

The Urban Nexuses of Social Injustice

Dunu Roy, Hazards International, Delhi

12-13 May 2016, Brighton
Nexus Network Urban Nexus workshop

The Puzzle of Planning

The roots of injustice and inequality in urbanism are deeply ingrained in what is the dominant theoretical construct of “development”. The seeds were sown two centuries ago, at the dawn of industrialisation in 1826, when von Thunenⁱ, a German economist who worked on theories of rent, proposed a “Ring” Model of a city at the centre with four rings around it. The innermost ring was of intensive farming and dairying; next a second ring providing fuel and building materials; then a third ring of grain production; and finally an outer ring for raising animals. This was, therefore, a model of *dependency*, wherein the city could survive only if it could not only appropriate food, energy, and water from the surrounding hinterland, but also its land, labour, and capital (three factors that are missing in the many themes discussed at international conferences; but there is a strong case for including them in the discussion). It was a model of the city as a centre of *extraction* and *appropriation* that lasted for a century.

However, in 1915, when industrialisation received a massive boost because of the First World War, the American geographer Galpinⁱⁱ, offered a curious legitimisation that rendered invisible the process of *extraction* by highlighting the *services* a central town offers that determines the land use in the periphery around it. This was followed by the German geographer Christallerⁱⁱⁱ, who developed the idea of a “Central Place” where, if services increased at the centre, then the periphery would develop. Another German geographer Loesch^{iv}, added non-service and socio-economic functions and suggested that the centre controlled the “Economic Landscape” around it. Finally, between two world wars, geography yielded again to economics, and the Austrian economist Schumpeter^v, theorised in 1947 that it was the “Innovative Firm” at the centre that was responsible for its dynamism. Thus, as the city grew, the centre-periphery relations began to spread outwards in ever-widening rings but now, theoretically, the periphery was dependent on the centre.

This theoretical domination was reinforced by the French economist Perroux^{vi}, who proposed that a concentration of economic activities at the centre is necessary for the periphery to grow. Hirschman^{vii}, a German economist, then conceptualised the “Growth Pole” at the centre as a planning strategy. Boudeville^{viii}, another French economist, defined the growth pole as “a set of expanding industries located in an urban area and inducing further development of economic activity throughout its zone of influence”, or as a “Development Pole” that sends out growth impulses into the hinterland. Meanwhile, Hilbert, a German mathematician, had developed a mathematics based on the work of the American mathematician Veblen, which could convert theory into practice by yielding numbers that could be incorporated into plans^{ix}. Thus, hitherto abstract

planning theory received a welcome quantification through numbers that provided substance to the concepts.

This is how insidious “trickle-down theory” was born. In geography, it proposed that development ‘flowed’ from higher order to lower order settlements; and in economics, it posited that wealth ‘trickles’ down from the top to the bottom of society. Therefore, all that the planner has to do is to plan for the linkages that enable wealth to accumulate at the centre (or the top) and eventually flow to the periphery (and the bottom). This theoretical construct has been the basis for urban development in much of the globe, specially the so-called “developing economies”. It underlies the notion of the city as an “engine of growth” as it sends out “growth impulses”. It provides the logic for “investor-friendly” policies for “urban renewal” based on “private-public-partnerships”. And the “dematerialised smart city” is nothing more than the innovative trajectory of using information technology to gather digital data for controlling the city and extracting the maximum revenue out of it.

What often discloses the character of a city, therefore, is what is seen as being at the ‘centre’ or at the ‘head’ of it. For the feudal city (or town) it was the castle, the manor, or the fort of the land-owning class. For the city of trade or industry the centre became the market square or the bank and the port. The garden city became the ‘green’ adjunct of the great industrial centres. When democracy emerged to displace royalty, the house of the legislature occupied the planner’s imagination. And the centre of the ‘smart’ city is corporate headquarters, often of the giants in the realm of information technology. The popular mind is so gripped by visuals that are propagated by the media that new aspirations are built (such as the city will become like Paris, or Shanghai, or Manhattan) that are devoid of content, meaning, and context. It is only when the actual flyovers and high rises and malls and energy distribution matrices come up, that the people at the receiving end begin to ask the real questions.

Searching for Answers

The developmental path in India has been no different from that in the rest of the globe. From 1950 to 1990 Indian planners did try to steer the nation out of the colonial morass and focus on the periphery, both globally and nationally. Thus, in the first three Five-Year Plans (1951-66), they concentrated on agriculture and on public housing and preparation of Master Plans for the cities that acknowledged the debt that the centre owed to the periphery. This was also the political spirit that imbued the fierce independence of the Non-Aligned Movement carved out at the Bandung conference. This lasted through the Fourth to Sixth Plans (1969-79) that were made to promote the growth of smaller towns and the integrated provision of services for the poor. But the Seventh Plan (1985-90) broke with the tradition of the welfare state to entrust the responsibility of housing construction and provision of Urban Basic Services for the Poor to the private sector; at the same time as India broke ranks with Asia and Africa in a neo-liberal globalised economy.

The debt crisis of the 1990s vastly empowered the centres of global finance and once again the impoverishment of the periphery, both within and without the city, revived with

vicious impetus. The city, as the neo-liberal engine of growth, both amassed resources to power that engine as well as extorted greater value from the mass of unorganised, casual, contractual, and informal labour that poured in from the deprived periphery to serve the engine. For perceptive observers, the question was, how could development theory be challenged in such a situation? One of the answers that logically suggested itself was that the nexus of political forces that absorbed and concentrated wealth at the top of the geographical and social pyramids could only be countered by another alliance of forces coming together at the bottom to protect its own creative instincts and interests. And such a coming together could perhaps offer clues to a different theory of what could constitute a city.

It was within this ideological ferment of the 1990s that some of us set up the Hazards Centre in India to cater to the need for knowledge that the periphery required to confront the centre. The Hazards Centre is a place where researchers from different disciplines could gather to provide information to those who most needed it. It is a response-based institution; that is, it has no pro-active agenda of its own and when community and labour organisations approach it for assistance with respect to a hazard that they experience, the Hazards Centre responds by setting in motion a participatory information gathering and analysis exercise, in the belief that understanding the problem is indispensable to its solution; and that the best people to define and accept the solution are those who experience the problem in the first instance and are the real agents of change. In other words, the production of knowledge has to go outside the precincts of the university and academia, which have also become victims to the emphasis on the individualised ethic of liberalisation.

Joining the Dots

I do not offer the experience of the Hazards Centre as “best practice” – far from it – but the examples that constitute a body of practice provide illustrations of the urban nexus of injustice and how ordinary working people organise to resist that injustice. I begin with a city where violent eviction of slum dwellers from the centre to the periphery (both within the expanding boundaries of the city) is symptomatic of a general urban disease. At one such threatened eviction, the residents collected data to reveal that they had spent an average of a million rupees per family over twenty years to ‘develop’ the land (that’s about ten thousand pounds sterling). So they asked the question, where was the land on which legal houses were to be built (but were never constructed) and why were they not entitled to the land they had ‘developed’ at such great cost? This radical change of focus from housing to land challenged the centre’s claim to land and other resources as commodities and provided inspiration to other working class slums in the city.

In another city, the urban working poor realised that, in the city’s search for modernity, they were also being deprived of livelihoods as urban policies cracked down on cycle rickshaw pullers, street vendors, waste-pickers, washerwomen, head-loaders, masons, domestic maids, and numerous other service jobs which lacked legal protection – and also characterised the ‘slum’ as an ‘illegal’ residential community of working people. So they carried out collective and participatory research at a hundred locations across the

city and discovered that what their class needed was not jobs, but *legal* claim to identity, space, and credit that would permit them to pursue occupations from which they could earn a somewhat adequate living. It was the absence of these entitlements that laid them open to daily harassment by police and municipal officers as well as compelled them to part with a over a quarter of their income as bribes and penalties, both at work (the street) as well as at home (the slum).

In a body of research carried out over several urban centres, alliances of what has been called the “precariat” (wrongly, in my view – since the quality of vulnerability ingrained in the word renders invisible the creativity and productivity of this class) have demonstrated several other aspects of why the city is considered to be an “engine of growth”. For instance, participatory community research disclosed that when a labourer migrates from the periphery to the centre her productivity often goes up more than four-fold but wages go up only by a quarter. In another case of research by a bricklayer’s union, the food intake of the worker was estimated to be *less* than 60% of the measured daily energy output at work. A third community study showed that the consumption of water and fuel by a daily labourer’s family was roughly one-eighth of the urban average and one-sixteenth that of the rich. These figures repeatedly underscored the diverse forms of extraction from the bottom to the top rather than any trickle down, as well as the incredible capacity of this class to survive.

Finally, in an overarching combination of many factors of resource use and their impact, using the instrument of carbon footprints, it was computed that the equivalent emissions of an urban worker earning less than Rs 8000 per month (that would be equivalent of the minimum living wage in most countries) was just below the annual sustainable limit of 1 tonne CO₂ per capita emission that is required to keep global warming below 2°C. This, however, is when only consumption of resources is considered. If, theoretically, multi-capital accounting through the saving of resource and carbon fixing is considered, as in the case of those who recycle waste or prepare food or engage in child care or grow vegetables or use sewage to produce fish, then the income levels are likely to go up by half. Global figures indicate that at that level of energy use it is possible to achieve all the indicators of health, including low child and maternal mortality, adequate nutrition and education, and productive work. Why, then, should this community of practice not be the basis for the truly “sustainable” and “inclusive” city?

What, in conclusion, does this imply for a notion of ‘development’ and how ‘urbanisation’ is embedded within it? The present nexus of resource use is clearly unsustainable and unjust. The use of superior and more efficient technologies is only likely to deepen that nexus and sharpen the social conflicts born out of inequality, as long as social relations remain the same. The critical questions that seem to emerge for all those who seek to support a subaltern perspective of the city may be enumerated as follows:

1. Is the ring model adequate to explain how cities are configured or is there the possibility of a more complex multi-cellular structure?
2. How is urban society to be configured so that there is an equal distribution of resources with access guaranteed to all?

3. How is work to be configured so that social life is productive and meaningful and not driven by profit motivations alone?

These are questions that seek urgent answers, but neo-liberalisation has ensured that the centres of research and learning are no longer responding to these questions as they have largely become complicit in legitimising “growth”, especially of the urban kind, in the belief that that is the answer to the problems of poverty and wretchedness.

Which is why these questions also pose those independent researchers who are trying to engage with real people in real circumstances, seeking a way to not only challenge the nexus of injustice, but also to construct a truly just society.

Sanchal Foundation/Hazards Centre
92 H Pratap Market
Munirka, New Delhi 110067 India,
hazardscentre@gmail.com
011-26817806, 26714244
www.hazardscentre.org

ⁱ Rosenberg, Matt: The Von Thunen Model, A Model of Agricultural Land Use;

<http://geography.about.com/od/urbaneconomicgeography/a/vonthunen.htm>, accessed 29.05.2016

ⁱⁱ Faragher, John Mack: Open-Country Community; in Hahn, Steven, and Jonathan Prude (eds.): The Countryside in the Age of Capitalist Transformations; UNC Press, https://books.google.co.in/books?id=SKT56-3vBL8C&pg=PA235&lpg=PA235&dq=galpin+central+town&source=bl&ots=Duto8LulCL&sig=DVvIEyixLASW0sxe9EY-wlYNj44&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiuv7Krsf_MAhXKnPQKHT49CjUQ6AEIMzAE#v=onepage&q=galpin%20central%20town&f=false, accessed 29.05.2016

ⁱⁱⁱ Briney, Amanda: Central Place Theory, An Overview of Christaller’s Central Place theory;

<http://geography.about.com/od/urbaneconomicgeography/a/centralplace.htm>, accessed 29.05.2016

^{iv} Losch, August: The Economics of Location; translated William H Woglom and Wolfgang F Stolper, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1954,

<http://www.economia.unam.mx/cedrus/descargas/economicsoflocat00ls.pdf>, accessed 29.05.2016

^v Sledzik, Karol: Schumpeter’s View on Innovation and Entrepreneurship;

https://www.academia.edu/5396861/SCHUMPETER_S_VIEW_ON_INNOVATION_AND_ENTREPRENEURSHIP?auto=download, accessed 29.05.2016

^{vi} Komarovskiy, Viktor and Viktor Bondaruk: The Role of the Concept of “Growth Pole” for Regional Development; Journal of Public Administration, Finance and Law, Issue 4/2013,

http://www.jopafl.com/uploads/issue4/THE_ROLE_OF_THE_CONCEPT_OF_GROWTH_POLES_FOR_REGIONAL_DEVELOPMENT.pdf, accessed 29.05.2016

^{vii} Santiso, Javier: Hirschman’s View of Development, or the Art of Trespassing and Self-subversion; CEPAL Review 70, April 2000, http://www.cepal.org/publicaciones/xml/7/20007/lcg2095i_Santiso.pdf, accessed 29.05.2016

^{viii} Christofakis, M and Papadaskalopoulos, A: The Growth Poles Strategy in Regional Planning: The Recent Experience of Greece; Theoretical and Empirical Researches in Urban Management, Volume 6, Issue 2, May 2011, <http://um.ase.ro/no62/1.pdf>, accessed 29.05.2016

^{ix} Branch, Melville C: Critical Unresolved Problems of Urban Planning Analysis; Journal of American Institute of Planners, Vol. 44, Issue 1, 1978, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01944367808976877>, accessed 26.05.2016