops and panel discussions from 11 to 15 June 2008. In addition, 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:

## ***1. Collective Identities and Social Stratification and Fragmentation***

The wave of urbanisation experienced during the last decades can undoubtedly be seen as a new stage of modernity. Unlike in former processes of urban growth, present urbanisation is influenced and fostered by mass migration and the electronic media both of which are interconnected. Especially in an urban context, communication networks are no longer confined to the local or national level, but operate worldwide. While, on the one hand, migration into megacities tends to loosen traditional loyalties, kinship relations and customs, these 'traditional' forms of human organisation are on the other hand reconfigured into new patterns and may be strengthened in different ways. Religion and ethnicity as well as culture in general have largely lost their territorial basis and the new media help to turn diasporic networks into virtual global communities.

Against the backdrop of rapid urbanisation, demographic concentration and social, ethnic and/or religious stratification, stands the question of how city neighbourhoods in large urban agglomerations are construed and how specific localities and local identities are created. In which ways do populist, religious, and ethnic movements occupy new social spaces in these urban agglomerations?

Using the prepositions "from, against, in spite of, and in relation to" (Appadurai, 1996), how are specific collective identities formed? What and who are "the others" in terms of urban neighbourhoods and groups? In which contexts are social, ethnic and/or religious differentiations made and what do they relate to? How are shared imaginations produced within a group and to what extent are they influenced by the media and by transnational diasporic ethnic, religious or other networks? Furthermore, what does it take to generate collective action on the basis of such shared imaginations? What role does nationality, ethnicity, colonial heritage, religion, gender, and/or class play within the configuration and collective imagination of the urban spaces? At what is the search for a "new center that holds" directed? (Bauman, 1995)

## ***2. Governance***

One of the major features of megacities and city-regions is a loss of social, economic and political 'governmentability'. In many cases, governmental and municipal institutions have proven inadequate in their abilities to cope with rapid growth, permanent change and rising violence. Besides insufficient institutional and administrative capacities, a lack of knowledge prevails with respect to the various social processes involved and how they interrelate. As a consequence, more and more developments take place in informal and illegal ways whose forms, functions and patterns of interaction are hardly understood and remain under-researched.

The influx of international speculative capital into local real estate markets changed the structure of private housing and rental space dramatically. Even in OECD countries, involvement in state-funded housing projects has dramatically decreased and global investment is changing residential patterns in most core cities of the Western world. These tendencies are far more prevalent in many cities of the developing world. Lower and middle income families are driven out of the emerging business centres and newcomers cannot be absorbed. Informal labour markets lower tax revenues substantially and thereby limit potential investments into the urban infrastructure and public service. Moreover, city governments have to tend to the interests of those who do pay taxes – a minority in most cities of the developing world – and to compete with tax cuts and/or tax exemption for those who are eager to invest

in the city. Consequently, the marginalized majority may often be left out of the municipal decision-making process.

In this context, it may be asked how – under the conditions of accelerated growth and global economic interdependency – governmentability can be (re-) obtained, and which forms of good governance prove to be promising? How are grass roots networks based on gender, ethnicity and/or religion involved in managing communal affairs? In what ways do city governments make creative use of forms of social, ethnic or religious stratification and fragmentation to cope with existing problems? How can more inclusiveness, political participation and recognition be achieved at times of unprecedented urban growth? How do local and/or national governments and international organizations influence these processes?

### ***3. Empowerment***

Empowerment constitutes the other side to formal urban governance. The concept is understood here as a reconfiguration of power structures and of self-empowerment under even the most unfavourable conditions. A central interest concerns the forms of civic engagement and empowerment in different political, cultural and regional settings characterized by rapid urban growth and (often) by harsh living conditions. Can new civilizing arrangements be found within marginalised urban settlements and what are the patterns of their emergence? In how far do they change the interactions within and between different social, ethnic and/or religious communities? Do they contribute to the formation of an overriding urban narrative and identity? How and in which ways do local and transnational ethnic and religious bindings influence urban social and other stratification and fragmentation on the one hand and civil empowerment on the other?

Given their central role in political and economic empowerment, particular focus could be placed on gender relations in specific social, ethnic and/or religious groups. How do existing urban realities challenge established gender relations? Does the new urban transition lead to more gender empowerment within civil society structures? And if so, how do changed gender relations influence modes of interethnic and/or interreligious cooperation or conflict?

Further point of interest concerns the conditions under which social, ethnic or religious fragmentation foster civic engagement, and which types of empowering local networks exist? To which degree do these networks contribute to urban sustainability, liberal democracy and wealth? Are they able to balance the lack of efficient formal governance? Moreover, in which way are these networks influenced by transnational migration and/or connected to the global economy by means of transnational networks, and which impact do these relations have on local empowerment strategies?

### ***Urban Flourishing or Erupting Volcano?***

With the project “Urban Planet”, the Berlin Roundtables on Transnationality intend to foster a deepened understanding of the forms of urban fragmentation and of the processes of urban identity (re-) configuration as well as to contribute to the development of formal and informal strategies to cope with corresponding difficulties and conflicts. Besides, the underlying interest of the Roundtables 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. Can megacities become an urban environment where citizens have not only the right but also the chance to pursue their aspirations; where, as John Friedmann puts it, “human flourishing is inscribed in the liberal democratic ethos?” Or “is the

sociology of protest in the immiserated megacity a regression to the pre-industrial urban mob ... easily managed by clientelism, populist spectacle and appeals to ethnic unity,” essentially turning into “volcanos waiting to erupt”, as Mike Davis asserts provocatively? Toward what end is the urban planet advancing?

### Literature

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