

**AbdouMaliq Simone**, *Improvised Lives: Rhythms of Endurance in an Urban South*, Cambridge: Polity, 2018. ISBN: 978-1-509-52335-1 (cloth); ISBN: 978-1-509-52336-8 (paper); ISBN: 978-1-509-52339-9 (ebook)

Cities of the so-called global South are often imagined on the brink of collapse. Social and environmental inequalities driven by hyper-urbanization, overpopulation, and unemployment in Southern cities contribute toward this apocalyptic imagery. Impoverished and overcrowded spaces inhabited by poor and working class populations are, in particular, characterized as “warehouses” of expendable labor, and “dumping grounds” for “surplus humanity” (Davis 2006; UN Human Settlements Programme 2003: 46). But what these alarming trends in urbanization often obscure are the ways in which millions of marginalized residents of Southern cities strive to maximize the resourcefulness of the spaces that they occupy. In his recent book, *Improvised Lives*, AbdouMaliq Simone attempts to make visible the inner workings of poor and working class neighborhoods mostly seen as uninhabitable and dysfunctional. Simone argues that urban districts in the South exceed the status of precarious housing to serve as a platform for unexpected connections, uncertain experiments, and strange alliances between people and things. By focusing on the generative potential of spaces written off as uninhabitable, Simone offers a fresh perspective on Southern urbanism based on notions of improvisation, ensemble work, and strangeness.

Central to Simone’s work is a reconceptualization of what it means for a place to be uninhabitable. Commonly used to describe a place that is unlivable, the uninhabitable in this book refers to the practice of *living with* the urban. Living with the urban is a generative process; it refers to how residents find ways of creating opportunities that maximize the resourcefulness of uninhabitable spaces. To explain the nature of the relationship between different people, things, and materials in this process of extracting value from Southern districts, Simone borrows the concept of the “ensemble” from Jazz music. The ensemble imagines democracy and improvisation in how each resident pursues his or her own path to maximize the potential of their inhabited spaces that do not seem to count for much. Simone explains that as an essential feature

of this “continual remaking of the built environment as asset”, improvisation is ultimately a strategy of endurance that allows poor and working class residents to “write themselves into a milieu that otherwise might seem to marginalize them” (p.5, 24). Simone uses a range of examples from Jakarta, Hyderabad, Delhi, Freetown, Chicago, Naples, and Haiti to highlight commonalities in how popular districts across the so-called North-South divide are transformed on a daily basis to generate economic and social opportunities. For instance, Simone uses the case of high-rise affordable housing in Jakarta, Indonesia – Kalibata City – to demonstrate how the home in this apartment complex is more like a tradable entity that can be rented according to diverse spatial and temporal arrangements. Similar improvised operations and experiments can be observed at work in the working class district of Seelampur, Delhi, which is normally characterized as a dysfunctional residential area dominated by Muslim minority residents but that also functions as a sophisticated factory floor spread across hundreds of smaller units. Simone sees the districts of Kalibata City and Seelampur not simply as places of residence but as staging areas where ensembles of improvised relations involving different residents, and pluralities of financial, administrative, and leasing arrangements are played, and that generate unanticipated, unusual, and ambiguous realities.

Rhythms of endurance and longevity emerge as important functions of the ambiguities and strangeness of improvised urban relations. Simone uses the example of the constant re-creation of a makeshift cafe in Kalibata City as different places during different times of the day and night to illustrate this point. As an ever-transforming space, it is difficult, if not impossible, to verify or control the kind of activities that the cafe supports. This kind of temporal use of space – sustained by processes of unmapping, improvisations, and indeterminacies – is the antithesis of the modernist conception of space based on a strict segregation of functions in clearly defined zones. Improvised spaces maintain a rhythm of endurance despite and because of their strange, incalculable, and undesignated character. Provisional use is thus a deliberate strategy employed by the residents of urban districts who recognize the importance of not drawing too much attention to themselves by making more permanent interventions.

As a study of the improvisational and generative potential of poor and working class neighborhoods across the world, Simone undertakes a task similar to Michel de Certeau's (1984) work on everyday spatial practices. Simone's emphasis on the uninhabitable or the practice of living with the urban creates new capacities based on alliances, connections, and experiments involving people, things, and materials similar to de Certeau's ideas about consumption: a productive process involving a subversion and manipulation of established rules by users who are not its makers. But unlike de Certeau, Simone is more interested in the infrastructure of "place", which contributes toward its function as a platform for new opportunities, experiments, and alliances. Simone calls the places where improvised lives are held "districts", and the process of creating a platform and milieu that enables people to do things in a generative and unrestrictive fashion as "districting". For de Certeau, space – defined as practiced place – is the site of everyday life, which is free from material specificities of place. On the contrary, Simone is interested in how districts function as the places of improvised lives, without dictating how such lives and activities are carried on.

While political, the multitude of operations, alliances, and experiments that take place in urban districts in this book are not seen as acts of resistance. Speaking of the role of residents engaged in the political practices of districting, improvisation, and ensemble work in urban South, Simone asserts that "[t]hey might not bring down the city, but they are in most respects able to bring down the city to the requirements of their makeshift economies that effect a modest but real redistribution of goods and services to their residencies otherwise formally cut off or excessively disciplined" (p.17-18). Simone explains that while collective ensemble work is not entirely cooperative, it can be seen as a maneuver and strategy developed by individuals who are trying to make the most of their districts. Such actions are more accurately explained as attempts in making urban districts more inclusive rather than a reaction against exclusionary urban policies and practices.

For Simone, a kind of urban politics called "the politics of peripheral care" emerges when large numbers of poor and working class populations are consigned to urban peripheries. Simone's peripheral politics is reminiscent of James Holston's (2009) work on citizen power in

urban peripheries in Brazil where residents gained insurgent citizenship status by establishing their neighborhoods on their own using the process of auto-construction. In contrast to Holston's view of insurgent politics, Simone views peripheral politics deficient in attaining rights and services, but one that entails an "active *refusal of inhabitation* in its present terms" (p.125). For Simone, there is something about the material conditions of urban peripheries, which "come to be less places in which to reside and more staging areas for diffuse operations whose itineraries, trajectories, compositions, and motivations are increasingly difficult to discern" (p.32). Within this environment, while things may be happening in the same space at the same time, they may not have much in common with each other or have any impact on structural inequalities. The kind of urban politics that is possible here is not rights-based but one that helps endure the uninhabitable based on a proximity of actions.

*Improvised Lives* makes important contributions to our understanding of what it means to inhabit a city where there is extreme competition over space and resources. Without romanticizing poor and working class districts in urban South, Simone urges us to pay attention to the provisional and unmapped processes that they hold. The strength of this work is that it helps reimagine unlivable and marginalized spaces in Southern cities as generative and compositional. This is a major analytical shift because spaces occupied by poor and working class residents are conventionally understood in terms of their material deficiencies rather than their embedded energies and potentials. By doing so, this work helps urban researchers move beyond the homogenizing and problematic category of the "slum", and brings a new perspective to off-the-radar urban processes often framed within the discourse of urban informality.

*Improvised Lives* is a book that must be read by those who seek to understand the Southern city as a compositional and transforming entity, possibly because of, and certainly more than, its deficiencies and failures.

## References

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