

The Urban Turn

Abstract

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The urban turn of our time begins with the agrarian crisis. In fact, the agrarian sector in today's capitalist economy the world over is facing crisis. The emphasis is now more on logistical services, and making cities the nodes of logical management of economy. Thus, cities in comparison have become sites of greater investment, and the restructuring of cities is also under way. Cities are merging, gobbling up suburbs and countryside, becoming unendingly greater in size, accommodating more and more people, and are now the destination points of thousands and thousands of migrants. Cities have to be multi-functional to act as big trading marts, points of large networks of roads and digital connectivity, and sites of specialised services, besides being centres of administrative management and functioning as venues of parliamentary politics. Yet, they are also havens for refugees and migrants. Cities today conjure up the 'people', the 'mass', and what some call the 'multitude'.

After the advent of neoliberal reforms in the 1990s, cities as in India have begun to appear as sites of continuous fragmentation and gentrification. We can see in sum the following features: (a) infrastructure is re-organising the city in a way, which not only fragments work and reproduces the old social conditions, but calls for the permanent presence of the migrant as the intolerable but necessary factor in this process; (b) this reorganisation of the city is also a reorganisation of space that depends on a rent economy; (c) yet, in terms of urban governance, the reorganised city (always in the process of reorganisation) has a permanent problem posed by the anomalous figure of the migrant, who cannot be dispensed with and who cannot be settled; and (d) consequent to all these, the city, which produces violence, struggles, agitations, and movements, is not a harmonious entity brimming with the energy of its citizens, but an extremely contentious place marked by groups of people fighting for resources, space, rights, claims, and justice.

This context suggests the methodological need to focus on the figure of an outsider to understand the dynamics of urban growth, which is usually studied from inside, say from within finance, trade, the software industry, etc., and which makes the neoliberal city appear without fail to be a great consumption site bubbling with the energy of extraction and newer revenue-gathering exercises. The question of course may be asked: Methodologically why do we need this figure of the outsider to make sense of urban transformation, and for lack of better words, the 'urban turn' in our thinking?

The urban turn is also connected with a discernible shift in governmental focus. Policy regimes play an enormous role in the making of the urban turn. For instance, a century back employment became linked with urban peace. Factory legislations and trade unions became crucial parts of creating the social. The city gradually began to signify the role of urban governance in a proper management of society and democracy. In time, the city became the defining feature of a welfare state. Yet this would not be enough for the urban turn. For, unemployment could not be managed without the periodic new deals, which could only come rarely. Thus the city had to be a place of self-employment, small employments,

start-up ventures, and a vast multifarious site of circulation of all kinds of commodities – from plastic toys to information and money to sex workers and pimps. The old welfare state offered only passive support to subjects; neoliberal governance was to integrate the restless workless urban population in the ‘active’ economy, give them requisite skills, enable them to be competitive, and thus turn them into active urban subjects. Today, urban governmentality is at the core of the huge governmental exercises of management of economy, politics, populations, and institutions. Restructuring the economy, politics, and the state – what we know as the agenda of passive revolution – begin with transforming the city.

Yet the more fundamental shift comes in our own notion. The city merges into ‘the urban’. Is the city the same thing as the urban? What is this urban that has been created as an outcome of the shift?

Is the urban turn then like the ‘linguistic turn’ in social sciences that took place from the sixties to the eighties in the last century? Twists and turns in a labyrinth of concepts? A displaced site of something else taking place – a change that is neither in the city nor in the village, but somewhere else, perhaps in the form of capitalism and in its disciplining and punishing mode that we now term as ‘urban’?