

The City as Assemblage. Diasporic Cultures, Postmodern Spaces, and Biopolitics

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The paper focuses on the emergence of the megacity/postmodern city and argues that its conceptualisation as space must break with notions of linear development and homogenous temporality in the analysis of urban socialities and in the application of centralised forms of governance to the regulation of such spaces. I draw attention to diasporic settlements, the co-habitation of different temporalities and spatialities, the emergence and the co-existence of discrepant imaginaries and ways of being. There are implications for issues of identity, biopolitics, and for cultural analysis.

Problematizations

In what follows, I want to focus on what the postcolonial recognition of the ubiquity of diasporas and the emergence of a new problematic about transcultural processes mean for rethinking the questions of culture and identity from the point of view of the heterogeneity of spatiality and temporality. One of my aims is to challenge some long-standing assumptions in the discourse of modernity about temporality, spatiality, and social imaginaries, although Lefebvre (1991) already opened up a theoretical space for such an undertaking. In particular, I will argue that the idea that the ordered community is ideally ethnically homogenous and developmentally “progressive,” an idea central to occidentalism, is fundamentally incompatible with the mutant, creolised, and “vernacular” cosmopolitanisms (Hall 1999) that have now become the norm in the megacity/postmodern city.

A displacement is therefore necessary at the level of theory, informed, on the one hand, by the fact that the current phase of globalisation has seen a massive intensification and extension in the scale of displacement and migration of people, both at the transnational and the national levels, mostly to urban spaces throughout the world (Papastergiadis 2000; Sassen 1999). Whilst the figures themselves—for instance 140 million in 2000, which is far greater than in any other period (Castles 2000)—give an indication of the change in scale, the problem is not just about quantities. Rather, the problem is that the imagination of both the urban and the diasporic, especially with regard to governance, has largely remained circumscribed by reference to the model of the state as nation-state, supported by the idea of the nation as ideally ethnically homogeneous. The foundations of this conceptual framework continue to haunt postcolonial thought (Cheah 2004). Notions of hybridity and multiculturalism entertain an ambivalent relationship with this framework, appearing to undermine it, yet open to recuperation by the disciplinary strategies of governance.

On the other hand, social theory needs to take into account the range of concepts that have emerged to address problems relating to issues of change, determination, the nature of the living, historicity, and memory, namely, concepts of complexity, flow, turbulence, emergence, indeterminacy, multiplicity, poesis. I shall draw from them to propose the standpoint of the city as an assemblage, and point to the implications for cultural analysis, specifically in addressing issues of diasporas, the postmodern city, the biopolitics of governance, and the theorisation of mutations in cultures. One of my aims is to use this new work to problematize the approach in cultural theory that remains circumscribed within the conceptual framework of governmentality and governance, thus within the purview of knowledge/power that inscribes a particular imagination of the social world as one amenable to the exercise of a regulating and securitising power.

A related assumption within that problematic of the social is that of the subject as the rational, autonomous, unitary agent, incarnated in liberalism's idea of the self-centered individual. This subject not only doubles as the paradigm for the citizen of the modern nation-state, but functions as the normative standard in relation to which all other subjectivities and identities are categorised as lacking in some fundamental way: underdeveloped, or primitive or lagging behind, or exotic, that is, as "other," or as deviant. The idea that cultures and identities are fundamentally heterogeneous and mobile, the result of a history of encounters, exchanges, grafts, borrowings, and admixtures, cannot find a place within the logic of the older paradigms of identity and social order.

The point is that the interest of the nation-state from the point of view of governance has been precisely to constitute itself in the form of a homogene-

ous population, for example, the French, the English—though hierarchised in terms of class, race, and gender. Or at least, this interest has overdetermined cultural homogeneity as both the desired goal of its intervention in the domain of the social and as a condition for its rule. The normalising strategies which the nation-state has invented in the post-enlightenment period have tried to achieve this goal through the standardization of language and public conduct; the normativization of the norms of the normal on the basis of rational knowledges (as science, as Foucault has argued); the democratisation of its system of authority by founding it in the general will or will of the people; a state-oriented political economy; and the planned unification of the nation as a single community, with the discourse of race and culture playing a key role in this. It makes sense within these parameters to categorise difference and resistance as pathology, deviance, dysfunction, exoticism, or underdevelopment, that is, as problems that a disciplinary apparatus could address through the constitution of specific groups and their allocation to different regimes of formation and technologies of surveillance.

This form of governmentality and its disciplining strategies were applied to urban as much as to other spaces, for example the post-revolutionary Hausmannian redesigning of Paris, or the post-war remaking of cities within the concept of welfare and insurance, addressing questions dealing with education, health, security, employment. These devices were also part of the technology for (re)constituting the citizen in the modern city, in the attempt to homogenise, or at least to subject to the same legal regimes, the plural and mobile groups that have been characteristic of the profile of populations in cities generally, for instance, in early modern Europe, as Engin Isin (2002) has established. These apparatuses have been at work in colonial cities, and continue to operate, if unevenly, in postcolonial conditions. They have come to be seen as the instruments of modernisation and the signs of progress, so that implicitly the conceptual coordinates of the state as the nation-state, and its inscription of ethnic and cultural homogeneity and the point of view of governance in constituting populations, have become part of the invisible taken-for-granted, i.e. acting as “doxa” for planners and the social sciences alike.

Underlying the strategies of development and planning, one finds the assumption of linear temporality and the idea that “progress” or “modernisation” is a matter of stages of development that imply the erasure or conversion of the previous state of affairs in favour of more efficient and rational stages. Both modern governance, and town planning as an instance of it, are premised on this thinking. Within this perspective, the co-habitation of different spatialities and temporalities is seen as a sign of dysfunction, or a side-effect to be managed by translating discrepant environments either into the idiom of “heritage,” refigured as an aspect of the “culture industry,” or into

the idiom of a “multiculturalism” that tolerates difference—the “stranger within”—so long as they do not challenge existing relations of power and the goals of rationalization. In the present climate of “war against terror,” discrepant and counter-hegemonic ways of being are now thought of as inimical to good order and thus to be countered by a policy of total surveillance and, at the limit, “zero tolerance.”

One should bear in mind that the model of the “imagined community,” constituted in relation to print technology and modern governance, already made invisible, or marginalized the presence of non-Western people in Europe, but also the fact that cities everywhere have been, for a long time, the sites of transcultural exchanges amongst migrant populations. This is particularly true of imperial centres, for instance Rome, Constantinople, Baghdad, London. The tendency to see cultural and identity difference as a problem rather than as a normal feature of the urban cultural milieu is an aspect of this occidentalist epistemology. I am arguing that in order to move away from the older framework of analysis, theory today must recognise two related problematics: on the one hand, the complex interrelations between mobility and settlement, uprootedness and groundedness, being and territory (Ahmed 2003), and on the other hand, the recognition that the intertwining and heterogeneity of cultures is far more endemic and of longer duration than many analyses of diaspora, hybridity, multiculturalism, migrancy recognise (Said 1993). Cross-cultural and transcultural encounters and exchanges are precisely the mechanisms whereby cultures change, although conflict often attends these encounters, as in the case of invasion and conquest, or in the case of exclusion.

In other words, cultures are inescapably polyglot. This is even clearer today because the interpenetration of the global and the local at all levels means that the material and the virtual, roots and routes, are now correlated in terms of different spatialisations and temporalities constituted in relation to new technologies of communication and travel, new spatial technologies, and, alongside this everyday reality, in terms of new imaginaries that pluralise belonging in quite new ways (Sassen, 1999; Ong 2003; Shohat 1999).

It is worth bearing in mind too that the process of migration and settlement, whilst it is now differently grounded by reference to territorialization, nevertheless follows a pattern of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, which is driven by a search for settlement and ontological security that has long roots into the emergence of forms of sociality, as Deleuze and Guattari (1988) have argued. This perspective brings into view the fact that the ontological and the affective dimensions of being-in-the-world are correlated in the everyday. At the theoretical level, an agenda around diaspora and migrancy has surfaced in the wake of these developments that itself needs to be rethought in terms of the *longue duree*, going beyond the parameters of the hegemonic discourse of modernity. A displacement is therefore needed at the

level of theory with implications for policy, and for the invention of new apparatuses that would support the new forms of diasporic cosmopolitan socialities that are appearing in cities across the world.

This displacement shifts the emphasis onto the importance of spatiality and temporality, namely, geography, architecture, and place, considered in terms of the imbrication of memory and history in the objects and environments that constitute the lifeworld of people and the investments that one makes in the material world. The spatio-temporal location of identity and subjectivity in regimes and “realms/lieux” of memory (Nora 1984–93), draws attention to the presence of the past in the present and the co-existence of the different rhythms and temporalities that inscribe existential belonging in the everyday (Lefebvre 2003). Such lifeworlds function as the habitus in relation to which people make sense of their lives. The constitution of such worlds and the constitution of social imaginaries and identity are correlated processes, that is to say, it is not possible to analyse the one without making visible the effects of the other processes.

Another displacement relates to the point of view of governmentality as elaborated in the work of Foucault, and thus the focus on the apparatuses and knowledges that constitute norms, authorise specific forms of power, and generate the technologies of the social concerned with forming, disciplining, and regulating populations (Foucault 1979). Contemporary conditions in the emergent megacity lead one to question the ability of state-based disciplinary regimes of power/knowledge to constitute socialities that conform to the norms it seeks to determine. The question that comes to mind is whether the co-presence of global and local effects—regarding social imaginaries and new identities—poses a fundamental challenge for state-based interventionary programmes. It can be argued that the model of governance premised on homogenous populations and temporality and on territorial exclusivity—with its own assumptions and myths or imaginaries about national and ethnic authenticity, cultural value, administrative efficiency, the space of belonging, the norms of the normal, and so on—is obliged to impose ways of being and technologies of control that intensify conflict. The attempt in France in 2004 to use legislation to impose conformity to norms, as in the case of the wearing of the veil in school, has demonstrated the problems with such local mechanisms when dealing with processes that respond to geo-political and geo-cultural forces.

It should be noted that there exists a different discourse about the urban lifeworld for which flux and mobility, the evanescent, and the indeterminate are intrinsic features of modernity, intensified in the pleasures and dislocations that make the city the site of transient populations and speedy lives, as expressed in Benjamin’s (1999) work. This view accords with the standpoint of assemblage that I will develop later. It is important to point out too that

against this celebration of a certain “nomadism” and of particular creative and radical groups, one must remember the insecurities and hardships of those, mostly the poor, whose displacement is driven by the exigencies of survival in a world constantly transformed by forces outside their control. These forces operate across the new “contact zones” and “scapes” that are in fact correlated according to capitalist calculations and forms of ownership. Today, all these pressures and tendencies make the city a place of stabilities and instabilities, of de- and re-territorializations that play out a diversity of ends. This means that the analysis of the culture of cities must foreground the standpoint of its diasporic configuration and the interpenetration of the global and the local at all levels of social reality, challenging the dichotomies of here and there (Cairns 2004).

The megacity as new problematic

Let me note two research projects that take account of the problematizations that I have summarised in addressing the question of the city today. Bishop, Phillips, and Yeo (2003) explore the neglected interface between urban studies and development studies, proposing a new approach that brings into view features of urban realities that have not been adequately recognized because of the way disciplinary inscription has so far cut up the world. A salient feature is the fact that multiple temporalities co-exist within the urban space, temporalities that are colonial, postcolonial and geopolitical, more intensely experienced now, but present in other periods too, as postcolonial studies has shown regarding the invisible presence of non-white populations in the metropolitan cities of Europe in imperial times (Fryer 1985). The authors argue that global urbanism and postcolonialism are concomitant phenomena, shaped by interdependencies that are obscured by the conceptual framework which divides the colonial, the postcolonial, the cold-war and post-cold-war into a series of distinct periods succeeding each other. They point to the hybrid and mobile character of the identities that co-habit the urban space, a plural spatiality which is punctuated by different rhythms of existence and by the diversity of experience and social relations that are lived in it (Pile/Thrift 1995; Yuval-Davis/Werbner 1999; Lefebvre 2004; Grosz 2001).

The work of Koolhaas (2002) and others (Chung et. al 2002; Simone 2001; Sassen 2001), with their focus on the postcolonial city and the megacity, adds concrete support for the (Lefebvrian) view about co-habiting spatialities and temporalities, detecting the process in the discrepant urban life-worlds that are theorised in terms of dysfunction or failure from the point of view of a western instrumental modernity or occidentalism. Looking at Lagos as exemplar, Koolhaas notes that what appears to be signs of decay and fail-

ure turns out to be complex systems of survival operating through recycling, trading, and networks of mutual exchange and relations. These enact sophisticated strategies for sustaining non-“Western” forms of existence for populations of millions of people in poorly resourced environments. Such activities are what conventional theory categorises as “informal,” that is, as elements of the “black” or shadow economy that escape the regulatory and disciplinary gaze of state agencies. Such activities exist to a degree in all cities anyway, for instance in favelas, bidonvilles, ghettos, and so on. They are the object of a biopolitics aimed at either containment or rehabilitation. What is clear is that postcolonial cities are set to increase in size and number globally—from Hong Kong to Shanghai, to Mexico City to Delhi—and that existing forms of governance cannot control these so-called dysfunctional areas that are not just by-products of displacements occurring both transnationally and from the rural to the urban (for instance already 40 % of the African population live in urban areas): they are constituent elements of postmodern urbanism and global capitalism. What is equally clear is that the effects of geopolitical power and transnational corporate activities reproduce inequalities at both the local and global levels, so that the analysis of the urban must be informed by wider theoretical perspectives developed in dissident and counter-hegemonic theorizations of the global, as in some postcolonial and cultural theory (Hardt/Negri 2000; Sassen 1999).

I would like to point to another perspective that throws additional light on the processes that sustain spatio-temporally plural and diasporic environments. It proceeds from the view that the lifeworld as living space is a territory appropriated by marking it in some way with marks that are culturally significant, that is, marks that constitute and reconstitute particular imaginaries. This activity, evidenced in the everyday in the décor and style of houses and buildings, or indeed in graffiti, and, generally, in the translation of place through their reiteration (their repetition with-and-in difference) in a new spatiality—say, China Town in Los Angeles, or Little India in Singapore, New England in the New World—is a form of memorialisation and socialisation of living space. It is a signifying practice that inscribes the material world with an affective economy and with historicity, so that it can be performatively appropriated as living space conceptualised in terms of such signifying practice. The fact that many people cannot appropriate the place they inhabit because of power relations that make them invisible or subaltern—say, women in some circumstances, the incapacitated, the elderly, the refugee, the “outsider” (Grosz 2001)—needs to be stressed when one thinks about the actualization of virtual spaces, the architecture of living space as well as attempts to intervene in these situations.

The reference to historicity is meant to bring into view the continuities as well as the shifts at the level of the imaginary when one considers displace-

ment and settlement, de- and re-territorializations, in terms of the identities and diasporic socialities that inhabit urban places. For one thing, it makes visible what the discourse of modern governmentality makes invisible, namely, the fact that the urban space has been plural and diasporic for a much longer period than it acknowledges. Besides, it enables one to interrogate the plurality of spaces by reference to the effects of power at the level of subjectivity and culture. Issues about assimilation and multiculturalism must be located within this perspective, so that the remaking of identities and communities can be understood as strategic responses to perceived power relations, taking the form of accommodation, or resistance, or coping strategies, or creative artistic practice (Enwesor 2002). A question about agency surfaces here that would require more space to develop than I have in the context of this paper.

The problematic of assemblage

In the rest of the paper, I would like to sketch a different analytical apparatus for addressing the range of issues I have noted, organised around the concept of assemblage. This concept has emerged as one of a series of new concepts, alongside those of complexity, chaos, indeterminacy, fractals, string, turbulence, flow, multiplicity, emergence, poiesis, and so on, that now form the theoretical vocabulary for addressing the problem of determination and structure, of process and change, and of stability and instability regarding social phenomena. As with the previous set of concepts in the social sciences, notably the notion of structure, they derive from developments in the natural sciences and mathematics. Their introduction signals an important shift at the level of theorisation and methodology, opening analysis to the recognition of the complexity of cultural, social as well as “natural” phenomena, for instance concerning sociality, the organism, mind, and culturally plural spaces.

Structure in conventional paradigms in the natural and social sciences grounds causal determination within a logic of stability and linear causality. It is a central epistemological element in the work of the grand theorists of social science such as from Marx to Parsons. The notion of discrete and nomological determination, which positivism and some forms of structuralism support, has clear pay-offs from the point of view of categorising and predicting social phenomena, and thus for the possibility of intervention and rational governance. However, the limitations of approaches based on this notion of determination have been demonstrated in their failure to account adequately for the dynamics of change, resistance, agency, mobility, the event, the irruption of the unexpected or unpredictable, that is, complexity. The limitations relate also to their inadequacy from the point of view of co-relating phenom-

ena across different fields, for example between the psychic and the social, the affective and the cognitive, and between matter and form. The problem for theory is that of re-thinking structure as well as multiplicity and indeterminacy within the same theoretical framework.

The concept of assemblage has appeared in the wake of questions about the relationship of structural determination to indeterminacy and emergence. In the recent literature it is mostly associated with the work of Deleuze and Guattari and clearly explained in Delanda (2002). One can also retrace its emergence by reference to developments in the physics of small particles, in topology, in molecular biology and generally in the interface between the theorisation of emergence and becoming (say in ontogeny and phylogeny), adaptation or autopoiesis and cybernetic systems (Maturana/Varela 1980), and post-structuralist mathematics. They all emphasise adaptivity rather than fixity or essence, the formal properties of the system rather than the specific instance, the spatio-temporal dimension rather than quantities, the relational, that is, co-articulation and compossibility, rather than linear and discrete determination, the multilinear temporality of processes such that emergence and irreversibility are brought to the fore (Prigogine/Stengers 1984).

In the light of the foregoing, assemblage can be seen as a relay concept, linking the problematic of structure with that of change and far-from-equilibrium systems. It focuses on process and on the dynamic character of the inter-relationships between the heterogeneous elements of the phenomenon. It recognises both structurizing and indeterminate effects, that is, both flow and turbulence, produced in the interaction of open systems. It points to complex becomings and multiple determinations (Ong/Collier 2004). It is sensitive to time and temporality in the emergence and mutation of the phenomenon; it thus directs attention to the *longue duree*. Whilst Deleuze and Guattari (1988) suggest desiring machines as exemplar, one could instead refer to weather formation and the genome, or for that matter, to the formation of identity and diasporic cultures, that is, to the (post-Deleuzian) question of emergence and becoming generally.

In relation to the latter, one must point to the fact that the translation of cultures through the diasporic displacement of people occurs mostly in urban environments. Cities are already technological and social assemblages, operating in the form of coordinated networks of sub-systems relating to buildings, transport networks, commodity exchange, productive practices, apparatuses of training, regulation and communication, artistic practices, and so on. All these sub-systems are open systems, coherent in terms of their own rules and routines and flows, yet open to the effects of contiguous systems, that is to say, they are dynamic, complex, processual, and autopoietic in their opera-

tion. Change and turbulence in one part of the assemblage has effects for the other parts, often with indeterminate consequences.

The conceptualisation of the city as assemblage has the advantage of enabling theory to recognise the degrees of freedom that enable the urban spatiality to adapt to change; another advantage is the ability to envisage disequilibrium as normal. Contemporary patterns of migrancy and settlement enable one to see this process of mutation in action, for example, in the case of the effects of mass migration such as Turks to some German cities. Such movements appear as event, that is, as an irruption that results in the emergence of innovation through adaptation, graft, invention, the mobilisation of potential capacities, new combinations, and changes in configuration.

In the idiom of assemblage, emergence is processual, it occurs according to a pragmatics of becoming. With regard to diaspora, one could take the case of the category of music called “urban,” which has developed out of particular combinations of hip-hop, rock, jazz, indie and other musical forms from around the world, recombined to express the specificity of urban living in different locales, using new technologies of music production. This music belongs to the complex set of signifying practices that inscribe and shape diasporic identity. Its meaning and effects need to be located in relation to the range of teletechnologies that now form or mediate contemporary social imaginaries. Their functioning relates, on the one hand, to their imbrication in global corporate capitalism and in strategies of subjectification and subjection, and, on the other hand, to their deployment as the visible and audible technics for establishing and supporting networks of social relations operating transculturally to sustain plural belongings and habitations. Teletechnologies, as a constitutive element of contemporary cultures, sustain cultural spaces where both virtual and real co-habit, a space open both to mediated capitalism and to “flexible citizenship” (Ong 1999) and alternative becomings. It is clear that the recognition of the centrality of migration and diasporas for an understanding of spatiality and culture, together with the standpoint of cultures as unavoidably intertwined and recombinant, entails a break with the epistemological framework that legitimates strategies of normalization, assimilation, exclusion and enfortressement in urban and national spaces, and the power relations played out through them.

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