

## **Urbanization in Comparative Perspective**

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The Carrefour supermarket in the Tijuca quarter of Rio de Janeiro is located right at the foot of the Favela Borel, one of the most violent slums of the city. Recently, the military police invaded Borel, killing four young men who, in the event, proved to be innocent. In visiting Carrefour, one would expect a significant display of security given the threat posed by its violent neighbor, both to property and life. Nothing of the sort. The supermarket is as tranquil as one could find in any wealthy suburb. Shoppers arrive and leave their cars with full confidence that they would still be there when they return.

For this tranquility, Carrefour has the drug traffickers in the hill to thank. The powerful and well-organized band that controls Borel has decreed that shoplifting or robbery in its vicinity and, especially in its well-stocked neighbor, is strictly forbidden. What happened to a few youngsters that violated the ban set an example and now no Borel resident, no matter how needy, would dream of stealing from the multinational retailer. Carrefour set up shop in Tijuca seeking to expand its market even in working-class areas of the city. The traffickers welcomed it as a mean to bring stability and amenities to “their” neighborhood, where their own women and children could walk and shop in peace.

The peculiar marriage of convenience between the French company and the Rio bandits is just one of the many paradoxes of the process of peripheral urbanization as it plays itself on the ground. As Bryan Roberts reminds us, capitalist globalization is a certainty and its impact on cities undeniable. However, the way that this influence is experienced locally depends a great deal on the class structure, the character of the state, and the specificities of national culture as molded by historical experience. The papers presented in this section provide us with a great deal of information on urbanization in three continents generally identified as “the Third World”. Those by Roberts and Graeme Hugo present a wealth of up-to-date statistical information on

global trends and on Asia and Latin America, respectively. The papers by Marcuse and Simone are more conceptual and advance a typology of urban trends (in the case of Marcuse's paper) and an examination of how "movement" in Africa actually takes place and with what consequences.

I will not repeat here the main points made in each paper, assuming that they have been read and are readily available. I will refer, however, to all four papers as I seek to supplement the materials that they present with three general considerations:

The first is that, more than ever, the city represents the *locus, vehicle, and reflection* of the dominant mode of economic organization. That dominant mode is a re-energized global capitalism that activates certain areas of the periphery as sites for export production or as markets, while it "deactivates" others deemed too poor or too unstable for profitable use. The flows of foreign direct investment (FDI), described by Roberts, can be taken as indicative of the various roles that subordinate areas of the periphery are assigned in a changing global division of labor. The city serves as a *locus* of this process since, first, much of the new export production is sited in urban areas and the rest is coordinated from them and, second, large cities are the prime markets for the new services exported from the centers. It is there that new telecommunications technologies and glittering new retailers, Carrefour being a well-known example, are located.

Urban areas are not only passive receptors, but active *vehicles* for the implementation of these novel capitalist strategies through their resources of infrastructure, communications facilities and, above all, people. The concentration of large numbers in a limited physical space can be appropriated as profit, either when these concentrations are tapped as consumers of new goods and services, or as sources of labor to fuel new forms of production. During the import substitution era in Asia and Latin America, the production and consumption functions were integrated since industrial production was primarily oriented toward the domestic market; at

present, labor is recruited for low-cost production of industrial exports. Import substitution production was highly centripetal since industries were sited in or near large cities which were also their principal markets. Export-oriented production, on the other hand, can be centrifugal to the extent that plants are located away from the largest cities in search of particular geographic advantages or cheaper sources of labor.

This is one, but not the only way, in which cities *reflect*, in their relative size and internal structure, the dominant mode of economic organization. The deceleration of urban primacy and rapid growth of secondary cities in many countries tapped for export industrial production, described by Roberts, is an example of this process at the level of national urban systems. The typology of diverse uses of urban areas in the United States and South Africa, presented by Marcuse, can be interpreted as a reflection of the dominant mode of economic organization within metropolitan areas themselves.

One of the features that has always fascinated urban specialists, in the past and at present, is the way in which economic and political phenomena are projected in space. Social arrangements for production, distribution, and appropriation are “written” in the face of cities through building patterns, the layout of streets and main roads, and the differential use of the land. Today, certain areas of peripheral cities are reserved for the control and command functions of national or even extra-national economies; others become sites for elite living and consumption, often in gated communities and exclusive shopping areas; still others are semi-abandoned and left to the poorest sectors. In Rio, citizens speak of “the favela and the asphalt” – the latter denoting regular formal housing and transportation and the former the slum settlements which signal the basic class cleavage in that city.

Clearly, cities do not reflect global capitalism as a mirror. The relationship between space and social and economic processes is not always transparent because other forces intervene. Otherwise, cities or countries assigned the same functions (or lack thereof) in the global division of labor would all be alike; in fact they are not. In my own comparative study of urbanization in the Caribbean Basin, undertaken with collaborators from five countries of the region, we were able to determine that even in such a restricted area and even between such small countries resembling each other in their basic positions in the global economy, there were wide differences in urban primacy, urban systems, and the internal development of capital cities (Portes, Dore, and Landolt 1997). The key factor was the level of competence and relative effectiveness of the national state as it sought to neutralize the worst effects of capital penetration and turn it to advantage or as it simply “went along” with what market forces dictated. San Jose, capital of Costa Rica, and Port-au-Prince, capital of Haiti, stood at opposite ends of a continuum of physical order and social integration.

Similarly, Evans’ (2001) well-known study of *Livable Cities* highlights how, even within a single country, cities can vary widely in the ways they face external threats and opportunities. Hence, not only national, but also *local* authorities can make a great deal of difference in the way cities “reflect” global economic trends. Many peripheral cities resemble each other out of their common roles (or lack thereof) in the capitalist division of labor. Many others are different, however, because of the powerful effects of intervening factors. Such variations are not endless and stand in need of a compelling typology that highlights the major existing variants.

The second point that I wish to emphasize is that urbanization is not a process that occurs *in* a society, but is *of* that society as a whole. “Urban” and “rural” are not really separate parts of social reality which can be studied in isolation, not even zero-sum entities with one shriveling as

the other expands. They are instead integral parts of one and the same process, intertwined in multiple ways. Thus in countries undergoing urbanization, both the city and the countryside “urbanize” socially, economically, and culturally. Life in the village is no longer the same when a substantial number of its young people have migrated and when the remittances they send transform local customs and practices. Such remittances are not only economic, but also cultural infusing new visions, aspirations, and ways of viewing the world in remote areas (Levitt 2001). Not to be outdone, the countryside also affects urban life as the manual skills brought by rural migrants are put to use in the daily struggle for urban survival. In this manner an “informal economy of subsistence” based on the self-construction of housing and the raising or importing from home villages of animals and foodstuffs emerges giving to peripheral cities the distinct character noted by Roberts in his *Cities of Peasants* (1978).

Graeme Hugo’s analysis of the growth of Djakarta and its impact on the Javanese hinterland provide an exemplary tale of how the entire country, not just its capital city, is affected by urbanization. This dynamic explains why not only the urban poor, but the rural poor are well-informed about employment opportunities in urban areas and abroad, move there to take advantage of such opportunities on short notice, and participate in the culture of modern consumption, through second-hand items and imitations of brand products when necessary (Landolt 2001; Lozano 1997; Itzigsohn *et. al.* 1999).

My final point pertains to popular participation in the construction of cities and the nations where they are located. It would seem commonplace to assert that “people make towns” and that they continuously mold their environment, but too often the focus on global economic structures, demographic trends, investment patterns, and the strategies of powerful institutions obscures human agency. The “people on the move” that Simone vividly describes in the African

case are not simply responding to external forces, but are also inventing and re-inventing their environment in ways that interact with the strategies and dictates from above, leading to unexpected consequences.

For this reason, it is necessary to study the city “from below” as well as “from above” since the absence of a ground-level perspective and the lack of information as to what is taking place at that level leads to impoverished descriptions and frequently erroneous conclusions. Despite the “maturing of Third World cities” to which Roberts refers, implying, in part, the closure of earlier popular opportunities and options, I am optimistic that new ones will be found. Urban scholars have been consistently surprised by the ingenuity displayed by popular groups in adapting to difficult circumstances and actively molding their environment (Roberts 1989; Eckstein 2001; Grimson 2003). Things are no different today.

For the same reason, I am skeptical of claims by post-modernist authors such as Jean Baudrillard, that a “Fourth World” of communities, cities, and entire nations is being made redundant by globalization and is being “deactivated”. That may be the logic of the capitalist system, but is not the reality on the ground since people find multiple ways to stay connected. If orthodox means do not suffice, unorthodox ones will be identified, including those labeled illegal by the authorities. Thus, in the most remote “misery villages” of Greater Buenos Aires, one finds radios and TV sets to stay tuned with what happens in the world, animated debates in local soup kitchens (“comedores populares”) about national and global affairs, and stores selling pirated CDs and imitation-brand sports wear. Much as Third World peoples may be deemed non-productive or economically unimportant, they refuse to roll over and die. They move around, migrate, find unexpected economic niches, and ways to stay otherwise “connected”.

Patterns of internal and international migration and the composition and character of cities to which they are directed reflect these efforts.

This is also, in part, the story of Carrefour and the bandits of Favela Borel. Seen “from above” it is just another tale of a multinational displacing local merchants, diffusing imported and expensive tastes, and profiting handsomely in the bargain. Seen “from the ground”, however, the situation is far more complex and much more negotiated. The traffickers who govern the favela have redefined their neighbor as a source of employment for locals, convenient consumption, and periodic “contributions” to community initiatives. While illegal in this case, the interaction reflects the manifold ways in which “urbanization from below” affects, re-molds, and even derails that dictated by the up-down logic of globalization.