1

Introduction

The debate on urban theories

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, socio-economic exclusions, deeply encrusted in cities of both the Global North and the South, not only contradict earlier understandings of the urban as homogeneous and uniform, but also pose serious challenges to the modernisation theory – entrapped understanding of the urban as a process and promise of development which will engulf all. Emerging debates are linked by two fundamental dilemmas: First, how does the specificity of the regional/local and the diverse trajectories thereof call for a distinct theory of the city in the Global South? Second, what could be an appropriate conceptual framework for imagining urban marginalities?

The argument for specificity, in post-colonial theorisations of cities of the Global South, rests largely on the deep and stubborn pockets of poverty and social marginalisation in which many disadvantaged urban communities continue to live. Moving away from overarching theories of Southern exclusion, drawn from dependency and world-systems theories, recent scholarship on cities in the Global South has understood urban exclusion primarily in terms of space, broadly defined.[1] Scholars have critiqued typical policy frameworks which see slums in Third World cities as only material spaces to be measured and reconstructed. Instead, and drawing closely on David Harvey's (2009 [1973]) conceptual distinction of space as material and relative,[2] they have pointed to the need to see urban marginality, slums in particular, in terms of the context in which they evolved as spaces for living and livelihood (a process which is negotiated and incremental), their porous and fluid character (in contrast to the exclusivity of the residential space of upper-class urban citizens) (Bhan 2019), and their often seemingly contradictory opposition to state-sponsored housing projects. These features – more or less ubiquitous in cities of the Global South – of urban exclusion have led scholars

to new ways of thinking about urbanisation, rooted in the Southern context. Theresa Caldeira's (2017) conception of peripheral urbanisation sees the space in which the urban poor live as one marked by a particular kind of temporality and agency, with a set of relations to law and property that are very different from those that characterise the formal domain, which generate a distinct kind of politics and therefore necessarily lead to highly unequal and diverse cities. This genre of thinking has seen spatial exclusion in terms of communities of chronically poor people who are institutionally excluded from the government support structures that are necessary for their well-being (Pernell and Pietrrse 2010). What frames this kind of analyses is a broad understanding of post-colonial states, where recently formed governance structures are inadequately equipped to bring civic infrastructure and human resources to the urban marginalised. Thus, space as the context of urban exclusion is an understanding of history and institutions as they shape the way in which the urban poor have lived and worked, in contrast to a typically ahistorical and one-size-fits-all policy intrusions into their lives through housing or other similar schemes.

Increasingly, scholars writing in this genre have converged on the idea that cities of the Global South must generate not only a new, Southern paradigm of the urban and of urbanisation, but also a new epistemology, where knowledge and theory must begin and be located in the specific context of the Global South. This critique itself has been critiqued as particularistic and essentialist in terms of its understanding of the Global South as unique and different. Without going into the details of these arguments (Scott and Storper 2015; Roy 2016), one might point out, briefly, that there is a certain irony to this debate: the argument for a theory of the urban, anchored in the Global South, is opposed in fact to essentialising and othering (for example, to seeing the Third World city as the less developed counterpart of the First World city). And it is in fact linked to larger questions, for example, of modernity and democracy. The Southern city is increasingly seen as a centre point of modernity – and in fact of multiple modernities, that are not necessarily only western – and democratic agency and resistance as shaped by and shaping the post-colonial city, in ways that challenge the understandings of modernity and democracy from the western perspective. What frames these understandings, at the broadest level, are epistemological questions critiquing the process of production of knowledge in the social sciences which remain tied to western theorisations. Thus, the argument that 'it is necessary to view all cities from this particular place on the map' (Roy 2016) may appear to be essentialising the Southern city, but in fact could be read as a plea for reversing the location from where we do urban studies.

An important theme in this context has been the broader question: would the issue of specificity not lead us then to abandon the pursuit of more general urban theories and succumb instead to what has been termed 'provincial' theories (Scott and Storper 2015)? At the same time, there is very little clarity on what could be the basis of a comparative framework for a general urban theory that would make sense empirically and conceptually. Cities of the western world also have poverty, ghettoisation, rising informality and persistent exclusion. Urban inequities are reflected in extremes of wealth and marginalities (Nutalle and Mbembe 2005; Sheppard, Leitner, and Maringanti 2013).[3] How do we confront the question of overarching theories that could bind the urban poor of vastly different contexts of the Global North and South? The concept of the unity of the worker, defined as the industrial proletariat, cutting across nations, is now all but obsolete. In cities across the world, the urban poor may be employed in occupations that look similar: petty shop owners, street sellers, sweatshop workers, illegal immigrants working as domestic helpers, and so on. These spaces of economic marginality are marked by diverse social identities, race, ethnicity, gender, community, caste, and so on, making the task of factoring these into a unifying theoretical framework vastly challenging.

And it is in this sense that the second dilemma of urban studies is possibly posed – the question of informality. While informality is universal to contemporary capitalism, competing interpretations of informality – from flexible efficiency to dependency-inspired understandings as structured exclusion – sharpen the question: can informality be the overarching conceptual framework that broadly defines the urban in our times? Does informality indeed provide the lens through which we can view urban inequalities and marginalisation across the world? And if so, what is the theoretical lens through which we should view informality?

As is well known, economic downturns have periodically affected western economies, cutting down jobs and social benefits. Globalisation's more lasting impact in terms of creation of work and income insecurities and inequalities in developed economies has been widely chronicled. One thinks of Saskia Sassen's analysis of global cities – New York, London and Tokyo – which are densely networked nodal structures representing the transformation of economic dynamics from industrial to finance capital, powered by a rapidly developing information technology (IT) that binds global financial networks together. Finance capital is global, hyper-mobile and invisible. Sassen's contribution was to show that while the hyper-mobility of capital has been highlighted in the literature, it is important to understand that the

work process still occurs in the space of the city, and which, according to her, brings with it an emphasis on economic and spatial polarisation because of the disproportionate concentration of very high and very low income jobs in these major global city sectors. 'Emphasizing place, infrastructure, and non-expert jobs matters precisely because so much of the focus has been on the neutralisation of geography and place made possible by the new technologies' (Sassen 2005). Sassen thus lays out also the possibility of a new politics of resistance that might emerge from these cities, given the inequalities inherent in the technology- and finance-driven economic model.

A more specific view from the ground on the same theme was provided by Guy Standing's concept of the precariat. With the consolidation of finance capital, whereby the nature of capital is transformed from productive to rentier capital, its other, the precariat replaces the declining proletariat. For the precariat, a life of unstable labour is marked by temporary, flexible, contractual work, characteristic of financial and IT services, but also increasingly found in other professions, such as teaching, law and administration (Standing 2016, 2018).

Cities of the Global South, too, are increasingly globally connected, technology-driven, powered by the financial and information services sectors and manned by highly skilled and high income technical personnel, but resting on a non-formal, unregulated, voiceless and unskilled or partially skilled workforce which constitutes the base or the support system of the new economy. In Global South cities, an informal professional class is increasingly seen in domains such as teachers in schools as well as higher education institutions, in lower rungs of administration, both in government and non-governmental organisations. Insecure work, the relentless threat of downsizing and dismissals, individually negotiated rather than norm-based compensation packages, and contractualisation translate into precariousness in middle and lower levels of employment in private and state sectors across developed and developing countries. In this sense, informality in the age of globalisation possibly provides a broad frame within which urban vulnerabilities could be seen across the Global North and the South. Despite these emerging commonalities, to date, however, there are no substantive theories that link the impact of globalisation on categories of marginalised citizens in advanced industrialised and low-income countries.

In the Global North, precarity, although increasingly a cause of concern, is cushioned to some extent by universal school education, still existing robust welfare systems in western Europe, a living minimum wage and regulated working conditions. These features are all but absent in cities of developing or so-called low-income countries. What further makes the question of

comparison almost impossibly tricky is the fact that in cities of the Global South, vulnerable communities are not only those who are attached to the new economy, albeit on unfavourable conditions (workers in call centres, or in emerging lower rungs of services, or migrant labour in global supply chains), but also the much larger numbers who remain confined to traditional unskilled work (construction, head-load bearing, road cleaning, domestic work, and so on). These urban livelihoods, discussed in detail in the chapters that follow, highlight not only irregular and unprotected incomes, but also highly inadequate access to civic infrastructure, health and education. Informality, then, while a common frame in the broadest possible sense, nevertheless reproduces itself in very different ways in different parts of the world.

An important strand of scholarship has looked at the complex ways in which the urban space is defined by property as capital.[4] In the context of cities of the Global North, redevelopment/gentrification projects have redefined land value and reshaped urban space. Broadly the same processes may be at work in developing country cities, but with vastly different features. In Indian cities, as both state and the private sector, the latter frequently involving large multinational companies (MNCs), increasingly engage in the business of land appropriation, not only are agricultural lives and livelihoods deeply affected, but the merging of the semi-rural and the peri-urban produce spaces which defy understanding in terms of received theories of the urban and urbanisation. The same processes can be seen when urban poor communities, with deeply divided interests in urban land, respond in conflicting ways to housing projects for the urban poor, in which governments are also increasingly attempting to involve large private builders. The political economy of urban real estate in developing countries like India must be understood primarily in the context of city and regional politics, the character of the local land mafia, the complex networks that bind local politicians to real estate developers, urban poor communities split along linguistic and ethnic divides, and their diverse and often conflicting interests in urban land.

Drawing this section to a close, one could say that there are features of the urban in cities of the North and of the South which point towards the possibility of broad theorisations. However, until substantive justifications of comparison and robust methods of doing comparisons can be found, the idea of a generalised urban theory must remain an academic one, while we stay with the broadly shared view that the specificities of urban development in the Global South merit an altogether different paradigm of studying cities that received theories, drawn from the western experience – which see the urban as uniform and urbanisation as unilinear – do not offer.

What the book is about

Urban poverty is of increasing concern in policy and scholarly circles in India. While there was a recorded decline in percentage terms of urban households in the below poverty line (BPL) category (from 31.8 per cent in 1993–94 to 25.7 per cent in 2004–05 to 13.7 per cent in 2011–12), absolute numbers of the urban poor rose by 4.4 million persons between 1993–94 and 2004–05, and in 2011–12, the absolute number of the poor in Indian cities was 76 million persons (GOI 2018). As the gains of economic growth post liberalisation can be seen more prominently in cities, the intransigence of urban poverty has raised obvious questions about the appropriateness or otherwise of the growth model being pursued and its impact on disadvantaged urban communities. Larger debates on urbanisation of poverty have anchored discussions in India on whether urban poverty is a carry-over of rural poverty, the impact of migration on poverty, and to what extent have economic policies and democratic politics provided bridges between hitherto marginalised slum communities, on the one hand, and the technology- and services-led dynamic growth channels of modern cities, on the other. These themes are covered in Chapters 2 and 3 of this book.

Bangalore (also known as Bengaluru), the capital city of Karnataka in southern India, provides an appropriate entry point into these debates. As India's Silicon Valley, the core of the city's economic dynamism is the export of IT and IT enable services (ITES), surrounded by multinational banking, finance, venture capital, start-ups, real estate and the concomitant appearance of luxury concepts in services. An expanding middle class has gained from, as well as contributed to, these channels of economic dynamism. Spill-over effects have resulted in some expansion of opportunities of employment and earnings, particularly in the lower rungs of services, for hitherto disadvantaged groups, but there is also a growing presence of an urban underclass, excluded from the city's growth channels. The anchoring question that runs through the chapters is: what happens to the poor in a city that is rapidly growing rich? The present work looks at channels of both exclusion and inclusion. The field research that supports this work was conducted over several years, spanning the study of slums in inner city neighbourhoods, peripheral slums, garment workers' settlements and new housing projects for slum rehabilitation.

Conceptual/theoretical framework

Theorisations on urban space, briefly discussed earlier, have greatly taken forward our understanding of urban marginality, particularly where caste and community as social markers of identity are closely and historically identified

with spatial exclusions. Recent work on Bangalore has particularly emphasised the issue of urban land speculation and land as a means of dispossession of those working and living in rural peripheries (Goldman 2011). Other recent work on Bangalore has underlined the transformation of urban space, as a transnational capitalist class has come into its own via the IT revolution in India's post-liberalisation phase, even as older forms of inequalities and accumulation persist (Upadhya 2004, 2016). In each of these works, urban land has been seen as a space which has reconfigured class-based inequities. The concept of space deeply informs understandings of urban marginality in Bangalore. The Janaagraha-Brown Citizenship Index report (2014), based on a survey of more than 4,000 respondents across Bangalore city, defines citizenship in terms of access to basic amenities. The study, acknowledging that access to basic amenities is unevenly distributed across different parts of the city, and class drives this effect, nevertheless underlined that the space occupied by people in the city as citizens emerges as a universal category of entitlement. 'Citizenship significantly abates class in Bengaluru' (Janaagraha-Brown Citizenship Index 2014). This could be interpreted as: while space-as-class divides entitlements, space-as-citizenship offers an umbrella-like universalising effect.

Finally, the narratives around urban deprivation are caught in competing perspectives on land: claims of slum residents to right to property on slum land; governments regularly conduct evictions and razing down exercises, presenting slum residents as illegal encroachers; while large corporations/real estate developers make a stake for the same land for the purpose of construction of housing, malls, hospitals. On the other hand, arguments for the urban poor's right to slum land, most often made in the context of housing, becomes more complex when slum land is seen also as a means of livelihood. Benjamin (Benjamin and Bhubaneswari 2006, 2011), studying local markets in Bangalore's Azadnagar, KR Market and Yashwantpur slum areas, raises the point that far from being the static and marginalised survival strategy with which the informal sector is associated in the popular mind, these markets represent dense networks of wholesale and retail trade, and are marked by a complex web of finance, with capital flowing between real estate, trade, manufacturing, and so on. According to Benjamin, these localised markets provide vast employment multiplier effects as well as produce numerous and relatively easy entry points for poor groups in the form of openings as head-load bearers, manual workers and street hawkers. Although governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are attracted by housing schemes,

housing interventions inevitably disrupt these local markets, which need to be encouraged because of their employment generation as well as their dynamic nature.

As is known, slum land serves the poor both as a space for living and frequently also as a space for setting up small enterprises, in both manufacturing and trade. Benjamin's plea for preservation of land for its existing purposes has a practical as well as a normative component, and strongly echoes the typical slum dwellers' desperate efforts to cling to their land, whatever its size, and however precarious their claim to it might be. Our research on inner city slums in south central Bangalore revealed that slum residents have differential interests in land. Those who have relatively larger and/or more than one plot, have built vertically, are otherwise economically resourceful or are politically networked, versus those who have little or nothing. The former groups define slum resistance to new housing projects and layouts (which may threaten not only their livelihoods, but also, importantly, their rentier interests in the land which they occupy) while the latter group may aspire for new layouts and buildings but may not be vocal articulators of such aspirations (discussed further in Chapter 7). There is thus no uniformity of interests of slum residents in slum land.

In any case, looking beyond these, the defence of slum-based local economies may point to a situation where the urban poor's economic opportunities would remain permanently tied to low levels of economic activities, predicated on low investments and subsistence incomes. Benjamin's own examples (Benjamin and Bhubaneswari 2006, 2011) are of head-load bearers, manual workers and street hawkers, who may live in slums and use these spaces as well as neighbouring low-end local markets for their economic activities. It should be remembered that, representing the lowest end of the urban informal workforce, these groups are marginalised, socially and spatially, and earn low and precarious incomes, with limited access to social security, education and health. The domain of self-employment has been seen by some as a possible panacea for the urban poor, and by others as a domain of permanent structural exclusion. Without going into the details of these debates, it is perhaps possible to point out that Benjamin's defence of local slum-based livelihoods may provide very little scope to imagine the typical slum dweller's exit and mobility from the limiting framework of petty self-employment and low-wage work.

While deeply enriched by the insights emerging from this genre of literature, the present work, however, locates urban marginality primarily in terms of work and incomes of the urban poor, and traces the structure of work to the broader political economy that determines the character of industrial

development, employment and incomes of the urban underclass. The centrality of wage, specifically, and income, more broadly, which the book uses as the primary anchor for looking at the lives and livelihoods of the urban underclass, connects this research to a broadly Marxist framework of analysis. Dependency theories have long shaped our understanding of post-colonial development, while at the same time the limitations of dependency have increasingly come to prevail on our understanding of the dynamics of development in the Global South. The original theorisations of the North and South as core and periphery have been challenged with the rise of new economic powers in Asia and Latin America; overall, the effort within the structuralist imagination of dependency has been to emphasise the space of autonomy of dependent states and the distinctiveness of national politics; thus, specific and contextualised class configurations, coalitions and conflicts may lead to different policies and constraints, generating varying developmental trajectories. Structuralist theory thus assumes that outcomes are not just inscribed by existing economic structures; there is a space for political strategies and interactions to make a difference.[5]

The discussions about whether the state is autonomous or determined by capital (taken up in more detail in Chapter 2) are interesting only up to a point, and the pendulum could swing continuously, as in the real world one could find illustrations of both, in varying degrees and within the same context. Overarching ideas of macro determinations – as given in the world-systems theory, an important variant of dependency, that the global system shapes the conditions of each country's development at the national level – remain useful reminders of the broad limits of development in the Global South. But, as is well known, in pitching class conflict at the global level, dependency theory provides no conceptual tools with which to imagine the nitty-gritty of class relations underpinning the interrelated process of domestic and global accumulation at the national level. More germane to the present work is the fact that neither classical Marxist theory nor dependency theory provides us with tools to examine conflicts that involve large numbers of the urban working class who are not proletariats in the Marxist sense. The central questions then are: who are the urban poor, and what is the locus of urban power which defines and maintains the structure of urban economic inequalities in cities of the global south? To these questions, there are no easy answers to be drawn from existing theoretical frameworks.

Given these limitations of existing theoretical frameworks, in this book I use an eclectic combination of concepts drawn from each of these. Bangalore's economy, tightly networked into the global IT/financial sectors, approaching

that of other global cities, may represent a shift from production to finance/services as the locus of capital's power. As technology and finance capital spin wealth but no jobs, large numbers of jobless or small-time self-employed may be seen to be at the sharp edge of the contradictions of globalised capitalism. However, in practical terms, the contestation between global capital and petty producers/traders remain in the abstract. Kalyan Sanyal, in his acclaimed book (2007), saw this class as the outside of capital, and petty self-employment as the sponge that absorbs all who cannot be absorbed within the circuit of capital and cannot even be considered the reserve army of capital, as they are the permanent outcasts of modern industrial capitalism, but which help sustain the latter by providing a subsistence base to all who remain outside. While this is a powerful conceptualisation of urban exclusion, in practical terms it is difficult to imagine the petty self-employed workforce in any kind of relational context, particularly in terms of conflicts related to economic interests, although of course economic hardships may get articulated through political mobilisations of their diverse social identities.

Indeed, the reality on the ground in Third World cities is that a large supply of unskilled (often migrant) labour is available, and there is in fact an increasing significance of wage work in informalised, contractual or casual work, both in manufacturing and in services, and in the public as well as private sectors. Thus, while the monistic theory of the capital–labour conflict needs to be modified in the context of the multiple forms and domains of wage labour, the present work makes an argument for reiterating the centrality of wage as it defines urban vulnerabilities. Self-employed petty producers/service providers are in fact inextricably linked to the world of informal wage and work, and may move between the two domains. This conceptual framework, then, building on informalised wage as the primary domain of urban vulnerabilities, allows us to view both the capital–labour relationship as it is played out in different domains and the state as both employer and regulator of wage labour. The price of labour force is distributed in a much more unequal way than are the productivities of social labour. Or, in other words, the differences in productivity are far less than the differences in social value. With free trade and relatively open borders allowing MNCs to move to where they can find the cheapest labour, the law of value operates at the global level to allow extraction of the value produced in the peripheries to the benefit of the monopoly capital of the centres (Amin 2017). This extraction, however, happens with the direct and indirect collaboration of the state, as has been pointed out with regard to female garment workers in global supply chains. The role of the state in extraction, structured by informality, is further elaborated later.