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Dislocating the Urban Subject

"I saw innumerable hosts, foredoomed to darkness, dirt, pestilence, obscenity, misery and early death."

Dickens, 'A December Vision', 1850, (quoted from Davis, 8)

From Dickens' accounts of 19th century London, to Mike Davis' apocalyptic depictions of today's developing cities, rapidly urbanizing cities have been a source of great anxiety throughout history. Instances of rapid urbanization since the industrial revolution have been met by urgent efforts to counter the perceived disorder, danger, and chaos of the city. These counter projects are generally of one of two types (or a hybrid of the two): anti-urban utopian visions for escaping the city; and attempts to rationalize, control, or beautify the city.

Anti-urban, agrarian fantasy has a long intellectual history from Thomas Jefferson's vision for the young United States, to William Morris' Arts and Crafts visions as represented in his utopian novel *News From Nowhere*. Such instincts found form in urban design and planning schemes from Ebenezer Howard's *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* to the Disurbanists' 1929 post-urban proposals for abandoning Moscow and shifting to linear settlements along major infrastructural corridors. (Post and Oswald) Socialist governments around the globe have undertaken deurbanization programs in pursuit of the Marxist ideal of "gradual abolition of the distinction between town and country, by a more equitable distribution of the population over the country." (Marx)

Attempts to rationalize chaotic urban landscapes likewise have a history of theorization and design that reaches through generations of urbanization processes. From Haussman's monuments and monumental incisions in Paris, to the City Beautiful tradition born in 19th century America, to Robert Moses' grand visions for the urban renewal of New York City, generations of designers and municipal governments have sought to clarify, beautify, and rationalize the city. The slum clearance programs undertaken in rapidly urbanizing cities around the world share much with these traditions that tends to view the city as a physical and aesthetic object to be perfected.

Both of these responses to rapid urbanization often rely on the displacement of massive numbers of urban residents. In this paper, I will examine two distinct modes of mass movement of people out of and within developing cities by governments: the socialist projects of deurbanization via population redistribution undertaken in Vietnam in the years following the Vietnam War and slum clearance programs in Delhi and elsewhere.

While these two types of urban population movement differ substantially in the scale (distance) of movement and in the positioning of the displaced population relative to the governments responsible for their movement, the rhetoric surrounding both are strongly shaped by considerations of environment/health, morality, and security. In each case, this rhetoric is marshaled by the governing authority in order to define identities and

citizenship rights in forms that justify mass unsettling in the service of larger projects to make or remake national or municipal identities.

Deurbanization and Health

In the years following the end of the Vietnam War, the government of the newly unified Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) undertook an ambitious effort to reconstitute the newly unified nation according to the leveling ambitions as set forth by Marx in the Communist Manifesto. In seeking to breakdown the urban-rural divide, which had become especially pronounced between the rural north and the relatively highly urbanized south, the government set out the ambitious goal of redeploying some 20% of the population between 1976 and 2000.(Desbarats, 50) While the resettlement efforts did not live up to these ambitious goals, millions of Vietnamese citizens were moved, primarily from urban areas to rural districts.

The deurbanization program undertaken by Vietnam's socialist government was a state-making project first and foremost. In seeking to form a new socialist nation, the government used resettlement as a strategy to heal wartime divisions and level class divides. Where the rhetoric attached to the program alludes to health, it is primarily the health of the state or society at large that is the central concern. After years of rural-urban migration driven by insecurity and war in the hinterlands, Vietnam faced huge food shortages with the end of American food aid at the conclusion of the war.(Turley, 607) Thus, the reconstitution of the rural agricultural workforce was among the most immediate health-related motivations for the massive deurbanization of Saigon (renamed Ho Chi Minh City) and other cities in southern Vietnam.

Much of the rhetoric used in describing the deurbanization program recalls the language of disease, purgation, and health. Turley, in describing the cultural conflict between the predominantly rural leaders of the North Vietnamese administration and the urban citizens of the newly occupied south, says that they "found the urbanites decadent, parasitic, and lacking in social consciousness."(609) As a healing process, the population redistribution was intended to "help reshape the old social order through the destruction of antagonistic class forces." (Desbarats, 49)

Slum Clearance and Health

From Dickensian England to the developing cities of today, health, environment, and aesthetic judgment are often commingled in the judgment and descriptions of the urban poor. In the recent case of the clearance of 150,000 people and their dwellings from an informal settlement along the banks of the Yamuna River in Delhi, the allegedly deleterious effect of slum-dwellers on environmental and public health played a major role in the legal and public opinion battles surrounding the case. According to Bhan, the slum dwellers were "constantly accused of polluting the Yamuna River both in court and in the media." (139) These sort of claims, through which "the poor are held to be largely, actively and disproportionately responsible for threats to the environment and public health," are symptomatic of what Amita Baviskar labels "bourgeois environmentalism."(Bhan, 139) According to Baviskar, this "bourgeois environmentalism" links environmental concerns with aesthetics, public health, and civic

order concerns. The middle and upper-class residents who have brought the public interest law suits forcing these mass eviction of informal settlements in Delhi, see themselves as battling “the spectre of dirt, disease, and crime, a monster threatening the body civic.” (Baviskar, 92)

McFarlane links this “bourgeois environmentalism” with the colonial obsessions with dirt, disease, sanitation infrastructure, and miasmatic notions of public health and disease among the British colonial rulers of Bombay. McFarlane describes the linkages between environment, health, and governance in the sanitation projects of 19th century London saying,

“In allowing circulation of air, water, waste, goods, traffic, and people, infrastructures were critical to the social production of a self-governing hygienic, moral subject.” (418)

Mitchell identifies a similar linkage between redemption via hygiene and citizenship in his recounting of the displacement of the village of New Gurna as part of the state-making process in Egypt, saying,

“the performing of the nation required that every one of its rural inhabitants be declared outside the nation, uncivilized and unhygienic, so that in rendering them civilized and clean, the nation could be made.”

While the slum clearance projects being undertaken in developing cities today are similarly motivated by and explained through a linkage of hygiene and citizenship rights, these efforts are less concerned with the redemption of the “unclean” than they are in the creation or perfection of an image of a “clean and green” city. Such projects assume an irredeemably corrupted slum dweller that is “economically unviable, environmentally harmful and criminal... homogenous category inseparable from the built environments of the illegal “slums” that they inhabit.” (Bhan, 141) Given this characterization, the government’s project shifts from redeeming and reforming the slum dweller as a proper subject or citizen to the clearance or total removal of the people and their settlements.

Security and the Socialist Deurbanization Program

While the stated motivations for the Vietnamese government’s deurbanization campaigns was primarily the ideological remaking of the nation along Marxist ideals of equity, security, both internal and external, was also a critical motivating factor in the policy.

In the wake of a long and bitter war, the SRV used the deurbanization process as a tool for the promotion of internal security and stability. The government “targeted for resettlement the people who posed a threat to the revolution” in order to “[break] up potential nuclei of urban-based opposition” (Desbarats, 53, 49) In its role in the making of the new nation, the resettlement program sought to erase regional and ethnic distinctions by targeted specific ethnic groups such as the largely Sino-Vietnamese urban merchant bourgeois and tribal populations in the Central Highlands, both seen as potentially problematic counter-revolutionary forces.(50) In addition to dispersing potential enemies into the rural territories, the SRV sought to redeploy “loyal Northern ‘revolutionary’ families” so as to monitor potential insurgents in the newly constituted rural “New Economic Zones”. (49)

The deurbanization and resettlement programs were also used to redeploy population strategically so as to protect particularly vulnerable or volatile areas important for the defense of the new nation from outside attack. New settlements were established in “sensitive areas near the Cambodian, Laotian, and Chinese borders” and eventually the “New Economic Zone” strategy of resettlement spawned a program of self-sufficient “New Army Villages” established for explicitly defensive purposes. (Desbarats, 54)

Slum Clearance, Crime, Security

Just as security was an important, if largely unspoken, component of the motivation for deurbanization and population resettlement program in post-war Vietnam, concerns over social stability, crime, and order are often at the heart of the rhetoric justifying slum clearance projects. Though, according to Bienen, “migrants and squatters are not, in the short- and medium-run, highly destabilizing to the politics of the cities to which they migrate or to national level politics,” fear of crime and social disturbance are often invoked as justification for clearance projects.(666) In describing the perception of slum dwellers as “economically unviable, environmentally harmful and criminal,” Bhan recognizes the linkage made between criminality, environmental health, and capitalist market participation.(141) Similarly, Coit describes the difficulties in implementing a slum upgrading project in a Ho Chi Minh City informal settlement as arising partly from the area’s reputation for “harboring thieves, prostitutes, gamblers and drug addicts and drug dealers.” (278)

In Mitchell’s account of the forced removal of the residents of New Gurna, near Luxor, Egypt, charges of criminality were layered atop the aesthetic objection. While the complaint that the poor residents “spoiled the view” seemed to be at the heart of the effort to relocate the village, charges of criminal tomb robbing had special resonance because the act violated not only civil law, but a crucial sense of sacred history in the young nation. (202)

While the characterization of slum dwellers as criminals who are dangerous to the social order is often invoked to justify evictions, increasingly criminalization is based on the very act of existing and living in informal settlements rather than specific criminal acts or security threats. This phenomenon of criminalizing the urban poor, is discussed in greater depth the section on identity and citizenship below.

Deurbanization and State-Making

The deurbanization project undertaken by the SRV clearly fits with Mitchell’s characterization of state-making as a two-fold project composed of “nation as performance” and “nation as pedagogy”.(182) The act of resettling massive numbers of citizens can be seen as the act of performance and the reconstitution of a national myth of native rural origins can be seen as the pedagogical project of the new regime. In creating a new national identity, the SRV sought to break down existing social orders through resettlement while simultaneously calling forth a rural nativism. Beyond breaking up potential insurgent populations, the resettlement program intended a wholesale

scrambling of the social order. The SRV hoped that “geographic disorientation would accelerate the socially leveling effect of rustication.”(Desbarats, 49) Though the project was explicitly a ruralizing one, the Vietnamese population resettlement process shares many of the characteristics outlined by Holston in his description of Modernist city planning processes, which aimed to “change society and manage the social by imposing an alternative future embodied in plans.” (158) Like those processes that Holston describes, the Vietnamese deurbanization program aimed at “decontextualization, defamiliarization, and dehistoricisation” in order to “reorganize local diversity under the banner of national heritage.” (160, 169)

Much as Mitchell describes the architectural efforts of Hassan Fathy in the service of the young Egyptian state seeking to create a national mythology of rural origins, the SRV deurbanization efforts were presented as an opportunity for Vietnamese recreate a mythical rural past in “Return[ing] to the Villages.” (Desbarats, 51) During a “special conference on repatriation” held 1976, Saigon’s Military Management Committee stated the need to “intensify propaganda aimed at enlightening compatriots and to step up arrangements to help them to return to their native lands more quickly and by more satisfactory means.” (Turley, 617) Going beyond straightforward repatriation the program sought to recruit “urbanites for new rural lives” by “encouraging and helping small merchants, who [were then] concentrated in large numbers in the urban areas,... to return to their native places... or to go and take part in building the new economic areas.” (618) Thus the deurbanization process was intended to both build a new myth of rural Vietnamese origins and destroy the old social order via a radical disorientation process.

Identity, Citizenship, and Slum Clearance

As in the socialist depopulation campaigns in south Vietnam, the slum clearance efforts undertaken in rapidly urbanizing cities around the world are sharply tinged by issues of nativism, citizenship rights, and identity. At every level, from the municipal, to the national, to the global, the formation and manipulation of identity and image is often critical to the motives and rhetoric surrounding a government’s slum clearance actions.

Social Exclusion

Where the Vietnamese transition to socialism employed massive geographic displacement as a mechanism to erase ethnic, economic, and social difference, the transition from the developmental state to the state as enabler of neo-liberal market forces that has taken place in many developing countries in recent decades requires an accentuation of difference rather than a leveling. While the deurbanization programs in South Vietnam sought to create a new “big tent” national identity to subsume existing social structures in their nation-building efforts, slum clearance efforts like those undertaken in Delhi and elsewhere often highlight the outsider status of the slum dwellers so as to more easily usurp their citizenship rights and justify their removal. According to Baviskar, “perceiving the poor as migrants and as newly arrived interlopers on [Delhi’s] urban scene is a strategy to disenfranchise them from civic citizenship.”(96) Bhan points to the very designation of slum dwellers and slums as an act of “aestheticization of the poor,” whereby the poor are linked inextricably with the physical structures in which they

live and flattened into an easily consumable and easily erasable image.(139) Thus, not only are the poor from a different place, but they are of a wholly different species or variety of matter, one that is imbued with all of the “shades of criminality... lack of entrepreneurialism... and lack of hygiene” that we have explored in the above sections.(140) By so distinguishing the residents of informal settlements, a governing authority’s actions in evicting them is seen not as “the destruction of individual’s lives and livelihoods, but simply the erasure of an image of slum, emptied of the people who live within it.” (140)

Produced Informality

While the recent Delhi court cases have sought to make starker distinctions between those who do and do not have citizenship rights in the city, there has conventionally been a complexly layered system for the classification and certification of settlement areas in Delhi as in many other cities. This complex and constantly re-negotiated suite of rights, vulnerabilities, and obligations created perfect conditions for the operation of what Tilly describes as the state as “organized crime” or “racketeer” wherein the state “produces both the danger” in the form of the threat of eviction “and, at a price, the shield against it” in the form of official or unofficial protection offered by “political entrepreneurs”.(Tilly, 171; Bavaskar, 91) The ambiguities and haziness of the system created an informality that was “produced by the state itself” in order to deliberately suspend formal norms for political gain and social control.(Bhan, 133)

Neoliberal Citizenship

As many states in developing countries have, in recent decades, undergone a shift from “the nationalist development state” to “neoliberal ideologies of self-government and market participation,” the basic notions of what constitutes legitimate claims to citizenship rights in the city have shifted.(Bhan, 128) Labeling the poor as migrants, encroachers, and criminals is part of a process of “erosion of the claim of the poor to be legitimate urban citizens” in the neo-liberal city.(140) In recasting the state as primarily an enabler of benevolent market growth, the neoliberal transition pushes the city towards a future where “subjects [are] merely customers, clients, and consumer.” (Isin, 162) If, as Bhan says, this conception of the subject means that the “honest citizen” is one who can “pay for a flat,” slum dwellers are immediately outside of the bounds of this new economically-defined citizenship. (138)

While neo-liberal ideology may place market participation above traditionally state-defined citizenship rights, in most cases the state plays a critical role in this transition. According to Isin, “[i]f the city is the space of the struggle for these rights, the state still remains as the source and grantor of them.” (162) In the case of the slum clearance in Delhi, the state, as represented by the Delhi High Courts, was instrumental in articulating the shift in rights when they stated that “when you are occupying illegal land, you have no legal right... to stay there a minute longer.”(135) With such a proclamation, the courts affirmed what Harvey identifies as a backward logic of what are now seen as “fundamental rights (of private property and the profit rate)” and “derivative rights (like the right to be treated with dignity).” (The Right to the City, 941)

While the transition to neoliberal governance has shifted to a state-enforced conception of citizenship rights as based on an ability to participate in capitalist markets, Holston suggests that people living in informal settlements are, by their very presence and their demand for recognition and services, asserting an “insurgent citizenship” that challenges the notion that “the state is the only legitimate source of citizenship rights, meanings, and practices.”(157) As such, slum clearance programs like those carried out in cities around the world, like Vietnam’s deurbanization program, can be seen as a tool of counter-insurgency and social control.

Staging the World City

The shift towards neoliberal ideology in state and local governance has also produced a well documented theorized shift towards greater entrepreneurialism at the scale of municipal government.(From Managerialism, Xu and Yeh) As global capital has become more and more mobile, cities scramble ever more furiously to position themselves to attract investment. In addition to major infrastructure investment and the creation of a “business friendly environment,” cities around the world have undergone massive makeovers in order to reposition their image in pursuit of status as “global cities,” “world cities,” or “world-class cities.” (Xu and Yeh, 288)

If, as Blockmans says, the city acts as “the material expression” of the ideals of the ruling class, then slum clearance can be seen as a critical aspect of the “staging” of the transformation to liberal market economics in the ruling classes of the city aspiring to “world-class city” status.(14) Aspirations to world-class status are often explicit or implicit motives for slum clearance and other efforts at “cleaning up the city”. (Bhan, 135) In her analysis of a slum upgrading project in Ho Chi Minh City, Coit identifies the aspiration to “[transform] their city into another Hong Kong or Singapore” among the city’s governing “Peoples’ Committee” as critical to their preference for slum clearance over *in situ* upgrading. (280)

Particularly, in the case of primate cities and national capitals like Delhi, the zeal with which slum clearance is undertaken can be doubly charged by a desire to present the city both as a “world-class city” in its own right and as a proud exemplar of the nation’s development, sophistication, and prestige.(Bhan, 140) As Baviskar says, “Delhi *matters* because very important people live and visit there; its image reflects the image of the nation-state.”(90) As such, sprawling informal settlements are in direct opposition to the aspiration of the intensively planned city to act as “model city, prosperous, hygienic, and orderly.”(91)

Conclusion

The displacement of masses of people, whether motivated by anti-urban ideology or by a desire to control and order urban space, is among the most disruptive forms of action that states take against the governed. In both the case of the post-war deurbanization of Vietnamese cities and the widespread slum clearance operations enacted in Delhi and other cities throughout the developing world, these displacements can be seen as efforts to “constitute governable subjects.” (Cornwall, 80) The SRV Vietnamese government used deurbanization to invent a new native rural mythology in keeping with Marxist

ideals and to strategically scramble social relationships deemed potentially threatening to the newly unified state. The Delhi High Courts, in their rulings calling for the eviction of informal settlements sought to redefine urban citizenship in order to “cleanse” the city of people and settlement patterns deemed incompatible with aspirations of the city and the nation. In both cases, rhetoric of health and security were essential in defining new regimes of citizenship and identity that justify the displacement actions.

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