

AbdouMaliq Simone and Edgar Pieterse, *New Urban Worlds: Inhabiting Dissonant Times*, Cambridge: Polity, 2017. ISBN: 978-0-745-69155-8 (cloth); ISBN: 978-0-745-69156-5 (paper); ISBN: 978-0-745-69159-6 (ebook)

New Urban Worlds: Inhabiting Dissonant Times attempts to address the theory-practice relationship that has always been strenuous, yet unavoidable, in Asia and Africa. The appeal of the book is the promise to make everyday practices the key to understanding African and Asian urbanization. Simone and Pieterse “desire to restore experimentation as a normative aspect of living in and running cities and want to think about how concretely to create space for such experimentation to be possible” (p.x). The appreciation of unpredictability and flexibility in unequal societies, not just as modes of survival but as a way of life, is an important feature to comprehend contemporary urbanization. At the same time, it poses a challenge in theorizing the city, because it makes city-making open-ended, or at least subject to multiple scenarios.

The book’s structure follows themes that the authors see as necessary “conceptual and strategic interventions” to develop “concrete politics” in both city-making and urban theorizing (p.10). Simone and Pieterse outline a number of contradictions within understandings of the urban in the first chapter: the intensification of “narrowing and expansion, ambiguity and precision, dissipation and consolidation, embodiment and digitalization, movement and stasis” (p.2). The urban involves “intensive differentiation of people and things”, but at the same time subsumes all “singular human experiences” into making the city as an abstract world (ibid.). Hence, they make the case for rethinking the urban in the second chapter, “Precarious Now”, pointing to the unprecedented scale of urbanization in Africa and Asia—developments occurring without the luxury of the resources Europe gained from colonization in its early urbanization. The influences of the “operating environment of globalized infrastructure finance systems” and “global suburban norms” of consumption preferences are evident in urbanizing Asia and Africa (p.42, 43). These consumer yearnings, the authors argue, have affected the “urban majority”—understood from

Simone's previous publications as residents who continuously shape the city through everyday occupations and alterations of spaces in anticipation of various possible scenarios of urban futures (Simone 2014; Simone and Rao 2012)—to reinforce “the hegemony of inappropriate and unaffordable urban infrastructural landscapes” and the taking of environmental risks and financial debts (p.43).

Chapters 3-6 introduce a series of conceptual interventions, namely the “re-description” of urban environments, a focus on “secretions” in everyday urbanism, the horizons or possibilities of “alternative urban claims and modalities of organization” (p.123), and the centrality of “experimentations” in urban life. The need for re-description is based on the messy realities of the city—even when formal urban plans cling onto certain technocratic calculations that seem to be definitive, there is no particular component that is definitively fixed (p.81). As a result, even infrastructure projects that the state claims to be comprehensively designed would likely leave out realities that are not formally recorded. Simone and Pieterse did not provide an example here, which would have helped to clarify this claim. However, I found their claim resonating in my own research in Jakarta; for example, the assertiveness of the government to build flood mitigation infrastructures as a panacea to an acute problem, in spite of academics' criticisms of the project design (see Padawangi and Douglass 2015).

At the same time, city dwellers are always affected by and to a certain degree may internalize external ideologies. In addressing problems in neighborhoods and to seize possible future opportunities, residents conduct their own interventions in the built environment, including everyday “hacks” that might not be known by others who do not participate in their particular social relations. These hacks, however, may not necessarily be free from mainstream socio-economic systems. Simone and Pieterse use the term “secretions” to refer to these hacks for two reasons. First, they are not represented (and are thus *secretive*) in formal urban planning policies. Second, these hacks are flowing as *excesses* of practices to address everyday problems as well as to anticipate uncertain futures. The authors note that these “opaque social practices and cultures” can be overwhelmingly dense because there are

too many of them and too many different variations, but “taking secretion seriously” is necessary to “re-describe the relational and institutional potentialities of these cities” (p.121).

The book’s strength is that it does not stop at critiquing the ways in which an obsession to achieve generalizing urban theories in academia has impeded scholars from paying attention to details in each locality, but rather goes on to connect conceptual interventions with strategic politics, as exemplified in Chapter 5. “Horizons from Within the Break” outlines an actionable agenda for prioritising the fulfilment of the basic needs of all urban residents as “fundamental wellbeing and dignity” (p.143). In fulfilling those needs, they advocate for the “optimization” of public spaces in cities with overcrowded settlements lacking infrastructures, because streets and nodes provide economic opportunities that can range from vending, employment, to facilitation of physical mobility from one place to another. Rather than seeing streets and nodes merely as infrastructures, the optimization of public spaces means seeing them as social spaces, economic arteries, and “primary cultural domains” (p.143).

The authors call for scholars and activists to engage with dominant policy-making processes as “insurgent political institutions”, pushing “the formal system as far as it can bend”, and “stoking radical passions” for societal change (p.154). Citing the examples of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the New Urban Agenda, Simone and Pieterse look at these global policies as opportunities to plant ideas in existing institutions as experiments to “occupy imaginaries about the future” in global institutions (p.159). The authors foresee urban policy change as key to the transition between the present and a better future, rather than an abrupt disruption/revolution. This also resonates with my own experiences in studying cities in Southeast Asia. Many of the issues have immediate impact on urban residents, such as evictions and floods; as a result, it is important for academics to intermesh theoretical/conceptual understandings of the city with action to address pressing social issues. Consequently, the book is a call to redefine the relationship between urban studies academics and their research subjects, questioning so-called “neutrality” and “distancing” as not particularly relevant given the everyday exigencies of urban societies.

The authors' call for putting experimentation at the center of understanding urban dynamics, in this sense, also applies to scholars to take experimentation seriously in academic urban studies research.

An important point that connects theory and practice is their claim in the "Experimentations" chapter: "In order to advance a cumulative, slow-brew politics attuned to the popular and rooted in an ethic of care, particular knowledges and political sensibilities need to be cultivated as central to the practice of research and theory building" (p.155). To do so, the authors advocate five propositions with regards to "doubleness" as the appropriate sensibility in urban action. First, the need to continuously try to connect and weave various scales of being and action; second, keeping both the "systemic" and the "acupunctural" in urban interventions by assigning and designing micro-level actions to feed into the broader systemic actions; third is the consistent attention to both "the intimate"—the personal dimension of urban life—and the public; fourth is the creativity to articulate the "designed" and the "organic-emergent"; and fifth is the perspective that always seeks connections between formal political chambers and street politics (p.154-156).

Despite its insights, that highly resonate with my own experiences, there are at least three issues that I wish the authors would have addressed better in the book. Firstly, Simone and Pieterse choose to settle with ecosystem services in addressing the environmental issues that are currently haunting many cities in Asia and Africa because of their scales of urbanization and government unresponsiveness. "Once a rounded understanding of the local economy is established, attention can shift to ecosystem services" (p.143). The authors package the call for ecosystem services with the call to establish the commons to fundamentally change the form of "economic accounting" of shared resources. However, to consider environments as services and to assume they can be valued as such is problematic. The authors do not immediately explain how the commons can rectify the value abstraction of environments if nature is still seen as a resource for urban services. Economic valuations of these ecosystems as "resources", when brought to formal policy-making structures, are likely to miss much of the detail in messy social and cultural realities. For example, seeing

rivers in cities as service providers would reduce the spatial and cultural connections beyond economically valued services. Or, coastal fisherfolk communities that peg their livelihoods to the sea understand the coast and sea as socially and culturally integrated spaces in ways that the ecosystem services framework is unable to capture, as they are not merely services. Ecosystem services may be one form of policy “hack” or experimentation, but there needs to be other experimentations in parallel to address environmental degradation as well as social injustices.

Secondly, I was looking forward to a discussion of movements in Jakarta as deep as the one on the African Center for Cities, but did not find it. Having known Simone’s other work on Jakarta and his connections with the Urban Poor Consortium—an organization of urban poor in Indonesia that is well-known for its empowerment agenda as well as policy network strategies with academics and progressive politicians—it is a missed opportunity not to have an in-depth comparative analysis. The Asian geography could also have featured the work of Slum Dwellers International or the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights that have wider regional networks.

Thirdly, the book may find more resonance among those who share the same urban studies vision than among those without the resources that afford their concentration and patience, such as more pragmatic academics and policy-makers. While it was an enjoyable read for me, who found my voice as a scholar—as well as passions and frustrations—represented by the book, the conceptual arguments may not reach others that well. Conceptual arguments and claims, although interesting and important, require good concentration and stamina to endure before getting to examples in the form of the relatively long narratives of case studies. The gap between theory and practice is so wide that those leaning toward practice may still find the narratives too abstract.

Notwithstanding its limitations, the book does deliver what it promised: conceptual scenarios for concrete actions, without an “overarching theoretical story about urbanization processes” (p.185). The messages in the book are unsurprising for those who are familiar with both scholars’ previous works, but it is nevertheless a usefully concise work that

connects concepts and action rather well. In their own words, "...we have attempted to tell a story that values *both* the resourcefulness of urbanization processes that remain a highly contested meshwork of influences, articulations, circuits, itineraries, impositions and collective efforts *and* the substantially plausible prospects for bringing new sensibilities, political justice and material sustenance to urban life" (p.185-186). The book's important contribution is in making sense of urban messiness and still conveying a coherent conceptual understanding to configure potential multiple scenarios of action.

References

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