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Urban Sociology

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Lecture 5

Urbanisation in the Global South: Approaches of Understanding

Welcome back to the course on urban sociology. So, in the last module, in module one, we had already covered the introductory concepts, the theories of urban sociology, learning about globalization, urban infrastructure and governance. So, today we will begin with module two and this module is focused on contemporary urban India.

Our first lecture of this module will be on urbanization in the Global South: Approaches of Understanding. So far, we have dealt with a lot of theories that has originated in the west and we have discussed before that the applicability of these theories in the Global South which is quite questionable.

The urban experiences in the cities of the Global South is distinctive. It is different and thus, we need to first problematize the field of urban studies which is dominated by approaches which make the cities of the Global South out to be lacking in terms of certain qualities of cityness. Only then we can effectively develop an analytical lens to better understand the cities that we live in, in the Global South.

In today's lecture we will first talk a bit about the writings of Jennifer Robinson, who talks about the urgent need to decolonize the area of urban studies with specific focused on regional processes of urbanization as we are doing here, studying much more closely the process of urbanization in the Global South. Then we will discuss about another overarching and very, very contemporary theory that spends a lot of time and helps us specifically understand the processes of urbanization in the Global South.

So, this is Ananya Roy's analysis of the 21st century metropolis and why particularly she calls for new geographies of theory. This is very interesting with a particular focus on locations in urban studies which would enable us to understand that there is not one, there is not one single but multiple forms of metropolitan modernities.

Then we will move on to another very, very contemporary idea which fits the context of urbanization in the Global South. This is known as Subaltern urbanism, where again we would be referring to the works of Ananya Roy, who further shows how the image of the Third World City is represented and studied in the scholarship in urban research. Finally, we will talk about some of the tendencies in southern urbanism as explained by Seth Schindler.

When we think about the cities, we think about major cities of the Global North - London, New York, Tokyo. What we do forget in this process is that there are a large number of cities in the world that do not register on the intellectual maps that chart the rise and fall of global cities. They are neither a global city nor a world city. They are instead seen through the lenses of what we call developmentalism, an approach which broadly understands these places as lacking in the qualities of cityness.

The concern is to improve capacities of governance, service provision and productivity. This is because our ideas of the city have always rested on the experiences of a small group of western cities, as urban theory itself has always been positioned and dominated by the west. The problem here is that when we talk about cities through the developmentalist approach, the developmentalist city experiences, it usually does not contribute to the expanding definition of cityness but it exactly does the opposite. It tells us what cities are not.

In fact, Mumbai, Cairo, Mexico City where we are witnessing rapid urbanization are not global cities but fall into the category of megacities that are bigger than cities like Chicago, Paris, Los Angeles but still not as powerful as them. So, as you can understand, the idea of power is extremely important in this large range of definition that captures global cities.

So, as I was telling you that I would be spending some time discussing the contributions of Jennifer Robinson. Jennifer Robinson believes that these popular categories of global cities or more commonly known as the world cities ultimately limits our imagination and planning of the future cities around the world. This is very important. Even the use of the term Third World City, something that we use very frequently puts in place a hierarchy where the First World is automatically in a more superior position than that of the Third World.

This rise of Third Worldism in the field of development studies has also been concerned with the speeding up of the economic growth of less developed countries, almost as if they have to catch up with the developed nations. She believes that a more cosmopolitan approach to urban studies is in order, an approach that would be without categories and one that would embrace the diversity of experience in ordinary cities or as we call them, megacities.

According to Knox, many population are excluded from the space of global capitalism and thus from the field of world cities as they are deemed economically irrelevant. But to suggest

that poor cities and countries are irrelevant to the global economy is certainly not true. Say, for example, mineral resources crucial to the global economy, crucial to the world economy are drawn from some of the most poorest countries in the world. So, instead of focusing on the position and functioning of cities within the world economy, Robinson urges us to think about a more cosmopolitan, post-colonial urban studies that would be much more contemporary and much more holistic in its approach.

There is also a dearth of alternative vocabulary and approaches that severely limits our ability to mobilize creative ways to address the situation of the poor, marginalized people in cities around the world. Therefore, there is a need, there is an urgent need to break free of the categorization and to rethink these widely circulating approaches in theory.

The final step is to decolonize the field of urban studies so that new theoretical reflections and scholarly insights for theorizing beyond the West is effectively generated. Scholars from the privileged western environment must engage with and learn from and consequently promote the ideas of intellectuals in less privileged urban spaces.

Ananya Roy, along a similar line, also urges that it is time to rethink the geographies of urban and regional theory. She believes that much of the theoretical work on city regions is firmly rooted in North America and Western Europe. However, according to her, according to her pathbreaking work on urbanization processes in the Global South, the urban future largely lies in the cities of the Global South, like Shanghai, like Rio de Janeiro, like Mumbai, etc.

Thus, she asks the reader a very important question in her work. Can the experiences of these cities reconfigure the theoretical heartland of the urban and metropolitan analysis? She points out how these megacities are bursting at the seams. These places are undergoing rapid growth and urbanization. Yet the first world cities are always seen as models or ideal prototypes that generate theory, that generate empirical observations and policy to be borrowed and replicated by the rest of the world.

While the third world cities or megacities are seen as problems, as infested with social problems and social issues which require diagnosis and reform. For this very reason, through her paper, she seeks to articulate new geographies of urban theory. But to do this, one has to dislocate the Euro-American center of urban theoretical production. This means shifting the center of production of urban theory from the west to the Global South.

It is not enough for the third world cities to be seen as different or the 'other.' The distinctive experiences of the Global South also have the capacity and the potential to generate productive theoretical frameworks for all the cities, thus the sort of theory that she is talking about must have the capacity to be located and dislocated at the same time.

This means they have to be produced in place here specifically the Global South but also then be appropriated, borrowed and remapped. Thus, it is necessary for us to view all the cities from this particular place on the map not simply give recognition to the existence of the uniqueness of the cities of the Global South.

Specifically, in the context of South Asia, the agrarian question has always been the centre of focus and the urban question has quite often been neglected as we all know. There is also a constant focus on urban politics, urban citizenship, violence and marginalities. As a result, the South Asian cities are constantly preoccupied with how subaltern subjects consent to and participate in the projects of urban redevelopment and urban inequality. This is why Third World literature provides a very sophisticated understanding on the larger topic of what Ananya Roy calls urban informality, an issue first World countries are curiously very silent on.

There is, of course, a tendency to view informality as unregulated, illegal, a domain of the survival by the poor and marginalized, who are often wiped out by the process of gentrification, by the process of redevelopment but the fact that informality is one such mode of the production of space is often missed out by the First World theorizers on urban. This will be discussed in greater detail when we discuss about urban informality in our next lecture. However, we should remember that the Third World literature on informality is a treasure trove of conceptual work on the grassroots of the city and is thus able to expand considerably the analysis of urban politics or metropolitics.

Another point to be noted, as I was telling you is the 21st century metropolis that has been constantly restructured in the sense that its shape and size is changing in a way that as we are seeing that the margins and the peripheries are becoming centers, centers becoming frontier and regions becoming cities. It does not follow census jurisdictions of the mappings of city and suburbs. In this case, to read the extraterritorial is equally important to the understanding of the formation of power and governance and forms of accumulation and dispossession. Thus, the central argument in Roy's paper that we come to understand is how modernity can be felt everywhere in different ways.

In fact, there are multiple forms of modernities. In metropolitan theory, modernity was always located in the Euro-American city in the experiences of Vienna, London, New York, and that the cities of the Global South are the inheritors of a somewhat backward modernity, those that aspire to mimic Euro-American modernity.

But this is definitely not the case. We have seen how cities of the Global South have always been considered to be the master trope of slums and disorders. But Nuttall and Mbembe note

that lavish urbanism can be found in African cities too, just like how slum life is everywhere, including that in America.

A second argument is that there are alternative forms of modernities which are distinctive sorts of native modernities produced in different cities of the global south - the Shanghai modern, the Bengali modern, or the Cairo cosmopolitan. It is thus important for us to take seriously the emergence of the modern outside the limits of the west if we are to change the direction of theory in comprehensive urban sociological research.

One major issue in the context of urban studies is how cities are represented in urban research and in popular discourse. We identify the city of New York by the Empire State Building just as we identify Mumbai through the iconic image of the Dharavi slum. It becomes important to then think about how we can talk about the slum not through the age old dystopic and apocalyptic narratives but to the idea of subaltern urbanization which helps to identify the slum as a terrain of habitation, livelihood, self-organization and politics.

Crerar's description of Dharavi in the following passage helps us to rethink these spaces in a new light. It is very interesting. I would quote so he writes, "across a filthy, rubbish filled creek we entered the slums having residential area treating carefully to ensure we do not step in human sewage. Live wires hang from wobbly walls. We crouch through corridor like passages between houses made from reclaimed rubble as the sky disappears above our heads. Behind flimsy doorway curtains we spy babies sleeping on dirty mattress in tiny single room homes, mothers busy washing, cooking and cleaning. The few hours I spent touring Mumbai steaming Dharavi slum are uncomfortable and upsetting, teetering on voyeuristic. They are also among the most uplifting of my life.

Instead of a neighbourhood characterized by misery, I find a bustling and enterprising place packed with small-scale industries define their circumstances to flourish amidst the squalor. Rather than pity I am inspired by the man's alchemic ability to thrive when the chips are down. It is so very interesting and, in a nutshell, speaks so much about the vibrancy of social life in the southern urban spheres.

With this passage, Ananya Roy, in another of her articles, *Slumdog Cities Rethinking Subaltern Urbanization*, starts talking about how the megacity can be understood as the constitutive outside of contemporary urban studies in a 'relationship of difference' with the dominant norm of the global city.

This basically means that compared to the global city, the mega city is the 'other.' It does not fit into this category simply because megacities are not seen as the command and control points of the world economy, but the constitutive outside is not the opposite but a condition

of emergence which means the megacity renders the very category of the global city impossible, revealing the fragility of the global centers.

Why is this so? Because, think about it no global city can function without a relational dependence currently on distant economies for maybe fossil fuel or most importantly, cheap labour. The megacity thus becomes the subaltern within the urban studies. Roy's objective is to transform the ways the cities in the Global South are presented. Thus, subaltern urbanism is an important paradigm which confer recognition on spaces of poverty and forms of popular agency that often remain invisible and neglected in the domain of urban theory.

The megacity which is almost always the metonym for underdevelopment, is vaulted through the icon of the slum, which means that the slum has become the icon through which the third world city is recognized. But a shift is needed here. Borrowing from Partha Chatterjee, Ananya Roy looks at the figure of the subaltern as an agent of change, one whose very livelihood or habitation involves the violation of law. It has become in the global south a way in which the urban poor survive.

In this process, the subaltern is granted with a distinct political identity. His figure is associated with a distinct territory, in this case, that of the slum. It is also in this way that the idea of the subaltern has entered the realm of the urban studies which has led largely to the emergence of what is known as subaltern urbanism. Subaltern urbanism is important in today's day and age to shift the focus from metrocentricity to shed light on what Mcfarlane calls urban shadows or the spaces at the edge of urban theory.

Finally, we come to Seth Schindler, who, in his paper towards the paradigm of southern urbanism, talks about cities in the Global South as constituting a distinctive type of human settlement. The city is often a site of everyday struggle for many urbanities where they seek new ways to connect with the city in order to obtain drinking water, locate spaces to defecate.

In fact, uncertainty characterizes southern cities and the life worlds of many urban residents and modes and strategies for knowing the city that evolved are incongruent with the existing theoretical models. Thus, in an attempt to understand the complexities of southern urbanism, he outlines three popular tendencies of southern urbanism which he believes is fundamentally different from its northern counterparts.

He does understand that there is no cohesive global south, but these three aspects of urbanity characterize many of the southern cities today with varying combinations and manifestations. So, what are these tendencies? Southern urbanism tendency one I am talking about, southern urbanism, is characterized by a persistent disconnect between capital and labour which gives

rise to urban governance regimes geared towards the transformation of territory rather than the improvement of population, as he says in page 52 of his work.

In the west, city expansion was fuelled by the absorption of wage laborers. There was forceful removal of peasants from land they had cultivated and it was transformed into pasture. Divorced from their means of subsistence, the dispossessed had no choice but to sell their labour power for a wage. Cities like Manchester, Newcastle and Liverpool became manufacturing powerhouses where peasants arrived and gradually transitioned into an industrial worker.

Thus, the government which was originally concerned with managing and protecting territory, came to understand a country's population as the source of the state's power and wealth. Thus, the state developed very elaborate and intricate bureaucracies to act upon what Michel Foucault referred to as 'human multiplicities' in order to produce an efficient and disciplined labour force.

But in the case of the cities of the Global South, connecting capital and labour is no longer a priority for the government. Many cities in the global south have accumulated more capital and labour than at any time in their respective histories yet they remain intractably disconnected. The formal economy is unable to absorb the vast number of people in the labour market.

Sanyal in 2007 narrates how primitive accumulation in rural areas in India is alive and well. But the transformation from peasantry into proletariat is permanently suspended in many southern cities because there is no reason to produce an industrial proletariat if he is likely to remain idle. Thus, public and private capital tend to not be invested in population but in infrastructure, in real estate and this is transforming cityscapes drastically.

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Let us talk about the second tendency and elaborate a bit about it. The metabolic configurations of the southern cities are discontinuous, dynamic and contested which means and I provide an elaboration here all cities are sustained by energy and resources that are drawn from other places and whose consumption produced waste which is either absorbed by the city or transferred elsewhere.

The metabolic configuration of southern cities differs tremendously from that of the northern cities in a number of important ways. Residents of southern cities connect with metabolism in a range of ways, while a number of residents who are a minority formally connect with public utilities and services service systems with the majority access while the majority access urban

infrastructure informally. Residents of southern cities may tap electricity for municipal power poles. For example, in this way, the authorities would be forced to extend urban services in the neighbourhoods.

There is also a cross lack of data regarding basic metabolic flows of waste and water. For example, if one were to measure the metabolic flow of waste and ignore the informal waste workers, then one will not be able to meaningfully understand cities that do not conform to an imagined archetypical northern urbanity.

The last tendency, “political economy and materiality are always co-constituted in southern cities, so neither can be reduced to structure or context.” An elaboration, there has been a proliferation of scholarship on materiality of the cities of the Global South but we should take into account the materiality and political economy that is always already co-constituted.

That is, they inform each other. In fact, the human and the nonhuman are largely interconnected. For example, anywhere else it would be normal to focus on transportation, electricity or sewage systems. But in the cities of the Global South, human and non-human entities are connected in durable networks.

Let us say that if the material characteristics of waste have resulted in the investment or privatization and the introduction of new technology that can process that waste, then the growing middle classes whose consumption pattern tend to generate high volumes of waste is connected to it and hence these two elements co-constitute each other.

Ultimately, Schindler's account is one that is interesting and enriching for scholars like us who wish to study the cities of the Global South in a more systematic manner and detailed manner, understanding the connects and the disconnects within the urban system.

So, let us quickly summarize the points that we covered in today's lecture. We spoke about Jennifer Robinson, who calls for the need to decolonize urban studies. We discussed the works of Ananya Roy, who suggest that there are multiple metropolitan modernities that we must take note of if we wish to understand the 21st century metropolis.

We saw that Ananya Roy puts forward a very powerful idea on subaltern urbanism which gives recognition to spaces of poverty like the Third World slums. And finally, we discussed the ideas and tendencies provided by Seth Schindler, who points out three major tendencies of southern urbanism which makes the cities of the Global South a distinctive type of human settlement.

So, all the references that I have referred to while delivering this lecture would be sent to you. Thank you for joining this particular lecture, and we will again meet for the next lecture which is on the Indian context and informality: cities and slums.