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City Life from Jakarta to Dakar

Movements at the Crossroads



ABDOUMALIQ SIMONE

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City Life from Jakarta to Dakar

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AbdouMaliq Simone is an urbanist and Professor of Sociology at Goldsmiths College, University of London. Since 1977 he has had many jobs in different cities across Africa and Southeast Asia, in the fields of education, housing, social welfare, urban development, and local government. His best known publications are *In Whose Image: Political Islam and Urban Practices in the Sudan*, and *For the City Yet to Come: Urban Change in Four African Cities*.

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ABDOUMALIQ SIMONE

Goldsmiths College,
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Contents

| | | |
|--|--------------------------|------------|
| | List of Illustrations | vii |
| | Series Editor's Foreword | ix |
| | Preface | xiii |
| | Acknowledgments | xv |
| On Cityness | One | 1 |
| Towards an Anticipatory Urban Politics: Notes from the North of Jakarta | Two | 61 |
| Intersections: What Can Urban Residents Do with Each Other? | Three | 117 |
| Circulations: Finance as a Model of City Making | Four | 161 |
| Back to Intersection and Recharging the City | Five | 191 |
| Reclaiming Black Urbanism: Inventive Methods for Engaging Urban Fields from Dakar to Jakarta | Six | 263 |
| | Endnotes | 335 |
| | References | 357 |
| | Index | 377 |

List of Illustrations

| | |
|---|-----|
| Map 1 Regions from Jakarta to Dakar | xvi |
| Map 2 Jakarta Utara (North Jakarta Districts) | 64 |
| Map 3 Jakarta in Indonesia | 68 |
| Map 4 Central Kinshasa | 122 |
| Map 5 Abidjan | 200 |
| Map 6 Khayelitsha in Cape Town | 226 |
| Map 7 Inner City Johannesburg | 238 |
| Map 8 Central Bangkok | 271 |
| Map 9 Central Douala | 309 |

Series Editor's Foreword: From the City to Cityness

For a good bit of human history, people spoke of *the City*. They often meant a specific city or large town, like Rome, Mecca, Jerusalem, Constantinople, or Paris. But when they did, the city thus held in mind was imbued with a cosmic meaning—Rome, the eternal city; Paris, the city of lights. The practice of taking a local place of a certain demographic proportion as the center of a global reality continued down into the late modern era. Thus, in the social sciences in the century or more from the 1890s on there was a field called urban studies, the subject of which more often than not was *the City*—as in the city as megalopolis or, more recently, the global city. Even the general idea of urbanization was for the longest while understood as an unrelenting kind of uniform, global process that ate up the rural past and its allegedly less modern locales. The early twentieth century tradition of urban studies as an ecology of urban populations is a notable but by no means singular example.

In our time, still early in the 2000s, the practice of thinking of cities as more than their geographically local limits has begun to fall away. To be sure, there are still urbanists who specialize in the city and poverty or the urban neighborhood or the gated enclave—as if these particulars of late modern city life were vectors of growth and decay that spread across the earth wherever populations gathered in very large numbers to

live or struggle. Yet, as happens from time to time, the received scientific and practical wisdom of professional urbanists is challenged in ways so empirically commanding that one by one people who care about city life begin to see and feel and think anew.

AbdouMaliq Simone, perhaps more than any I know, has been just that kind of urbanist—one, that is, who breaks the mold of traditional thought by the utterly straightforward method of visiting real cities and visiting with a particular vigilance for cities of the global South that are least convenient to the thinking of a city as an instance of the City. I can remember the first time I read Simone's work. It was an earlier essay on invisibility in four African cities that I would never have come across had a brilliant student of mine not found it somewhere in a remote corner of the internet. That relatively short text changed everything I had been thinking about globalization and the so-called global city. There and in *City Life from Jakarta to Dakar*, as in other writings that have established him as one of the world's most original observers of city life, Simone brilliantly captures the contradictions and absurdities of city life that we who live in cities recognize without realizing what they mean.

Thus it is that the subject of *City Life from Jakarta to Dakar* is not the City, but cityness, which is to say a much more global phenomenon and one intractably local and irregular. For Simone, cityness captures those elements of city life that cannot be captured, least of all by the organizing categories of modern social science. Cityness is about surprises—contradictions that are the source of human enterprise, absurdly illegal activities about which the most ordinary people possess the finest detailed knowledge, the visibility below surface appearances of, yes, terrible human misery but also of people working

together in order to live. What Simone sees is the startling possibility that in the most peripheral regions of city life, where there is neither clean water nor sewage, it is the people themselves who are the infrastructure. This one insistence, among the many that sneak up on the reader in this book, turns the table on urban studies—infrastructure is human not material, people not pipes matter most, and city life—the lived reality—replaces the City. Cityness is about local living, not abstract planned cities.

Simone does not, however, write as jet ethnographer, a phrase Pierre Bourdieu once used. Over many years he has lived in and studied the cities of the world, most poignantly those of the impoverished Southern tier. The experiences of a trained observer when put to the page pull the reader, often against her will, into the worlds of cityness that play out in far corners most would never visit. Yet, without a lot of arm waving, Simone is also deploying the most current of theoretical ideas—none more compellingly than that of the global realities as a series of rhizomatically joined assemblages. From Gilles Deleuze to Manuel Delanda and others influenced by them many have tried to reckon with this puzzling notion that in our time life moves constantly, unpredictably without organizing tap roots. Worlds are assembled by inscrutable forces. People live in them on the move against all odds; and the poor who must live in the margins are, as Simone seems to say, those who are the better, not less, able to make them work.

As so many have helped us see—Giorgio Agamben chief among them—it is life itself that is at stake in the new global assemblages. And what Simone does is to move the more philosophical ideas of assemblage and naked life into the language and experience of city life and toward the cityness in

which all of us are sooner or later caught. There is to my mind no better guide book to cityness and its consequences than *City Life from Jakarta to Dakar*.

Charles Lemert
New Haven, CT
June 20, 2009

Preface

This is a time of cities. More precisely, cities have preoccupied people from many walks of life for a long time. But particularly now, there is a sense that cities have attained new capacities and challenges that require multiple ways of talking about and engaging them that do not always seem to easily fit together. After all, to live in one city today means living in many, as any individual city folds in and stretches itself across urban experiences, information, and economies throughout the world.

So the realities of Lagos, Jakarta, São Paulo, or Cairo—to name just a few of the largest cities of the so-called Global South—are not distant from the critical events and processes that affect the lives of urban residents in other parts of the world. The histories of settlement and administration, as well as the mechanisms and practices at work in shaping the everyday experiences of residents, may be different from those in New York, Omaha, or Leipzig—as individual cities everywhere have their singular dynamics, and cities of the South their own problematic and long-term connections with Europe and North America, as well as with each other. But these differences are not simply matters of various development stages or technological progress. They don't simply tell us about essential ingredients that cities either possess or lack.

Rather, these differences broaden our understandings about

what cities are and could be. They point to cities—not as outgrowths of specific histories, nor as organic or technical systems available to new levels of adaptation or change—but as places and occasions for experimentation, for seeing what happens when bodies, materials, and affect intersect, and the various ways of living that can proceed from that intersection.

So this is not a book that simply wants to include cities from Jakarta to Dakar—across Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Africa—to the normal curriculum on urban studies. Rather, by focusing on these cities, and particularly on the ways in which residents themselves try and make urban lives, the intention of the book is to help change what we think it is possible to do in whatever city we may find ourselves.

At times the book emphasizes the experiences of cities that on the surface would seem very far removed from conventional understandings about what works and is the norm. At other times, it concentrates on the very particular everyday tactics through which residents decide where to locate themselves, how to spend limited resources, who to talk to or affiliate with. These specificities are not intended to convey an otherwise invisible dimension to cities or to point out that our usual sense of what a city needs may not always be the case. Rather, delving into the economies, social relationships, and everyday practices of large and often messy cities of the South is meant to emphasize what all urban residents everywhere must often do or at least consider in order to put together their lives in the city. Sometimes, only by looking elsewhere can a person recognize important aspects of their own life. Thus, the “destination” of this book is not for specialist studies of specific regions or development problems. Rather, it hopes to be a tool-box of ideas, stories, and points of view applicable to making urban conditions everywhere a little more creative and just.

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Map 1

Regions from Jakarta to Dakar



On Cityness

One

If you think of your life in the city, how many streets have you never gone down, how many elevators have you never taken up, how many beds have you never slept in, bars never pulled up to, fashion trends not gotten behind? If you think of your life in the city, how many times have you wanted to follow someone into a new life, how many arms have you imagined grabbing you from behind and pushing you into new versions of yourself? How many times have you just missed a bus where there was an empty seat next to a friend or partner you wouldn't be finding ways to get rid of? How much do you know about where the water that you use to wash off a bad dream comes from, or how the light at the end of the tunnel will be replaced when it burns out?

Why do I ask these questions? We all know that cities can often be overwhelming places, and that we need a determined attitude and clear focus in order to navigate their complexity. We know that maintaining even the semblance of a functional life in cities requires efforts to make them familiar and manageable. This requires particular ways of paying attention to what is going on and decisions as to what it is important to take seriously, as well as what things and events have something to do with our lives. Routines and structures exist to facilitate familiarity and predictability. The coding of cities with their various designations of names, districts, functions, and zones; transport infrastructures which shape predominant

ways of circulating through urban space; and the distribution of services and facilities that link together the provision of specific consumption needs—all are a means of structuring our urban experience.

But this is going to be a book about movement—the movement in cities and between cities. It is about people taking sudden turns into new realities even when they are accustomed to often mundane and repetitive details of making ends meet. It is a book about things darting back and forth, of events moving in and out the shadows. It is the motion of work, of how urban works gets done. In this regard it doesn't so much emphasize structures and policies as it does the processes where urban residents try to actively figure things out, take chances, hedge bets, and make small experimentations. It is about all of the calculations, intuitions, and speculations that go into trying to keep heads above water. The cities dealt with in this book are particularly salient contexts for these kinds of explorations since urban life in them largely relies upon wits, psychological maneuvers, small escapades, and impulse. Importantly, the very process of making things stable doesn't entail following a set of rules, formulas or best practices. Rather, it entails shaking things up, playing in larger arenas, and paying attention to new territories and people.

The book tries to embody these dimensions by moving within and between districts and cities. The book is not about a city or a set of cities in particular, but rather uses different cities to emphasize the various intricacies of everyday urban life, the challenges that residents face on a daily level, the scope of their accomplishments, and the usually ambivalent results they produce for themselves by being able to use the city in many different ways. Often the very ways they get out of trouble put them into trouble of a different kind. And they have to start figuring things out once again—sometimes alone

and sometimes with various combinations of known and unknown people. The book is also about anticipation, about how residents try to stay one step ahead of the game. Residents have to operate in often ambiguous spaces and times; it is not always clear what outcomes their actions will produce and they have to live with this ambiguity. The book attempts to talk about what this experience is like and what kinds of individual and collective behaviors ensue.

Above all, the book attempts to talk about various aspects of cityness. The demands of putting together livelihoods, managing domestic spaces, and demonstrating accountability to key institutions and personal networks all limit the ways in which we engage cities. Yet these opening questions point to what is the simultaneous promise, threat, and resource of cityness—i.e. the city's capacity to provoke relations of all kinds. Cityness refers to the city as a thing in the making. No matter how hard analysts and policymakers might try, practices of inhabiting the city are so diverse and change so quickly that they cannot easily be channeled into clearly defined uses of space and resources or patterns of social interchange.¹ In other words, at the heart of city life is the capacity for its different people, spaces, activities, and things to interact in ways that exceed any attempt to regulate them. While the absence of regulation is commonly seen as a bad thing, one must first start with the understanding that no form of regulation can keep the city “in line.”

In a neighborhood such as Oju-Elegba in Lagos, the day's commerce gives way to the night and a different kind of operation, even if what is bought and sold during the night is largely what is bought and sold in the day. But a new “regime” of authority seems to kick in. For while the local government, trade associations, police, security companies, and sanitation crews are still officially in charge of their domains of activity,

still in charge of maintaining order, much of what really takes place is ceded to a new format where the rules may still be the rules but are now, for these hours, slightly qualified. Exceptions are made as to what activities will now be interdicted, or how certain spaces are to be used. Not that any of such rules are really operative to the letter during the day. But for the night, things are allowed to happen with an enhanced visibility. Residents that otherwise would not been seen dealing with each other during the day are busy having much to do with each other in the night.

Deep into the night at 3 a.m., the assemblage of discrepant activities seems to pile up on each other given their proximity. Small stalls sell huge marijuana cigarettes next to those that sell votive candles, and then there are sales of rice, cigarettes, laundry soap, and batteries throughout the night, as well as cooked meals, many stalls specializing in various regional cuisines. Pharmaceuticals, charms, and local medicines are hawked both by ambulatory sellers and various forms of make-shift stalls. Set back further along the streets are stores whose histories have known hundreds of functions and whose identities even now fluctuate according to the time of day. At this hour, hardware stores become outcall services for sex workers delivered to almost any location in the surrounding vicinity; a small business center takes calls and sends out a fleet of young repairmen on motorcycles for various domestic emergencies such as broken water pipes or shorts in overtaxed electricity distributors that often occur when too many households try to connect to a branch line. Schools that teach computer classes during the day host all night prayer meetings next to bars and small discos, next to a small law office which at this hour serves as a kind of floating “design workshop,” where a local politician holds court soliciting ideas, plans, drawings, and models for new housing developments, roadways, drainage

systems, and a host of small improvements on every aspect of life in the area.

Local patrons take turns holding all night dispute resolution meetings for various neighborhood and domestic conflicts; a small storefront church rents out its facilities for local bands to rehearse; and there are the constant operations of local bakeries, furniture fabrication, and car repair. While theft and the illicit always work their way into the scene, a strong sense of security is maintained. Eyes are always trained on what is happening; local youth are tightly organized into both mobile and stationary patrols. Anything out of the ordinary or any prospective threat is immediately cut off, and there are tight chains of command. In part, this is both to keep thieves and conmen at bay, but also to make sure that the hundreds of different kinds of activities taking place all have their space, and to ensure a fluid transition between the night and the day—as spaces have to be turned over to their respective owners and functions. Yet, all these different things happen side by side. Even when each turns a kind of blind eye to the contradictions or discrepancies that are produced, these activities still find themselves “happening upon” the other, and they are aware of the larger “neighborhood” in which they are able to exist. Every activity has to know something about the other and to find ways of acknowledging their mutual existence in order for them to take their space, to find a consistent means of operating night after night.

In a fundamental way, this cityness has become and always has been largely peripheral to city life. That is, the very dimension that characterizes the city—its capacities to continuously reshape the ways in which people, places, materials, ideas, and affect are intersected—is often the very thing that is left out of the larger analytical picture. Rather, cityness is something that we are to know implicitly and take for granted. It is to be the

common sense of our urban experience, and as such, we can easily move on to consider the wide range of issues concerning what kinds of relationships are most important and what conditions sustain or break them. We can move on to the vast problems of segregation, inequality, security, escalating, or declining land values and jobs, changes in the quality of life, the costs and quality of essential services. We can then pay attention to how best to calibrate relations among people, places, institutions, responsibilities, economic activities, and social functions through more proficient forms and practices of urban governance. These calibrations are structured according to law, policy, and specific ideas about norms, efficiency, and justice. But they are also subject to relations of power. Here, specific individuals and institutions use the uncertainties incumbent in urban life and the need of most residents to have a sense of order as occasions to accumulate the material and symbolic resources that are used to exercise authority over how relations get made.

As cities historically have been rough and tumble places, where some people can acquire a great deal of money and live in increasingly spectacular conditions while others barely scrape by, the diversity of the city can easily foster highly competitive relationships. There is competition over how land is to be used, competition over who can do what kinds of activities in a particular place, competition to make one's voice heard, competition over a set number of jobs and opportunities. While competition has rules, the city—with its plurality of relational possibilities, deal-making, loyalties, and affiliations—enables competition to be often vociferous and cutthroat. As such, the city has been seen as something that needs to be tamed and kept in line.

HOW DOES CITYNESS RELATE TO EFFORTS MADE TO KEEP THE CITY IN LINE?

Urban development attempts to resolutely settle the question of how things within the city get articulated once and for all. This has been an effort to sum up the ways in which built, social, political, and ecological environments will be connected—a process now often reflected in the emphasis on public–private partnership, and urban governance as a blending of various sectors, actors, positions, and institutions. This attempt at summing up, of synthesizing and maximizing the synergies that can be attained through holding resources, people, and places in continuously re-stabilized relationships—concretely framed through infrastructure—is itself the result of many small gestures, maneuvers, and innovations. Yet, because this objective and its subsequent results do not often effectively engage local histories in recognizable ways, such trajectories of urban development face a particular conundrum.

The conundrum is this: Buildings, layouts, provisioning systems, and organizations try to hold together and stabilize relationships between materials, environments, bodies, and institutions. Urban infrastructure attempts to bring these elements into circuits of association that constitute both bodies and territories in ways that must be continuously calibrated and readjusted. But any collective is a collection. As a collection, each component has to deal with the others, but they also have a life outside the collection, something that came before and that is ongoing. So when technology, people, things, and space operate as a collection, this process has various implications for the different networks in which each of these elements is individually situated. Water, power, people, effort, and materials that are collected in order to attain a kind of optimal functioning are drawn from many other places. Any collection of these things in one place inevitably has an

impact on the places from which they were drawn. And they act back.

As a result things and people come and go, intensify and withdraw their engagements, and, in the end, every arrangement is temporary. Connections break down, and collections generate unanticipated outcomes, penetrate across territories and situations for which they are unprepared. Because certain collections aim to build more monumental, inclusive, efficient, all-encompassing, and far-reaching operations, they also bring together larger numbers of heterogeneous elements, processes, and histories into their ambit. Instead of proficiently coordinating these different compositional elements into a regular and thus predictable pattern of interaction, the very power of these operations destabilizes the relationships the collected elements have with other environments and networks. Rather than conveying stability, these major urban developments impart a sense of their own temporariness and insufficiency.

For all the efforts made to ensure order, accountability, and the transparency of how things work and decisions get made, cityness continues to haunt the city. This is because in the same place and time, another set of conditions, another way of doing things, and another reality have always already been possible—and in an important way, were always already in place. It is precisely this virtual presence of cityness in each and every major and mundane action undertaken to structure urban life that is made peripheral—even if the viability of urban economies, governance, and innovation needs that cityness as an essential resource.

Thus, in cities there are two senses of time in operation. In other words a city is full of memories about what has taken place in the past, and those memories also include a certain amount of imagination—of hopes and dreams that the city

could have been a certain kind of place, but one that never seemed to reach fruition. These imaginations have never fully gone away, as the city remains a place of dreams, present and past, of bits and pieces of ways of doing things that never really had enough time or support to fully implant themselves. Cities were and are places full of experiments, of different ways of being with people, spaces, and things. While many of these practices never really “take off” or become institutionalized, they remain in people’s memories and sensibilities. So, cityness also includes a sense that behind the present moment there is another time operating, other things taking place, unfolding, waiting, getting ready or slipping away, and that we know only a fragment of what is taking place.

We can extend this notion to other forms of “double time.” For example, in some cities that were strongly marked by a colonial history, the time of the “postcolonial” finds many of their inhabitants believing that it is impossible to make a life in the city in which they live. Conditions are too uncertain and fluid, or they are certain that they have no prospects to make a life within them. As a result, these inhabitants demonstrate a capacity, however tentative, to live anywhere, regardless of the extent to which this willingness is voluntary or involuntary. Lives are risked, everything is sacrificed in order to move; territory is claimed and has no other function but to be sacrificed in pursuit of some other place that holds out the promise of a better life. At the same, but in a different time, there is the persistence of colonialism, but now as something which comes to characterize the conditions in most any city. For example, the spatial segmentation and highly particularized interests and ways of doing things that seemingly cannot be integrated, and which once characterized life in the colonial city, are true of cities everywhere.

In Europe particularly, urban space is hollowed out and

dislocated in such a way as to take apart the physical environments through which different kinds of people might come to know each other. Still, there remain prolific in-between spaces. More precisely, seemingly marginal, wasted, or carceral spaces become something more in-between, always pushing, always under threat. But they still act as a platform for a non-territorially fixed sense of being in place that short-circuits the efforts of governments to make certain urban residents always feel “out of place.” In the suburbs, inner cities, *banlieues*, peripheries, and estates, people’s lives are clearly constrained and their movements and life possibilities circumscribed. Yet, people pour in and pour out of these places, mix it up in fights, cooperation, generosity, and toughness. Money is moved, things fall off the truck, and conference calls are made between Lagos, Bangkok, Shenzhen, and São Paulo on battered folding chairs in the back room of some instant coffee café. Even as the interweaving of diasporas and localities takes place with complex forms of calculation and anticipation, neighborhoods are flooded with people who try to make sure that they are taken for something they are not, as well as by a desire for anonymity.

Of course neighborhoods are also full of traumas experienced elsewhere. People are trying to get away from wars, family dramas, persecution, and hopelessness. These traumas make places volatile. Thus, it becomes difficult for residents to really locate themselves, particularly in face of all the different policing, social work, educational, and welfare agencies that are either omnipresent or nowhere to be found. As a result, many residents remain silent, and their anonymity is often enforced. As the French urban activist Gustave Massiah put it, the poor and the strange must never stop proving their innocence. Still, more residents and more spaces of the city are staying out of representation, are demonstrating a flexibility to

be linked to any scheme, any agenda, anywhere else. After all, the colonial world was full of various diasporic, cosmopolitan subalterns pursuing various tricks of the trade to go from here to there—and the world's cities are generating new versions of these mobile subalterns all the time.

As Rose and Osborne point out, while the city was always an unstable domain requiring constant intervention, it needed, at the same time, a spontaneous, undetermined, and unfixed character. In fact, the ability to govern the city would emerge out of its fluidity. To govern was not to immobilize the city's energies but to harness them in the interest of each and all. For an ongoing process of generating and then re-connecting various forms of life, relations of space and time, and different actors was both the motivation for government and the source of its power.² So no matter how proficient urban management systems may be, this desire to "fix" things, to make precise identifications of space, problems, or populations, becomes increasingly difficult. Events can be positioned in so many ways at such great speeds as to make any consensus on what events mean impossible.³ Bodies, as message-bearing systems, must rush to accelerate their "circulatory migration" through proliferating networks of communication and exchange, always displaced in order to maintain place.

Urban spaces are also lived in ways that disrupt hegemonic mappings. For the seemingly coherent landscape of the city is only possible when unruly eruptions, interference, and murkiness are negated or erased. With this erasure, whatever appears coherent about the city is fundamentally tenuous and uneasy. For the extent to which "urban development" is able to conceal the sheer fact that something is being erased is never certain. The extent to which those who govern cities can cover up the specific hopes embedded in the ways of doing things that end up being erased or pushed aside is never certain.

Concerted efforts have been made to govern the city through zoning, cadastre, property, and administration. Yet, these efforts do not completely erase the unruly yet dynamic intersections among differences of all kinds to which the city offers both a setting and a cause. The choreographed coherence of the city wanes at the very point at which the attempted control of space and bodies weakens this dynamism. It wanes as the capacity of residents to navigate the unruly spaces and realities of the city are diminished and then inevitably remain weakly implicated in every system of governance. Ash Amin talks about the frontiers that proliferate across the city and whose effective use and navigation require the suspension of familiar cultural assumptions and social strategies. The real articulations among different facets of urban life then take place in the very crossing of these frontiers in what he calls “banal transgression.”⁴

Even efforts to use every aspect of the urban environment in order to observe, calculate, and order the behavior of urban residents—through smart buildings, CCTV cameras, traffic systems, 3G cellular technologies, GPS, and other locational systems—are limited in terms of how comprehensive they can be. As Steve Graham and Mike Crang indicate:

Urban ubicomp clearly has a fetishistic power in appearing to finally offer solutions by rendering place and space utterly transparent in some simple, deterministic way. Indeed, we would argue that there is a danger that locative media are equally seen as a technical fix for oppositional voices and alternative histories in art projects. In this sense the myths matter and have effects. But they are only mythologies of a perfect, uniform informational landscape. In reality, the seamless and ubiquitous process of pure urban transparency that many accounts suggest will always be little but a fantasy. In practice, the linking of many layers of

computerized technology is generally a “kludge” . . . Far from the pure vision of what de Certeau calls the “concept city,” we may find the production of myriads of little stories—a messy infinity of “Little Brothers” rather than one omniscient “Big” Brother.⁵

In Andrea Arnold’s recent film *Red Road*, the main character, Jackie, spends her days monitoring CCTV cameras for the Glasgow City Council. She diligently uses her gaze as part of an apparatus that attempts to keep urban life in line. One day, however, she spots a man in an abandoned field near a huge housing estate with a prostitute. Zeroing the camera in she recognizes him as the man behind the wheel in a hit and run that killed her husband and small child, and who was supposed to be serving a long prison term. While the cameras have been able to place the man in a given area of the city, Jackie must go where the cameras cannot in order to get close enough to him in order to carry out her intention of revenge. Even as she is watched on other shifts by the cameras she routinely sits behind, she hurtles to some abyss trying to track the guy down in the real world of the city’s streets and housing projects. Jackie takes an unexpected path into a life and version of herself that she would never have imagined, one opened up by the very act of surveillance itself.

No matter how we pay attention, no matter how street wise and calculating we might be, the city is the world where everyone can be simultaneously swindled and dazzled, and where everyone can be a trickster playing to a crowd he or she otherwise would never deserve. As such, to then affirm that we now know the “real deal” and precisely what to do risks wiping out those confident portrayals of a city capable of taking on the unexpected, of dealing with almost anything that anyone brings to it. For it is this sense of surprise, of not knowing exactly what will happen, that enables us to be “taken in” to all

that we believe the city offers. After all, we are city dwellers full of visions that are colliding with and eating off the other, always electric, wired for sound, and always looking for a connection.

DESPITE THE CONTROLS, WHY THE PERIPHERY IS STILL IMPORTANT TO URBAN LIFE

Still, cityness remains at the periphery of our attentions. What I want to do in this book is to talk about different forms of periphery as they relate to cities, and ways in which the periphery can be productively “brought back in” to our considerations of urban life. While this project aims to be applicable to cities across the world, the reflections here are based primarily on cities either that have been at the periphery of urban analysis or which embody urban processes and realities that have largely been left out when these cities are taken into consideration. Thus, reference is made to a swathe of urban life running roughly from Dakar to Jakarta.

Cities that can be located across this invented latitude vary immensely in terms of their characteristics, histories, and positions in an increasingly globalized network of relations among cities. Dakar, Abidjan, Lome, Lagos, Kinshasa, Johannesburg, Nairobi, Dubai, Karachi, Dehli, Mumbai, Bangkok, Phnom Penh, and Jakarta are not brought together here as objects of comparison or to consolidate them as indications of new urban trends or theories. The working assumption is that these cities have something to do with each other, both directly and indirectly—some through various combinations of shared colonial histories, development strategies, trade circuits, regional integration, common challenges, investment flows, and geopolitical articulation. There is no overarching framework that makes these cities instances of a particular type or of economic trends that cement particular connections

amongst them that are more powerful than, say, their connections to cities elsewhere in Europe and the Americas. Yet, the rather artificial lines that can be drawn west to east and vice-versa, skirting the usually obligatory reference to cities of “the North,” do have a real materialization. This materialization is found in the ways key policy and commercial actors in these cities make reference to each other’s urban realities and the migratory and trade flows that leave long-term historical marks and possibilities.

In an important way, these cities “move toward” each other. They do so in gestures and inclinations shaped by the search for economic and political strategies that enhance their “normalization” as viable cities according to standards still largely shaped by occidental notions of modernity. But there is also the search for strategies that address particular practices of inhabitation, livelihood formation, spatial diversification, and social contestation which, while certainly not unknown in cities of the North, assume a different kind of importance for these particular cities—no matter how different from each other they may be. There is a growing recognition that cities can effectively operate in the world without having to adhere to a uniform set of prescriptions—either of economic development, governance, or the shape of the built environment. Instead, cities must find their own particular way to consolidate their histories, locations, and populations and make themselves something more than eligible sites of inward investment from multinational companies. Instead, the question is how they can be active players in making new kinds of economic relationships across different scales and spaces.

Rather than simply being capital or port cities, regional hubs, *entrepôts*, or major tourist destinations, cities in the South could engineer new kinds of spatial relationships. These relationships would permit new kinds of synergies,

cross-investments, commodity chains, distribution networks, production complementarities, and alliances in the multi-lateral forums where key policies and deals are made. For the cities identified above, the opportunities for producing new spaces—new connections, new opportunities, new exchanges, and so forth—are then largely with each other. Here the financial, political, and technical predominance of New York, London, Frankfurt, Tokyo, Los Angeles, and Paris need not exert an overarching force.

These efforts may be identifiable only in the hundreds upon hundreds of small initiatives that affect, even unwittingly, some kind of articulation—and not in some grand, self-conscious design these cities might collectively launch. As such, these initiatives remain peripheral to the predominant considerations of global urban change. These cities both occasion and embody the often unruly intersection of very different ways of life—intersections that have purportedly been “well regulated” in cities of the North. By trying to work out effective ways of regulation that make sense to their histories, capacities, and inclinations, these cities experiment with different ways of operating in the larger world. Taken together, then, these two forms of the peripheral—the intersection of spaces, peoples, and ways of life “inside” the city and what these cities are trying to do on the “outside”—combine to generate important new ideas about what cities are and can be.

THE HISTORICAL CONDITIONS WHICH MAKE URBAN SPACES AND PRACTICES PERIPHERAL

In my explorations here I will not deal specifically with each of the cities itemized above. For the most part, I will stick to those I know well—which mostly include the major cities of Africa, as well as Phnom Penh, Jakarta, and Dubai—while making occasional reference to others. This partiality does not

obviate the overall points I want to make regarding new forms of urban regionalization underway in the bands across Africa and Asia. Certainly there is sufficient secondary material out there that can be woven into the discussion; but the direct ethnographic materials and policy experiences are primarily garnered from those cities in which I have some substantial experience.

Most of the observations here have been developed through many years of work in the slums of Africa and Southeast Asia. The designation “slums,” while important to the work of political advocacy and policy development, tends to group particular kinds of urban spaces across the world into generalizations that end up obscuring important features about how the poor actually live and use cities. This is not to deny that perhaps the majority of residents in cities of the Global South live without adequate income and access to some form of stable assets, shelter, and safety nets. They live without access to clean water, sanitation, and power, and enjoy highly limited protection of rights, law, and political voice. In 2003, United Nations Habitat estimated a global slum population of 900 million.

The growth and persistence of slums clearly have a deleterious impact on cities as a whole. Without access to sufficient space, healthy living conditions, basic services such as water and sanitation, and security, people’s efforts are primarily devoted to providing for basic needs, and this takes up a great deal of their time. States at both national and municipal levels simply do not provide a comprehensive distribution of market-supporting goods—such as water, clear legal frameworks, power, and sanitation. Therefore, people have to spend a lot of time trying to find things like water, pay high prices because they can only afford to buy a little bit at a time since there are no economies of scale, and spend time trying to

get over water-borne illnesses because they have no access to clean water.

In part, this failure to integrate the city through the distribution of goods that would support economic activity and increase incomes stems from the colonial history of many of these cities. Colonial authorities rarely invested in the planning and governance of cities under their jurisdiction as coherent, integrated entities, because they were primarily interested in the extraction of resources and the affordable control and mobilization of urban labor.⁶ Rather, these authorities usually identified specific local brokers, customary rulers, and imported military officials—in other words, fragments of previously interlinked ethnicities, societies, and regions—to carry out the day-to-day operations of rule.

Extensions of trade, religion, and domination have originated in many parts of the world, spreading their influences, control, and ways of doing things in various trajectories. Cities have long histories of being at the confluence of different trade routes, as well as contestations over political and religious influence. All of these push and pull existing populations in various directions, and prompt the additions of new peoples and economies. Therefore, it is impossible to ever assume that cities existed at some point as integrated entities, their residents and activities all effectively coordinated under an overarching set of values, rules, or institutions. Yet, European colonialism, as well as many of the postcolonial investments and affiliations with the urban South, has operated through partial institutions and powers. The continued reproduction of customary chiefs, military cliques, dominant ethnic entrepreneurial groupings, ruling families, and political associations makes it difficult for effective state structures to emerge—ones that have the interest of a general urban citizenry in mind.

Thus, city life in many parts of Asia and Africa simply becomes the purview of the few. As a result, the viability of the city—its economic output, accumulated revenues, and development resources—is generated by only a small proportion of its territory and population. Even when slums do demonstrate economic capacity, in terms of all the goods and services that its residents do and can produce, governments tend to treat them in highly punitive ways. Residents are forcefully evicted from areas where, no matter how bad the living conditions, they have established an entire fabric of relations critical to their livelihoods. Governments crack down on so-called illegal, unlicensed businesses and trades. In many cases, where small entrepreneurs attempt to legitimize their status through securing property, capital, and licenses, they are shut out from such prospects by municipal agencies and banks.

In most ways the picture of contemporary urban life for residents of much of the urban South is bleak. Too often political regimes enforce their power by making life as precarious as possible for a significant part of urban populations. Despite disadvantageous colonial histories, many national governments once cultivated an elite from competing regions and/or ethnic groups within a nation through a balanced investment in education opportunities, human services, and accumulation opportunities, and then tied them to the state. But marked changes in the position of nations within global economies have substantially diminished the public resources available to do this.⁷ At one time, these governments ensured educational opportunities. Thus access to the most lucrative wage labor—usually located within the public sector—was made available to elites across various ethnic and regional communities. Urbanization and state employment produced at least the semblance of solidarity across these communities. At the same time, the mechanisms that have been employed for distorting

agricultural markets, and thus extracting implicit forms of taxation from the non-urban areas in favor of the urban elite, are legendary. Prices paid to local producers for important commodities were kept artificially low; state marketing boards would dispose of large quantities of important products on black markets and pocket the profits for important elites rather than for state coffers.

Still, many of these distortions were aimed at maximizing resources for the state. These resources were to be distributed throughout the country. Increasingly, with massive budget reductions for education forced upon states, they no longer have the resources to engineer such solidarity across different regional and ethnic divides—although the extent to which states that have been granted substantial debt relief will manage the retention of funds that otherwise would go to service high levels of indebtedness remains to be seen.

As states over the past two decades shed many of their former responsibilities and oversaw a substantial retrenchment of public employees, resulting in the subsequent decline of urban incomes and the privatization of major economic interests, governance became more informalized.⁸ Specific dominant groups use this process of dismantling to transfer significant resources to private spheres, and the state then uses its authority to mask these transfers.⁹ Widespread privatization of state assets has frequently been used as a vehicle to maintain control of these assets in the hands of those occupying state power but now acting in a private capacity. The procedures through which these assets are sold and subsequently organized are often organized with the complicity of the state and are often irregular.

WHEN PERIPHERALIZATION, POVERTY, AND NEW POSSIBILITIES BECOME ENTANGLED

Those who are disadvantaged in this process increasingly resort to plunder and looting.¹⁰ Employment of any kind—formal and informal—is increasingly difficult to access.¹¹ As a result, extended family and residential support systems find themselves overburdened.¹² It is estimated that roughly 75 percent of basic needs are provided informally in the majority of African cities, and that most sectors and domains of urban life are largely informalized, even as formal institutions continue to multiply and grow.¹³ Whereas unemployment has long been a persistent reality for African cities, available compensations now require more drastic action.¹⁴ At the same time, various components of economic rationalization have opened up possibilities for the appropriation of formerly public assets—land, enterprises, services—by private interests, particularly for the emerging elite, well positioned in the apparatuses managing the restructuring of national economies. Structural adjustment policies have been more than simply instruments of institutional realignment or fiscal calibration in their impact on the public sphere.

While a semblance of social cohesion and collaboration continues to be reproduced or reworked, how people are connected to each other is something that has given rise to great anxiety, conflict, and experimentation, particularly in urban Africa. Increased mobility of urban populations among places marked by ever-increasing disparities in economic capacity means that city residents witness more people suddenly accumulating and losing material wealth. As a result, the pressures on maintaining a sense of cohesion within extended family systems, and on the practices of resource distribution that go with it, are enormous.¹⁵

Even efforts at consolidating a sense of place can make the

city seem less cohesive. For example, Dakar, Accra, and Lagos have witnessed the explosive growth of housing starts in the past two decades, as repatriated earnings are invested in land acquisition and home construction. While at one level, this investment represents an ongoing commitment to consolidating a place in the city, the widespread corruption and shabby work of contractors, the inflated costs of building materials, and the volatility of financial transactions have acted against the long-term security sought by investors. In addition, since the bulk of such investment is placed in construction, rather than in explicit production-centered activities,¹⁶ the notion of what place is becomes increasingly narrow. In other words, property is often divorced from the prospective viability of the larger economic context in which it is situated. As a result, more transactions with other places, most usually Europe, are required in order to sustain these investments in property.

For the youth particularly, there is greater uncertainty as to what it takes to get ahead or to stay out of trouble. Clearly old-fashioned networking, school connections, and political loyalty are important. But there are marked ebbs and flows characterizing incomes and opportunities. On one day a neighbor suddenly has a lot of money; two months later they have nothing. As a result, few individuals can put together a viable perspective on how to secure a consistent livelihood over the long run.

In the city, households must rely upon many different renditions of so-called customary ties—through which households are able to extend kin-like relations, and thus support and obligation. At the same time, they must increasingly find ways to operate outside these frequently claustrophobic sets of relations. The efforts to forge networks across different ethnic groups and geographic territories are fraught with uncertainties given either the absence or wearing away of

strong organizational cultures through which such relations could be socialized. Outside of school, church, and work there are few contexts through which people can collaborate in situations not focused on entrepreneurial activities. At the same time, the more provisional networking efforts happening outside of institutions are actually less vulnerable to manipulation by the state.

During the past two decades, international institutions such as the United Nations and the World Bank have focused on decentralizing the governance of cities to very local levels. States, however, have often used this process as a way of maximizing their control of urban neighborhoods without necessarily delivering better services or tolerating real democratic decision-making.

Additionally, civic associations that do exist in neighborhoods and districts tend to be organized along highly hierarchical lines. Individuals seek to disrupt these hierarchies, but at the same time, try to maintain their ostensible purpose, which is to offer clearly defined positions and responsibilities for their members. Still, many popular civic associations are prone to political manipulation—both in order to lessen their potential political force as formal associations and to disrupt their ability to coordinate local actions. The majority of residents are either unable or unwilling to negotiate their way through these political games in a context with few real job or financial opportunities, especially in places where state power consistently transgresses the established rules of the game. Accordingly, alternative means of accumulation must be secured.

The content of deprivations are numerous and interlocking, and have ramifications that extend across generations and territory. They impact on global climatic conditions and political stability. Yet, the long lists of deprivations do not in themselves summarize what actually does take place in slums.

In other words, the absence of certain material conditions assumed to support a viable life does not rule out life altogether. Residents find particular ways of dealing with those absences in particular combinations of generosity, ruthlessness, collaboration, competition, stillness, movement, flexibility, and defensiveness. Some residents will hold their limited ground to the end; others will live lives all over the place, willing to become anything for anyone almost anywhere. What these combinations will look like depends on the particular histories of cities and their relationship to other combinations—i.e. the combinations of economic policy, spatial organization, political culture and contestation, and how particular localities are situated in relationship to others, as well as other cities, regions, and economic poles.

The combinations of sentiment, action, inclination, and effort are also the stuff of available local economies. Although their economic activities are mostly focused on sheer survival without hope of making large earnings, street sellers, hawkers, repairers, and hustlers all pay attention to these combinations and try to anticipate what might happen as a result. Take a busy transport center, with buses and cars of all kinds taking passengers from a given city to somewhere else. Take the assemblage of drivers, loaders, sellers, touts, mechanics, and hangers-on. There are no systematic market surveys, passenger and customer profiles to inform these economic actors about what to do. There are usually few institutional authorities available to mediate their relations with each other, assign specific places of operation, or calibrate their dealings with one another. Still, they pay attention to who is dealing with whom, what kinds of passengers gravitate toward different cars or buses serving the same destination. They pay attention to what kinds of items they purchase before or following their journeys. They pay attention to the kinds of words exchanged