

Beyond Dualism into Hybridism

Transforming Politics and Economy via the daily life of Cities

Cities are increasingly constituted as hybrids in politics, society, economy, and space. Why is the concept of hybridity important in viewing such changes? I argue in this presentation that it helps us to move away from un-helpful and politically dis-empowering binaries. Considering hybridity rather than dualism helps us to focus on real terrains of contestation and understand how cities are constituted via the direct materiality of daily action. Cities are shaped in large part by increasingly complex and dynamic configurations. This is not just in the larger movement of history in economy and politics. For sure, there are significant issues. For instance, 9/11, increasing oil prices, the increased control of the world economy by corporate groups, and global warming. What I refer to is the way the daily life of cities accommodates and re-shapes these events in the way of complex local contestation. Some of these contestations are those that are well publicized. Many others, however, reveal themselves via a closer look at city terrain. These are in terms of complex political arrangements, unexpected relationships across ethnic divides, as well as new fractures. Hybridity, as I shall discuss below, may also tell us more about new ways of viewing older formulations of conflict. This is essentially because it allows us to view cities from more rooted understandings of city transformation. In doing so, we can move away from several types of common binaries: Informal—formal, planned—slum-like, modern—traditional, legal—illegal. It is particularly important to consider another set of more implicit binaries. These place cities in richer countries as “developed” and those in poorer countries as less developed. Thus, in my presentation on cities like Bangalore, Delhi in India, I draw on not just the wealthier parts of town, but attempt to show how each impact the other. In a similar way, I suggest that a useful extension of this analysis lies in a conceptual project that focuses across urban settings between rich and poor countries.

As “hybrid” entities, cities are much more than demographic congregations or than passive locations for global consumption, production, or extraction. Instead, a closer look highlights the importance of the daily life of politics and economy as being a powerful transformative force. Central in this drama is the dynamic of land, space, and location. Land turns out, for instance, to be much more than an element of the tripartite with labor and capital. Space and location suggests for example the importance of ever increasing and diverse tenure settings. These allow for surpluses from real estate markets to be invested into the economy, a wider distribution into society, and pave the way for political alliances. There are other

important political impacts when land is seen from its transformative potential. This relates to the central political arena of municipal government. Municipal politics is not just about day-to-day civic maintenance. Rather, it becomes a key player in shaping global contests when large financial capital attempts to “land’ their footprints.”

Just as for land, a closer look at the economy driving large cities like Bangalore, Delhi, and a myriad of small towns is not just that of factories or mega malls forming secondary locations to global chains. Instead, while we do see some of these global bases, much more extensive are inter-linked and predominantly small firm clusters functioning on an autonomous basis. In fact, these clusters threaten global capital by their tight control over consumption territory. Such small firm settings also have an impressive ability to innovate. This is increasingly set not in individual “invention”. Instead, innovation has deeply systemic aspects shaped by customized production set in sophisticated relationships.

Considering the hybrid city reveals a sharp edge to the practice and politics of planning. We see that Master Planning favors both big business and higher levels of political government. While the former seek out subsidized public funding for land and high-grade infrastructure, the latter seek to establish tighter political control. Both efforts find a serious roadblock in an economy fueling municipal politics. Of particularly significant threat they find new definitions of bureaucratic structures, the occupation of productive space, and in particular, complex social connections. Considering this politics at its fine grain set in daily life shows the issue here is not just of local groups resisting these forces, but rather, in a stealth like way, encroaching, eroding, and subverting them. In this dynamic of a transformative centered around land, economy and politics, it is not surprising that local society itself is re-shaped. Inter-linked economies bring to play relationships across ethnic grouping, where customs and norms find re-negotiation. The development of land further shapes this process via the emergence of fluid coalition politics that opens up un-expected political space. Such political hybridity is especially important for local groups in resisting more central players that now include globally connected big business, well-connected elite that back higher levels of government.

In taking this path of observing at close hand economy, politics and space, moves us beyond dualism: formal—informal, modern—traditional, polluting—clean, planned—un-planned, low—high tech. It may also moves us away from yet another all-encompassing binary—of the nation-state and the market, and with this, the assumption of the centrality of Master Planning. Instead, moving towards accurate conception of hybrid economic processes in their systemic structures helps reinforce the centrality of politics. Perhaps this is the significance of a closer look at city and city life that helps us explore its unexpected alleys and new plazas constituted in a range of human experiences and textures.