

Telescopic Urbanism and the Poor

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‘In a city that is more than 50% squatters, it is not the squatters who are the city within the city. Rather the middle class and the wealthy constitute the small separate enclave. The well-off are the city within the city. The squatters are the majority, so they are the city. When they fully understand that politics and policies will change for the better’

Neuwirth, 2005:142

‘[In] world class city ... middle-class politics is waged in defense of the urban commons, social integration, good governance, and the public interest. It is in the name of these values that the urban poor are banished from city streets. It is also in the name of these values that new experiments with governance are launched: neighbourhood groups, resident welfare associations, urban reform communities, public interest NGOs’

Roy, 2011a: 326

Abstract

In 2003 UN-Habitat warned that by 2030 around a third of the world's 9 billion humans could be suffering from multiple deprivations, living in slums like conditions in the world's cities. Urban attention is beginning to turn to this problem, and to questions of sustainable urban competitiveness and growth, but without much referencing of the one to the other. This chapter claims that the city of the future is being looked at through the wrong end of the binoculars, with 'business consultancy' urbanism largely disinterested in the city that does not feed international competitiveness and business growth, and 'human potential' urbanism looking to the settlements where the poor are located for bottom-up solutions to wellbeing. The chapter reflects on the implications of such an urban optic on the chances of the poor, their areas of settlement, and their expectations of support from others in and beyond the city. While acknowledging the realism, inventiveness and achievements of effort initiated or led by the poor, it laments the disappearance of ideas of mutuality, obligation and commonality that telescopic urbanism has enabled, in the process scripting out both grand designs and the duty of distant others to address the problems of acute inequality and poverty that will continue to plague the majority city.

Introduction

In May 2011, I was invited to a seminar hosted by the King of Sweden on the Future Urban World. Over two and a half days, some 20 urban scholars, business leaders, politicians, opinion-makers and development activists talked about ensuring how the urbanised world can reinforce the synergy between growth, equity and sustainability, through appropriate interventions in the city's built, economic and cultural environment. Along with a Sweden with high-level experience at UN-Habitat in Nairobi, I was asked to introduce the topic of 'the unbuilt city for the unborn 3bn'. I conjectured that this city had already been built or was oozing incrementally in the megacities of the world – it was called slum/squatter

city. I argued that this city, which will house the majority of the world's population within the next 2-3 decades, most barely surviving in extraordinarily harsh environments, will require more than 'development from below' to secure a semi-decent existence for its dwellers. I proposed that we should think about the large-scale engineering of wellbeing through housing tenure reform, better public services, sustained anti-poverty commitments, the society of mutual obligations and a renewed social contract.

I thought I was on receptive ground. After all we were in Sweden, still a bastion of social democracy. But my talk was not well received - only an English environmentalist alarmed by the massive escalation of urban migration and what that will result from climate change agreed with me. Others said that I was too pessimistic, that inequality and not poverty was the key issue, that slum life was far more dynamic and hopeful than I had portrayed itⁱ, that the long-haul to shifting development thinking away from a discourse of rights and central or distant obligations to one of local empowerment and bottom-up responsibility was the only way forward. There was some gesturing towards how the rich/powerful in the West might intervene – ironically by a conservative politician and a global CEO – but otherwise the consensus was that slum city will upgrade itself by its dwellers or appropriate local interventions. I left the workshop bemused and feeling slightly out of date, and the unease lingered for it couldn't be explained away by the social composition of the gathering.

This chapter is an attempt to make sense of a sanguine and disengaged approach to the urban poor living in slum/squatter settlements. My claim is that it stems from a particular view on urban possibility in a future grasped as parsimonious, uncertain and opportunistic, one in which there is no room for public interventions without prospect of immediate socio-economic return. Accordingly, and reinforced by a sense that the city in a global age only exists as a collection of settlements with varied geographies of affiliation rather than as the

sum of its parts, only particular parts of the city are projected as spaces of potentiality or attention for such a future, eschewing any obligation to think the city a field of shared life and common rights. The city is grasped as a space of disjunctive juxtapositions and autonomous communities, of selective provision from and access to a divided commons. This sensibility is reaffirmed by two powerful urban imaginaries that have risen to the fore in recent years, one from a colonising minority with powerful allies, and the other from advocates of a contained majority, both ironically tracing similar subjectivities of survival and reward.

This kind of telescopic urbanism that only sees parts of the urban landscape is centrally implicated in preventing the scale and severity of human existence from being considered as anything other than a problem of autochthonous development. My argument is that the urban imaginary will need to change radically for things to be different, and a start would be to think the city once again as a provisioning and indivisible commons to which the poor have equal entitlement on a human rights basis. It would be easy to dismiss this idea as hopelessly idealistic, its viability compromised by rules of legal entitlement that would exclude large numbers of the poor living in cities as illegals and non-citizens, by the biases of hamstrung, inefficient or corrupt public authorities captured by the rich and the powerful, by the manoeuvres of elites, interests and communities who benefit from the apportioned and appropriated city, by the sheer magnitude of need in the city of endless population growth. These are real impediments, but without a move of the sort that brings the whole city back into view along with the principle of public goods shared by all urban dwellers, the maintenance by telescopic regimes of a very large proportion of humankind in a state of extreme hardship and vulnerability will persist unchallenged.

Business Consultancy City

To turn to the first projection, economic geographers and practitioners sensitive to the spatial dynamics of the capitalist economy have worked hard in recent years to propose cities as engines of the knowledge economy, as the powerhouse of future capitalist inventiveness, productivity growth, and consumer demand. The urban is returning to the economic calculus, shored up by celebratory texts theorising cities as centres of competitive advantage and prosperity generation (see Brugmann, 2009; Glaeser, 2011). In the way that the city, with its belching factories, rising consumerism, and entrepreneurial spirit, came to be known as the driver of industrial capitalism, the city is being proposed once again as the source of future world economic surge and opportunity in the post-industrial economy.

The account of new urban economic centrality is a familiar one. It finds vitality in a certain abundance of supply-side readiness, entrepreneurial dynamism, knowledge clustering and elite sociality typical of the bustling metropolis, all held to power new growth and opportunity. Interestingly, its examples are no longer confined to the emblematic North, but also include cities from the aspiring South. Among the engine cities, we find cited Shanghai, Mumbai, San Paolo, Johannesburg, Cape Town, along with familiar names such as London, New York, Frankfurt, Paris, Toronto, Sydney and Stockholm. The cutting edge of growth – industrial and non-industrial - is traced to particular characteristics of urban composition and global connectivity rather than to the national economic and political environment. Hardy surprising, then, that these cities have also begun to act like a Hanseatic League, forming alliances and collaborative partnerships, comparing notes, and generalising a new ontology of future prosperity from their collective experiences.

An influential example of the new thinking/making of the world economy as a string of central places is PricewaterhouseCoopers' (2008) *Cities of the Future*, which, working with Mayors and leaders from several of the above cities, unambiguously formulates the new

frontier. In the city ordered for elites, consumers and creative classes - materially and symbolically - the report finds an agglomerative dynamic involving enterprising subjects, consuming populations and enabling environments that promises both global and local returns. This dynamic is traced to a series of economies of proximity (resulting, for example, from the co-location of inter-related industries, producer services, and knowledge communities) and the offer of opportunities for association and networking (in schools, neighbourhoods, professional environments, and cultural and social venues), with further supply push and demand pull aided by the city's smart buildings, attractive amenities, consumer cultures, information hubs and highways servicing the knowledge/entertainment economy.

The visual projection of the city of economic promise is selective, a spider-like overlay on the multitudinous city that only brings certain spaces into view: CBDs, enterprise zones, shopping malls, entertainment districts, transport and communications hubs, universities and other centres of creativity, gated communities, and the suburbs and high-rise blocks supplying the employees and consumers of creative/entertainment city. The protagonists are well dressed, hard working, qualified, on the move, building a life, having fun. The rest of the contemporary city, aptly described by Burdett & Sudjic (2011) as 'endless city' – the prosaic, jobbing, informal, making do, surviving, unkempt, hybrid spaces occupied by the majority population - blurs out of focus, barely acknowledged as of the urban growth machine, out of place.

If modernist urban planning, out of its utopian aspirations that sometimes over-engineered wellbeing, or its interest in seeing the city as a whole, took an interest in the urban poor and gestured at its integration through plans for mass housing, work, welfare and circulation, the visionaries of business consultancy city have no such pretensions. Theirs is a telescopic urbanism, largely numb to the interests of the increasingly disenfranchised and

poor majority city. There is no pretence here of productive integration of the expanding population living in informal, makeshift or high-rise settlements; at least not in the knowledge/entertainment economy. What is seen is only an excess of bodies in festering spaces best kept cordoned off or out of the sight of elites, middle classes and investors, left to their own logics of survival, moved along when encroaching on prime land. On a good day, this population is offered rudimentary concessions when the supply of cheap, menial labour is choked off or when a riot is in the offing, or critics are reminded that if the poor continue to flock to the city there must be something there that works for them (Glaeser, 2011 – see Gleeson, 2012 for a critique).

In short, the majority city, more precisely the bulbous mass at the bottom, is sensed to be of no or only jobbing use to business city because the latter's dependencies are globally distributed rather than spatially contiguous and because it cannot absorb so much surplus life. Accordingly, the majority city can be conveniently treated as of another world, anomalous, an encumbrance, a zone of waste, or if not this, a zone of bootstrapping self-help, a pool of compliant labour held on the thin edge between working and abject poverty. But, attending to the wellbeing of the poor is ruled out. Indeed, business city, in the North or the South, is warned by its planners and consultants to do everything necessary to safeguard the creativity-entertainment economy. This includes encouraging coalitions between the municipal authorities, businesses and the middle classes, to define and police the boundary between the clean and safe city with productive potential, and the dirty, illegal and threatening city hindering progress, as Sanjay Srivastava (2009) reveals in the case of Delhi's quest to become a world class city through spectacular consumption and bourgeois activism. It also includes allowing the same coalitions to reclaim the faltering and stretched infrastructure of the city – its transport and communications networks, water, sanitation and electricity supply, and communal urban spaces – by silently extending their own illegal or corrupt practices to

secure access, and clamouring against the efforts of the poor to do the same (c.f. Swanson, 2007 on Ecuador; Graham, Desai and McFarlane, 2011 on Mumbai). To do otherwise is explained as risking everything in the race between cities to secure a place in the global knowledge/entertainment economy.

Human Potential City

Paradoxically, and possibly because of the evacuation of elites from urban society broadly defined, along with the diminished case for the city as a site of both growth and social cohesion, the urban optic of those on the side of the poor has also become telescopic (with some notable exceptions, as we shall see below). Out of choice, resignation or pragmatic urgency, the world of slums, informal settlements, illegal occupation, and other forms of existential improvisation in the interstices of the ‘endless city’, is increasingly referenced to itself, to interventions that will enhance self-help and development from below. Slum/squatter city is being re-imagined as another kind of creative/resilient Schumpeterian space. Here too, there is little talk of the shared urban commons, of modernity’s uplift, of duties of the social contract, of dwellers’ rights to the basics of life.

We might label this the ‘human potential’ optic, shored up by a mounting body of case research in the slums and squatter settlements of cities such as Nairobi, Rio, San Paolo, Mumbai, Delhi, Dhaka, Istanbul, Shenzin, and Caracas. Zooming into the heart of such settlements, it finds signs of deprivation and misery but also many stories of hope, resilience and human vitality. It has no particular care for audit by numbers, or more accurately, behind the statistics of absolute and relative poverty, it finds context-specific place biographies and complex ethnographies of being and becoming, irreducible to the language of abjection. It judges general surveys worrying about the magnitude and proliferation of slums, and interpreting the trends as a sign of unacceptable poverty and deprivation in the 21st century, to

be too doom-laden and overly pessimistic, an insult to inhabitants, seen to manage, strive and achieve (and here, Mike Davis' *Planet of Slums* seems to have become a particular bête noire to ridicule).

The 'human potential' optic and more generally stories of lives led on the ground get behind the facts to press in on even the organisations generating them. A decade ago, *Slums of the World*, UN-Habitat's (2003) first and influential attempt to calculate the world's slum population portrayed a grim picture. It forecast that by 2030, 50% of the urban population – itself accounting for two-thirds of humankind - would exist on or under the poverty line in slum-like conditions, largely in and around the cities of the South. It showed that compared to the 6% of the developed world's population living in urban slums (in 2001), the average figure for the developing world was 43%, with staggering figures for virtually all of sub-Saharan Africa (72%), poorer Latin American countries such as Belize, Bolivia, Guatemala, Haiti, Nicaragua, Peru, and a swathe of Asian and Middle Eastern countries (all above 50-60%). The verdict of the report was unequivocal: slum life was, and would remain, a life of multiple deprivations, and few rights and reprieves, with inhabitants spending all resources and energies on sheer survival. It understood slum life as bare lifeⁱⁱ.

A few years on, a sister-organisation, the UNDP celebrated its 20th anniversary by publishing the *Human Development Report 2010*. This report too speaks of the plight of over 1.75bn people suffering from multiple poverty, devoid of freedoms considered necessary for human development:

'Human development is the expansion of people's freedom to live long, healthy and creative lives; to advance other goals they have reason to value; and to engage actively in shaping development equitably and sustainably on a shared planet. People are both the beneficiaries and the drivers of human

development, as individuals and in groups (p.3, summary of report).

But in an important twist based on Amartya Sen's writings, the right to human development is no longer defined as a bestowed right, but one that individuals and communities are expected to acquire by enhancing their capabilities with help from others. Influenced by Sen's 'capabilities' approach to development, but also aware of the pervasive neglect by states and judiciaries of slum dwellers, UNDP has come to accept that the way forward is to help the poor to help themselves, through advocacy and material support from a variegated 'pro-poor' policy community that includes local and international NGOs, sympathetic public bodies and political organisations, and grass-root initiativesⁱⁱⁱ. This optic from below – full of internal differences and disagreements between the social actors about the right way forward – looks at the spaces beyond business city as ecologies of survival in their own right.

The volume of writing reinterpreting the slum/squat as a space of becoming is fast growing, and it is markedly different in tone from the accounts of only a few years ago. The new genre includes page-turning ethnographies by serious literary figures and investigative journalists; work without any of the voyeuristic hyperbole we find in the other genre of revisionist portrayal such as the film *Slumdog Millionaire*. The books do not shy away from the difficulties of slum existence – want, lack of privacy, ill-health, insecurity, absent basic services, noise, pollution, overcrowding, disease, precariousness, extortion and harassment. But they also speak of improvisation, ingenuity, community, fortitude, hope, laughter, music, personal hygiene, clean-ironed shirts, homemaking, neighbourliness, labour and entrepreneurship, hope, and above all a string of remarkable individuals and activists. The settlements bounce back as complex, vibrant, evolving ecologies of their own right,

possessing many of the characteristics of the 'moral commercial' syndrome of survival celebrated by Jane Jacobs (1992).

Two emphatic examples of 'human potential' urbanism are Doug Saunders's (2010) *Arrival City* and Robert Neuwirth's (2005) *Shadow City*, both authors keen to reject the term slum for its denigrating connotations. *Shadow City* is a manifesto for the squatter city, for the right of occupancy without legal title. Neuwirth lampoons slum clearance and re-settlement programmes, held to destroy community and networks of association vital for information and survival. He also cautions against the offer of land/housing ownership rights to settlers, on grounds of their gradual restriction of available space for newcomers and the negative consequences of profiteering trade in title deeds. Instead, his argument, on the basis of comparing the history of change in Nairobi, Rio, Mumbai and Istanbul, is that key to the vitality and improvement of the informal settlements is the right of occupancy, the security to tenants that they can stay in their homes and the neighbourhood.

Neuwirth claims that with the backing of real squatter rights, or little fear of eviction, the residents of Rocinha in Rio, Sanjay Gandhi Nagar in Mumbai, and the gecekondu of Istanbul have over the years invested in their properties, improved their neighbourhoods, seen the growth and arrival of business, campaigned for utilities, developed sustained associational life, and spawned campaigning or representative organisations. Through the effort of residents improving their own dwellings and maintaining communal spaces and services, these settlements have been gradually upgraded, providing the means to develop fulfilling lives and livelihoods. In contrast to settlements such as Kibera in Nairobi, which also possess enterprising and hardworking individuals but remain insalubrious, neglected and underdeveloped due to the absence of housing security and collective mobilisation beyond the smallest self-help groups, these settlements are considered to have become functioning

poor neighbourhoods, sending people out to work elsewhere, but also providing local opportunity to residents to improve their lot.

Arrival City is written by another journalist based on his travels in 20 of the countless number of settlements that sprout daily on the urban outskirts, housing in rudimentary makeshift shelters the growing mass of rural migrants driven to the city for work/survival. Saunders too rejects the term slum and its connotations of abjection, hopelessness and stagnation, in finding even in these grimy and ill-serviced clearances a teeming populace with the rural skills and drive to get on and up: enduring adversity, mobilising entrepreneurship, working with others to form businesses, find work, make savings, built better homes, improve the fortunes of their children, send remittances home. In such ‘transition spaces’ of social and spatial mobility, the rural poor, for Saunders, begin their journey into becoming an urban middle-class thanks to their resourcefulness and the reciprocities of kinship and neighbourliness that circulate in the settlements.

Like Neuwirth, Saunders argues that a particular local ecology is needed for such an outcome. True transition spaces such as certain Latin America favelas, Turkish gecekondu, Chinese ‘urban villages’, and Dhaka perimeter communities are judged to be different from ‘blocked’ repositories of poverty such as the high-rise estates on the edge of Western cities, slums in the South that offer no rights of ownership or occupancy, and informal settlements stifled by overbearing/corrupt authorities and populist organisations. For Saunders the city of transition into the urban middle class – proposed as the self-help answer to mass urban poverty in an age of conditional foreign aid and stretched national resources - is the one in which bourgeois freedom and infrastructural upgrading by the state (to secure access to water, sanitation, energy, transportation, and basic education) come together. Saunders (2010) is in no doubt that:

‘To achieve social mobility and a way into the middle class for the rural-migrant poor, you need to have both a free market in widely held private property and a strong and assertive government willing to spend heavily on this transition. When both are present, change will happen’ (p.288).

The most unlikely of places are offered up as spaces in which, as the UN would want, ‘people are both the beneficiaries and the drivers of common development’ (UNDP, 2010:3). Like the frontier settlements of the age of exploration, the first collection points of the ‘largest migration’ in history (*op. cit.*) are being refashioned in all their gutsy grime and grim endeavour at the spaces of bootstrapping human endeavour in a new age of minimally facilitated self-help. In human potential city, the urban reservoirs in which a large section of the unborn 3bn between now and 2030 will first see life, or where billions among the already living will end up, reconfigure as the answer to mass world poverty, once upgraded, serviced, and invested with ownership rights; making few demands on business city or on governments, capitalists and other elites.

So, there we have it: Schumpeter Mark I and now Schumpeter Mark II in the same conurbation, both creatively entrepreneurial, but neither troubling the other: one glitzy and hoovering up all available resources to service its growth appetite (Aksoy, 2011), the other gritty and survivalist, servicing itself, and of course, also the urban elites when needed. A perfect arrangement, or if this is too strong a description, the only pragmatic solution, it would seem, for an impossibly large problem of human want and displacement defying top-down resolution.

Concessionary Urbanism

Telescopic urbanism, in focusing on specific sites, leaves out everything else, above all the myriad hidden connections and relational doings that hold together the contemporary city as an assemblage of many types of spatial formation, from economically interdependent neighbourhoods to infrastructures, flows and organisational arrangements that course through and beyond the city. These relational geographies do not return the city as an integrated or singular entity – there is far too much variety, porosity and autonomy in contemporary urban life for this to happen (Amin and Thrift, 2002) – but they show the parts of the city held apart by telescopic urbanism to be interdependent. The ‘topographies that bring the informal and the formal close together’ are one link, for example, between dwellers in different parts of the urban landscape getting jobs, producing, earning, and consuming, being exposed to pollution, floods, disease, and violence, and living without rights, entrapped in ‘a vicious cycle of social and spatial exclusion’ (Burdett and Rode, 2011: 15).

Telescopic urbanism, with its interest in discrete territories rather than the relational urban topography, is playing its part in naturalising the cauterised society, pretending that the urban excursions of the rich and powerful to secure a place for a city in the world league and the re-fashioning of the poor as frontier survivalists and future middle-classes have no bearing upon each other. With no regard for the city as a social whole, it dismantles the politics of shared turf, common interests, and mutual obligations, in the process negating the poor anything more than their own enclaves and efforts, exonerating the rich, powerful and influential to do anything about slum/squatter city, and dissolving any expectation that the contract between state and society should extend to the poor, now in any case reconfigured as the resourceful. This is why telescopic urbanism is worth appreciating as a politics of severed society and space, including vernacular versions that choose to see smiling faces, entrepreneurship, resourcefulness, clean shirts, televisions and mobile telephones in the slums

of the world, instead of the precariousness and vulnerability, if abjection is too blunt a term to describe the reality of slum dwelling (Gupte, 2012) ^{iv}.

In this optic, the best on offer from the authorising city to the survivalist city, when the authorities can be persuaded to heed a claim, is of a concessionary nature, an act of munificence or begrudging recognition of a section of urban society considered supplicant or anomalous, without entitlement. Thus an act of provisioning – from the right to build or occupy to connecting a slum to the water or electricity mains - arises as a one-off concession to stave off future trouble (e.g. slum violence, uprising, contamination), quell the clamour of demand, or appease moral conscience. It minimally gestures at the public goods taken for granted in welfare societies, such as access to primary health care or education, basic utilities and services, or housing tenure; public goods that ironically turn out to be essential for a capabilities-led approach to development. A concession, almost always rudimentary and sweated for by the poor, arises out of squatters being recognised as needy but illegal subjects rather than as rights-bearing citizens. As Partha Chatterjee (2011: 15) claims, in drawing a distinction between the affordances of ‘political society’ and the bestowals of ‘civil society’, recognition is the product of squatters constituting ‘themselves as groups that deserve[s] the attention of government’, as a ‘moral community’ for whom an exception to the rules of rule can be ceded in the spirit of ‘assistance’:

‘The settlers, therefore, have to pick their way through a terrain where they have no standing as citizens; rather their strategies must exploit, on the one hand the political obligations that governments have of looking after poor and underprivileged sections of the population, and on the other, the moral rhetoric of a community striving to build a decent social life under extremely harsh conditions’ (*ibid*: 205).

Whether the terms concessionary urbanism or political society best describe the act of slum recognition^v, what seems clear – contra the claims of heroic individualism or community spirit animating human potential urbanism – is that getting access to the basics of life is the result of long and arduous collective struggle by the unrecognised, aided by willing experts, activists and organisations. It is the fruit of organisation and common effort against all the odds. It involves, among people who are least equipped with the necessary skills, energy and resource, long hours of collective learning, pooling, campaigning, labouring and paying to acquire the communal tap or toilet, electricity, better transport connectivity, and other basic amenities. Slum titles or upgrading are the product of community mobilisation around life-enhancing material objects such as water meters, communal taps, and ration cards (Das, 2012b). The prices paid, the effort expended, the ages waited to get onto the first rung of productive human being are considerable, relying centrally on neighbourhood socialities and kinship solidarities, or imaginative experiments of ‘deep democracy’ linking activists, communities and pro-poor organisations into sustained campaigns of recognition and provision (Mehta, 2011; Mehrotra, 2011; Appadurai, 2002). The concessions won from the authorities, and other forms of external mediation such as the availability of ‘poor funds’ that borrowers pay back, aid for entrepreneurial, infrastructural and housing projects, better connectivity into the city’s labour market, or low-cost expertise in slum improvement, are the product of organised initiative, frequently by groups of women battling against patriarchal conventions and inept local leadership (Mitlin, 2008; Aquilino, 2011; Thieme, 2010).

There is a politics of mobilisation and collective place-making that needs to be recognised in these efforts, taking us one large step away from accounts of slums as spaces of individual becoming and entrepreneurship, towards seeing the labour of subaltern organisation and insurgency without which even concessionary urbanism is unthinkable (Roy, 2011b). Regardless of whether the gains are the fruits of civil or political society, a

third optic beckons to be acknowledged, tracing a complex spatial circuitry of common interests and concerns, at once local and trans-local, pressing in on the authorities and others with resource and influence to see slum/squatter city. It is one that registers the topographical coalitions and connections across and beyond the city, the communal energies and commitments, the agonistic relations between the subaltern and the state out of which the right of the poor to the city is claimed.

The question that continues to press, however, is whether the processes revealed by this interpretative shift yield satisfactory improvements in the lives of slum dwellers, that is, whether the victories of such hard collective labour add up. My claim is that the gains, however significant for individual settlements, do not scale up locally or elsewhere, dependent as they are on situated effort that waxes and wanes as actors are pulled in different directions, worn down by the lethargy of the authorities and their own meagre resources and capabilities, reliant on the commitment of stretched peripatetic intermediaries, and often caught up in a sharp and divided politics of claim. The public toilet or water pipe arrives after 10 or 20 years of struggle if a cause is mobilised and sustained, and then little else follows, while in countless other slums, nothing is conceded from the authorities in the absence of local mobilisation or intermediation by pro-poor organisations. Insurgent or concessionary urbanism, depending on your point of view, involves an immense amount of effort, skill and commitment that the poor barely possess to secure ultimately sporadic, piecemeal and rudimentary rights and services. Most importantly, it speaks no truth to power, moved to act only at will under moral or political pressure.

The City of Collective Rights

Perhaps slum dwellers, left out of the calculus of civil society, can expect no more than this, living as they do in very large numbers in cities and societies constrained by stretched resources, limited fiscal headroom, disengaged elites and middle classes, an economy that relies on a large reserve army of labour and instituted precariousness, states in hock with all but the poor, and political movements and community organisations that play at communalism to advance their own sectionalist interests. The poor are last on the list of urgent reform, so perhaps insurgency and pragmatism – the graft of piece-meal improvement – remain the only options, if no magic wand of revolution or top-down modernisation is at hand.

But to stop here is to concede that any improvement in the conditions of the urban poor – up to half of humanity by the middle of this century - will remain fragile, hit and miss, easily undone when backs are turned. It is to concede that slum dwellers, owing to their legal status, remain a population without rights, left outside the society of sovereign and civic obligations, now usurped by the haves alone. It is to abandon any pressure exercised on states and elites by the UN Charter of Human Rights and its equivalents that they attend to basic human needs regardless of social location and status by providing access to primary education, health care, food, shelter, water, sanitation, energy, and other staples necessary to enable the very development through human capabilities that the UNDP proposes. It is a delusion to think that human potential city can do without an explicit politics of the staples ensuring that wires, wheels, ducts, sewers, building materials, occupancy rights, and other communal provisions snake through the makeshift city, perhaps delivered by diverse providers in the fiscally hamstrung city, but regulated by the public authorities to underwrite standards, continuity and affordable access. Between the negligent state and self-serving elites, if the will and compulsion to provide is missing, hidden under a language of resource

insufficiency, slum illegality, and undeserving populations, then let us name this as the problem, so that the case for a politics of the staples on grounds of universal right can be renewed.

A first step towards a politics of the staples understood as shared infrastructural rights across the urban territory is to turn the telescope the right way round so that the whole city comes back into view, revealing the multiple geographies of inhabitation and their interdependencies, cross-referencing business consultancy city and slum city as part of the same spatial universe. Indeed, this is exactly the kind of thinking behind UN-Habitat's (2008) recent report *State of the World's Cities 2010/2011*. Though the report chooses to say little about the organisation's earlier prediction that the world's slum population will grow exponentially, it argues that the maintenance of any trend to lift people out of absolute urban poverty depends on a rights-based regime of recognition and provision. With the unambiguous subtitle *Bridging the Urban Divide*, to highlight the deepening social and spatial splintering of cities, the report appeals to policymakers and practitioners to implement plans and visions that commit to the poor on a human rights basis through schemes that improve their access to serviced housing, education and economic participation (e.g. through labour intensive public works programmes). It also asks for slum dwellers and the poor in general to be given the opportunity to participate in the city's planning decisions and cultural representation. In its own words, the 'adoption and implementation of a strong human rights-based approach upholds the dignity of all urban residents in the face of multiple rights violations, including the right to decent living conditions. The right to the city can provide municipal authorities with the platforms they need for a wide range of policies and initiatives that promote an "inclusive" urban environment. The right to the city calls for a holistic, balanced and multicultural type of urban development' (p. xvi).

Here, the city is imagined as a whole, a space of universal rights, and a plural and inclusive polity. If there is an implausibly utopian ring to the idea of the ‘city for all’ (a UN-Habitat phrase), it is balanced by the sobering thought that it might take such framing to address poverty on a mass scale and also to reinforce popular and progressive opposition to power’s comprehensive neglect of those without means. Without such a move, the adventurism of business consultancy will find no limit, and the idea of inclusion will remain restricted to the labours of human potential city or political society. Only this kind of universalism allows the grossly neglected and the unthinkable to return to the realm of the possible, the idiographic of good practice scattered around some cities of the world to gather up as a nomothetic of the just city. It comes with no guarantees, nor is it a panacea, as we know from the fraught history of rights-based approaches to social justice, frequently ignored by the authorities and hard to police, often manipulated by those with greatest influence, minimal in their offerings and sometimes an impediment to revolutionary change, and divisive when distributed as solely individual rather than collective entitlements. But for those without means on the baseline of survival, wanting to get by and up or even engage in revolutionary activity, access to the promises of the UN Charter would go an awfully long way. To deny the poor entitlements that bear valuable material resources necessary for a decent life at a time of deep and large-scale deprivation, on grounds of the limitations of a discourse of universal rights strikes me as oddly perverse.

A curious aspect of UN-Habitat’s position on the way forward to a rights-based urbanism is good municipal governance. The report turns to comprehensive urban planning, to regular monitoring of social inclusion targets set by a vision-led programme of urban regeneration, and to improved coordination between different arms of municipal governance in order to ensure that things add up for the poor. To an extent, this emphasis is not surprising given the legacy of state corruption, bias, inefficiency and fragmentation that

traduces the poor in so many cities of the world. The turn to good governance nudges the state – local and national - to become more than the individuals and offices that decide to take an interest in the slums, and it certainly reasserts, against the neoliberal grain, the centrality of the state, planning, and public provision in underwriting the needs of the poor. But what of the substantive minima of a rights-based approach to urban inclusion, the ‘obligatory points of passage’ (Colin McFarlane, personal communication) through which the poor find the hand up to a fulfilling life? Can the list realistically include, as UN-Habitat proposes, preparations for subsidised public housing, just rights of occupancy for slum dwellers, the retention and conversion of public land, and the guarantee of basic welfare and infrastructural rights?

Clearly, naming the obligatory points depends on the particularities of place, which will define the possible. These include constitutional and fiscal specificities that determine who has rights, the spectrum of possible interventions and what can be afforded, the topography, size and material state of individual slums which will define the nature of need and connectivity with the rest of the city, and the balance of power between the local state, elites, intermediaries and slum communities which will shape the spectrum of demand and response to it. With such difference in play, it makes little sense to presume that a list of gradually mounting rights can be ticked off. But might it be possible to deduce a minimal set of rights from common demands and struggles repeatedly spoken of in the accumulating body of situated research on slums around the world? This research tends to confirm, in the manner argued by Neuwirth (2008), the quest of slum dwellers for a right of occupancy that need not be reduced to individual title to land or housing, as long as tenancy can be secured, eviction avoided, rents kept affordable, and housing improvements allowed. At stake is the necessity for shelter, tenure and proximity to the means of survival, without discriminating qualifications of individuated right linked to housing ownership or formal citizenship. What

springs to the fore is the principle of housing as a public good, prior to preferences about its form, which might range from public housing to a regulated private rental market).

The ground research also returns certain elements of the collective urban infrastructure as an obligatory passage point. Time and again, the line between wellbeing and misery in the slums seems to be drawn around access to, and the cost of, piped water, sanitation and electricity, along with primary healthcare and education. These are the material sites of usurious exploitation, communal conflict, time and resource available for meeting daily needs, and securing a healthy and potentially better future. Getting even the most rudimentary forms of access to these services is a costly, laborious and often hapless quest, involving years of waiting and pleading, illegal procurement and retribution, dependence on unreliable and exploitative intermediaries and providers, sacrifice of countless other priorities, needs and necessities, courting hazard, risk and deprivation, travelling afar to access expensive and low quality services, and considerable envy and conflict between those with means and those without. Piped water, communal taps and toilets, basic sewerage, mains electricity, mobile dispensaries and accessible schooling would make all the difference, and there is ample evidence that slum communities are prepared to pool money and labour to get connected, share services, pay affordable tariffs, get involved in maintenance and repair.

Housing and basic infrastructure defined as a right of the poor - who often define connectivity rather than free access as their right (Das, 2012a) – opens the way for an unambiguous politics of the staples for slum/squatter settlements. If the legality of the spaces and their inhabitants is no longer reason to impede provision, the debate can shift to the terms and conditions of supply. To begin with, that slum communities may be willing to play their part in infrastructural preparations and pay affordable tariffs for services also means that arguments of financial constraint weaken, opening the way to direct municipal provision or

regulation of supply. Such reasoning adds pressure on the fiscally hampered or corrupt and inefficient public authorities to think anew, in the way implied by UN-Habitat, but it also signals to private suppliers, and to elites and global investors disproportionately claiming the city's collective resources, the need to play their part in slum upgrading. The principle of universal infrastructural rights opens the way for a politics of distant and local obligations, delivered through measures such as funding from a redesigned Tobin tax, corporate levies, a global public housing and infrastructure fund, rich cities and socially responsible corporations becoming involved in slum upgrading, and providers of utilities and public services agreeing to graduated tariffs that the poor can afford. This is not to duck pointed questions regarding the profit-driven and land-grabbing motives of private sector involvement in slum upgrading, which finish up squeezing the poor out of their settlements, but with stringent public-interest, pricing and community participation qualifications, the hazards of profiteering can be avoided (Weinstein, 2012).

I believe it is fair, though far from sufficient, to express the problem of urban exclusion on a gargantuan scale in the 21st century as a binding human rights imperative, for the inclination of states and elites is increasingly to defect, for they have no need for a surplus population of the size anticipated. Of course, without its enforcement, a politics of rights – qualified here as a right of the poor to public goods – is meaningless, and today the utilitarian reasons for those in power to deliver such a politics are slight^{vi}. Equally, the conferral of rights does not automatically yield an improvement in the lived experience, freedom and capabilities of the poor as Sen (2010) shows in his forensic critique of Rawls' rights-based theory of justice. But without a narrative of inviolable human rights, the case for public goods as the first step in human being and societal belonging simply disappears, because the entitlement of the billions living on the breadline in un-serviced urban settlements to clean water and sanitation, and to basic shelter, education and health care remains conditional:

upon the concessionary state, benefaction, proofs of deservingness, the return of the poor as future tax payers, consumers, labourers and entrepreneurs. This may mean the poor having to wait forever, caught in a numbing tangle of words among experts and decision makers vexing about the merits of private versus communal, legal versus moral, allocated versus earned rights.

Conclusion

The above are only intimations of a politics of the urban staples couched in the language of city wide infrastructural rights. The devil will lie in the detail of local balances of power and resource, differences of legal and customary practice, and degrees of need. My central aim, however, has been to suggest that the extraordinarily unequal state of the world demands once again a politics of large-scale social engineering so that certain basics of human being can be made universally available. If this is to happen without the totalising ideals of old-style socialist modernism or the brashness of contemporary capitalist expansionism (Nigel Thrift, personal communication), a place to start is to commit to the basics of life such as water, sanitation, shelter and education as indivisible and non-appropriable public goods. It seems strange to return to a language of the staples and the commons that animated the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but the onslaught of neoliberalism on the public and the common, and the harsh contemporary reality of mass vulnerability and want necessitate such a return.

Bruno Latour (2008: 11) may be right to warn that a 21st century politics of ‘design’ will need to be wary of facts and truths taken for granted, ‘if the whole fabric of our earthly existence has to be redesigned in excruciating details; if for each detail the question of good and bad has to be raised; if every aspect has become a disputed matter of concern and can no longer be stabilized as an indisputable matter of fact’. Yet the ability to think anew and design democratically may depend on the general spread of certain staples. Either way,

without the concerted effort to expand the infrastructural rights of the poor, business consultancy urbanism will take over the city, as it has already begun to do in parts of the world aspiring to world-class status. Here, the elites are on the march, intolerant of even concessionary urbanism, bent on clearing slums and people of an unpleasant bearing to make way for the city of shiny buildings, glitzy consumption, fast highways, clean streets, plentiful real estate and relaxed planning regulations. The manoeuvres of the cleansing class – a coalition of middle classes, aspirants, cosmopolitans, consumers, businesses and global investors - promise a very different city, one that cannot abide the poor within sight or making a claim on the city now considered as theirs.

The aim of this coalition is to clear the slums, push the poor to faraway places, reclaim the streets, criminalise the desperate illegal and informal acts of the poor to secure water, electricity, a bare living. The preparations include scoops on the use of illegal water pumps or siphoned electricity by the poor and vigilante attacks on slum dwellers that stray into middle class areas to collect run-off water, while remaining smug or silent about their own forays into illegal pumps and generators, bribery of official and providers of services, and sinking of tube and bore wells into precious aquifers (Roy, 2011a; Truelove and Mawdsley, 2011). They include getting the slum laws changed from rules of title to rules of aesthetic judgement so that the authorities can be press ganged into wasting no time to bulldoze slums on grounds of unsightliness and contamination (Ghertner, 2010). They include, through such manoeuvres, exposure of the authorities as soft, inefficient or corrupt, and eventually their capture in service of the *nostra* of world-class city. They include the stigmatisation of slum city as anachronistic, impure, a halt to progress; a stigma internalised by those about to be displaced as they succumb to a new aesthetic and affective ordering of normality (Ghertner, 2010).

In aspiring cities such as Delhi and Mumbai the cleansing elites are getting their way. Here, even the insurgencies of political society and the affordances of the concessionary state allowing the poor to subsist in the urban interstices and openings of the unruly and under-regulated city, are being choked off, fanned by a paranoid rhetoric of danger and impurity from behind gated doors. Other cities world will choose to follow suit as rumours of rich pickings from business consultancy urbanism spread. They too will want their place in the sun in the unfolding post-occidental modernity, by letting the poor roast in the sun, riding out periodic uprisings crushed by the authorities and betrayed by organised progressive forces (Tronti, 2012). It may be time to rove the telescope across the urban landscape and over the colonising urban elites, to insist on the infrastructural needs of the poor as a human rights priority, to see the infrastructures of slums as part of city-wide technical systems. When infrastructural provision in the slums is ‘instantiated through uncertain relational rhythms produced by collectives – of residents, municipalities, political parties, and metabolic processes – working at infrastructure, and politicized through ... *patronage, political society, the illegible social, and state destruction*’ (McFarlane and Desai, 2012: 1, original emphasis), eliminating such contingency has to become a political imperative. Then the balance between inventiveness, fortitude and sociality, and desperation, disappointment and unrewarding struggle that so many slum stories speak of such as those in *Trickster City* (Tabassum, et al, 2010) might tip decisively towards the former rather than the latter.

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ⁱ In the voluminous body of writing on slums and informal settlements, there is little agreement on how best to describe life within them. For some observers they are simply a particular type of low-cost neighbourhood that supports all forms of life and livelihood, while for others they are places of comprehensive abjection and destitution. Such interpretive differences profoundly influence normative stances. My position is that while the vitality, variety and complexity of slum life ought to be recognized, for a vast majority of inhabitants,

the experience is one of multiple deprivations and extreme vulnerability, if abjection is too strong a description (Gupte, 2012).

ⁱⁱ UN-Habitat has since pulled back from long-term forecasts, preferring to speak of the shorter-term trends and in less precise ways. It notes (UN-Habitat, 2008) for example that between 2000 and 2010, over 200 million people in the developing world would have moved out of slums, but against a trend of absolute increase in numbers. It steers clear of giving a figure for the latter.

ⁱⁱⁱ I am acutely conscious of the dangers of placing all these bodies and efforts under one umbrella. Many community-based initiatives see themselves as separate from even city-wide networks, while many social movements and human rights organisations make a point to show that their methods of working are different from those of donor-dependent NGOs.

^{iv} This is not in any way to deny the improvisations of survival and advancement daily cobbled together in slums, including the inventive pirating of modern technologies, as Ravi Sundaram (2010) has shown insightfully in the case of Delhi without making light of the struggles and hardships faced. My interest lies precisely in acknowledging this fine balance, but also in the politics of revisionist naming, which is why I am not overly keen on demands to jettison the word ‘slum’ on the grounds that it homogenizes and denigrates the variety of housing tenure, livelihood and wellbeing to be found in informal settlements (c.f. the special section of *City*, 2011, Volume 16, Number 5, honoring the work of Alan Gilbert on regimes of housing occupancy). If ‘slum’ serves to incite a politics of justice for an alarmingly large mass of humanity living in appalling urban conditions deprived of basic rights and services, then there is little reason to drop it, despite all its limitations.

^v The rules of recognition vary between states, with countries such as South Africa, Brazil, Argentina, and Venezuela acknowledging the citizenship rights of slum dwellers (and then choosing to act accordingly by granting housing ownership or occupancy rights and diverse public services, or ignoring the rights). In turn, slum dwellers frequently couch their demands in the language of rights, averse to the assumption that all they possess is a moral claim (c.f. Das, 2012a; Desai and Sanyal, 2012).

^{vi} I doubt whether world capitalism, starved today of sustained demand, and in need of an expansionist fix to its realization crisis, ‘based on higher wages in low-wage countries, debt relief in poor and richer countries, new schemes of social protection, and a financial architecture geared to public utility’ (Blackburn, 2011: 35), is especially interested in the meagre offerings of slum city.