Subaltern urbanism in India beyond the mega-city slum: The civic politics of occupancy and development in two peripheral cities in the Mumbai Metropolitan Region
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EPILOGUE: POLITICAL SOCIETY AS A CHANGING BUT RECALCITRANT STATE CAPABILITY

As alluded to in the introduction, the theoretical challenge of this thesis would be to discuss the dialectic between how urban formations established through political society come back to shape politics and processes around occupancy and development. To do this, I will leverage Saskia Sassen’s (2010) theory of change based on the premise that, “conditions x or capability y can shift organising logics and thereby actually change valence even if it may look the same” (25). By way of epilogue, I will look at occupancy urbanism as a condition and political society (as an arena of organised informality) as a capability in relation to managing the economic, spatial, and democratic contradictions implicit in the Government of India’s plans to have world-class and slum-free cities. Starting from the Nehruvian developmental period, political society and its manifestations derived from several interrelated factors: many people not yet being able to comply with the property relations and civic norms liberalism requires, the pragmatics of government agents and auxiliaries dealing with netas and other local interlocutors, the lack of affordable housing and services, and an incomplete and resource strapped welfare state apparatus. Rule breaking and bending, encroachment, and unauthorised development were tolerated and seen as necessary interim zones or domains of exception, until such time that economic growth and appropriate institutional reforms empowered citizens and the state to be able to comply fully in line with the word and spirit of the constitution. However, when these practices and places become obstacles to more powerful private or state interests, there are moves to criminalise or remove them. This is why informal or laissez-faire urbanisation is punctuated with demolition and eviction drives, but in general, carries on as the prevalent mode of spatial production. The informality that political society governs becomes important for deciphering the selectivities of state actors in terms of when laws and norms are enforced and how this changes over time regarding issues of urban development. Political society becomes an institutional mechanism of adverse inclusion for ‘populations’ and a mechanism of privilege for promoters and others vested in shaping the trajectories of development in the city. Political society, in this mode, is a constitutive circuit of the state, but not when it comes to formal economic policy or master plans (cf. Benjamin 2000). Those in the ‘policy sphere’ use political society when its capacities and actors become instrumental for to the implementation of governmental policies and projects aiming to discipline ‘populations’ or reign in laissez-faire development in various places. For many residents, political society is a mediating filter that fixes and brokers occupancy and locality development and as such, it constitutes a circuit of informal governance that is in practice responsible for dealing with those people and places rendered antithetical to processes and aesthetics associated with world-classing and slum-freeing and becoming a ‘rule of law’ civil society.

Political society today has historical origins, but it is not some pre-modern or backward social form that the neo-liberalising Indian State is trying to disempower in
order to achieve orderly cities rendered valuable to capital investment and accumulation and aesthetically pleasing to modern urbanites (although this is undoubtedly how some planners and much of the urban middle and elite classes see it). Rather its present form and functioning can be seen as an outcome of contemporary statecraft. Inadequate job creation, increasing investments in non-productive assets and capital intensive industries, combined with the switch from a welfare state model to a governmentality development model focused on entrepreneurialising the poor in a context of intensified marketisation, monetisation, and commodification creates an ever increasing governance gap—between what the formal state is willing and able to do and the needs of large sections of the population—which necessitates and empowers political society to occupy and manage these gaps. The horizon of an integrated liberal democratic society with rights based state-society relations and private sector-state relations holds no water within the current stages of capitalism and the related urban ‘spatial fixes’ of world-class and slum-free cities. However, as argued by Chatterjee (2008a) an electoral democratic state cannot write-off a large majority of the population, so various agencies and actors move between toleration and instrumentalisation of political society and the spaces it produces to help politically manage the contradictions between world-classing the city and the needs and future prospects of many urbanites. Returning to Sassen’s theory of change, political society and occupancy urbanism shifted from interim modes of politics and spatial production to being necessary for politically managing dualising cities. While political society and forms of occupancy urbanism do mitigate some of the vagaries, excesses, and limitations of the state, capitalism, and civil society, they have their own exclusions and are fraught with rent-seeking and structural dominations. To accept this as the best we can hope for, or to elevate it to a form of postcolonial democracy, is to accept second-class status and development standards for large parts of the urban population and enduring vulnerabilities.

This analysis of political society and different forms of occupancy urbanism present points towards how these might be taking on a different ‘valence’ to that of denoting an unofficial acceptance of unequal incorporation in cities. Shatkin et al. (2014: 3-4) label the situations described in this thesis as the “entrenchment of local politics” that continues to stymy ‘rational’ planning. Ironically, while the local state in India is the weakest formally, the de facto local state, when political society is included, seems relatively strong given the obstacles it is seen as producing to the urban plans and policies coming from higher scales of governance. However, the ‘flexible territorialisation’ indicated by which informalities become regularised and which ones become criminalised (Roy 2009) would be difficult to sustain if not for the power and practices of the pivotal and vanishing mediators operating through political society, who in effect, make it easier for the state to clear the way for another round of re-territorialisation in certain situations. Here it is warranted to quote Judith Butler (2006: 65 & 96) at length to help unsettle the distinction between local politics and the state with the former thwarting the plans of the latter:

They [petty sovereigns] are instrumentalised, deployed by tactics of power they do not control, and using it to reanimate a sovereignty that the governmentalized constellation of
power appeared to have foreclosed. These are petty sovereigns, unknowing, to a degree, about the work they do, but performing their acts unilaterally and with enormous consequence. Their acts are clearly conditioned, but their acts are judgements that are nevertheless unconditional in the sense that they are final, not subject to review, and not subject to appeal [...] The question is how does the production of space for unaccountable prerogatory power function as part of the general tactics of governmentality? In other words, under what conditions does governmentality produce a lawless sovereignty as part of its own operation of power?

When a municipal councillor facilitates more building in slums, when a promoter neglects to get an occupancy certificate, when the landowner in a gaothan refuses to widen an internal road so that emergency services can reach the tenant settlement, when the water department sanctions a second line to an unauthorised building, and when municipal officials pick and choose when to deploy laws as tactics (such as the occupancy certificate requirement), they are all exercising prerogatory power by taking decisions that are not legally sanctioned and which are in practice largely not subject to internal checks and balances, or external review. However, the context that allows for this power is not only of their making. The state practices of “unacknowledged urbanisation,” of being soft on the rule breaking and bending of promoters and the municipality, the increasing lack of affordable housing, and the overly bureaucratic process of building authorised housing, and the expectations of paths to regularisation, together produce a fertile political environment for petty sovereigns. At the constitutional level, Chatterjee has argued that instituted citizenship is linked to property relations that a large percentage of the population do not have the means participate. This too conditions the need for a political society, which allows for different formations of occupancy urbanism, which are made possible through the subaltern urbanisation structured by aggregate decisions of petty sovereigns. From a certain vantage point, this terrain looks to be at odds with official state goals of creating world-class and slum-free cities. From another it looks to be a situation that can be mobilised periodically, in certain contexts, as a state tactic for freeing up land that has been encroached upon or illegally developed. In theory, this allows upper echelons of state power to not have to go outside the law or enforce imminent domain to free up land. It is conceivable that allowing laws and procedures to be flouted by others gives them room to strategically decide when to make illegalities and irregularities at the municipal level a problem they must deal with; at times, that just happen to coincide with increased levels of demand in the real estate market in these areas. In this scenario, occupancy urbanism becomes a condition that rationalises state intervention in municipal matters. Following, Sassen’s (2008; 2010) argument, the spaces produced through political society occupations and mediations become a capability for the state to expel those residents exposed in the unauthorised development dragnet. It can become a complex and recalcitrant capability for carrying out primitive accumulation or accumulation by dispossession. However, the territoriality-territorialisation dynamic100 of the field of political society over time produces complicated and opaque political geographies and vested interests for those

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100 See chapter 4: section 4
who live in formations forged through these dynamics, the supply-side political society actors, and their various state collaborators (whether willing or resigned). Navigating this terrain for the purpose of implementing the ‘world-class’ city related policies requires leveraging the same actors and channels, and practices that produced the ‘problems’ these policies want to remedy in order to negotiate through this thicket of vested interests and culpability. Regarding this hypothesis, it is worthwhile to repeat Shatkin et al.’s (2014) statement that:

The state has frustrated the ambitions of corporations, consumer citizens, and others who covet a vision of global urban transformation and the commodification of urban space...these goals have progressed through a second channel [...] a multitude of localised mutations of state-society relations, which have emerged as local actors have looked for opportunities in the fissures of power at the municipal level to gain pockets of urban political influence, and to reshape urban space and infrastructure (5).

This captures how spaces generated by political society come back to shape politics of development, requiring those who likely speak derogatorily of political society and view these processes as beneath them, having to engage with them in their attempts to order, modernise, and commodify the city. This thesis suggests that political society may be functioning as a recalcitrant capability of the state and calls for more conceptual and empirical attention to this process.