

# Introduction

## *Urban Margins*

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**Kamran Asdar Ali and Martina Rieker**

The negotiation of the conceptual-spatial boundaries of the urban modern, the city as the space of the production of the modern citizen-subject, constitutes a major preoccupation of much twentieth-century social thought.<sup>1</sup> The concomitant problem bodies and problem categories (e.g., rural migrants; tradition) that such discussion has produced critically inform our contemporary conceptual grammars. While few would revisit the “peasant in the city” narrative that dominated much of the social science literature of the 1960s and 1970s, many of its underlying presumptions remain.<sup>2</sup> However, grand narratives of invasion have given way to narratives that struggle to capture the newness of both urban and rural areas. In the language of the World Bank, this “new influence” marks a global phenomenon called “the urban transition.”<sup>3</sup> It is this new inscription of urban space and rural back spaces that informs, directly or indirectly, the inordinate attention also given to urban poverty by projects influenced by the new “urban turn” in the language of international development. These new spatial inscriptions beg the question as to the role and function of ruralities within “the urban transition.” In the context of Egypt, to take one example of developmental concerns, the Demographic Health Survey over the last decade has clearly shown that the real impact of neoliberal restructuring has been spatial.<sup>4</sup> Since the beginning of the twentieth century the poverty line had clearly separated urban and rural space. A decade of neoliberal restructuring has fundamentally altered this relationship, positing the poverty line as a phenomenon categorically dividing lower Egypt (the megacities and their agrarian hinterlands) and all of upper Egypt (the back spaces). At least in the conceptual models offered

by the World Bank, the demographics of the urban transition mark this new urban space from which the “winds of change” will come.

The world presently consists of more than four hundred cities with a population of over 1 million (by 2015, there may be 550 of these cities). Future growth is projected to happen exclusively in cities, not in rural or suburban areas. Alongside megacities like Jakarta, Dhaka, Karachi, Mumbai, and Shanghai and Lagos (all in the global South), which will have populations over 20 million by 2025, there has been a concomitant growth of small and second-tier cities. These enlarging urban spaces, with inadequate planning, job opportunities, and infrastructure, absorb most of the rural migrants who are forced to leave their homes due to policies of market reforms and agricultural deregulation. Hence, the older dichotomy between city and countryside can be conceived as being replayed and contested by the gap between small cities and megapolises.<sup>5</sup> In other words, with megacities furnishing the parameters of our understanding of contemporary urban landscapes, small cities and provincial towns increasingly are becoming marginal within these new global hierarchies of urbanism taking shape.

In this issue we seek to revisit conceptually and theoretically the question of marginality in the production of contemporary urban cartographies in the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa. Notwithstanding the heightened interest in urban studies in the last few years, the megacities have, as suggested above, structured our understanding of cities and the questions we bring to the study of urban space at large. Very little attention has been given to other urban landscapes, including the small- and medium-sized towns on the margins of this discourse (e.g., Sana, Hebron, Peshawar, Thimpu). Even less attention has been given to the different set of questions the study of such “marginal” cities may bring to our understanding of twenty-first-century urban landscapes. Among others, these may shed light on a very different kind of rural-urban nexus that the working poor negotiate as they variously move through and/or reside on the margins of municipal boundaries of these larger cities. Thus we seek to rethink the issue of marginality in at least three particular frameworks. One is to focus research on smaller cities within a hierarchy of regional (and global) urban spaces. Second is the production of marginal spaces within such cities. If we concentrate on the second proposition, it is evident that we know very little about the complex economic, social, and cultural life of those communities that lie at the juncture of the rural-urban divide. Third are questions concerning the networks, the textures of everyday life, that shape various forms of marginality in both small cities and megacities. To return to the above-discussed Egyptian case, migratory trajectories there are enmeshed with networks connecting an array of periurban localities: from the margins of smaller agrarian towns in upper and middle Egypt to

the periurban zones of the big agribusiness cities in the Delta. What critical insights might the social history of these periurban margins elucidate about contemporary urban life and its back spaces?

The case of Pakistan exemplifies some of the dynamics that lead to the social and demographic shifts we highlight. In a recent review paper, Ali Cheema and Shandana Mohmand have argued that the rapid growth in industrialization in Pakistan in the 1950s led to an increase in rural-urban migration. However, since the 1960s, due to the dispersion of industries and development of transportation facilities, the rate of urbanization is fastest in districts that did not have high levels of previous urbanization. By the 1970s the rate of growth of small- and medium-sized cities of certain regions of Pakistan outstripped the rate of urbanization of the ten largest cities in the country. This process has in turn affected a social and economic decline in the population's dependence on rural structures, an increase in internal trade between rural and urban areas, and also an agricultural raw material linked industrialization strategy. These transformations have clearly manifested in the shift of political and social power from more traditional village systems to traders, industrialists, money-lenders, and those who control the transportation networks.<sup>6</sup>

Such processes are present in many countries of the global South and have given rise to a proliferation of fringe urban communities whose residents oscillate between urban and rural identifications. They compete for low-paid agricultural work while seeking to enter the urban labor market.<sup>7</sup> This push-and-pull phenomenon is amply demonstrated in Ananya Roy's work on urban transformation and poverty in West Bengal, India. Roy shows how the reduced possibility of agricultural work has led to large immigration to the cities by men and women. Yet the recent deindustrialization process in the region has made urban work equally difficult to access for these migrants. Rail links to Calcutta connect periurban spaces to the city as the poor commuters create spaces within the urban labor market while retaining a sense of place and community in the village. Men and women experience this commute and access to the urban differently. There is always a gendered element, Roy argues, in how sexual freedoms, moral economies, domestic responsibilities, work processes, and labor segmentation operate in these processes.<sup>8</sup> The essays that follow offer a comparative discussion and visions of some of the above-mentioned processes in the contemporary city in the global South. A focus on such cities allows us not only to present a more complex picture of new urban forms, but also to explore how urban life and urban marginality take on quite distinct local forms.

The essays emerge out of a long-term dialogue initiated by the Shehr Network on Comparative Urban Landscapes ([www.shehr.org](http://www.shehr.org)), an academic initiative that seeks to further a social-historical and critical understanding

of contemporary cities and urban practices in the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa. It examines the efficacy of the category of the city in modernist discourse and seeks to chart this spatial imagination and its effects through an exploration of the complex processes through which gendered, classed, and raced citizen-subjects have negotiated and been the object of urban projects in these regions. Attuned to both the legacy of modernist conceptual grammars and their inadequacy for understanding the remaking of space and place in the neoliberal present, the network aims to open up an arena in which to address the particular positioning(s) of contemporary urban landscapes and urban practices.

### **The Uncertainty of Urban Life**

The conceptualization of the social divisions referred to above is significant for understanding how the modern city is experienced by its citizen-subjects. The tensions, polarizations, and entanglements that accompany these processes across and within state boundaries shape new forms of historical categories, which Michel-Rolph Trouillot calls “fragmented globality.”<sup>9</sup> As capitalism manifests itself in contradictory forces of hope and despair, constitutionalism (democracy) and deregulation, hyperrationalization and avant-garde experimentation, controlled markets and speculative exuberance, antimodern nostalgia and progressive narratives, it is no wonder that risk, uncertainty, and fear have become its constitutive cultural icons.<sup>10</sup> The spread of magic, witchcraft, and the occult in Africa, which Peter Geschiere<sup>11</sup> so eloquently discusses in his work, or the anxiety, stress, moral panics, and “millennial apocalypse” of the contemporary United States that Kathleen Stewart and Susan Harding describe in their influential essay,<sup>12</sup> become representations of these contradictory forces of hope and hopelessness, and of fear, which Massumi posits as the most economical expression of form of late capital that we inhabit.<sup>13</sup>

Infrastructures, new modes of technological interconnectivity, have been intimately linked to this vision of the modern, the dream that the urban promises its inhabitants. This relationship is refreshingly brought forward in Caroline Humphrey’s recent paper on a midsize Siberian city and the breakdown of the taken-for-granted infrastructural projects. The extreme dependency of city life on the regular supply of heat, electricity, and water takes on a crisis mode when in this specific case supplies are interrupted. The lack of heat in subfreezing temperatures, the lack of electricity for public transport—trams, trolleys—in societies with a low percentage of car ownership, and the lack of streetlights for darkened streets in the middle of winter (with myths of lurking “others,” such as “gypsies” who snatch children, and the perceived destabilization of public space with increasing numbers of unattached men wandering the

countryside looking for shelter and jobs) bring home the uncertainty and vulnerability of a city living without adequate infrastructure. Half an hour of bus journeys becomes fifteen kilometers of walking on frozen roadways. Humphrey shows that in distant reaches of postsocialist Russia the process of deindustrialization has produced new categories of the expendable as part of the retraction of state support to infrastructural projects, thereby adding to the uncertainty of civic life in extremely harsh physical and social environments.<sup>14</sup>

The modernist dream of infrastructural investment leading to an urban-based, technologically informed, and progressive culture has become illusionary in many parts of the world. Like contemporary Russia, other states have not been able to meet fully their modern responsibility to provide basic services and consequently leave their citizens to fend for themselves within configurations of unstable microservices and petty trade.<sup>15</sup> Take the case of Lagos, which has grown from a city of 300,000 in the 1960s to one of 10 million today, where during the oil boom of the 1970s, international planners and the Nigerian government redesigned the city and put in an extensive network of roadways, bridges, intersecting cloverleaf highways, and huge housing projects. In the aftermath of the plundering of the country's and the city's wealth by a succession of dictatorships and the abandonment of Lagos as the capital for Abuja, Lagos today has two hundred distinct slum settlements where along with the local poor reside refugees from the wars in West Africa—principally Liberia and Sierra Leone. Not dissimilar to the decaying infrastructure in Humphrey's Siberian town—with increases in ethno-nationalism, xenophobia, and poor-on-poor violence—only one in twenty Lagos households is connected to the municipal water supply, waste water is disposed of through open drains, in many instances buckets or pits are the only latrines, and private generators are the main source of most reliable electric supply: the tender mercies of petty trade and microservices with an absence of the state in any form.<sup>16</sup>

These themes are adequately brought forward in AbdouMalik Simone's essay on Douala, Cameroon, and Dakar, Senegal. The crisis metaphor that invades the description of African cities is rethought in Simone's work in creative and innovative forms.<sup>17</sup> In response to the total abandonment of the state to provide for its own citizens and the nonexistence of welfare regimes, many turn in African cities to informal forms of "getting by" through kin networks and manipulating social capital. Simone does not entirely dismiss the efforts of civil society organizations or NGOs to mitigate the situation of marginality and deprivation, yet in an earlier work he shows how in communities across urban (West) Africa people recombine contingent relationships between bodies, spaces, signs, and infrastructures to connect with varied ways of life and different social actors.<sup>18</sup> In the same

work, he argues that there is a production of a micropolitics of alignment, interdependence, and exuberance linked to a particular emotional field that connects people in the emergent urban fabric.<sup>19</sup> Here the concept of emergence and emergency is central to his argument. In a critical engagement with more modernist understandings of political mobilization that demands democratic rights and economic resources from the state, Simone argues for a rethinking of these categories by putting forward the concept of emergency democracy, which encapsulates and entangles the dual meaning of emergence and emergency. It helps him to show how in the large or midsize African cities that he studies people collaborate, without sometimes knowing about it, through a wide range of affiliations that may be kin-based, local, translocal, gendered, religious, or secular. His rendering of the contemporary urban landscape may enable us to rethink political possibilities for African cities where a diverse, multilingual, and ethnic population considers the challenges, pitfalls, and compromises of coexistence.

This theme of compromised coexistence is eloquently picked up through the lens of gender and the city by Sandya Hewamanne in her work on female migrant workers in the Free Trade Zone outside Colombo, Sri Lanka. The issues of female disorder, lack of control, and chaos, so often the concern of modern, bourgeois, and national imaginaries, are critically contested in Hewamanne's description of these workers' lives and their negotiation of the city with its contingent freedoms. Her work critically examines ways in which gendered subjects negotiate their lifeworlds in a major South Asian urban landscape by ethnographically detailing how the city represents a site of personal autonomy and political possibilities. At different moments public discourse in distinct national urban spaces has produced the city as both the site of modern citizen making and the site of corruption and pollution. Hewamanne shows how rural women reconfigured the city for themselves through their distinct grammars, aesthetics, and performance of the urban. Her essay raises pivotal questions about how women and men map the city differently. As these migrant women's "freedoms" are read in terms of promiscuity by the dominant moral codes, Hewamanne sensitizes us to forms in which women's and men's interaction with various sites, routes, and spaces within the city are represented, commented upon, and restricted within the larger society. Yet the city is also, as she shows, a space of mobility, transgression, and different pleasures that women seek, in the process negotiating the everyday in favorable and unfavorable terms.

Put differently, the essay seeks to make visible the contradictory character of our modern lives. To take a cinematic representation from another society in the global South, a certain type of women's mobility such as is depicted by cycling women in Marzieh Meshkini's *The Day I Became*

*a Woman* (Iran, 2001) powerfully informs particular modernist rendering of emancipatory narratives. Yet the privileging of these modern urban tropes such as mobility, speed, and rationalized spatiality forecloses certain critical questions that examine ways in which the multitude of poor women in the Middle East and South Asia negotiate urban space in conditions of declining public transportation infrastructure. Working-class women's relationship to city life and to those who are "unfamiliar" creates its own sets of bodily and emotional disciplining.<sup>20</sup> For many urban residents public life does not always allow for the pleasures of the modern: the cafés, parks, concert halls, beaches, or the promenade for women to enjoy alone. Rather, especially for poor women, it offers the options of harassment in the narrow alleys of industrial townships, in long waits at bus stops of the unpredictable public transport system, and in the discriminating work culture that needs to be negotiated due to the compulsion of earning a living. This rendition is not to argue for an "insufficient modernity" or a lag in some teleological sense, but it asks us to explore the context of urban social politics enmeshed in the multiplicity of discourses and everyday struggles that working-class and poor women have to encounter.<sup>21</sup>

### **Smaller Towns, Other Pleasures**

Within the study of the contemporary Middle East research on urban spaces focuses almost exclusively on the megacities such as Cairo, Istanbul, Beirut, and more recently Tehran and Khartoum. One effect of the focus on these megacities in the region is that they have furnished the new grammar for our understanding of the trajectories that urbanity takes in the region. The articulation of colonial modernities across the region set in place a spatial recasting of space and place. For example, the shift from Saharan to Mediterranean and Atlantic trade in North Africa led to the deurbanization of southern North African cities and the hegemony of northern cities. The establishment of nation-states in the Middle East, the selection of capital cities, in turn constructed the framework in which urban life came to be seen as the equivalency of national life. The essays by Lisa Taraki and Mandana E. Limbert portray marginal urban spaces in the Middle East and hence go against this trend, aiding us to explore how the regional history of urban modernity disciplines its boundaries. We would argue with them that if the urban is the future, creating endless rural backspaces, the role and function of smaller cities and towns in the regions require special attention (e.g., Gaza City, Asyut, Abadan).

Taraki takes seriously the histories that detail how urban life has been affected by the collapse of regional populisms as viable ideologies, the rise of religious nationalism in the Middle East, and the systemic erosion of the welfare state and state socialist programs. In an embattled space of

the contemporary West Bank, she shows how some sections of the middle strata in Ramallah—the city that has become the de facto Palestinian capital and only cosmopolitan space in the occupied territories—are dealing with the unraveling of the postcolonial nationalist project with its incumbent promise of modern, educated, productive citizen-subjects. Rather, they have seen the deployment of myriad privatized individual and family projects for social mobility and distinction. Driven by anxieties and aspirations of a potentially hegemonic nationalist secular and modern project of the post-Oslo era, the members of the new middle class sought to execute their projects with singular determination. This led to increasingly commoditized urban spaces where quality education, modern and globally marketable skills, taste and refinement, self-improvement, and entertainment are sought by an eager clientele of middle-class individuals anxious not only to appear modern but also to distance themselves from their sometimes quite recent peasant, bedouin, or lower-middle-class urban origins. However, in the process of constituting and reproducing itself (most conspicuously through the unceasing drive for the accumulation of material and cultural capital), this class also produces its subaltern others, be they migrant peasants, refugees from the camps, or lower-class youths, all of whom threaten the collective vision of the desired modern urban order. So as much as Israeli aggression threatens Palestinian public and private life, the Palestinian urban middle class remains haunted by the “unmodern” within its own history and present.

Finally, Limbert’s work on the cultural politics of a small oasis town in the interior of Oman explores ways in which marginal urban pasts and presents are constructed in the everyday life of the people of Bahla. Situated at the historical nodal points of centuries-old Indian Ocean trade between Africa, South Asia, and East Asia, Muscat-Oman and other Persian Gulf city-states have reclaimed their space as financial and leisure-seeking destinations in the postoil boom period. While attention has been given to the making of modern metropolitan Muscat, and by extension the modern Omani state,<sup>22</sup> less attention has been given to understanding more fully the social dynamics in towns of the interior except that of their unmaking on the margins of the construction of the modern center of power. In her urban ethnography that links the history and everyday life of Bahla to larger changes in the Omani state and the Persian Gulf area, and to other global forces that impinge upon these transformations, Limbert raises important questions about how the modern urban is understood and lived outside the megapolises. These questions, we contend, offer new possibilities for alternative, dynamic, and more complex understandings of the contemporary urban in the global South.

## Conclusion

Looking at the building boom in China's cities and the pavementization of its farmlands for industrial growth and housing development—harking back to the Siberian experiment of the early Soviet state—we see almost nine thousand high-rises built in Shanghai alone since 1992. Thousands of buildings have no tenants, can never be paid for under capitalist conditions, and cannot be justified under market conditions. This said, the countryside is urbanizing at rapid speed, generating migrations of epic proportions by displaced peasants. Where the future lies for this new exponential growth in China, linking the coastal megacities along the Pearl River and Yangtze River deltas—Shenzen, Guanzhou (Canton), Zhuhai, Shanghai—with the hinterland in a series of interlocking highways and industrial parks, is anyone's guess. The cost in terms of human and social disruption is extremely high, and China remains a socially volatile space where more than 70 million underemployed people roam the land looking for economic security.<sup>23</sup> In the post-1979 “economic reforms”-oriented China, there are almost two hundred protests daily against the government's social abandonment of the poor and its land seizure policies for industrial plants, highways or housing, and infrastructure. One can only wonder whether Shanghai and other booming megacities of coastal China will end up like Lagos, after the current speculative bubble bursts. Rem Koolhaas notes, although in a peculiarly positive way, that such conditions for modern cities are emblematic not only of the African metropolis, but rather remain the terminal condition of all major cities, even London and Los Angeles, in an era of civic and social abandonment of the poor and the expendable.<sup>24</sup>

Such provocative future imaginaries motivate us to think through some of the ways in which urban transformation is occurring in the global South. In doing so and sharing this body of work, we seek to fill a persistent gap in the existing literature on urban space in the regions under discussion. Moreover, as the literature on contemporary urban issues concentrates on the megapolises, this collection of essays on smaller and medium-sized cities and the periurban spaces of large cities also explores questions as to how definitions of urbanity, and by implication rurality, have shifted within the context of these new urban cartographies, and with what sorts of *effects*.

While African, Middle Eastern, and South Asian cities may not have witnessed the same intensity of modernist industrialization as cities in other regions of the world, research has seldom taken into account how larger structural changes in distinct economies have affected the practices and experiences of people on the ground. The larger field does not have the sort of social histories that have explored urban lifeworlds in an era of

deindustrialization and major structural changes such as those available for many cities in the West.<sup>25</sup> Hence, the attempts presented in this collection enable us to ask further research questions in order to understand how real estate speculation in Beirut, the decrease in state-sponsored employment in Cairo, and the rapid urbanization of Dhaka affect the lived experiences of the citizens of these cities. The collapse of regional populisms as viable ideologies (e.g., Arab nationalism); the rise of religious nationalism, whether in South Asia or the Middle East; the erosion of the welfare state and state socialist programs; the increased migration to and from the two regions; and the transnational flow of goods, capital, and information call for a move beyond a formalistic and legalistic account of the process. We argue that there is a lack of social histories to provide an understanding of how the process of globalization—and its influence in decreasing employment opportunities in the formal sector, increasing the numbers of nonorganized female labor in entire sectors of the economy, increasing piece-rate work, elevating the percentage of noncontractual industrial labor, and decreasing state-sponsored employment in Karachi or Mumbai—affects people's experiences. Within this context, recent global economic restructuring has provided arguments for free trade and open markets and has acclaimed the emergence of difference, plurality, and tolerant coexistence. Yet it has also obscured how the forced integration of national markets into the world system has resulted in the disappearance of national subsistence and given rise to new forms of division of labor.<sup>26</sup> Building on these sets of issues, our endeavor remains to bring together scholarship that seeks to highlight the changing social dynamics in Middle Eastern, African, and South Asian cities through new theoretical lenses. We argue that questions raised in the essays that follow are essential to place the field of urban studies within the three regions in a comparative dialogue with each other and with similar efforts across the globe.

## Notes

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