

Book reviews

Urban Studies

2016, Vol. 53(12) 2670–2677

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DOI: 10.1177/0042098016653918

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Sanjay Srivastava, *Entangled Urbanism: Slum, Gated Community and Shopping Mall in Delhi and Gurgaon*, Oxford University Press: New Delhi, 2015; 317 pp.: ISBN: 978 0 19 809914 7, £27.90 (hbk)

Reviewed by: Sneha Annavarapu, Department of Sociology, University of Chicago, USA

Entangled Urbanism is an indispensable read for urban sociologists who are interested in processes of identity-formation *of* the city and *in* the city. The author has an ambitious project in mind that explores the deep inter-connections and imaginations of the city and everyday material lives. How do we imagine our city? What are the politics of exclusion in the process of imagining a ‘global’ city? The importance of this question lies in the empirical truth of aspirational global cities in the Global South, but the theoretical seduction of this question is in theorising the production of locality and authenticity in cities all around the world. What makes the question of ‘entangled urbanism’ most relevant to contemporary urban sociology is that it moves scholarly attention towards the overlapping and enmeshed urban lives instead of approaching spatial inequality only in terms of ‘enclavisation’ and segregation. As Srivastava puts it, ‘The city is no whole entity, but a series of connected realms, each of a distinct character, linking varied lives and processes into an urban entanglement’ (p. 261). While

of course the issue of spatial segregation is supremely relevant even today, what needs to be studied is also how intimate entanglements transpire in the social production of the ‘city’. This is especially the case in cities in the Global South, where slums and gated communities exist side-by-side.

The author uses data from multi-sited ethnographic inquiry, along with historical analyses, in Delhi and Gurgaon (India) to show us how our imaginations of the city are not direct derivatives of ‘our place’ either socially or geographically, but are borne out of an intensely charged struggle with desire, aspiration and constraint across several sites in the city. Relatedly, our *apparently* fragmented cities with their ‘self-contained realms’ (p. xii) are fundamentally interconnected. In line with the politics of the book, it would not be a stretch to say that the author aims to de-fetishise the city of Delhi by making visible the systemic production of spatial inequality. At the heart of the book is, of course, the complicated triad between the citizen, the state and the market in Delhi and how the position of the ‘citizen’ has changed over time with structural changes in the political economy of India. The interaction effects of gender, class and caste produce different experiences of the changing city. As such, the author makes no claim to have had a conclusive epiphany about the ‘identity of Delhi’ as much as an analytical insight that captures the intimate and contradictory entanglements that come about in the city: ‘the city is that place where the state and the private enterprise, cultures of

contract and kinship, the desire to both transcend locality but also to be part of it come together in uneven ways' (p. 259). This kind of suggestibility is a chronic feature of the book where analytical and sharp descriptions seem to take centre stage, sometimes even relegating major theoretical claims or methodological clarifications to a place of relative non-importance. One gets a sense that the fragmentary nature of this book is a conscious effort on the part of the author to reflect the brittle experience of life in a deeply unequal postcolonial city.

The book is divided into three parts, each part focused on one particular social space. The first part titled 'Spaces of the Periphery, Subjects of the Center' consists of three chapters that span the social world that is contained within and spills out of Nangla Matchi, a *basti*¹ or a settlement. These chapters brim with ethnographic insight and rich descriptions of the precarious, yet resilient, lives that populate Nangla Matchi. In giving us a detailed account of the role of the state and the market in configuring everyday life at Nangla Matchi, Srivastava focuses in on how the impending demolition of the *basti*, the circulation of fake identity proofs and duplicitous documents and the resolution of conflicts related to real estate bring to light the contentious relationship that the settlement dwellers have with the ever-pervasive presence of the state. In a sense, the centrality of a normative community vis-a-vis a normless state comes through clearly in these chapters. As he puts it crisply, 'it is a relationship of the double bind, of wanting and not wanting the state' (p. 55). While the market does not put on a show of care, the relationship between the settlement dwellers and the state is complicated due to the presence of care and compassion along with threat and deceit. This part of the book also does a fantastic job of showing how arbitrary and moody the various organs of the state are in the lives of the underclass and

exactly how *public* everyday life, thick with kinship and neighbourhood ties, in Nangla Matchi is – especially in contradistinction to what follows in the book, with descriptions of the middle and elite classes' lives in the same city. The city is imagined, then, as being unstable, ever-changing in its topography, precarious – but also as the only space which (falsely) promises that these issues will find resolution. In a strange sense, the city holds the lock and the key to any door.

In the next part, titled 'Post-nationalism, *Bhagidars*, Consumer-Citizens, the *Mohalla*, Bedrooms and Kitchens', the author sketches out a 'spatialised middle class' in Delhi and Gurgaon by demonstrating how symbolic boundary-making processes at a site are deeply spatial in producing a 'citizen' identity in gated communities. Srivastava draws a comprehensive map of how farmlands around Delhi and Gurgaon were bought over time by companies invested in creating real estate spaces for the middle classes, which has resulted in a material and symbolic reinscription of erstwhile farmland and produced a situation where residential enclaves exist alongside villages – a fractured social space that produces discourses of fear and criminality in the gated communities. In line with other sociological literature on the rise of middle-class activism around getting rid of the slums and purifying public spaces, Srivastava shows us how the social production of space at gated communities is geared towards the consolidation of a 'consumer citizen' subjectivity and operates through a process of material and symbolic inclusion (turning *land* into *property*) and social exclusion (restricting access). The position of the consumer-citizen emerges with the market-driven usurpation of farmland and the state-sponsored legitimacy of middle-class activism. A particularly insightful analysis of gender relations within the gated communities also points to the renegotiation of what constitutes 'public spaces' where

middle-class women are free to engage in sociality and how in every move of including women in public spaces, there is a corollary move geared towards tightening the boundaries of the gated community itself to keep the rural Other out. The very self-identity of the gated community as being a 'community' and not a *mohalla*, which is the local term for a neighbourhood, points towards purifying the language of self-identification.

Part III, titled 'Consuming Cultures and Urban Spaces: Between the *Basti* and the Mall', segues neatly from the concerns of identity that the spatialised middle class in Delhi and Gurgaon seem to negotiate in the previous chapters. This part has four chapters that deal with the cultures of consumption that are produced at specific sites ranging from a large temple complex to big and small shopping malls in Delhi and Gurgaon. Srivastava, as has been the case in the entire book, captures a multitude of everyday interactions at these sites to demonstrate how the 'surplus' consumption of objects, experiences, ideas and values through recursive negotiation of cultural symbols, meanings and strategies (p. 206) is spread across time spans in a bid to become modern but remain Indian.² In that sense, locality at these sites is produced spatially (the exotic 'rural') and temporally (the bucolic 'past'). For example, malls are designed to produce a sheltered 'street culture' which does not resemble the street outside but which resonates with shoppers as an aspiration that is shared by 'all' in spirit. In weaving a narrative of experience that retains the pleasures of 'locality', what comes through is a *need* to maintain apparent contradictions (such as a 'global Indian') which becomes possible only at the expense of cultural and symbolic appropriation and spatial exclusion. However, this does not mean that the affective atmospheres in these consumer spaces are ones that are set apart from the 'world outside'; rather, the production of space

at these sites is consistent with the normative discourses of modernity and development in urban cities – such as purifying public spaces and producing an 'Indian modernity' – and seems to testify to the virtue of such discourses. In fueling desire and imaginations of consumer-urbanity, these sites do not aim to exclude people as much as to make more people desire exclusion for the sake of a 'better city'. The new politics of exclusion, mediated by consumer fantasy and desire, operate on the value of invisibility.

The final chapter of this part and of the book is a coda to the symphony of ethnographic sensations produced in the book as it traverses through the processes of meaning-making and self-identification produced at 'Revolution Forever', a company that deploys a multi-level marketing scheme. In this chapter, the author takes us through the pipes of consumerist desire as his lower middle class informants take on the uncertain and risky business of multi-level marketing schemes in order to thrive in the city. The market narrative of 'take the risk – don't think too much or your chance is gone!' seems to complicate the state narrative of 'rights to resources'. The city, in that sense, fosters a threshold existence between several worlds.

In all, Sanjay Srivastava's *Entangled Urbanism* is a rich text with provocative arguments in every chapter. However, the major problem with the book was that it tried to handle too many concepts at once. Very often, I found myself unable to retell an argument simply because clarity was compromised for the sake of revealing interesting information, or because there seemed to be no argument as much as an analytical point. As an ethnographic text, this is truly nuanced and gripping, even though the methodology section is not as rigorous as a social scientist might want it to be. As a foray into reworking theoretical concepts, it falls short of delivering its latent promise. As an attempt to think through the concept

of the 'everyday' in spatialised terms, this book is perhaps one of its kind.

Notes

1. Srivastava refuses to use the term 'slum' due to the violence the word does in representing the lives of people who live in it, and I too shall use the term *basti* instead.
2. The moral dilemma of the role of Indian women as modern consumers is also resolved in these malls since the performance of ideal womanhood is made possible by capitalising on the gendered anxiety of 'saving for the family' by using coupons and cashback deals, or performing the role of the 'economically illiterate' woman who spends all of her money on frivolity.

Oli Mould, *Urban Subversion and the Creative City*, Routledge: Abingdon, 2015; 206 pp.: ISBN: 978-1-138-79704-8, £90.00/US\$145.00 (hbk)

Reviewed by: Robert Hollands, Newcastle University, UK

When I came across this book title via the internet I was incredibly excited, and *Urban Subversion and the Creative City* does not disappoint. The work is thorough, engaging and critical in spirit, and is packed full of theoretical insights and colourful examples of what the author calls 'urban subversion'. Mould is keenly immersed in his subject matter, and his enthusiasm for it is both obvious and infectious. This is a book which every human geography and urban sociology student should read, and would enjoy at the same time (despite the Routledge hardcover price of £90.00).

While one might argue that there is now an overabundance of writing on creativity in cities, Mould's contribution is a positive one in that it not only subjects the concept to a thoroughly critical treatment, but also offers an extended discussion of alternatives to it. His general argument is that the dominant

Creative City (or CC for short) paradigm (derived largely from the writings of Richard Florida), and the majority of existing urban creative policy frameworks, are, at their core, characterised by instrumental forms of neo-liberal urban economic development and entrepreneurial governance models beset by inter-city competition, branding/market-ing strategies and injustices. Mould argues that the only true creativity produced here is through everyday citizens' critical reactions to this formulaic model. These forms of what he calls 'urban subversion' represent 'real creativity' which can challenge the capitalist city, yet they are also, ironically, susceptible to being incorporated into it. The author seeks to theoretically dismantle the dominant CC paradigm and to demonstrate how it ends up creating inequalities and actually hinders creativity, and shows how we might think about subverting and going beyond it.

The book is divided into two parts. In the first part Mould deftly unpacks the historical forces behind the rise of the CC idea, critiques the impact of the creative classes on cities and shows the consequences of these ideas for urban development. He cites neo-liberal globalisation, urban branding and inter-city competition, the political rise of the creative industries and the popularity of the creative class idea as reasons behind the creation of a dogmatic paradigm. Through concrete examples he also shows the negative impact such creative policies have had on cities, such as increased inequalities, divisive city zoning, gentrification and a social polarisation of cultural participation. In short, the CC paradigm literally 'eats itself', actually stunting creativity and fostering cultural homogeneity, as well as creating dissent.

The second part of the book is concerned with going beyond the dominant CC paradigm, and seeks to articulate new ways of thinking about urban creativity. Here he looks at the history of resistance to capitalist urban development in order to begin to get