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### **The modernity of mega-cities: echoes in history, power and the politics of difference.**

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The spectre of the mega city has long held its thrall. Realised more fully in fictional accounts stretching from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present, the spectre of the descent into human chaos, disorder and alienation is closely associated with urban narratives. Urban scholarship is also infused with deepest fears of popular culture. Themes of chaos are more compelling than the counter images of replenishment and order. Nevertheless, the urban question, both in popular culture and in scholarship, remains captured within a persistent duality. This observation raises the question of whether it is possible, or even desirable, to wrest social inquiry from the thrall of a potent cultural imagination. After all, social inquiry can be understood as an expression of deeply embedded cultural and philosophical meaning. For example, the 'sociological imagination' is specifically recognised as an essential ingredient of sociological scholarship, albeit tempered by the empirical, historical and theoretical<sup>1</sup>. All scholarship is inevitably intertwined with fantasy and fancy. Specific recognition of the capacity of popular culture to influence the shape and form of scholarship is part of the acknowledgement that through scholarship we construct truth. Reflexive scholarship enables the unsettling of premises and assumptions that shape inherited truths. It allows analysis to evaluate their substance and to consider alternate readings. Applying a reflexive approach to urban scholarship requires us to grapple with its contours of urban discourse, and allow possibility of re-inscription<sup>2</sup>.

The contemporary phenomenon of the mega city, mirrors the expansion of London in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century on a global scale. Drawing on sociological scholarship that has sought to describe the shifting forms of modern power, I will argue that the extremity and uniqueness of the London experience profoundly influenced the ethos of western social, scientific and political thought, particularly the forms and formulations of liberalism that were carried into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The juxtaposition of urban form, and social policy with the phases and transitions in liberalism, briefly sketched here, begins a consideration of the nature of modern forms of power that are reflected in these matrices by tracing the interrelationships between social knowledge, political strategy and economic reality.

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<sup>1</sup> Willis, E (1983) *The sociological imagination*, OUP.

<sup>2</sup> Foucault, M. (1983) *The order of things: an archeology of the human sciences*, Vintage Books: New York.

## Power and the echoes of history

The radical expansion of London in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century is characterised by the proliferation of an extra legal population who inhabited the city's underbelly outside and beyond structures of law, administration and governance. Unlike the slower and more ordered expansion of the European cities, unprecedented urban expansion in London resulted in abject poverty and misery. In 1801 the population of London was approximately one million. By the mid century it had tripled to 3 million and doubled again to 6.5 million by 1901<sup>3</sup>. This compares with the typically slower and later expansion of European cities. For example, Paris had a population of only 500,000 in 1801, rising to 1 million in 1850 and to 2.7 million in 1901. In Europe, city formation in the wake of the advancing industrial revolution was tempered by stronger civic and public health sentiments<sup>4, 5</sup>.

The expansion of London was well underway in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century in the wake of rural decline<sup>6</sup>. Population flows to the city were accelerated by legislative and policy approaches based on Malthusian principles and rationalities<sup>7</sup>. Malthus argued that excessive population expansion in civilised societies, unlike in primitive societies, could be curtailed by 'social' mechanisms<sup>8</sup>. 19<sup>th</sup> century Malthusian economic and social policy reflected Malthus' specific assumptions about procreation and the 'rational' capacity of individuals, couched in the general principles of liberalism and the concept of the natural forces of the economy derived from the work of Adam Smith<sup>9</sup>. These policies, formally reflected in the provisions of the *Poor Law Act* of 1834, actively disrupted the viability of rural life and amplified the numbers of poor and destitute already swelling the new urban population<sup>10</sup>. The *Poor Law Act*

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.demographia.com/dm-lon31.htm> accessed 6/12/07.

<sup>4</sup> In contrast see <http://www.demographia.com/dm-par90.htm> accessed 6/12/07

<sup>5</sup> Foucault, M. (1977) *Discipline and Punish: the birth of the prison*, Hamandsworth: Penguin Books.

<sup>6</sup> Roach, J. (1978) *Social Reform in England 1780-1880*, New York: St. Martin's Press at 54.

<sup>7</sup> Sir Frederick Morton Eden's *Inquiry into the State of the Poor of 1789* which recommended the abolition of the traditional system of parish poor relief. Coulqhoun's *A Treatise on Indigence* of 1806 recommended a nationalised system of poor relief to encourage the relocation of potential workers, the abolition of paid parish work, and the diminution of that poor relief in the workhouses. The national system would also detect and 'criminally indigent' and encourage the use of insurance see Roach, note 8 at 66.

<sup>8</sup> The dangers of untempered population expansion featured in by Malthus (1776-1834) *Essay on the Principle of Population*, published in 1789, and in the extensively revised edition of 1807. Malthus understood the 'natural' forces of the population as irrational, unpredictable and perilous, yet amenable to social regulation.

<sup>9</sup> Smith, A. (1776[1976]) *An Inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

<sup>10</sup> Roach argues that these practical measures were aimed at reducing the problem of poverty and its inherent threat to national security and were supported with schemes to provide, elementary education for working children to enhance their moral training, to discouraging crime and to reduce the influence of trade unions and political agitators, and a more uniform and comprehensive system of policing (Roach, 1978:121).

established a nationalised system of poor relief that aimed to impose economic independence on 'the common man', thereby diminishing the population of dependent poor, by reducing 'improvident' marriage<sup>11</sup>. To give this idea effect, it removed the entitlement of women with 'illegitimate' children to claim parish support, replacing that right by the obligation for women seek financial support from the fathers of their children<sup>12</sup>. The effect of these provisions was to disrupt the economic viability of locally based families forcing relocation to the city to seek subsistence living there.

The swelling population of London created appalling conditions. They did not attract official attention, however, until the first wave of the cholera pandemic wreaked havoc in 1832<sup>13</sup>. The unprecedented and unimagined squalor of urban life first made public in Edwin Chadwick's Report on the *Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Population* of 1842, shocked middle classes<sup>14</sup>. The inquiry documented disease and deprivation in the festering localities of the poor. In 1843 a second report described the appalling conditions in the overburdened graveyards<sup>15</sup>. While, the report of the *Royal Commission into the Health of Towns* published in 1844 acknowledged the need for public management of the environmental conditions of the towns, commitment to a concerted response did not emerge until after the second cholera outbreak in London in 1848. That event resulted in the death of 50,000 people, mostly among the poor.<sup>16, 17</sup>.

The correlation between disease and poverty, and the emerging recognition of the social conditions of health was first documented at this time, principally by pioneering European physicians<sup>18</sup>. The scientific demonstration of the correlation between environment and health fundamentally shifted the dominant ethos of freedom and choice in liberal philosophy toward a recognition of the economic and social limits experienced by the working and

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<sup>11</sup> Op cit at note 5 at 54.

<sup>12</sup> A summons could be brought against a deserting father. If he were found, an 'order in bastardy' required him to pay 'half-a-crown' weekly for support of the infant.

Op cit at note 5 at 67.

<sup>13</sup> The first cholera first hit London 1832 with approximately 3000 deaths  
<http://www.mernick.co.uk/thhol/1832chol.html> accessed 6/12/0

<sup>14</sup> Watson, R. (1969) *Edwin Chadwick, Poor Law and Public Health*, London: Longman at 24.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid at 48.

<sup>16</sup> Frederick Engels wrote *The Condition of Working Classes in England* in 1844 although it was not published in England until 1892 (Engels, 1969[1844])

<sup>17</sup> The report charted the prevalence of disease and poverty through maps and descriptions of streets, dwellings, schools, refuse, 'privies', sewers, drainage and odours Chadwick recommended complete reform of the drainage and sewer systems, improved housing and the extension of powers of the Poor Law medical officers (Porter, 1999:412).

<sup>18</sup> For example, during the 1820s the French physician Villermé (1782-1863) famously subjected data from a massive demographic study of Paris, undertaken by the Hygiene Department of the Royal Academy of Medicine in Paris and completed in 1821, to a rigorous statistical analysis that showed that the in the *arrondissements* of Paris morbidity and mortality rates consistently correlated with income (Porter, 1999:407) Similarly, Belgian statistician Adolph Quetelet (1796-1872) showed that rates of fertility and death, stature, weight and strength, drunkenness, crime and insanity were linked to economic circumstance (Porter, 1999:406)<sup>18</sup>.

destitute classes<sup>19</sup>. This shift allowed the philosophical and political transition toward the 'welfarism' that emerged as the form of liberalism characteristic of western liberal democracies in the first early 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>20</sup>. Welfarism as a political form parallels the form of power or population governance best described in Foucault's (undeveloped) concept of bio-power and further developed in a more specific context in the work of Nikolas Rose<sup>21</sup>. The distinguishing feature of bio-power is the strategic alignment between medicine, public health and the state such that citizenship is transcribed in the obligation to engage with medical and psychological expertise<sup>22</sup>. Most thoroughly described in the capacity of individuals to manage themselves according to medical rationalities<sup>23</sup>. This form of power is exemplified in the myriad mechanisms of discipline and freedom that permeate the complex social systems of modern liberalism<sup>24</sup>.

The dominance of neo-liberal economic and political thought in the second half of twentieth century has generated sociological literature concerned with the nature of modern forms of power. Nicholas Rose maps different phases of liberalism<sup>25</sup>. Ulrich Beck describes the reflexive nature of the modern engagement with risk<sup>26</sup>. Foucault's poses 'governmentality' as a complex form of modern power that encompasses the complexity of subjective formation and the engagement with shifting social, economic and political forms<sup>27</sup>. Together these approaches enable a narrative to be drawn around the complex effects of shifting social and political forms. They invite us to observe that in later decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the global imposition of neo liberal economics, represents a further shift in the liberal dynamic<sup>28</sup>.

## Mechanisms of population governance

The promulgation of 'welfarism' and correlative forms of governance predicated on the regulated freedom of the population, dictated that 20<sup>th</sup> century cities developed as metaphors

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<sup>19</sup> They also provided a rational basis for the development of public health strategies that were more swiftly recognised and adopted in Europe.

<sup>20</sup> Rose, N. (1985) *The psychological complex: psychology, politics, and society in England, 1869-1939* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

<sup>21</sup> The term 'biopower' will continue to be used to describe the form of power under discussion .

<sup>22</sup> Rose, N. (1990) *Governing the soul: the shaping of the private self*, London: Routledge.

<sup>23</sup> Cruikshank, B. (1993) 'Revolutions within: self-government and self-esteem' *Economy and Society* 22(3): 327-343.

<sup>24</sup> Foucault, M. (1991) 'Governmentality' in Burchell, G., Gordon C. and Miller P. (eds) *The Foucault Effect*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

<sup>25</sup> Rose, N. (1993) 'Government, authority and expertise in advanced liberalism' *Economy and Society* 22(3): 284-299.

<sup>26</sup> Beck, U. (1992). *Risk Society: towards a new modernity*. London, Sage.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid at note 20.

<sup>28</sup> The representations of this form of modern power have sufficient theoretical and empirical parallels to be approximately compatible with conceptions of risk society developed by Beck, Lash and others.

for the regulatory supervision of the population. The strategic alignment between medicine and the politics of welfare liberalism, given exemplary expression in the urban environment, created methods of supervision and surveillance that extended beyond the reach of formal legal structures into the lives of citizens, particularly the poor<sup>29</sup>. Bio-power enabled and justified interventions in communities that were considered beyond governance until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The salient feature of this form of liberalism is its capacity to construe marginalized populations as simultaneously criminally and medically deviant, thus rendering them amenable to specific but differentiated forms of governance<sup>30</sup>. 'Scientifically' based assessments of deviance justified intervention in terms of the philosophies and rationalities of the welfare state. Slum clearance programs in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, for example, drew heavily on the principles and rhetoric of disease control established in the public health of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>31</sup>. The programs purported to address dangerousness, understood as the unauthorised activity of the criminally organised and mentally diseased lower classes. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, poor urban populations were made subject to strategies of population governance through criminalisation, removal and the application of medical and 'psy' rationalities. Recognition of the social determinants of health linked the rational complex. Urban planning and replenishment programs reiterated the rhetoric of regulatory oversight and physical construction of criminally averse and therefore healthy spaces. The aspiration toward comprehensive governance of the populations was made possible by the political structures of welfarism.

In the second half of the twentieth century the gradual imposition of neo-liberal philosophy and economic strategy correlates with the emergence of risk society as described by Ulrich and others. The technologies of risk society represent a 'loosened' version of welfarism in that the aspiration to govern the population remains but is realised through a heightened emphasis on reflexive self-government. Like the regulatory aspiration of welfarism, reflexive forms of self regulation take place within the structures of the encompassing environment of the modern city. The return to the urban forms characterised by uncontrolled proliferation of slum populations necessitates a withdrawal from the forms of population governance that were made possible through the regulated spaces of the 20<sup>th</sup> century urban landscape.

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<sup>29</sup> Op cit at note 19.

<sup>30</sup> Op cit at note 23

<sup>31</sup> Stein, L.(2006) Planning Law, OUP at 15.

## Slipping from governance

Contemporary slums populations exist in unregulated, extra-legal spaces. The proliferation of these populations, graphically documented by Mike Davis, can be described as a product of the economic and social policies promulgated in advanced neo-liberalism and extended across the globe principally by the policies of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund<sup>32</sup>. Rapid urban advancement across the globe is replicating the social and political conditions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. On a global scale population shifts are reflected not only in urban expansion but in gross movement of refugees, migrants and other mobile populations. The 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed an accelerated expansion of displaced, illegal and semi-legal populations.

In India, illegal or semi-legal residential areas and formal slum communities are a permanent urban feature. Without formal entitlement, illegal or semilegal households frequently access basic services such as water and electricity only through black market mechanisms that lack safety, service quality and leave customer vulnerable to exploitation, bribery and other forms of coercion. Slum communities lack basic amenities. In Delhi in 1990, 480,000 families in 1,100 slums had access to 160 toilets and 110 mobile toilet vans<sup>33</sup>. The lack of facilities forced slum dwellers to defecate in open places creating tension over defecation rights. For women rules of modesty require defecation after dark bringing risk of harassment and sexual assault<sup>34</sup>. Slums are rarely policed, and the inability to access formal services is mirrored by inability to access emergency and health services.

In the second half of the twentieth century slum clearance policies have given way to attempts at slum reform. In India, State run programs in the 1980s that aimed to provide basic services to the urban poor often failed to realise material benefits for slum communities, particularly where such programs were directed to the urban manual scavengers and sanitation workers who remain profoundly marginalised through the powerful ideology of 'untouchable' caste status<sup>35</sup>. In South America, the residents of the shantytowns, 'favelas' and 'barrios', who live without legal title to their land are excluded from access to running water, electricity and rubbish collection. Irregular construction and lack of conformity

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<sup>32</sup> Davis, M (2006) *Slum Planet*, Verso.

<sup>33</sup> Chaplin, S (1999) *Cities and sewers*,

<sup>34</sup> Op cit note 32.

<sup>35</sup> Op cit at note 24

with building codes effectively frustrates 're-inclusion' programs that seek to grant legal title<sup>36</sup>. Illegal and semi legal communities live precariously.

Semi-legal and slum populations also elude international human rights law. The assumption that the successful promulgation of human rights norms can occur through domestic law is confounded by the emergence of displaced urban populations. Mega-cities are characterised by extremely rapid social change combined with paralysis of government, interrupted only by interventions that are justified in the language of human rights. This is so even when populations resist intervention. For example, slum clearance on the grounds of (unspecified) social and health risk often fails to provide suitable alternate housing let alone forms of housing that supports viable livelihoods<sup>37</sup>. While instances of successful spontaneous self rule have been described in the literature, and persuasively documented in fiction, the self help partnerships that characterised approaches of the World Bank the IMF policy in the 1980s have not held sway<sup>38</sup>. Slum, semilegal and illegal communities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are fending for themselves.

Paradoxically, the human rights movement can also be seen as contributing to the expansion of global neo-liberalism through promulgation of the 'right to development'. The right to development movement emerged following the ground breaking work of Amartya Sen who showed the economic fallacy of the disconnection between civil and political and social, economic and cultural rights<sup>39</sup>. Sen with others, notably Thomas Pogge, continue to mount a passionate response to global poverty and inequality, arguing against the dominant economic rationality of global neo liberalism<sup>40</sup>. Right to development rhetoric is as also deployed to claim the benefits of wealth creation and the 'trickle down effect' of neo-liberal economic policy. Populations outside the formal economy are invisible to global neo liberalism.

## Beyond governance

Sheer weight of numbers renders efforts to bring slum populations within 20<sup>th</sup> century forms of urban governance futile. Where welfare and risk society liberalism sought to bring marginalized populations within changing forms of governance, global neo liberalism is characterised by an incapacity to bring populations within its field of vision. This represents a

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<sup>36</sup> Carmalt, J. 'Rights and Place: using geography in human rights work' *Human Rights Quarterly* 29 (2007) 68-85.

<sup>37</sup> Op cit note 28.

<sup>38</sup> For example the organization of slum communities in Mumbai in *Shantaram*, by Gregory David Roberts, Scribe (2003).

<sup>39</sup> Amartya Sen (1999) *Development as Freedom*, OUP.

<sup>40</sup> Pogge, T (2005) 'World Poverty and Human rights', *Ethics & International Affairs*, 19:1

return to the early liberalism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century where the 'population' features only in the abstract. In the absence of governmental rationalities and strategies that 'know' the population as subjects, the poor are rendered invisible and unknowable. Marginalised urban populations 'appear' only when random unfathomable violence escapes the confines of the extralegal community, or environmental disaster is so profound that the passing attention of international media rests on their plight for a moment. Slum and illegal population in neo-liberalism are not only beyond governance, but beyond power.

## Conclusion

This essay has argued that the contemporary phenomenon of mega cities is indicative of a new phase of liberalism described as global neo-liberalism. The key characteristic of this form of liberalism is the abandonment of the aspiration of governance and return to the principles of early liberalism. While acknowledging the inherent tension between coercion and freedom inherent in governmental forms of liberalism, recognition of the exponential global expansion of slum and extra-legal populations should spark concerted efforts to halt or alleviate the condition that give rise to gross displacement. As in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, populations cannot be bought within governmental power until there exists the conditions that make it possible to 'know' them as subjects of governance.