

Intervention Symposium—“Urban Theory from the Global South”

Conclusion

Turbulent Urbanities

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Despite incessant decolonizing revision and reframing, the histories of the urban South remain saturated with at least the affective atmospheres of (dis)order. Even when the explicit tropes may seem to say otherwise. A constant sense of apology or hesitation that no matter what is attained an imposed or self-generated turbulence is never far away. A situation where the capacities of urban inhabitants to make urban life outside the prevailing global or historical norms tend to be qualified. As they fear being construed as overly romantic, dismissive of all the modalities of subjugation.

But what makes us think that (dis)order is in need of a solution? That the search for status, for recognition, and a different international order is anything more than a perpetual inclination to plunder, of seizing or being seized, to eat beyond the terms of survival? What do the brackets, (dis), want to indicate—that stability and instability, settlement and unsettlement, cannot avoid an inevitable conjunction? That a modality of the existence of things cannot find a term beyond the designation of an absence? That the undoing of order simply results in the repetition of a different kind of order? That things cannot exist within each other’s proximity without some kind of overarching frame; that they are unrecognizable and have no value without

the specification of a relationship that defines their capacities in terms of what each does for the other within a general language of comparability? Why is it so difficult to consider a process of things affecting and being affected by others in ways that are always uncertain, open, and multiple; that are not contingent upon discerning patterns and rules? After all, is this not what we often seek “refuge” by turning to the urbanisms of the South?

If matter is in continuous motion, down to the most localized of instances, what is there to be (dis)ordered, or is this concept simply a temporary hedge, a placeholder for something that requires too many pointers and perspectives? As philosopher Thomas Nail indicates, motions of matter do combine and stabilize into relatively fixed patterns, synchronies, and relations. Thus there can be the appearance stability, but inevitably things become turbulent again, forming new improvised and indeterminate dispositions, as any configuration of relations is composed of things that are always already also elsewhere, never entirely locatable within a single field of observation; always external to any frame. And if we think of reality as a continual process of transformation only ever comprised of indeterminable modulations, then any process of coherence or incoherence of order might appear to be a rudimentary field of perception enacted by the methods of knowledge production operative in a given historical moment.

This is what Foucault meant by “the order of things”—the means through which a field of perception is composed through the drawing of lines that not only establish points of reference or localizable matter, but also act as a skein across the infinitesimal spaces between points—an episteme. The order of things has subsequently been based on marginalizing notions of nature that encompass the immediate experiences of things, the formation of collective feelings and subjective apprehensions. The occlusion and thus implicit amplification of the spaces between points, establishes then a scenario of desire—to always be elsewhere but not everywhere, to enjoin but not incorporate, to be a part of things, not only in terms of recognition and status, but also in the “parting” of the world, a rupture, a break in the action. For there is a “lure of the world” that draws one toward many different possible destinations simultaneously; an experience that is both joyful and tragic, that draws one into all possible dangers but with the sense of seeming impossible conjunctions and strange alliances. After all, it was such conjunctions and

strange alliances that were the enabling conditions of multiple urbanities. The way in which urban majorities—the working poor—were able to endure apparent insufficiencies of all kinds.

Turbulence is not only palpable but has become a prevailing urban condition. In part because of the exhaustion of the bifurcations that characterize the relationships between human and nature, human and (non)human, white and black, being and having, primary and secondary qualities. Every urban politic so far has been oriented toward mediating the false ontological distinctions ascribed to these divides. Insufficient for conceptualizing the contemporary urban domain, turbulence is *both* a condition of unimpeded capital accumulation, increasingly through the dispossession of residents from experiential and conceptual anchorage, and the affective correlate of needing to start in *the middle of things* as the operational procedure to navigate the assemblages of massive carbonization, artificial intelligence, logistics, overproduction, value inflation, social media(tion), and infrastructural collapse that characterize the urban today. Subsequently, turbulence comes to characterize the socio-psychological situation of the urban inhabitant—always having to readjust, recalibrate without recourse to anything but the most truncated of convictions—as reflected in the resurgence of nationalist and identitarian sentiments. The search for status and recognition with all of the pharmaceutical enhancements now on offer.

Turbulence is also the abruption of the long-term efforts to regularize processes of motion. While the logics of capital depend on the unhindered circulation of information and commodities, the non-locatable motions of people render them at least partially ungovernable and from which it is difficult to extract resources and loyalty. The exigency of rule then is how to capture people in motion, while at the same time ensuring the will of affiliation through promoting an ideology of freedom. Here, experiences of freedom then were linked to property.

Property was something always in need of development. It was not simply that one was able to possess land, but property was something in need of development, in need of being attached to measures of productivity. This required a taming of the land, the imposition of disciplining maneuvers exerted by the position of the owner. So, the imbrication of the property form on the body of blackness made it available to the coercive force possession required to impose a specific disposition on both body and land; to detach it from its organicity and ecology.

Such coercion was the necessity upholding liberty. Separability, engineered through property, thus turns freedom into an abstraction rather than lived experience, a condition always threatened by the instabilities in maintaining bodies and terrain as something detached, individualized. Property is thus a constriction of spaciousness, a reification of freedom in the terms of self-possession—something always wary of the possibilities of being “possessed” by other forces.

Freedom as an aspiration then is always vulnerable, always at risk of the volatilities entailed in defending a static position, a property. A position which, nevertheless, cannot stand still. Not as a matter of circulation, but rather through maximizing its exchange value, constantly turning it into something else, but without its opening out onto the world as something through which many things are able to pass, to use or engage. It is motion that doesn’t go anywhere. Motion that constantly worries about its freedom as a matter of precluding trespass, devaluation—as when too many inexplicable “others” move next door or when property taxes become unaffordable, or when property is refinanced too many times, and where freedom becomes a debt always due. In the midst of widespread dispossession then, this equation of freedom and property as the grounds through which rule is exercised, leads to a preponderance of motion of all kinds, where inhabitants spread themselves out across different itineraries and terrain, generating yet another register of turbulence, both generative and debilitating.

So in this space between the brackets and the noun (), between the “dis” applied to “order”, what does it mean to act from the middle? Far from a position of stabilization, of balancing out bookended extremes, the middle finds itself incessantly undermined as stabilized terrain, and rather “finds” itself, conversely, as a medium of unsettlement. Look at all the global middle classes who, having evacuated the rough and tumble communalisms of the street in favor of disciplined adherence to performances of respectability, must assume greater levels of indebtedness in order to stay in place—a place which is going nowhere. All intensifications of the declarative, that epistemological maneuver that attempts to settle matters once and for all, to pin things down, no longer provide the guarantees for an ongoing existence. Guarantees on which the legitimation of “doing the right thing” were based. From interoperable data to algorithmic determinations of definitive positions within shifting combinations of variables, from

the logistical maximizing of value to the droned zeroing in on any target, the impetus to define, settle, and circumscribe both ironically and cruelly unsettles anchorage, location, and confidence.

As urban residents change houses at rates close to changing clothes, where households spread out across multiple locations, where residents are incessantly in motion attempting to seize opportunities or avoid being seized by bad decisions and excessive obligations, an unsettling of inhabitation coincides with an intensifying dread that no matter what gets done it will be insufficient to ensure any kind of future. What does it mean then to act from the middle of such turbulence, where the proficiencies to categorize and contain across more expansive registers—from the nanoscales to planetary ones—exhausts the very reservoirs of those non-probable, incomputable, chance, and virtual relations that propel invention and ward off atrophy.

We seem to live today in conditions of *generic instability*. Such conditions point to the ways in which protracted histories of practice—through which the details of how the material and technical bases of cities have been articulated, disjoined, converted, juxtaposed, and amalgamated in both parallel and intersecting vectors of force—are no longer capable of holding the city together. Nor are they capable of being rejiggered and readapted to increasingly volatile atmospheres—climatic, financial, political. The specificities of materials, actors, and technicities are not constellated into patterns or evidence of macro-structural maneuvers. They figure their own *alliances*. Strange relations are being “designed” anyway. What is important is not to try and settle things down, but to move with them, and learn how to modestly, without grand expectations, to turn or steer them into specific possibilities that often only accidentally present themselves.

For there is an aesthetics that renders any overarching organizational logic inoperable. We may walk through the streets as we always have, may be caught up in the same routines, and expect the same results of these redundant actions. But these are invested and enacted with a sense of always something beyond, right here and now, through which the familiar could veer off into new directions. An eerie form of an aesthetic arithmetic that suggests that whatever appears in front of us is always “less than” and “more than” at the same time. This in turn is, as Foucault reminds us, *life’s priority*.

This is a matter of how any event, interaction, or scenario works off all that precedes and follows it, how their very conditions of possibility are posed, not simply within the personalities, histories, or situations of a given context, but in the time underway, the multiplicity of indetectable transversals of responding to the entirety of the world at a given moment, which makes itself present in an unprecedented specificity. Any event, scenario—no matter how insulated, specific, power-laden—takes place in the midst, in the simultaneity of multiple other events. Each exerts impacts beyond the locales and boundaries that would structure their relevance and the ways in which they would be conventionally attended to.

Instead of the search for “order”, in the rough and tumble everyday urban worlds of trying to make the most from what was available, of putting together people and things that didn’t seem to really go together, inhabitants tended to be convinced to let many different scenarios play out, demonstrated a basic tolerance for ways of doing things that didn’t necessarily correspond to their values or beliefs. There was something else besides, right next to the amplified attentions to identity, parochial interest, and parasitism, and that this something else was located, not within the ambit of human and social will, but the materialization of the urban itself. It is a notion that resonates with Deleuze’s figuration of a “center of determinacy”. All of the traumas of the past, everything that has been tried so far, whether it works or not, all of the times where one has fallen down to pick oneself up again does not prepare a person for what will take place now. All of that suffering that won’t be redeemed, but which has thickened your skin, turned the surface of the body into a confusing map of contradictory itineraries.

What is often missing in the deliberations of urban (dis)order is a sense of *refusal*. A refusal to be recognized, to be integrated into the vernaculars of citizenship and freedom. A refusal to be a captive audience, to be extracted from. A refusal to be a part of a society; to make one’s desires known. An indifference even to the capture; to find within the *hold* scenarios and dispositions that cannot be understood in any language. For example, the significant enlivening of feminism in Latin America during the past two years, expressed through the continuous feminist general strike, asserts the importance of “destituent desire”, i.e. the capacity to say “no”, no to every dimension of state violence, to every hegemonic form of managing social reproduction and precarity. This “no” is the predication of the capacity to bring new things to

life, not simply as an abstract negation, but as the active enunciation of a collective in the making. The general strike is an active withdrawal of implicit confirmation, a refusal to go along with the program, even with the prolongation of life taken as a value that outweighs the end of patriarchy or state terror. For urban inhabitants who have long relied upon everyday antagonisms in situated encounters with powers whose seemingly arbitrary distribution made it difficult to generate the most elemental plans for a tomorrow, narratives without conflict.

Again, the key consideration here is to circumvent the anchoring of relationality in any predeterminate overarching sense of attachment and fantasies of everything tied together in some supra-positional subject or subsuming ecology, as stereotypically characterizes certain strands of Anthropocene thought. Our technical imagination still is firmly linked to the *additive*, to what new knowledge and tools can be brought to the table. When the more relevant challenge perhaps is how to bring things to end; how to subtract from the world the obsession with maximizing, to subtract the search for status and recognition, and rather live as *unrecognized* and *inoperable*.