Occupy Urbanism: Radicalizing Politics and Economy beyond Policy and Programs

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Abstract

This article proposes a narrative of city contestations beyond policy and programs. It considers why Indian metro elites, large land developers and international donors paradoxically lobby for comprehensive planning when confronting ‘vote bank politics’ by the poor. Poor groups, claiming public services and safeguarding territorial claims, open up political spaces that appropriate institutions and fuel an economy that builds complex alliances. Such spaces, here termed ‘occupancy urbanism’, are materialized by land shaped into multiple de-facto tenures deeply embedded in lower bureaucracy. While engaging the state, these locality politics remain autonomous of it. Such a narrative views city terrains as being constituted by multiple political spaces inscribed by complex local histories. This politics is substantial and poses multiple crises for global capital. Locally embedded institutions subvert high-end infrastructure and mega projects. ‘Occupancy urbanism’ helps poor groups appropriate real estate surpluses via reconstituted land tenure to fuel small businesses whose commodities jeopardize branded chains. Finally, it poses a political consciousness that refuses to be disciplined by NGOs and well-meaning progressive activists and the rhetoric of ‘participatory planning’. This is also a politics that rejects ‘developmentalism’ where ‘poverty’ is ghettoized via programs for ‘basic needs’ allowing the elite ‘globally competitive economic development’.

The Indian metro elite, very large land developers, retailers of ‘branded’ products, and the country offices of international donors react to the politics of the poor in a paradoxical way. These four groups are immensely powerful, globally empowered, and interested to make cities competitive. Yet, since 2000, they have increasingly adopted a language of comprehensive planning, lobbied for planned affordable housing, actively supported emancipatory possibilities via ‘civil society’, and deployed a language of ‘participatory development’. Reflecting on this incongruous situation, I focus on two aspects.

First is ‘vote bank’ politics. This relates to poor groups laying claim to public investments in basic infrastructure and services via a ground-up process focused on land and economy in return for guaranteed access to voter lists in municipal elections (Benjamin and Bhuvaneswari, 2001; Benjamin, 2006; Benjamin et al., 2008). Such a
politics, seemingly messy, fluid and obviously incomplete, however, places such citizenship claims beyond discipline by ‘the rule of law’ or by ‘structured civil representation’.

The second aspect relates to international donors facilitating large developers and retailers to tap opportunities in the emerging markets. Central here are real estate surpluses from large-scale land development, and subsequently, those from retailing opportunities of branded consumer products in malls and planned retail zones.

I find the term ‘occupancy urbanism’ (Benjamin, 2007) useful in several interconnected ways. First, it focuses attention on the politics of developmentalism — projects, policy and master planning programs. Second, it posits a conceptual advantage to viewing city politics in an open-ended way. Third, this ‘openness’ is constituted by ‘city centric’ materialities wherein:

- land, much of which is incrementally settled, is highly politicized;
- socially embedded local government’s political and lower level bureaucratic circuits help shape public investments and regulation;
- there is an economy of interconnected small firm production and retail, closely connected to land issues and local government.

Such materialities help explain the extensive political consciousness that poses such stringent resistance to neoliberal globalization.

Occupancy urbanism contests narratives that view cities as passive stage sets, acted upon by a macro-narrative (usually ‘The’ economy). Instead, following Massey (2005), it opens spaces of politics revealed via ethnographic explorations of land, economy and institutions. Land (rather than Economy) as a conceptual entry, helps reveal subtle, often stealth-like and quiet, but extensive forms of political consciousness. This perspective avoids a conceptual ‘prison house’ built around assumptions of a predestined development trajectory, or the constraint of uneven terrains viewed as fractures, and relationships ordered within a taxonomy.

‘Occupancy urbanism’ instead views cities as consisting of multiple, contested territories inscribed by complex local histories. It is useful to consider more closely rich works of ethnography that recognize and maintain fluid and open-ended views of the space of city politics. This perspective, although complex and necessarily uneven, seems fundamental to conceptualize contemporary contestations. With this introduction, it is useful to look more closely at what may be core elements of city-based ‘vote bank’ politics.

1 My use of the term ‘The’ (economy) draws from Timothy Mitchell’s discussion in The rule of experts (2002: 4). This conceptual issue implicates some fine city studies characterized by a sense of ‘loss’ of public culture, the ‘failure’ of, or ‘incomplete’ planning, and being overtaken by ‘rapid growth’ leading to spatial and other ‘fractures’. Rich local histories and ethnography is thus devalued into a ‘contingency’ posed against an overarching narrative driven by a global financial regime. Political ethnography is assumed set within a binary of ‘organized’ party politics and posed as feudalistic clientelism. Much of contemporary economy, an aberration in the ‘meta-narrative’ of industrial growth, finds itself slotted into the ‘informal’ sector that, with the failure of planned development, is demarcated as a ‘slum’. See Cadene and Holmstrom (1998), Srinivas (2001), Nair (2005), Davis (2006) and Graham and Marvin (2003).

2 These insights come from an independent research group in Bangalore and Delhi (Benjamin and Bhuvaneswari, 2001; Benjamin, 2006; 2008; Benjamin et al., 2008).

3 See Massey (2005). Land provides other useful conceptual entry points. Unlike a narrative centered on ‘economic development’, it avoids the ‘entrepreneurialism trap,’ and unlike Graham and Marvin (2003), avoids an ‘infrastructure’ trap, both of which can be constituted into a narrative around the binary of ‘competitive’ and ‘inclusive’ cities.

The nightmare of vote bank politics

The spectre of ‘cities besieged by cancerous slums, non-conforming activities, and vote bank politics’ emerges as a nightmare for Chief Ministers. International donors frequently advise heads of provincial governments to hire international consultants to put a modernist spin on attracting economic development: ‘Bangalore transforming into a Singapore, Bombay [Mumbai] into a Shanghai, and Delhi into a London’!5 Activist groups and academics rightly see a direct link between such visions and the unprecedented evictions of poorer groups from central city locations — but tend to broad brush it as ‘the market at work’. This approach, while recognizing power and class, misses three political arenas. The first is the policy arena, closely penetrated by real estate lobbies, and influenced by finance institutions.6 The second is the recent lobby of ‘reform oriented’ elite civil society: NGOs and Citizen Watchdog Committees. These groups pressure the higher levels of the judiciary on electoral reforms and other ways to cut down ‘vote bank’ politics, and promote ‘citizen participation’ to ensure ‘planned development’ against ‘slums’. In partnership with research institutes and think tanks they actively target the core of ‘vote bank’ politics — the elected councils of municipal government. A central effort here is to shift political debate on essential issues of water and enhancing de-facto land tenures into disciplined ‘public consultations’ where these actions are portrayed as ‘illegal interventions’ to be policed by ‘reform initiatives’ and participation by ‘legitimate citizens’ (Benjamin, 2005b). The third political arena is the subtle occupancy of terrain which, as discussed below, gives rise to vote bank politics.

The nightmare of vote bank politics is hardly fantasy. An illustration is provided by the takeover of territory within the flagship ‘gated’ housing project of Mumbai’s most famous and largest real estate company, whose director is very senior in the most bureaucratic and political circuits of India’s financial capital. Yet, this author’s annual visits to that complex between 2003 and 2006 showed each time, an expansion of squatter territory facilitated by the extension of municipal services. In 2004, at a keynote session of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry’s (FICCI) international real estate conference, this director decried the encouragement of slums as

5 The first of these vision statements was by ‘Bombay First’, a big business consortium modeled on ‘London First’. See, for instance, ‘Vision Mumbai: Transforming Mumbai into a world-class city’ by Bombay First & McKinsey & Co (http://www.bombayfirst.org/McKinseyReport.pdf — accessed on 4 July 2008). Soon afterwards Bangalore’s metamorphosis, posed by its then Chief Minister of Karnataka, was urged on by his special high powered advisory group, the Bangalore Agenda Task Force — a consortium of IT CEOs, Finance & Consulting companies and other social luminaries. The author’s interviews with the Confederation of Indian Industries (CII) in 2003 revealed they envisioned Kolkata as a key node in a ‘golden triangle’ with Shanghai and Bangkok — aided by the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID), Price WaterHouse Coopers (PwC), and the Asian Development Bank (ADB). Delhi’s anxieties about its world class status, especially over the Commonwealth Games, can be witnessed in the speech of its Chief Minister at: www.planningcommission.gov.in/plans/planrel/52nddc/delhi.doc (accessed on 4 July 2008). These proclamations are not without controversy. Delhi’s Chief Minister was embroiled with the PwC and the World Bank in its water privatization controversy. See ‘Delhi water project soaked in controversy’ http://www.indiatogether.org/2005/sep/gov-delwater.htm.

6 In particular, the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) and the Confederation of Indian Industries (CII) — the country’s biggest business lobbies — financial institutions like the ICICI Bank and infrastructure finance companies like IL&FS. These partnerships with international fund managers (seeking opportunities in Indian real estate, mega infrastructure and organized retail markets) share links into several layers of ‘policy’ circuits: One ‘space of flows’ lies between the country offices of the World Bank IFC, USAid, UK DFID and the ADB. Also implicated in this are ex-bureaucrats turned consultant advisors, and policy centers like India’s Planning Commission, but also several national and provincial policy institutes and think tanks. Intermeshed in these circuits are two other spaces: ‘reform’ oriented bureaucrats (now positioned as CEOs) heading various provincial-level parastatal agencies in the business of routing foreign development aid and often in charge of the contracting process of mega projects.
one of the main impediments to globalizing markets. Another speaker went more berserk, calling for elected councilors to be lined up and shot.

This political arena baffles and surprises progressive researchers. In mid-2005, for example, a Dutch-funded research project on ‘inclusive globalization’ revealed an interesting puzzle. When the researchers visited eviction sites in Mumbai, to their great surprise, they found several sites had been reoccupied. A state-level politician of that city confirming such situations to this author pointed out that poorer groups were hardly naïve, and knew very well how to use the ‘system’. Visits to a variety of settlement types in North Mumbai revealed not just occupancy on well policed land controlled by the forest department, but how these were supported by lower level party workers and astute middle level municipal bureaucrats. Together this ‘system’ drew on the resources of a prominent member of parliament to allocate municipal funds to extend individual water and sanitary pipelines — which in effect strengthened their de-facto tenure.

To explore such processes, Delhi’s Sarai Program and Mumbai’s Collective Research Initiative Trust organized visits to several such territories with very diverse land histories (including squatting). The multiple and unexpected forms of contestations demonstrated how local occupants negotiated with smaller developers via the bureaucratic–political system. Other examples abound. For instance, ‘IT’ dominated south and east Bangalore has several such situations. In that city’s Master Planned southern territories, a very large open plot next to one of the city’s prominent gated housing complexes was, between 2005 and mid-2007, taken over by squatters. Further east in the hotly contested IT corridor of mega office complexes, a rapidly expanding land settlement of mostly poor groups contrasts with the shiny glass and stainless steel facades of the call centers. Here awaited an unexpected surprise. Our initial visits there in 2003 suggested a key role of Dalit (lower caste) ‘social movements’. This seemed obvious as a strategy to expand a political constituency to contest Bangalore’s largest and most influential land developers.

Subsequent ethnography by 2006 revealed a much more complicated and nuanced politics. Village and town councils had been extending basic services, while occupant groups actively played the real estate market. Both in effect created an arena subverting the mega (Benjamin, 2008; Benjamin et al., 2008).

Academics from diverse ideological positions dismiss such vote bank politics as ‘patron clientelism’. They view it as an extension of street life enmeshed in a dark world where property dealing is ‘decisively connected to local thugs, ward-level politicians, and other small time peddlers of influence’ (Appadurai, 2000: 639). This view is not very different from the highly popular ‘third world’ city journalism that views such city terrains as rapidly emerging doomscapes (Verma, 2003; Davis, 2006). In policy circles, with the current paranoia, ‘slummy third world bazaar street life’ is now considered equal to the specter of terrorism.7

Such views in effect pose an ‘alternative’ narrative to that of NGOs opening up emancipatory possibilities via ‘deep democracy’ (Appadurai, 2002), and ‘entrepreneurialism’ via ‘micro credit’. Considering ‘occupancy urbanism’ instead, can helpfully point to the politics of such ‘NGOization’ and its deeper connections to contested globalizations around mega infrastructure projects. With increasing uncertainty over funding capital investments via direct market measures such as bonds or tolls, indirect mechanisms linked to real estate surpluses accrued from rapidly developing peri-urban land markets seem attractive. With territories occupied in ‘unplanned ways’ this model too seems risky. This has prompted donors, like the World Bank in Bangalore’s water privatization case, to fund an elite ‘civil society’ group to organize ‘structured citizen participation’. It is hardly surprising that this civil society

group is a key member of a national campaign to cut down vote bank politics. As elsewhere, in Mumbai’s case such attempts at ‘manufacturing consent’ faced subversion — by progressive activist groups, but in a more sustained way by local municipal councils. It is perhaps this disruption of modernity that forms the elite’s nightmare.

Modernity subverted and a crisis for planning?

In a recent article on occupancy urbanism cited above (Benjamin, 2007), I highlight how mega projects intending to globalize Indian metros like Bangalore confront a subversive politics on the ground. Master Plans designate large territories for development in higher-level policy documents, but in reality these territories remain ‘occupied’ by pre-existing settlements and see newer ones developing. ‘Occupancy’ refers not just to

8 It seems hardly surprising that NGO-led development is closely associated with micro credit. On the need to promote ‘Third World Entrepreneurialism’ as a way to avoid a ‘violent revolution from below’, see ‘The Agenda with Steve Paikin’ in the Canadian television channel TVO interview with Jeb Brugmann on global urbanization — ‘welcome to the urban revolution’ at: http://www.tvo.org/cfmx/tvoorg/theagenda/index.cfm?page_id=43. In contrast, the work of John Harriss (2001; 2005) and Michael Goldman (2005) is central. Goldman discusses in vivid detail how global NGOs and consultants transfer ‘know-how’ that is not just ‘PR’ material but is especially aimed at building public consent and acceptance of neoliberal reforms (see Goldman, 2005: 236–9). My point here, while related, focuses on how NGO centered efforts replace the space of municipal debate. This is linked to many efforts to make cities globally competitive — in Bangalore, the issue of water privatization; while in Mumbai’s case, under the World Bank-sponsored MUTP project, the issue relates to urban renewal that evicts the poor and disrupts their work and living possibilities. It is ironic that the NGO SPARC that inspired the concept ‘Deep Democracy’ is now implicated centrally in this process. For an investigative report that implicates NGOs in problematic resettlement, see Benoit (2006). It is hardly surprising that the huge public protests resulted in the World Bank instituting an independent inspection panel and stalled funding (see, among other websites, http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTINSPECTIONPANEL/Resources/ManagementResponseGazi.pdf (accessed May 2008) and ‘World Bank chief to review Mumbai slum resettlement projects during India visit’, International Herald Tribune at http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2007/11/01/asia/AS-GEN-India-World-Bank.php (accessed May 2008). What is central here is not just the ‘technical-managerial problem’ of resettlement, but also the developmentalist narrative that allows this to happen. Thus, what remains a further pointer to confusions in NGO-led empowerment is SPARC’s involvement in partnership within a policy frame posed by the Shiv sena — the Right wing Hindu fundamentalist party that Appadurai and several other authors have rightly criticized.

9 In the Sarai piece (2007) cited above, I presented some visual illustrations of mega projects and also master planning. The link between an image of ‘occupancy urbanism’ and its subversion of financial surpluses realized from real estate surpluses is central here. To elaborate, some of these connections are more direct when we consider a commercial IT complex being built on land expropriated via eminent domain under the new land acquisition laws, and then allocated at subsidized rates to a private corporate consortium. Other more indirect ways are equally significant. For instance, the private consortium BIAL (led by Siemens International) that manages Bangalore’s international airport has a revenue model that includes functions internal to its core activities (landing and parking charges) but also where 60% of gross funds accrue from non-airport revenues (John, 2005a; 2005b). The latter funds are not just from the restaurant but also from real estate rents and development charges sought to be imposed by the BIAL on other commercial and non-commercial land activities that are located in the much wider territory administered in part by the Bangalore Airport Planning Authority in partnership with the provincial government. This authority, in its jurisdiction over a wider territory, acts in effect as a planning authority. Similarly, another mega-project, the Bangalore–Mysore Infrastructure Corridor (BMIC) — an expressway connecting these cities, is financed not only by toll charges associated with the expressway but also a series of six townships and their associated commercial and residential developments. Another even more indirect but critically important illustration lies in Bangalore’s water project — the center of a water privatization debate. Here, the funding for capital investments to pump up water from much lower hinterlands is sought from the establishment of a wider territorial authority operating
physical space but also to the appropriation of real estate surpluses made possible by the ‘embedding’ of municipal government into popular society. Much to the dismay of globalized financial institutions and large developers, this reflects the diversion of their potential profits into an economy of small firms. To the dismay of centralized political parties across ideological lines, such real estate surpluses also fuel an autonomous political process at the municipal level — reflected perhaps in the complex unpredictable coalition politics that characterizes urban India. It is hardly surprising then that ‘planners’ are duty bound and cajoled into declaring these land settings as illegal, non-conforming uses. This makes it difficult for local bodies to extend infrastructure and services, recoup funds for these, and also secure de-facto land tenure for what are usually rapidly growing political constituencies.

This politics around land claims is likely to be a major factor in the very high voter turnouts by ‘slum’ inhabitants in municipal elections: 95–98% in Bangalore, as is probably the case in other cities too. All this is sharpened when land and services are essential not just for residence, but also for a huge economy constituted by home and neighbourhood based manufacturing and trade. Moving beyond the ‘patron client’ conception allows us to read this not just as poor groups’ passivity or exploitation, but rather as evidence of a popular political consciousness of how to pressure municipal and state administrations. Political consciousness evolves as ‘folklore’ and includes complex alliances with higher income traders, the lower and middle level municipal licensing department, and the police (Benjamin, 2005a). For politicians, especially aspiring ones, nurturing such popular political consciousness is central. Vote bank politics is also a dynamic stage set, shaping their own futures in establishing constituencies as they reach out to higher-level political and bureaucratic circuits.

Planners, elite groups and academics across ideological positions often blame urban crisis on a lack of planning. The progressive position within this promotes ‘inclusion and participation’. In many ways, this attempts to subvert the popular political consciousness that has evolved as an intrinsic part of municipal government. It is one of accumulative experience that dates back to the 1890s. Municipal debates in Calcutta, later in Bombay and Madras, centered squarely on how services were to be extended to avoid plague and fire, while addressing infrastructural improvements. More historicized readings of city terrains reveal three interconnected aspects: ‘slums’ as a category refers to diverse types of land settlement processes, each with a politico-legal-administrative history. As a conceptual category, ‘slums’ — by extension ‘slum policy’ — needs to be viewed in the context of changing institutional structure. ‘Development authorities’, set up in the 1970s as parastatal agencies, moved decisions about land and civic norms away from the municipal arena and thus attempted to technocratize deeply material political debate. Master Planning, undertaken by these parastatal authorities, shaped public debate into a binary of ‘planned development’ opposed to ‘slums’. The mid-1980s further posited these as ‘encroachments’ and non-conforming areas — although most city terrain predates Master Planning. Hence, the notion of ‘planned development’ and ‘slums’ are arguably inherently de-politicized tools central to this ‘anti-politics’ (drawing from Ferguson, 1990) institutional process. The real crisis, rooted in this political history and materialized in popular terms, relates to the legitimacy of planning, the policy process, and the narrative posed by well meaning progressive academics and activists around it: ‘inclusive and participatory planning’ to address ‘fractured cities’. It also points to a

in parallel to the amalgamation and centralization of the city’s municipal government. Occupancy urbanism effectively disrupts such financing possibilities by capitalizing real estate surpluses via a radicalization of tenure.

10 This specific figure comes from one of our research team who stood for Bangalore municipal elections. Working this political system demands an extensive political consciousness, especially on land issues. For instance, housing association office bearers know that gaining ‘rights’ within the Slum Act means that it is important not to push municipal departments into conducting surveys, which opens up the threat of evictions, but rather to engage with those administrative spaces that allow basic services.
crisis in assumptions about social movements shaped by progressive leadership to address ‘pro-poor policy’. Situated beyond the inevitability of ‘policies and programs’, occupancy urbanism suggests, drawing from Dikec (2007), this is best framed as a politics of policing.

With the above discussion on the crisis of planning, cities as political entities are necessarily ‘unruly’ and constituted by multiple and fluid spaces. This is problematic for the metro elite and large international donors pursuing neoliberal ‘urban reforms’. How these groups confront ‘vote bank’ politics comes as no surprise. First is the use of ‘policy’ to discipline those parts of provincial and local government that provide for radical space. This includes the use of ‘conditionality’ linked fund transfers and development programs (Benjamin, 2005b). Second, is the strategy of decentralizing ‘planning’ within severely circumscribed terms to move away from municipal debate to municipal management of ‘competitive growth’. Third, is the promulgation of a specific anxiety around occupation of land that resonates with popular consciousness. This is also where large private lobbies intervene in direct ways. For instance, the FICCI and CII (India’s second major business lobby) voice the interests of large real estate developers and financial institutions. Together, they pressure policymakers to strengthen Master Planning and adopt the powerful new land acquisition acts. The country’s largest private bank, ICICI, investing in ‘IT corridors’ and malls, also invests substantially in Geographic Information Systems (GIS) as a way to clearly define land titles under the rubric of ‘e-governance’ (Benjamin et al., 2007).

That vote bank politics should pose such fear seems paradoxical given the power and influence of these lobbies. It is not just their individual power, but also the fact that they enjoy the support of an interventionist Supreme Court of India. The judiciary’s directives to city administrators promote extensive evictions in all major Indian cities (and many smaller ones) and explicitly target vote bank politics.\(^\text{11}\) It is clear that large business lobbies and the international donor community enjoy unprecedented influence over policymaking at the highest of levels, including India’s planning commission.\(^\text{12}\) Although this is a matter of controversy, these are also times of great confusion among progressive groups — because of the harshness of evictions, but also because they are confronting the capture by big business and lobbies of what used to be key elements of the progressive narrative. It is hardly surprising that such ‘public–private partnerships’, that now include ‘civil society’ and mega investments, are shaping India’s largest ever urban renewal program — the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM). This program’s aim of making cities competitive supersedes existing funding to tie resources to stringent neoliberal ‘reform’ conditionalities. Even so, occupancy urbanism strikes in

\(^{11}\) Their directives restrict municipal infrastructure investments in Master Plan designated ‘non-conforming’ areas — which implicitly promote property markets of ‘authorized’ commercial areas. The famous author, Arundhati Roy, writes about a recent scandal in which a Supreme Court judge directed the demolitions of shops in non-conforming areas. Four journalists revealed that his family had benefited from the resulting increase in real estate prices of malls and organized retail (see Roy, 2007). The visibility in the media and protests from progressive activist and by senior judiciary focused rightly on the jailing of four journalists, but one cannot say that the justice system is any more progressive towards the poor.

\(^{12}\) In 2004–5, this author attended several FICCI and CII-sponsored international conferences on Indian real estate and urban development. In attendance were not just the country’s most senior policymakers but also the minister for urban development taking serious note of suggestions. In the audience were teams from major international donors, and the expected financial institutions and developers. What was significant was the open lobbying for policy changes, which 6–9 months later were announced as official policy. On the centrality of land issues in the ‘reforms’ agenda, see Benjamin et al. (2007). My interviews and Q&A sessions in workshops with senior policymakers on the ‘policy process’ were very revealing on two counts. First, that the new policymaking was ‘outsourced’ directly to the captains of industry, especially in the ‘reform’ states of South and West India. Second, as one of the most senior administrators nearing retirement mentioned, the old ‘steel frame’ that characterized the Nehurian Nation State had ‘long eroded’. 
unexpected ways at the ground of mega projects, and from within the system. Evidence of the latter is the lower and middle level bureaucratic stonewalling all over India suggested in the minutes of the JNNURM’s high-powered Technical Advisory Group meetings.\(^{13}\) Vote bank politics may lie in a merger of anarchic citizenship and occupancy urbanism to destabilize a very common mantra provided for cities in the global South: to be (both) ‘globally competitive and inclusive’.\(^{14}\) In doing so, it poses a challenge to developmentalism that seems to bog down activists and academics concerned with progressive change, but also one that blinds them to accept the inevitability of corporate urban politics.

Cities as ‘open-ended spaces’ of politics

‘Occupancy urbanism’ intersects complex material and conceptual planes. In playing out a creative tension with a concept that is both material and conceptual, a useful task would be to seek out a range of relevant literatures. It seems useful to undertake a conceptual project that maintains its material being around land and institutions shaping economy, unsubjugated by meta-narratives. Some broad starting points are:

- **Open-ended political conceptualizations**: Peattie and Rein’s challenging work on claims (1983) complements Massey’s work on locality (Massey, 1991). These works form a useful contrast to the conceptual pitfalls of the developmentalist ‘rights-based frames’ situated within the dirigisme of a nation-state, or a globalized market.

- **The plurality of land and law**: ironically, the destabilization of the meta-narratives finds materiality in that area which seems to be its own cornerstone: land and law. An important literature around this inherent fluidity abounds, dating to the 1960s, from Latin American urbanization. Here, Moore’s ‘semi autonomous social field’ poses a significant bridge to Santos’ ‘porous legalities’ (Moore, 1973; Boaventura de Sousa, 2004: chapter 4). These two concepts allow significant conceptual openings. One of these is to move the politics of land from its enchainment to function (usually one of economic development) to more multiple and interactive planes of fluid negotiation. These planes can be extended, as Razzaz does on issues of titles and service extension (Razzaz, 1994; Benjamin, 2004; 2005; see also the work of Singerman, 1995). In productively posing a fluid-autonomous space also engaged with governmental institutions, this literature unsettles notions of informal–formal, illegal and legal, and patron-clientelism that dominate developmentalism.

- **City spaces as autonomous but engaging the state**: complementing the several ethnographic studies cited earlier, Singerman’s work in unravelling the complexity of the Sha’ab neighborhood in Cairo (Singerman, 1995) and Nigam’s critique of Partha Chatterjee’s concepts of ‘political society’ (Nigam, 2008) suggest a locality of politics that engage institutions of the state from an autonomous outside (1995: 132–72). These detailed descriptions, including concepts such as ‘politics by stealth’, find useful parallels in Bayat’s notion of ‘quiet encroachment’ (Bayat, 2000). However, rather than slipping into a narrative reminiscent of De Certeau’s ‘tactics’ (1988), it


\(^{14}\) One logic in this essentially neoliberal argument seems to be as follows: given that the earlier approach of the 1970s and 1980s of ‘basic needs’ have failed to generate poverty alleviating economic development, policy needs to recognize that to achieve economic development cities (assumed to be a unit of analysis) need to invest in higher end ‘world class’ infrastructure. Apart from some immediate welfare investments, over time, the poor will be lifted out of poverty — see, for example, Cohen (1990) and Harris (1996). Not surprisingly, city politics is thus reduced to ‘management and good governance’ and posits an arguably narrow institutional structure of ‘poverty programs and policy’.

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seems important to explore the transformative potential of these concepts concerning localism into a wider mainstream. In the earlier part of this essay, such transformative politics was linked to the extension of basic infrastructure and services, and land use regulation by municipal institutions. Together these material views of locality find resonance in Simone’s drama of the periphery (as a ‘frontier’) that ‘embodies an instability that is always potentially destabilizing of that centre’ (Simone, 2007: 462).

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Résumé

Cet article rend compte des contestations urbaines au-delà de l’action publique et des programmes. Il porte sur les raisons pour lesquelles les élites métropolitaines indiennes, de gros aménageurs fonciers et des donateurs internationaux plaident paradoxalement pour un urbanisme complet lorsque la politique de vote bank se heurtent aux pauvres. Ces groupes, qui réclament des services publics et gardent des revendications territoriales, ouvrent des espaces politiques qui s’approprient des institutions et alimentent une économie aux alliances complexes. Ces espaces, dénommés “urbanisme d’occupation”, sont matérialisés par des terrains formés de multiples occupations de fait, profondément ancrées dans les échelons inférieurs de l’administration. Même si elle implique l’État, la politique de ces localités demeure autonome à son égard. D’après cet exposé, les terrains urbains sont constitués de nombreux espaces politiques aux historiques locaux complexes. Cette politique, non négligeable, est source de problèmes pour le capital mondial. En effet, des institutions ancrées au plan local bouleversent d’énormes projets d’infrastructure haut de gamme. “L’urbanisme d’occupation” aide les groupes pauvres à s’approprier les excédents immobiliers grâce à des modes de jouissance fonciers reconstitués pour stimuler de petites entreprises dont les produits menacent des chaînes de marque. Enfin, elle suscite une conscience politique qui refuse la discipline des ONG ou des partisans progressistes bien intentionnés, de même que la rhétorique de “l’aménagement participatif”. Cette politique rejette aussi un “développementalisme” où la pauvreté est “ghettoisée” par des programmes en faveur des “besoins fondamentaux” qui permettent aux élites un “développement économique compétitif au plan mondial”.