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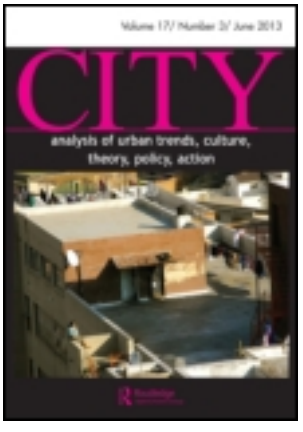

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Telescopic Urbanism and the Urban Poor: Symposium

Introduction

Michele Lancione

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How we look at cities—this is hardly news—matters. It matters even more when we are confronted with the "32 per cent of the world's total urban population" living in "slums" (only a 2001 figure, UN-Habitat, 2003). This symposium was sparked off by a paper from Ash Amin, "Telescopic Urbanism and the Poor", which challenges the way we look at, and we make sense of, the future of cities' informal settlements (see also Amin, 2013). Despite the singularities of each case, Amin argues that the city of the poor has been looked mainly from two partial – or telescopic – standpoints. On the one hand we have "business consultancy" urbanism, interested in international competitiveness and urban growth, and, on the other, "human potential" urbanism, focused on the creativeness and resilience of the "slum" city. Amin finds this telescopic urbanism problematic since it does not recognize the complex topologies of the city.

Challenging these views, Amin argues that we should consider these two 'cities' as part of "the same spatial universe". His claim is at the same time epistemological—because it invites us to encompass canonical telescopic dichotomies in our analysis of cities—and political. Turning the telescope to the right way is the first step for what he calls a "politics of the staples", a politics of shared infrastructural rights across the whole urban territory. Amin is arguing for a politics of large-scale engineering that considers the basics of life as common public goods: not given by concession, but by *right*.

Five contributors have responded to Amin's provocation. The papers, grounded in the rich field experience of their authors, criticize, expand, and refine Amin's argument.

Datta's intervention stresses the role of the law in the life of the urban poor. For her the right to the city is not always seized in fighting the law, but through a deeper engagement with the law itself, one that is always contextually based: "the right to the city is intimately linked to the legal geographies of the city". Moreover, she stresses the importance of understanding the urban poor as a non-homogenous group. In this sense, she refines Amin's politics of the staples: staples are dependent upon difference of gender, caste, class, etc. that must not be ignored by welfarist and universal approach to rights.

On a similar line of revision, and through a set of compelling vignettes used to set her argument, Roy points out that it is hard to assert "shared infrastructural rights" among the urban poor *precisely* because of the continuous waves of "eviction and resettlement, of dispossession and patronage", which Amin also recognizes. Along these lines, Roy discusses what she calls the "undecidability of us", where the dialectics of opposition are replaced by agonism and its deconstruction. In agonism, she argues, we come to understand the impossibility of "us", but it is right in that moment that we should recognise the possibility of a momentary union. This is not a welfarist approach but a more subtle, agonistic and momentary "spectral politics of the social whole". Her contribution, like Datta's, once again refines

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rather than rejecting the major points raised by Amin.

Taking Lagos for his main examples, Neuwirth makes a different point. For him cities like Nigeria's capital pursue the dream of remodelling themselves "in the image of some other glamorous, gleaming global city", making the life of the poor harder and continuously under threat. Starting from this standpoint, Neuwirth invites us to take into full consideration the lives of those at the margin. For him "telescopic urbanism" is not the problem—rather it should be fully implemented because it allows one to a better understanding of how "System D" (the informal economy of the "slums") works. In this regard, he argues that only focusing the telescope on the granular details of the urban poor, which includes their positive affirmation too, will eventually inform a positive discussion of the "right to the city".

The next contribution, by Pushpa Arabindoo, is more nuanced. In it Arabindoo argues against the "census-based" understanding of urban poverty, and the liability of a "data-based" approach to urban research. Criticizing the latest Indian's "slum census", she claims that Amin's "telescopic" approach may prove useful in accommodating "at a methodological level the statistical alongside the anecdotal", moving from governmental statistics to the complex urban ethnographies advocated by Amin, and vice-versa. However, she also argues that this approach should not emphasise the distinction between the "authorising city" and the "survivalist" one, which for her are "linked together through overt and covert webs of connectivity" (a point that echoes the "undecidability of us" expressed by Roy). Telescopic urbanisms, in the end, can provide a good way of seeing the city at the same time "simultaneously and in juxtaposition", allowing one to question how we make sense of—and politically act upon—the city of the poor.

McFarlane's contribution takes the politics of water in Mumbai as a powerful example of the topological interconnectedness of any struggle for fundamental resources like water, and of any politics of the staple related to them. McFarlane argues that city's elites are able to see beyond the limit of their telescopic view, but what they see is only what they perceive as being self-inflicted by the urban poor. What is needed is then the application of a "metabolic lens" to urban enquiry, in order to trace how particular metabolic processes (like the use of water to produce bottled drinks for the middle class) become almost "naturally" more prominent than other (like the use of the same water to grow subsistence staples). Tracing these processes of metabolic formation is therefore essential to appreciate, understand, and challenge the "malevolent urban modernities" upon which urban inequalities are founded. On the latter, McFarlane agrees with Amin on the necessity for a large-scale provisioning of infrastructural rights, but also stresses the importance of minor and specific interventions. The two are, in the end, the "fundamental challenge for contemporary political struggle in the megacity".

The contributions presented in this special feature, together with Amin's timely paper, provide an important starting point to re-imagining a politics of the staples grounded in the nuanced dynamics, and differences, of the life in the "slums". It is only by re-assessing the importance of mutuality and commonality that "the urban divide" will be bridged (UN-Habitat, 2008). This special feature shows that the *way we look at cities* is central in achieving this goal.

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