**The Urban Problematic**

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Bishop and Phillips’ excellent paper on the status of the city raises important issues for current apprehensions of urbanism foregrounded in the emergence and development of megacities and our attempts at conceptualizing what the urban might mean. Bishop and Phillips usefully adopt a ‘supplemental view’ of urban dwelling. By this they mean forms of urban necessity, ‘unofficial forms of dwelling’ (p4) invoking forms of invention (p6) they don’t interrogate, and the flexible, informal, strategies for living comprising ‘shadow urbanism’, all of which, they allow, are not unique to megacities (p6) but apply to smaller cities (in the global north) too. While not confined to the global south, the megacities they envisage, and the challenges they present to established models of urban theory, are in South America, Asia and Africa; cities swelling with the bodies of rural migrants. Their starting point is that the city is no longer a legible or distinct category, but partial and provisional, making it a focus for conceptual work, even if conceptual clarity is impossible. It is not clear from their paper whether they intend this as a criticism. They suggest it complicates the kinds of action-ability that bodies implementing reforms like UN-HABITAT can tackle, but urban partiality, provisionality and illegibility are, it seems, inevitable in such complex, multi-layered, improvised, social/architectural/planning forms as megacities present. In contributing to the project of making megacities slightly more legible, I want offer the following four provocations. These firstly attend to the specifics of megacities, secondly, the importance of including those who navigate them, thirdly, the significance of mobility and different forms of urban traction, and, finally, the need to keep divergent forms of translocality in mind in renewed attempts to think about different forms of globalisation.

My first provocation concerns the character of the surface across which, or though which, if, as Tim Ingold (2000) suggests, surfaces are deep and constituted in the textures of people, objects, infrastructures and so on, on which we understand urban life to be conducted. In holding on to the idea that urban surfaces are deeply textured, we are confronted with the specifics of their texturing and this makes the kinds of general rendering of megacities required to theorise them problematic. Megacities, on the contrary I want to suggest, are specific, and their specifics matter, just as they are composed in matter. Beijing, for example, is not Mumbai. Its surface is differently edged with possibilities, including those of urban protest and conceptions of individual rights. India’s democratic traditions constitute the processes of land acquisition and compensation differently from China’s and these, and other differences matter in the making of the urban fabrics of megacities and the lives that can be lived in them. Tokyo is a megacity, but its informalities and improvisations are quite different from Jakarta’s or Sao Paulo’s. I am not sure that an overarching conception of ‘the megacity’ is useful, rather, there are specifics in megacities that work in ways we need to understand.

My second provocation concerns the locations from which urban theory is derived and articulated. Urban theory comes from specific vantage points, whether or not this is admitted. Bishop and Phillips admit to speaking from the perspectives offered by, and to, urban scholars, planners, governments and welfare organisations. These are specific, and important, forms of urban curation, but they overlook the citizens – and sub-citizens – who navigate megacities. In including the navigators other perspectives and concerns come to fore which embellish our understanding of megacities. Shifting the perspective to the navigators poses questions about routes to and through cities, as well as the forms of consociation, the skills and the understanding of urban life required to navigate them. These questions in turn reveals fragments of knowledge about what capacities it takes to live the megacity, as well as the circumstances in which journeys from rural-industrial to urban landscapes are undertaken. Thus the city is more than its forms of curation, it is constituted in the dialogues between provision of various kinds, and the improvisations enacted within and through them: in these dialogics cities are made and lived.

My third provocation arises from the second and concerns the forms of traction which make megacities run. While no one would deny the significance of mobility in contemporary urbanism, this is not quite the same as making an analysis from *within* the logics of mobility as one of the city’s constituting forces. Megacities are made in the journeys rural migrants make to them, and continue to make around them in their everyday lives, making cities a nexus of journeys among other things. In a recent study of poor internal migrants living on the edge of Beijing I show how constant mobility is embedded in the constitution of these urban lives. As parts of the city are developed and redeveloped to make new infrastructures and the fortunes of developers, the only feasible location for migrants in the city is a moving one. They must keep relocating, staying one step ahead of the bulldozers (Knowles 2014). Megacities are not just about informal *placement* in the city, but the terms, conditions and routes of *displacement* – which vary from one megacity to the next - are crucial in shaping urban life. This supports and embellishes the conception that urban surfaces are tentative places where people and things come together in ways that are provisional and always in process of (never quite) becoming.

My fourth provocation concerns the importance of keeping divergent articulations of globalization in mind, or at the least, ways of thinking about the translocal dynamics of megacities. While Bishop and Phillips admit the overlaps between global and megacities, this is not quite the same as taking a global lens to the megacity, asking questions about key forms of translocality running through them. This would inevitably mean reaching beyond the hegemonic and iconic forms of globalisation in finance and mediatised flows, and beyond what Castells (2010) calls the landing places of network value. Globalisation, as I argue elsewhere (Knowles 2014a), has back roads as well as main roads. All sorts of materials, people and objects travel along them and hence it behoves us to probe beyond the ‘the mainstream flows of global capital’ (p3) and try to grasp the mutating forms and substance of the emerging translocalities that converge on megacities. These could be humble forms of plastic shifting from Chinese to African cities, smuggling activities in bush and border that fetch up in unexpected ways in distant cities, rendition routes and offshore ‘terrorist’ holding cells as in Guantanamo Bay and Hargeisa in Somaliland. These off-beat forms of globalization are as important in shaping cities and megacities as mainstream articulations. Admitting them into our analytic frames shifts globalization from something solid and certain to a set of spatially constituted relationships that are more uncertain, shifting, precarious and fragile and which bring diverse forms of precarity to people’s lives. Finally, in among the seething inchoate mobilities composing globalisation, its hyper-locality is declared even in megacities. Globalisation is lived in houses and in neighbourhoods. It is lived through work. And it is lived in the social relationships of these restless groundings.

**References**

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