



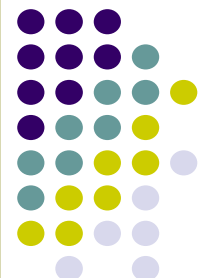
A Cultural Perspective on Meeting the Challenge of Slums

Edgar Pieterse

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Abstract

The emerging international consensus on how best to understand and transform slums locates the urban poor and their associations at the centre of a response to the challenge of slums. This is evident in a paradigm shift away from a narrow slum clearance/sanitation approach to one of gradual systematic improvement in partnership with slum dwellers. Whereas it is of strategic importance to have a bottom-up democratic perspective reflected in global discourses on urban development, of concern is the fact that a particular associational model of organisation and mobilisation is privileged as the most appropriate model for expressing social citizenship. Such a tendency does not do justice to complexities of slums and to the dynamic realities of agency and indeterminacy in these localities. The time has come for urban development theory and policy to engage more systematically with cultural studies to find out how one can best illuminate the creativity and agency that by definition keep slums afloat and mobile.

About the author

Edgar Pieterse is a Visiting Associate Professor at the School of Development Planning and Management, University of Stellenbosch. He is also Special Advisor to the Premier of the Western Cape and an Associate of Isandla Institute.

Edgar can be contacted via edgar97@icon.co.za

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INTRODUCTION

The impetus for this paper comes from a review that I undertook late last year of the UN Millennium Task Force Report on Improving the Lives of Slums Dwellers, titled: *A Home in the City* (UN Millennium Project 2005). This report sets out in compelling ways what one can describe as the emerging consensus on how best to understand and transform slums in the march to meeting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). I was particularly struck by the robust perspective on the pivotal role of civil society organisations in addressing the challenge of slums and, within this, particularly the position and methodology of federations of slums dwellers. The policy perspective adopted and advocated for in the Task Force Report constitutes an important shift in mainstream thinking about effective interventions to address urban slums.

The UN Millennium Task Force Report followed closely on the heels of the important Habitat Global Report on Human Settlements of 2003, *The Challenge of Slums* (UN-Habitat 2003). In this report the paradigm shift away from a narrow slum clearance/sanitation approach to one of gradual systematic improvement in partnership with slum dwellers was clearly established. Furthermore, the UN-Habitat Human Settlements Report 2003 also went to considerable distance to demonstrate the structural

¹ This paper was presented at the International Housing Research Seminar *Building an International Body of Knowledge on Housing and Urban Development: Towards Achieving the Millennium Development Goals*, which was convened by the South African Ministry of Housing on 4-5 July 2005 at the Cape Town International Convention Centre. The views expressed in this paper are personal and do not represent any institution I am affiliated to.

underpinnings of urban inequality that frame the formation and growth of slums in the world. Again, it signifies a critical political economy perspective that further opened the door for progressive civil society interests to advance arguments about the importance of a politicised rights-based discourse in dealing with understanding and improving slum areas. These shifts in mainstream policy discourses are undoubtedly important achievements in promoting a more transformative approach to urban development politics and praxis.

Yet, after having engaged very intimately with the UN Millennium Task Force's report on slums, I had a number of questions rolling around in my mind that induced a sense of unease and dissatisfaction. My discomfort stemmed from what I perceived to be a 'thinning' of social life and sociality in slum areas through the imaginary about social citizenship that was being invoked by the emerging consensus. More to the point, I was left ambivalent about the elevation of the particular social mobilisation model of various homeless people's federations across the world as necessarily the most effective way of building onto capacities within poor communities. My ambivalence stemmed from the fact that I agree with much of the analysis in the UN Millennium Task Force's report about the methodology and effectiveness of these organisations (see Chapter 2), and further appreciate the strategic significance of having such a bottom-up democratic perspective ensconced in global discourses about urban development; yet, at the same time I am concerned about the reification of a particular social mobilisation model with respect to expressing social citizenship in the context of urban slums.²

My concern is both political and cultural and the latter informs the former. In this paper I aim to work through my unease and dissatisfaction as a modest contribution to the ongoing debate about how best to interpret and address the vexing challenges associated with slums. In the first part I summarise the contemporary 'best practice' discourse about dealing with urban slums and then hone in on the cultural implications of the model. The second part of the paper shifts register and explores more foundational issues about how slums are being imagined in contemporary mainstream discourses focussed on improving these areas. The third and final section attempts to draw a few provisional conclusions

² I recently completed a study with Firoz Khan about the growth and dynamics of the Homeless People's Alliance in South Africa which informed by concerns (see Khan and Pieterse 2004).

about the value of a more culturally informed approach to slums in terms of making sense of these spaces and being effective in supporting transformative initiatives.

THE NEW CONSENSUS ON ADDRESSING SLUMS

The UN Millennium Task Force Report sets out a comprehensive approach to dealing with the challenges of slums, which is crudely summarised here:

1. Recognize that the urban poor are active agents and not passive beneficiaries of development, which demands working with local communities to upgrade slums and negotiating planning decisions and the use of public resources.
2. Focus on improved governance, which involves recognizing the “Right to the City”, planning for development and adopting local strategies.
3. Support and enact local pro-poor policies, which includes, inter alia, enacting legislation that bans forced evictions and provide security of tenure; acting on land issues; providing adequate and affordable infrastructure and services; enabling community contracts and partnerships; building and maintaining public transport systems and services; enacting building codes and regulations that reflect the needs of communities; planning for adequate alternatives to the formation of new slums; involving the private sector; and, creating jobs citywide.
4. Mobilize financial, land and human resources and investments.
5. Empower local action through the development and strengthening of networks and support for international initiatives.
6. Monitor progress toward target 11 by linking local actors and knowledge to international monitoring. (UN Millennium Project 2005)

The heart of the report is the first point in this typology. There is a very strong assertion about the centrality of the poor and their associations to the larger effort of improving the quality of life in slums. I return to this issue later on. This agenda is almost identical to the policy proposals in *The Challenge of Slums* Report of 2003 (UN-Habitat 2003). The only substantive difference is that the latter is more overtly preoccupied with the various political-economic factors that reproduce urban inequality in cities and, as a result, the tone of the report is less optimistic about the prospects of reversing current patterns of urban inequality and injustice that reinforce the growth of dire slums.

INVERTING REGISTERS OF COMPREHENSION

At the core of the mainstream view on cities and slums in the developing world is a topos that locates these places on a continuum from nascent/informal to developed/post-industrial, with the latter representing the apex of human achievement in city building. Implicit in this mind-view is a desire to progressively move the chaotic, malfunctioning city of informality to a situation of order, based on a comprehension of optimal functioning, of course with the humanist intent that everyone who lives in the city can enjoy a reasonable and dignified quality of life. On the back of this desire for steady improvement is a belief in the power of (rational) planning and deliberation to agree on the necessary actions/interventions to improve the quality of life of especially the urban poor and vulnerable. It is broadly accepted – even if not always practiced – that to get this right, the intended beneficiaries must be actively involved and drive the process. This narrative tends to function on the basis of an assumption that modern, gleaming, skyscraper filled cities with adequate networked infrastructures in place to support the modern city to function, is the only ineluctable way into the urban future. I want to disrupt this myth with a few conceptual moves.

What is the city?

In a recent book by Nigel Coates (2003), *Guide to Ecstacity*, the modernist urban imaginary is fundamentally challenged and supplanted by the invention of an alternative conceptual map and vocabulary to grope at what alternative urbanisms may feel, taste, sound, look and smell like.³ Given the fresh and subversive novelty of this affective imaginary, allow me to quote some definitional fragments from the book:

...in Ecstacity [...] we should rise to the challenge of how locality, identity, freedom, diversity and security can be addressed together.

Ecstacity models a world that emphasizes local identity rather than some corporate ideology. Its particularity is in its variety, not its uniformity. As if in a Borgesian multidimensional space, it reinstates the empathy between the imagination and the everyday. It sets out to unite and respect the multiplicity of the world we live in

³ Coates (2003:17) explains that Ecstacity is “an imaginary place that foregrounds the sensual side of all cities. To help construct it, I have taken fragments from seven cities around the world, and woven them into one multi-coloured urban fabric. Its patterns shift according to the overlap of cultures. It both reconfigures what we already know and stimulates new responses.”

rather than erect the sort of barriers that exacerbate misunderstanding. (Coates 2003:41-42)

Furthermore,

Ecstacy is about ideas, relations and blended conditions. Its premise is that, first and foremost, the city should be a place of experience before the formal stylistic or functional qualities of buildings [or dwellings]. In it, architecture – or its own broad version of it – is a vehicle for a looser and more open framework that stimulates the space in each of us [...] it sets out the city as if a dynamic paradigm for each of its multi-various inhabitants, every one of whom can act as both stimulator and respondent. (Ibid:42,43)

Granted, the architecturally driven vision of Coates can be seen as mere distraction by an eloquent fantasist that detracts energy and focus away from the pressing problem of slums and its attendant poverty. However, my response is that our present thinking about meeting the challenges of slums is profoundly impoverished precisely because we locate these places and the teeming complexities in a black box devoid of complex agency and indeterminacy, which is nonetheless unconsciously ascribed to parts of the modern city that is considered developed or settled. So, an initial point here is in line with a long tradition of urban anthropology and sociology which seeks to ascribe and analyse forms and patterns of agency amongst all city dwellers, whether in slums or not (Eade and Mele 2002; Tajbakhsh 2001). It is of course the implications of such literature that has given rise to the shift in urban development policy discourses away from ‘needs’ and ‘absences’, to focus instead on the ‘assets’ and ‘capabilities’ of urban dwellers—a move that has spawned the burgeoning literature on urban livelihoods (Rakodi and Lloyd-Jones 2002). No question, this seam of research and theorising has greatly improved the capacity of local governments, NGOs and other urban development agencies to better understand the opportunities for support and enhancement of local practices in slums.

However, my argument here attempts to go somewhat deeper. In my reading, unless we are able to fundamentally re-imagine the nature of the urban and the multitude potentialities of the city, by virtue of the culturally sutured practices of the diverse people who live there, we will not be able to move beyond essentially technicist

conceptualisation of city improvement. The question that I am groping at is this: Why can we not see slums as *constitutive* of the city as say, the suburbs, or the central business districts, or the luminous commercial retail spaces that serve to anchor middle-class existences in the post-modern city? Given that in most cities in the developing world the majority of citizens live in slums, is it not time to rethink our epistemic categories and redefine the city through the practices of the slum, and other areas, in order to come to terms with “the complexity of human nature, and how it wobbles constantly between pragmatism and significance, between pleasure seeking and survival” (Coates 2003:43)? And should we not further seek to understand how the complexity of human nature is expressed in the creation, experience and remaking of space as an incessant series of manoeuvres to make life worthwhile and meaningful, even if the only meaning that dominates desire is to find access to a job, or anything else that will secrete cash, or a corrugated sheet of metal to fortify a leaking wall of a shack, or enough cash to buy a cold beer in the local shebeen where the woman of your dreams work as a cleaner...?

It is in this sense that I think the Ecstacity provocations of Coates are apt: We have to step back, climb outside our mental cages and completely rethink the ways in which we talk about, imagine and seek to impact on life and desires in slums. This means being able to locate slums within a larger matrix of urbanism which contextualises not the slums alone, but in fact the very possibility of the suburb or, for example, the high consumption gay spaces in the city, which fuel tourism economies in Cape Town. From there, we need to question the adequacy of our concepts, policy frameworks, and of course, good intentions...

In my view, a fuller, rounded and dense matrix of urbanism can only be approached and grasped through a strong cultural perspective. It is precisely such a perspective that I find singularly missing or, rather, thin in the mainstream accounts of the city, and especially the dynamics of slums. Instead, what is typically projected is a litany of statistics to capture (physical and social) infrastructure and economic absences, stylised accounts of livelihood patterns to give one a sense of everyday economies and levels of dependency on mutual support and/or state investments, and possibly broad-brush strokes on levels of associational involvement, especially in organisations focussed on livelihood improvement. These informational coordinates are of course important and relevant, but they typically reveal a lot less than what they conceal. Without a nuanced exploration of

social and psychic dynamics in poor areas, our knowledges of these communities and the urban system within which such communities are embedded will remain inadequate for the realisation of the imagination and politics that can lead to truly audacious interventions.

In this regard I believe the conceptual tools of cultural studies more broadly embedded in sociological and anthropological traditions can be of immense value (see Jencks 1993; Shields 1996). Moreover, the conceptual tools and perspectives stemming from Cultural Studies focussed on popular practices and systems of meaning-making may even be more productive (Barker 2000; 2002).⁴ It is clearly beyond the space available in this paper to explore these disciplinary fields and extrapolate their significance for apprehending the city, but suffice it to point to some examples of scholarly works that stand out as illustrative starting points for this epistemic imperative of remaking urbanism and, by extension, our appreciation of slums.

Lives beyond livelihoods

The recent book of Adam Ashforth (2005) on the relationship between beliefs in witchcraft and the prospects and reach of liberal democracy in South Africa is an eye-opener. Ashford paints a fine-grained picture of the pervasive relevance of beliefs in spiritual systems of meaning in modern-day Soweto. He successfully explicates how belief in witchcraft permeates the fabric of everyday life, criss-crossing class status and political ideology, and the inability of the very foundations of the state to deal with it because it lies in a realm beyond the regulatory reach of the state. More disconcerting, Ashford also explains how the dramatic rise of the Aids pandemic in fact serves to reinforce witchcraft beliefs because its very discourse and pathways of infection mirror

⁴ I find the following explanation by Chris Barker (2002:222) on the ambit of cultural studies useful: “cultural studies emphasizes that culture is: ordinary in that it concerns everyday life and not simply the arts; constituted by shared social *meanings*, that is, the various ways we make sense of the world; the product of the creative capacity of common people to construct meaningful practices; concerned with tradition and social reproduction but also creativity and change; constructed through processes of meaning production designated as signifying practices; to be understood as produced symbolically in language as a ‘signifying system’. [Furthermore,] culture is less a matter of locations with roots than of hybrid and creolized cultural routes in global space.” This mouthful in itself intimates how little we know about everyday life in slums for if we consider the available literature on livelihoods in slums it would be very difficult to come to an understanding of these dimensions of urban life. The only significant sources of such perspectives are novels, a handful of ethnographies (e.g. Ashforth 2005; Chernhoff 2003; Piot 1999; Simone 2004).

deeply held beliefs about the effects and workings of curses afflicted by witches. Yet, the inability of the modern state (and its agents) to acknowledge, grasp and engage on the terms of the witchcraft beliefs held by the people it seeks to help makes the state effectively incapable of adequately addressing the pandemic in epidemiological and phenomenological terms. At a more general level, Ashforth argues that life in post-apartheid South Africa has seen a growth in impoverishment and inequality which fuels all manner of *insecurities* in the daily lives of ordinary people. Spirituality offers one of the most important tools to make sense of these intensifying multitudes of misfortune, of which the spectre of Aids is particularly menacing. My recounting of the argument fails to capture the rich texture of Ashforth's thinking, so let me turn to the author's own words:

Since issues of spiritual insecurity pervade virtually every aspect of social life, acts of government also impinge upon them, sometimes in unexpected ways. The ending of apartheid, for example produced for many people in Soweto a sense that witchcraft was increasing and that occult violence was running rampant. The increasing socioeconomic inequalities over the past decades in the black South African population, a product of government policy as much as anything, have also contributed to a sense of insecurity. Education policy, health policy, AIDS policy, economic development policies, and more shape the distribution of social jealousy, the distribution of misfortunes, and the resources available for people to interpret the forces shaping their lives and mediate the conflicts that arise in the course of living them (Ashforth 2005:315).

In navigating the vicissitudes of everyday misfortune and opportunity, people draw on an expansive array of symbolic and meaning-making resources which remain beyond the purview of most development policy, because official development discourses invent worlds and people that are by and large one-dimensional and in the image of whatever development model is in vogue. However, at this point I have to acknowledge that there are examples of good ethnographic studies working along the seam of the livelihoods model. For example, the studies on urban violence in Colombia and Guatemala by McIlwaine and Moser (2004) come to mind. Furthermore, the bottom-up planning models of theorists like Nabeel Hamdi (2004) are also instructive and suggestive.

Yet, what remains in abeyance is a broader social theory of the city that works through and out of the everyday dynamics of the informal, make-shift, emergent city. The culturally attuned theoretical matrix termed ‘everyday urbanism’, I believe, offers a useful starting point. According to Margaret Crawford the notion of everyday urbanism conjoins two seemingly opposite sensibilities. Urbanism tends to connote the inexhaustible, overlapping and contradictory meanings of the city as it is enfolded in ever shifting, disjunctive “aesthetic, intellectual, physical, social, political, economic, and experiential” dimensions. “Urbanism is therefore inherently contested” (Crawford 1999:8). On the other hand, the everyday in common-sense terms denotes “the lived experience shared by urban residents, the banal and ordinary routines we know all too well—commuting, working, relaxing, moving through city streets and sidewalks, shopping, buying and eating food, running errands” (Ibid.). Everyday space in turn refers to the “physical domain of everyday public activity. Existing in between such defined and physically identifiable realms as the home, the workplace, and the institution, everyday urban space is the connective tissue that binds daily lives together” (Crawford 1999:9).

The point about this conceptual starting is that it turns its back on the monumental and the grandiose in the city; instead, the focus is on the micro-spaces of everyday engagement and negotiation to make places and trajectories in the city, and the multitude of attendant practices that are involved in such processes. Such practices are of course culturally mediated, which returns me to the earlier point that if we are truly going to re-imagine the meaning of urban life and futures from the perspective of the muddy street in the slum, we have to first understand what is actually going on through the meaning-making practices of the people who live there. At a broader conceptual level, the notion of everyday urbanism is a strategic entry point. At a methodological plane, ethnographic engagement and description is essential. At a policy level, participatory processes of narrative construction about who and what the city is for based on the needs, interests and desires of the excluded living in slums need to fuel agendas for intervention. The only pragmatic attempt to explore what this may mean in more or less concrete terms is set out by AbdouMaliq Simone (2002) in a policy dossier of a few years ago, as part of

informing the debates on the Global Campaign on Good Urban Governance of UN-Habitat.⁵

CODA: LETTING THE LIGHT THROUGH

You must understand that this is a place of high intention. This is a city where they mend torn sails, or souls; hammer hearts back into place; make fine adjustments in the eye; replace the mind's printed circuits. Where they roll the projector lens slowly till all the blurred, shapeless forms snap into focus.

But it is also an insupportable mean, petty place, just as the upswept dark corners of our hearts are mean and petty, with hard grey floors, bare walls, windows that will not open [...] Some light must always shine behind our lives; but here it is very difficult for that light to get through (Sallis 2000:13-14).

Even though this extract refers to the institutionalised rituals and borders of a mental asylum, it strikes me as incisive in capturing the processes at play when the state, even in partnerships with whoever, seeks to create better slums without the tools to make sure that the light can indeed shine through the people and places they want to remake.

In conclusion, I will attempt to address potential misconceptions that the lines of argument above may have given rise to. I would agree that the renewed commitment amongst states in the international system to systematically reduce levels of poverty and destitution is obviously an important and necessary step. I would even agree that there is a role for targets and indicators to help facilitative democratic exchanges and contestations about the realisation of stated commitments to invest resources to achieve improvement. However, I am deeply sceptical of the efficacy of such approaches in the absence of more localised and culturally informed understandings of places, people and their numerous overlapping and contiguous communities of association and engagement. This scepticism is heightened when very particular associational models of organisation and mobilisation are privileged as the most appropriate forms of participation or

⁵ The more important contribution of Simone (2004) is that he has done probably more than any other urban scholar to delineate the elements of an African epistemology and social theory on what everyday urbanism might mean on the continent.

engagement by slum dwellers in the efforts of states and private sector actors. Thus, even though I can appreciate the strategic and tactical rationale for promoting particular institutional models of association, I remain convinced that one would rather err on the side of invoking diversity, rooted in multi-dimensional understandings of daily life and attendant symbolic universes. It is in this sense that I believe and insist that the time has come for urban (development) theory and policy to engage more systematically with cultural studies to find out how best one can illuminate the creativity and agency that by definition keep slums afloat and mobile.

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