Authors Meet Critics

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Article: Slumdog Cities: Rethinking Subaltern Urbanism (2011, IJURR 35.2, 223–38)

Online Participants

Balakrishnan, Sai	Lewis, Nathaniel
BouAkar, Hiba	Lombard, Melanie
Cage, Caroline	Manella, Gabriele
Chatzi, Venetia	Nwachi Christy
Colini, Laura	Qian, Junxi
Karaliotas, Lazaros	Schrader, Stuart
Kose, Burak	Uffer, Sabina
Labbé, Danielle	Wang, Jun

Offline Participants

Anirban, Adhya	Herring, Christopher

Moderators

Yuri Kazepov
Giovanni Torrisi

<Kazepov, Yuri> Dear All, it's a pleasure to welcome you to the Authors meet Critics chat with Professor Ananya Roy, who, as you know, is Professor in the Department of City and Regional Planning at the University of California, Berkeley, where she teaches in the fields of urban studies and international development. We are very grateful to her for being here with us. Today I will moderate as Giovanni is in a traffic jam and will be arriving late.

If you want to start with your questions please go ahead…
        The first question is by Caroline.

<Cage, Caroline> I found your description of the four concepts[1] that 'disrupt subaltern urbanism' (p. 231) very interesting. I understand that you do not think of them as necessarily separate, but as concepts that give different ways of viewing the heterogeneity of urban centres. I wonder if you could give an example in one city or one region of how these different concepts can be described in this context and, thus, how they may or may not interrelate?

<Kazepov, Yuri> Ananya, the floor is yours.

<Roy, Ananya> Caroline, you are correct that I do not think of these as separate concepts. In fact, I think that these concepts are very much in conversation with each other. If I were to take the case of Kolkata, India, the site of quite a bit of my ongoing urban research, then these lines of conversation become amply evident. One can analyse Kolkata itself as the periphery of urban theory; one can analyse its actual peripheries; one can analyse these peripheries as shaped through informality (as a mode of the production of space); one can interpret such informality as grey spaces or as zones of exception. So, yes, I want these concepts to be useful heuristic devices that we can use to reassemble the normalized category of the urban. Caroline, why don't you tell me how you are thinking about these concepts?

<Kazepov, Yuri> Caroline, any reaction? Do you want to go further along this line? It would be really interesting. You might also specify where you are and what you are doing.

<Cage, Caroline> Thank you. I also see them as interrelating. I was thinking of them in terms of my own research in Kisumu, Kenya, and how they can be related to organizations of the urban poor and their role in an area that is not part of a megacity, but an evolving area on the periphery of a rapidly urbanizing city.
        This is an area that is on the way to becoming part of the city, and these organizations are still fighting for a voice in how it develops. As yet there is not significantly high land value, and thus it is not as 'politicized' as megacities. You could say it is in the process of becoming more peripheral.

<Kazepov, Yuri> Ananya any comment on this?

<Roy, Ananya> Let me suggest some other ways of thinking about these four concepts: (1) we can think of the periphery as a space not shaped by the logic of the centre (Simone, 2010); (2) that informality allows us to consider how such a space is also a frontier of capital accumulation; (3) that zones of exception allow us to understand the administrative practices of statecraft that govern such frontiers; and (4) that grey spaces

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[1] 'peripheries, urban informality, zones of exception and gray spaces' (p. 224)

remind us of the ethnocratic logic of 'blackening' and 'whitening' that shape these regimes of rule.

<Kazepov, Yuri> There is a question that is partly related to Africa and the issue raised by Caroline. Christy's question, please.

<Nwachi, Christy> Hello, Professor Roy. A very incisive article indeed. 'Metrocentricity' is a testimonial to failed regional policies of governance in Africa whereby unfairly concentrated industrial belts attract masses of skilled and unskilled labour. However, bearing in mind that cities such as London and New York harboured some of the worst slums in the nineteenth century, could the third-world cities be regarded as going through the same processes that cities of the global North have gone through?

<Roy, Ananya> Christy, thanks for the question. Let me clarify that I use the term 'metrocentricity' in reference to the essay by Bunnell and Maringati (2010) where they analyse geographies of authoritative knowledge. I think you are using the term in a different way — and that's fine. There is a wonderful piece by Vanessa Watson called 'Seeing from the South' where she argues that new lines of seeing can allow for new types of urban planning … But let me also try to answer the second part of your question in relation to my IJURR article. First, I think we need to consider that world maps of development and underdevelopment have shifted; so-called 'first-world' economies are today in dire trouble and so-called 'emerging' economies in the global South, e.g. India and China, are booming. This requires new analytical frameworks of us — well beyond the category of 'megacities'. Second, this may require rethinking development as a teleology, i.e. that we need to pay more attention to uneven geographies and uneven temporalities — which is what you seem to suggest in your question.

<Schrader, Stuart> Dear Professor Roy, I wondered if you could comment on whether, in your view, an analytic framework of racialization/racial formation and racism has critical purchase in the effort to call into question the conditions of knowledge of slumdog cities via the Spivak-inspired marking of archival silences? It strikes me that this article observes, but does not make explicit, the fraught heritage of race-thinking in urban studies as it is transported into the present and into the study of cities of the global South, whether in terms of biological metaphors deployed as analytic tools, in terms of the return to ontology, or in terms of topological metonymy that resurrects a discourse of chromatic bifurcation and intermixing without apparent reflexivity. How can critical scholars point to the racisms at work in cities of the global South, as well as in scholarship among thinkers from the global North (predominantly), without re-inscribing untenable notions of North–South diffusion of race-thinking?

<Roy, Ananya> Stuart, this is an excellent question and it serves as both an important critique of my IJURR essay and of this strand of postcolonial theory itself.

The straightforward answer to your question is that, of course, an analytic framework of racialization has critical purchase in postcolonializing urban theory, in

'provincializing' its claims. But your question also requires of us some reflection on the concept of the 'subaltern' itself and the ways in which, in the work of the influential Subaltern Studies school, the term has been defined mainly through class relations — Guha' (1988: 44) 'demographic difference'. Spivak's critique of such ideas of subalternity relies heavily on a feminist deconstruction of itineraries of recognition. Now, as you know, other lines of postcolonial theory have paid much more attention to how race inscribes the coloniality of epistemology, but your question reminds me that this is not necessarily the case with the Subaltern Studies school. Note also that of the four concepts it is perhaps that of grey spaces that is most attentive to projects of racialized power.

<Kazepov, Yuri> Very good. Let's move on to the next question from Laura.

<Colini, Laura> Hi all, and Professor Roy. Following your answer to Christy, do you believe that the four concepts you analyse in the article could also be useful in proposing new analytical frameworks in the epistemologies and methodologies of urban studies for the global North?

<Roy, Ananya> Absolutely, Laura. Much of my interest in 'new geographies of theory' is precisely about demonstrating how analytic concepts that emerge in the crucible of research in the cities of the global South can reshape the canon of urban theory and its interpretation of *all* cities.
        I make this point because I think, as scholars, we need to foster forms of 'critical transnationalism', i.e. theory that reveals its provincial roots but that can also travel. This is a bit different from the universalizing claims of the canon of urban theory, much of which has been forged in relation to a handful of cities in America and Europe, but which travels without friction or without traces of its origins.

<Torrisi, Giovanni> Laura, would you like to add anything?

<Colini, Laura> Just that I totally agree with Professor Roy. Her new proposal of looking at the vanishing points could be very useful, especially in the European debate about urban regeneration in the so-called 'deprived urban areas' or *quartiers en crise*.

<Torrisi, Giovanni> Let us now read the question by Junxi.

<Qian, Junxi> I really enjoyed reading this article, but I have a somewhat naive question. I would like to know, after such a substantial epistemological intervention, how would you actually define the term 'subaltern urbanism' anyway? I like all the four issues raised by you, but I think to study them requires very different lines of enquiry. How do you reconcile these four issues under an overarching concept of subaltern urbanism, especially as you seem to say that 'subaltern' does not necessarily denote a class dimension?

<Roy, Ananya> There are at least two questions here but they both require a discussion of subaltern urbanism and so let me explain what this concept entails and how I am writing

both within and against it.

The article starts with the premise that there is a vital and vibrant body of research and theorization currently underway that seeks to recover the urban practices of subaltern groups and subaltern spaces, and that such research is a welcome change from the apocalyptic portrayal of megacities and third-world slums. But at the same time I wanted to stage an intervention in how subalternity itself was being conceptualized in such work. Of course, in postcolonial theory itself, especially in Subaltern Studies, the subaltern has been understood as 'demographic difference' (Guha, 1988: 44), i.e. subordinate groups, and then also as those with popular agency. What Spivak does is to provide us with a dramatically different understanding of the subaltern — that the subaltern is about an archival relationship, it marks the limits of archival and ethnographic recognition.

So, in the IJURR article I am sympathetic to the work of subaltern urbanism but I also want to reorient it away from ontological and topological understandings of the subaltern and to make the case that a postcolonial intervention in urban theory can instead be about the conditions of knowledge production.

<Torrisi, Giovanni> Junxi, jump in. Any reaction?

<Qian, Junxi> A very interesting intervention indeed! I would say the discussion on the 'zones' in China is very interesting, but we may not forget that this space is somehow trespassing between a state of exception and a mainstream ideology of developmentalism in post-socialist China. In China the zones are also regarded as the economic elites' manipulation of capital accumulation. So actually interpreting it as being 'exceptional' in a relational way may require a good deal of future work.

<Roy, Ananya> I am drawing here primarily on the work of Aihwa Ong, specifically her important text, *Neoliberalism as Exception* (2006), both for a theorization of zones of exception and for a discussion of zones in China. As I mention in the IJURR article, Ong describes zones as both exceptions to neoliberalism and as zones of neoliberal rule, and above all she means zones to be a system of spatial order produced and maintained by the state. I would add that such zones of exception demonstrate the type of territorialized flexibility of the state that has been of interest to me in my work on urban informality.

<Torrisi, Giovanni> Now a question by Lazaros Karaliotas.

<Karaliotas, Lazaros> Dear Professor Roy, thank you for the thought-provoking article. Building on your reading and critique of the links between subaltern urbanism and political agency, I wonder if you could say a bit more on how these four interlinked 'vanishing points' that you describe could be interlinked with processes of political subjectivation, as processes that cannot be assigned to any pre-given place/site, in moving beyond the a priori construction of the subaltern as political agency.

<Roy, Ananya> Excellent question, and I have to admit that the IJURR article does not fully

take up this issue. I try to do that in more recent work, including a recently published co-edited volume (with Aihwa Ong), *Worlding Cities: Asian Experiments and the Art of Being Global* (2011). In this new work on 'worlding', I argue that postcolonial theory allows us to rethink geographies of authoritative knowledge and the question of political subjectivation that you raise.

For example, I am interested in postcolonial formations of self-rule, homegrown development, ambitious new projects of global urbanism and what in India and China is being billed as 'the Asian century' — these are processes of political subjectivation that cannot be reduced to subalternity.

Similarly, I am interested in emergent formations of 'middle-class' politics and the claims of these consumer-citizens in megacities — also something that cannot be reduced to subalternity —– and also processes that are not satisfactorily analysed by Chatterjee's (2004) distinction between civil and political society. But at the very least in the IJURR piece I wanted to cast doubt on the notion that there is some sort of 'essential' politics of the subaltern.

<Karaliotas, Lazaros> Thank you for this. Working in the Greek context, the issues you raise are of great significance.

<Torrisi, Giovanni> Thanks for a very interesting discussion. Professor Roy, do you have anything to add to this discussion or should we pass to the next question?

<Roy, Ananya> I think the Greek context is one of those that are most 'disruptive' of our canons of development theory and urban theory, in that it forces us to pay attention to new maps of crisis. It also forces us to think about a process that is of great interest to me — hyperfinancialization and the role of finance/debt capital in the making of everything, including the production of space.

<Torrisi, Giovanni> Greece is indeed an urban laboratory for social change.
A question by Gabriele Manella.

<Manella, Gabriele> Dear Professor Roy, thank you very much for your very interesting article and for being here. I have a general question (not too general I hope!). You paid a lot of attention to Mumbai, and I have heard sometimes that 'if you don't see Mumbai, you cannot understand the city today'. Do you think there is any truth in this statement?

<Roy, Ananya> Sorry, Gabriele, but can you clarify your question? Is this a question about method?

<Manella, Gabriele> It is a question about trends that can be found in Mumbai and that may be representative.

<Roy, Ananya> In the IJURR article I suggest that subaltern urbanism is both a paradigm of academic research and a paradigm of common-sense knowledge, i.e. the slum tours, the

slum films, the star-architects seeking to redesign megacities. So, in this sense, cities like Mumbai may indeed be 'paradigmatic' (I would not use the word 'representative' because I think that term has a very particular meaning in ethnographic social science compared to, say, statistical representation).

<Torrisi, Giovanni> Gabriele, anything to add to the issue?

<Manella, Gabriele> I see. Thank you very much for your answer!

<Torrisi, Giovanni> Sabina asks about grey spaces:

<Uffer, Sabina> I was wondering if you could say a bit more on the concept of grey spaces, especially on the question of who/what is doing the 'blackening' and 'whitening'? Is it the administrative practices of the zones of exception or is it also politics? If so, how are these two connected? Are there examples that you can give?

<Roy, Ananya> Good question, Sabina. Note that the concept of grey spaces is a relatively new one, especially as expressed in the writings of Oren Yiftachel (2008; 2009a; 2009b).
Yiftachel's work is concerned both with the administrative practices of the state as well as with a broader scheme of ethnocracy, but he is also very interested in the type of claims-making politics that this grey-spacing produces.
For an interesting text on blackening and whitening, take a look at Aihwa Ong's *Buddha is Hiding*, which examines how racial-ethnic minorities (in the US) are blackened and whitened, a somewhat different analysis of power and politics than her later work on zones of exception.
What draws me to the concept of grey spaces is precisely the issue you raise in your question — that it takes us beyond the administrative practices of zones of exception and allows us to think not only about 'graduated' zones of sovereignty (Ong's phrase) but also about 'variegations' of power, or what in my work on urban informality I often refer to as fractal geometries.

<Torrisi, Giovanni> Sabina, your chance to reply.

<Uffer, Sabina> Thanks, I will definitely look into these texts. Not much to add, I am just interested in the conceptualization of the state in these contexts. But the next question touches upon that as well.

<Torrisi, Giovanni> I have just received a question by email from **Christopher Herring**: He could not be with us because of a problem with his browser:

> 'I really enjoyed this piece. Just as Spivak's work challenges us to study how the subaltern is constituted as an object of representation and knowledge in Western historiography and theory, your article challenges us to study how the subaltern is constituted from within subaltern theory itself. One aspect I was surprised you

didn't draw attention to in your internal critique of subaltern theory, which nevertheless seems to be implied in it, is its normative posture. Each of the accounts you cite from the subaltern school are portrayed as celebratory, neoromantic portrayals of political agency, self-organized economies, and entrepreneurialism, and you seem concerned as to what path this emphasis might determine for a theory of subaltern urbanism. In other cases of subaltern scholarship, this is obviously reversed: dominant positive portrayals are challenged with negative perspectives from below. I was curious as to your thoughts on the normative implications that seem almost built into subaltern theory, whose epistemological core is by definition oppositional to 'dominant' histories, theories and portrayals? Or whether you see these trends as explainable without reference to such a normative critique?'

<Roy, Ananya> Some of my answers to previous questions address the important point raised here, and so let me provide a brief response.

I wrote this article because I was struck by the proliferation of academic and common-sense understandings of subalternity (condensed in the spatial metonym of the third-world slum) that celebrated entrepreneurialism, self-organizing economies and popular/tactical agency. Such views cut across the political spectrum — from visions of post-capitalism by left-leaning thinkers to visions of economic libertarianism by interlocutors like Hernando de Soto. In the IJURR article I wanted to call into question this interpretation of subaltern economies and to indicate that these are thoroughly commodified spaces, implicated in global circuits of capital accumulation (this has also been my work on microfinance), and also to call into question the romanticization of the tactics of the poor — not only by making note of its limits but also by pointing out its deep contradictions (i.e. that these tactics too are shot through with power and hegemony and cannot be reduced to a single, coherent politics of resistance).

<Torrisi, Giovanni> Thanks, Professor Roy — very enlightening.

Let us go back to our 'live-participants'. A question from Nathaniel Lewis.

<Lewis, Nathaniel> Hi Professor Roy, thank you for a really insightful tour through what is a relatively new concept/field for me — Subaltern Studies. One of the threads that I noticed throughout the article is a sort of tension in the social and economic realities of the subaltern subject (poverty, disenfranchisement) and the need to point out the very worthwhile ideas, concepts and 'ways of doing' that emerge from these subjects and the places they inhabit. This seems to be positioned as a positive alternative to the sort of Northern gaze that has typically cast the megacity as chaotic and dispossessed. At the same time, have you felt that the Subaltern Studies field (or certain specific studies within it) have ever bordered on creating a new type of gaze on the Southern megacity; i.e. 'celebrating' a sort of neoliberal pulling-oneself-up-by-the-bootstraps, etc.? In other words, are there risks/limits to the idea of the subaltern?

<Roy, Ananya> Nathaniel, yes, exactly! This is why I wanted to grapple with subaltern

urbanism. I don't want to suggest that scholars working within the genre of subaltern urbanism are somehow complicit with neoliberal frameworks, but fully agree with you that a 'new type of gaze' is being constructed. In some of my parallel research on microfinance, I have argued that we are part of a historical moment (what I call millennial development) during which poverty becomes visible, and often becomes visible in ways that restore dignity and humanity to the poor. But that such types of visibility also construct understandings of the poor as self-responsible and entrepreneurial. And that this, in turn, can fuel new forms of capitalism that (put crudely) seek to convert 'poverty' into 'capital.' I call this 'bottom billion capitalism', and you can see how it is at work not only with microfinance but also with spaces like the slum…

One way of understanding this is by returning to the work of scholars like Jamie Peck and thinking about the hybrid/mongrel character of neoliberalism itself. I am interested in these formations (which bear a family resemblance to subaltern urbanism) and I have been calling them 'neoliberal populism' — a celebration of the people's economy, new visibilities of poverty, and yet through all of this a deepening of market rule.

<Torrisi, Giovanni> Nathaniel, a very interesting answer to a very interesting question. Anything to add?

<Lewis, Nathaniel> Thank you! This is exactly what I was getting at — and thank you for a great intro to the topic. I mostly study sexuality in the city (which, now that I think about it, is not 'outside' Subaltern Studies at all!), so this was a great way to get acclimated.

<Torrisi, Giovanni> Next comment and question from Melanie Lombard.

<Lombard, Melanie> Hi Professor Roy, thanks for your article, which I really enjoyed reading. I arrived a bit late so sorry if someone has already asked about this. I was wondering about your conception of the state and its role as regards these issues, especially relating to the theoretical projects you highlight as disrupting subaltern urbanism. In particular, planning seems to be implicated in several (if not all) of these — as you have pointed out here and elsewhere with regard to urban informality, and also to the demarcation of zones of exception, and the reproduction and protection of grey spaces. Meanwhile, one of the implicit criticisms of subaltern urbanism seems to be its lack of an account of the state. Could you comment on this?

<Roy, Ananya> Melanie, I am very glad that you asked a question about the state. (Let me answer this at a certain level of generality, i.e. without discussing specific state practices such as planning.) I think that all four concepts are also, to a greater or lesser degree, theories of statecraft. Although Simone (2010) does not necessarily provide us with a conceptualization of the periphery that is also a theory of the state, I think that the work of Holston and Caldeira (2008) does this, mainly by working with the concept of 'citizenship,' i.e. by conceptualizing the periphery as a space of insurgent citizenship. Similarly my work on urban informality is very much an interest in how statecraft is

thoroughly informalized, and how the territorialized flexibility of the state tends to criminalize subaltern informality and regularize/valorize elite informality — this can also be understood as the blackening and whitening that Yiftachel (2009a; 2009b) presents in his theory of gray spaces. And, of course, the very concept of zones is about state power; note though that Ong is breaking with Schmittian/Agambenian understandings of sovereignty and exception by rejecting a state of exception that somehow exists outside of 'normal' zones of power.

<Torrisi, Giovanni> Melanie, would you like to comment on that?

<Lombard, Melanie> Thanks, Professor Roy, for your response. I particularly appreciate the way that these concepts incorporate the idea of the subaltern, but complicate it in ways that it doesn't explicitly address, including the significance of a heterogeneous notion of state power.

<Roy, Ananya> Thanks for the comment because I think that the postcolonial condition of global urbanism demands of us this type of 'heterogeneous notion of state power.'

<Torrisi, Giovanni> Now we have a final question from Burak Kose.

<Kose, Burak> Thank you very much for your engaging article. Having recently read some other urban scholars such as Colin McFarlane (2010) and Jennifer Robinson (2011), who also argue for a postcolonial critique of the field and search for the premises of, as it were, a novel comparative urbanism that seeks to provincialize Europe (and, in the case of urban studies, North America), I was wondering how you see the recent discussions in comparative urbanism in relation to your discussions of the subaltern and the vanishing points in the article. In what ways do you think a comparative framework could or could not address the question of subalternity as you discuss it in the article?

<Roy, Ananya> This is indeed a matter of ongoing discussion in the efforts to 'postcolonialize' urban theory and I am indebted to the work of both Colin and Jenny. I guess what is partly at stake here is what we mean by a comparative framework. I have been using the term 'transnational' because it is less suggestive of bounded geographical locations that are compared, and more suggestive of the travels of concepts, policies, critiques, paradigms. This is not to imply that comparative urbanists are necessarily working with bounded geographies, but instead to note that many of us are doing similar work but using slightly different emphases (and perhaps labels). Ultimately what I am interested in is the possibility of new geographies of urban theory, some of that work is taking place now, but much of it will be the work of your generation of urbanists.

<Torrisi, Giovanni> I've received another last question by email From **Adhya Anirban**:

> You have discussed four emergent concepts — peripheries, urban informality, zones of exception, and grey spaces — as critical phenomena within the Southern

theory of subaltern urbanism. Can we argue that these four emerging concepts can be stretched to formulate a global theory of subaltern urbanism? Within claimed 'metropolitan growth' (Burdett and Sudjic, 2010; UN Habitat, 2009), pockets of decline, deterioration, and depopulation are prevalent in the urban region (Oswalt, 2005). In many cases these sites of debasement — from my recent experiences in the City of Detroit — are also centres of individual entrepreneurship, local appropriation and human occupation. Do you think your four emerging concepts are applicable to cities beyond the South?

<Roy, Ananya> Since I have answered at least a couple of similar questions before, the answer to this one is quite simple: yes! The point of producing new geographies of urban theory is precisely to allow such emergent concepts to be applicable to *all* cities. And it is worth remembering that the global South is not only a geopolitical formation but also a socio-spatial relationality (an embodiment of coloniality and postcoloniality). In this sense, the global South is not just in the South but everywhere.

<Torrisi, Giovanni> Very well. I thank you all for attending this very interesting online meeting, and Professor Ananya in particular.

<Roy, Ananya> Thanks from my end as well — to all the participants and to Yuri and Giovanni for moderating.

<Torrisi, Giovanni> I hope to see you all for the next online meeting in a couple of weeks with Manuel Aalbers. Our next chat will be devoted to: 'Place, Exclusion and Mortgage Markets'. Have a good day!

<Kazepov, Yuri> … or evening! Thanks to you, Ananya. It was really a great and insightful chat. We'll keep in touch.

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