Politics in the City-Inside-Out

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Abstract

Neoliberal restructuring has engendered significant economic and social changes. The advent of deregulation, diminished role of the state, and the crisis of social contract have meant that a vast number of subaltern groups are now left on their own to survive and better their lives. Consequently, a strong view in the current debates seems to suggest that neoliberal city is a lost city—where capital rules, the affluent enjoy, and the subaltern is entrapped; it is a city of glaring inequality and imbalance, where the ideal of the “right to the city” is all but vanished. While this conclusion enjoys much plausibility, I want to suggest in this paper that there is more to neoliberal urbanity than elite rule and subaltern’s failure. For the new realities of these cities tend to engender a new discrete form of politics. Drawing on the recent urban transformation in the Middle East, the paper elaborates on this distinct politics by discussing how a key spatial feature of neoliberal city, what I call the “city-inside-out,” is likely to instigate “street politics” and inform the “political street.” [Neoliberal city, Middle East, spatial politics, political street, Global South, urban subaltern.]

Introduction

Inequality is not new to the city. Even the walled cities of the medieval Near East, where the rich and the poor and various ethnicities lived side by side, were marked by considerable hierarchies (Abu-Lughod 1971; Sassen 2006). Although modernity brought new disparities in terms of class-spatial and racial divides, the more recent neoliberal permeation is transforming cities in novel fashions. This essay, based on my research work in the Middle East (primarily Egypt and Iran, but also Morocco and Turkey) in the past two decades, aims to explore what the “neoliberal city” under the illiberal state has meant to urban space and the urban subaltern. I wish to examine what sort of strains it places on the ordinary urbanites, and what kind of “opportunities” it offers to them, and reactions it solicits.

Neoliberalism is broadly understood as an ideology that advocates the economy and society be freed from the state regulations, and be controlled, instead, by individuals and corporate bodies in accordance with their self interests, mediated through the invisible hands of the market. The spread of neoliberal logic through the implementation of “Economic Reform and Structural Adjustment” (ERSAP) has since the 1980s left enduring marks on the economies and societies of the global North and South (Harvey 2007). It has resulted in lasting imprints on urban spaces, engendering what may be called “neoliberal cities.”
The “neoliberal city,” then, is a market-driven urbanity; it is a city shaped more by the logic of Market than the needs of its inhabitants; responding more to individual or corporate interests than public concerns. It is marked by an increasing deregulation and privatization of production, collective consumption, and urban space. In this logic, the urban space becomes the function of what Harvey calls “surplus-capital absorption,” in that the city becomes the site of capitalist operation in pursuit of profitability rather than one that serves the public needs. This means that the state and public officials play lesser roles in shaping the city than before, or else act on behalf of capitalist accumulation rather than the interests of urban residents. This new restructuring has in practice caused much change in the domains of work/production, collective consumption, and lifeworlds, all with far reaching implications for configuring urban space and politics (Hackworth 2006).

With the gradual implementation of Structural Adjustment in the Middle East since the 1990s, the ex-populist or socialist states have increasingly retreated from public provision and collective welfare; public sector firms have been rationalized, private enterprises increased, and urban employment structure has experienced a dramatic shift. We see now the shrinking of the traditional labor-intensive public sector which once in the post-colonial era in the 1960s and 1970s was the dream of workers and the fairly educated middle layers. No other sector would match the perks, bonuses, job security, flexibility, as well as status associated with the public sector firms. It was, in addition, here that the most organized trade unions emerged and further boosted employment in this sector. However, with the neoliberal rationalization, employment in this sector shrank; workers were laid off, transferred, or retrained for different jobs, while their perks, security, and welfare diminished or disappeared. As rationalization continued, it further instigated unemployment, casual work, and an expanding informalization which altogether has resulted in the fragmentation of urban labor (Bayat 2002). Currently, a pervasive sector of dispersed informal and casual jobs and services marks the economic destiny of neoliberal cities (Portes et al. 1989; Gilbert 2004). An estimated 180 million Arabs subsist on this sector (de Soto 2011).

The partial retreat of public authorities from the provision of collective consumption has left the people’s everyday necessities to either the whim of private capital, the reach of the NGOs, or the mercy of charitable institutions. Not only essential subsidies on basic staples like bread, oil, and gas have been cut back or reduced, the removal of rent control has brought scores of vulnerable households (in particular newly wedded and young families) under the command of land markets. The predominance of private capital in the urban operations has meant that fundamental goods, services, and spaces such as drinking water, electricity, transportation, garbage collection, greenery, clean air, not to mention schools, clinics, policing or security are subject to privatization, or otherwise they are, at best, governed by a three-tier (state-private-NGOs) system in which the affordable state provision is deteriorating by low
investment and shrinking by the “privatization from back-door.” Thus, in this back-door privatization patients, for instance, have to bring their own medicine to public hospitals, or pupils have to get private lessons in public schools to compensate for diminishing attention due to the deterioration of public education (see Karshenas and Moghadam 2006). The costly private sector keeps expanding, and so do NGOs whose developmental meaningfulness remains minimal. Identity politics (e.g. Islamic NGOs vs. Christian NGOs) are reinforced and deepen ethnic or religious divides (Tadros 2009). The NGO sector in essence mediates an orderly transition to marketization and commodification in the societies of the global South (Elyashar 2005).

Today, the declining fortune of working class public housing with dilapidated structures and profound neglect represents no more than an extension of slum life (Davis 2006). Egypt’s public housing, a vestige of Nasser’s distributionist socialism, differs little from the substandard informal settlements in dereliction and disregard, and is less flexible for expansion and innovation. In what Harvey calls “accumulation by dispossession,” states assist in pushing the poor with insecure tenure rights out of city centers to grab high-value lands to hand over to corporations in pursuit of mega projects like shopping malls, leisure sites, or office buildings. This is an extension of the old-age policy of gentrification where dispossession takes place de facto by the invisible force of high prices and an inhospitable social ecology. Thus, in place of public housing or amenities of the welfare-state era, we witness the development of mega projects of fantastical magnitudes—airports, shopping centers, department stores (e.g. AKIA), tourist places, and gated communities—which cater largely to the local and foreign elites.

Of course these processes are not totally new; rather they have been accentuated and intensified by the neoliberal policies, which, in the meantime, herald decentralization, democracy, and citizen-participation. The idea of a diminished role of the state is predicated upon the participation of “civil society” in urban governance through NGOs, local councils, and municipalities to deliver services, organize budgets or conduct local planning. Even though civil society is unequal, and primarily the more privileged institutions are able to influence governance, nevertheless opportunities for subaltern mobilization may open up. What do these remarkable processes mean to urban space and its inhabitants? How are the politics of the urban subaltern articulated in these neoliberal times? Proponents of informality such as Hernando de Soto or de Souza view the sector as the clear expression of the deep desire of people in the global South to enhance free enterprise. Informality then stands as an alternative to the stifling state control over the economy (de Soto 1989, 2003). De Soto (2011) goes so far as arguing that the Arab revolutions were in part pushed by the “forces of the market” to “emancipate the entrepreneurial poor.” Here I do not wish to delve into discussing the merit of such arguments—in fact a strong argument suggests that neoliberal policies have played a key role in the revolutionary dissent (Ayeb 2011; El-Mahdi and Marfleet 2009). Rather I like to suggest that the sizeable
literature on informality has strikingly little to say about the spatial implications of informal life, and even less on the effects of neoliberal cities.

The city-inside-out

I propose that a key spatial feature of the neoliberal city relates to double and dialectical processes of “inside-outing” and “enclosure.” In the first place, the neoliberal city is a “city-inside-out,” where a massive number of urban residents, the subaltern, become compelled to operate, subsist, or simply live on the public spaces—in the streets, in a substantial “out-doors economy.” Here public space becomes an indispensable asset, capital, for people to survive, operate and reproduce life. Strolling in the streets of Cairo, Tehran, or Amman in the midst of a working day, one cannot but notice the astonishing presence of so many people operating out-doors in the streets: working, running around, standing, sitting, negotiating, or driving. One would wonder why there are such inconceivable traffic jams in the midst of the working day when people are supposed to be in enclosed spaces.

The increasing lay-offs and unemployment (the MENA region had the highest unemployment rate in the world in the 1990s; 26 percent youth unemployment remains highest; Al Tamim 2012) resulting from the public sector restructuring, removing job guarantees, and the transfer from manufacturing into services and high-tech capital intensive industries have boosted both casual and durable informal work as embodied in street vendors, messengers, drivers, and carriers, or in those laboring in street workshops (like street laundries, car washing, mechanics, alleyway repair shops), and not to mention of the spectacular pavement restaurants. Diminishing incomes and protection (food subsidies, rent control) have compelled many poor families to deploy more family members (like women and children) to earn a living, who often end up in the “outdoors economy,” if they choose not to seek support, and thus put pressure on the income of relatives.

Of course, there is always the “option” of “pavement homes” or simply bare homelessness. But given that space is also culturally constructed, the phenomenon may take varied forms. Middle Eastern cities, for instance, are largely free from the kind of stripped homelessness or “sidewalk life” that may characterize, for instance, Bombay or Delhi. For an exposed life under the public gaze of “friends and foes” constitutes the greatest of failures, thus obliging families to try at high costs to secure some sort of shelter. This is a shelter that is to protect the inhabitants not only from cold and heat, but especially from public gaze, from being a spectacle. While adults may not withstand the cultural agony of bare life, things are different for children. Indeed, “street children,” as a dark-side of the neoliberal urbanity, have now emerged as a salient marker of large cities in this part of the world. Here in the city-escapes, under bridges, in graveyards and side streets, street children have formed “flourishing” outdoor communities, some with elaborate order, discipline, and an
Slum dwelling, casual work, under-the-table payment, and street hawking have spread among educated young people with higher status, aspirations and social skills—government employees, teachers, and professionals. Informal life has thus become a facet of educated middle class existence. Taking advantage of the actually existing flexibility and facilitated by over-employment, informality, and corruption in the public sector, many state employees now subsidize their meager income by taking second or third jobs often in “out-door economy.” Thus it is not uncommon to discover that taxi-drivers, street petition writers, or traders of diverse kinds are actually teachers, low-income bureaucrats, army personnel, or even such professionals as lawyers.

Now that men tend to work in multiple jobs day-in and day-out, with the result that “they are never home,” women and housewives have to take on many of the tasks traditionally assigned to men like paying bills, attending to bank business, dealing with car mechanics, daily shopping, taking children from school, or going to government offices. So, in addition to men, women too, whether as out-door workers or in running errands, are increasingly mobile and present in the public spaces, in streets, offices, buses, trams, and traffic. Contrary to the prevailing assumption with reference to the Muslim Middle East, the “Islamic tradition,” especially veiling has not prevented women from public presence and visibility. If anything, it has helped their mobility by “protecting” them from unwanted male gaze. Even though the rise in the expression of public piety in the form of the hijab has placed greater pressure on unveiled women in public places, it has allowed greater freedom for women from “traditional” families to be present in outdoor public places. It might sound surprising, but in 2008 some 800 veiled women worked as taxi drivers along their male counterparts in Tehran under the Islamic Republic. This kind of compelled and desired publicness stands in sharp contrast to Andre Gorz’s notion of the domestic or “home work” as the “sphere of freedom” and self-regulation versus the discipline of social economy (or the sphere of necessity) where people have to work for the purpose of survival (Gorz 1982, 1985). In today’s neoliberal cities, outdoor economies and public presence are necessities and (for some women) spaces for self-expression.

The city-inside-out is not limited to spatial features of working life. It resonates even more powerfully in everyday lifeworlds; the way in which people subsist and operate in their daily existence. Simply, the neoliberal logic expands and deepens the informalization of lifeworlds, of which out-door life is a key attribute. Thus, the gentrification of city centers to accommodate global enterprises tends to push scores of low income and middle class families (state employees, teachers, professionals, or the workers) to live the life of the poor in the expanding “planet of slums” and squatter areas where out-doors life constitutes an underlying feature. Not only does informal subsistence heavily rest on the out-door economy of survival: begging, stealing, laboring, and prostitution (Fahmi 2007; Honwana and de Boeck 2005).
economy, informal communities, slums and squatter settlements rely greatly on out-door public space which inhabitants utilize as places of work, sociability, entertainment, and recreation. Simply, poor people’s cramped shelters, as in Cairo’s Dar- el-Salam neighborhood, for instance, are too small and insufficient to accommodate their spatial needs. With no courtyard, no adequate rooms, nor any spacious kitchen if there is any at all, the inhabitants are compelled to stretch and extend their daily existence onto the public out-doors spaces: to the alleyways, streets, open spaces, or roof-tops. It is in such outdoor places where the poor engage in cultural reproduction, in organizing public events—weddings, festivals and funerals. Here, out-door spaces serve as indispensable assets in both the economic livelihood and social/cultural reproduction of a vast number of urban residents (Bayat 1997a, 1997; Bayat and Denis 2000).

Unlike the rich who can enjoy costly enclosed life, the poor cannot afford to frequent indoor restaurants, cafes, holiday resorts, or hotels. Anyone strolling in the streets of Cairo during such holidays as Eid al-Adha (the feast of sacrifice), or Eid al-Fitr (the end of fasting month) will not help noticing the presence of overwhelmingly poor families, young and old, dressed up in their colorful outfits, on the Nile Cornish or adjacent waterways, to enjoy the affordable fun and festivity these spaces offer them. Unemployed youth or elders can only afford cheap outdoor tea-houses where, as in the case of the “tea-drinking youths of Cairo or Dakar,” they can spend hours un-deterred to engage in prolonged pastime (Masquelier 2010).

In a striking contrast to the stretching-out of the poor, there is a simultaneous process of enclosure, a process that represents one of the most glaring features of the neoliberal urbanity. Along with the expansion of slums with their real and imagined dangers of crime and extremism, has come the historic flight of the rich into the “safe-havens” of private cities or gated communities—the Beverly Hills, the Utopias, and the Dream Lands of the mega cities of the Global South including the Middle East (Genis 2007; Bartu and Kolluoglu 2008; Falzon 2004; Adham 2005; Landman and Schönteich 2002). The super-rich of the South become neighbors with the new class of dot.com-like smart professionals or private developers who also aspire to live the life-styles of private city dwellers. As the lower classes are encroaching and stretching their heavy presence into the streets and other out-door public spaces, where they appear as if “they are everywhere,” the rich, now apprehensive of the physical presence and “social dangers” of the dispossessed, tend to seek their own enclosed and exclusive zones—the private beaches, exclusive neighborhoods, gated communities, securely-guarded bars, restaurants and places of sociability, work, and even locations of worship and prayer. In cities like Cairo, the globalizing rich rarely attend the prayers halls of the ordinary people. Instead they generate their own private mosques, sermons and religious teaching, by bringing Sheikhs and preachers to the secure spaces of their exclusive habitat. In Rio de Janeiro or Johannesburg, the elites’ sense of security is tied up to the highly developed apparatuses of body guards, check-points, electronic

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monitoring systems, and barbed wires. Even their moving automobiles are not spared from formidable locks, bolts and alarms (Landman and Schönteich 2002; Graham 2010).

With such real and subjective “check-points” and “barriers,” neoliberal cities cease to be spaces of flâneurs, or the free flow of inhabitants in the urban expanse. The privatization of streets and neighborhoods means that “outsiders” lose access to these exclusive places, while the threat of real and imagined crime and violence restricts the movement of the rich, as well as ordinary people, notably women, into many areas of these cities (Phadke 2008; Sorkin 1992; Davis 1992). Moreover, the incongruous “urban ecology,” outsideness, enforced by the piercing gaze of locals dejects uninvited strangers with out-of-place habitus from inward-looking neighborhoods. One then wonders what such urban landscapes with their pattern of “out-doorsing” and “enclosure” mean to the notions of public and private. If public space is understood broadly in terms of open, accessible, and all inclusive space that is regulated by public authorities, then how public are such spaces when segments of the urban population lose access to them because of fear or being out-of-place? What happens to the public character of the spaces on which the poor stretch their lives, turning them into private economic assets or avenues of sociability and cultural reproduction? In truth these spaces turn out to be neither strictly public nor private; rather they become liminal spaces that navigate between a legally inclusive status and an exclusive appropriation of their use.

In these urban landscapes then, any Olmsteadian vision of central parks and open spaces to facilitate mixing and mingling between different social classes fades. The growing decenteredness and the fragmentation of cities into different and often contrasting communities, each with its own identity, protection, and possessive pride have rendered some to proclaim the death of the city as a bounded spatial reality with unified identity and cohesion (Huyssen 2008; Koolhaas 2001). What we have today, the argument goes, is not the city but urban space. Even though in reality cities have almost always been marked (and defined by Lefebvre among others) by differentiations, diverse life-styles, and spatial units juxtaposed in close proximity (Parakash and Kruse 2008:6-7), nevertheless concerns about fragmentation and the death of the city signify some fundamental changes in urban spaces.

Subaltern politics in the neoliberal city

What do these new spatial realities tell us about the relations of power in today’s megacities of the Middle East? What are the implications of neoliberal urbanity for the politics of the urban subaltern, particularly those who operate under authoritarian states and repressive regimes? The prevailing view on the left seems to suggest that the neoliberal city is a lost city where capital rules, the affluent enjoy, and the subaltern are entrapped. It is a city of glaring inequality and imbalance, where the ideal of the right to the city is all but
vanished. Evidence in a number of cities in the global South seems to give some plausibility to this claim (Bayat and Biekart 2009). For instance, Mona Fawaz’s studies on Beirut document how neoliberal policies have in the past three decades disempowered the informals, because urban land prices have increased (due to the presence of the expats, foreign capital, and companies), police control on their encroachments expanded, provision of social services have been delegated to non-state agencies such as NGOs or political parties, and there is now greater competition for such meager services, as the clientele has been extended to the impoverished middle classes (Fawaz 2009). This is in line with Harvey’s argument that the poor are structurally entrapped in the logic of capital from which they have little chance to escape unless something is done to the way in which capitalism as a whole operates (Harvey 2008).

For instance, how can the poor deal with the deteriorating environment that affects their lives in a city where leisure, greenery, and clean air are becoming privatized? While the rich may retreat into their green clubs, gated communities, weekend resorts, or secluded air-conditioned residences, the poor have very little options. Even resorting to NGOs (which mediate between the poor and other social movements) without having allies with powerful institutions within the states cannot help. As Peter Evans (2002) suggests, only a synergy of the communities, NGOs and the state may be able to address the problems of urban “livability.” In short, the neoliberal city is the victim of “urbicide” by global elites who kill the cities such as Managua by disemboding and fragmenting them through zoning and expressways that connect the elites’ work and leisure to their gated communities, leaving the rest to rot in poverty, crime, and violence of slums (Rodgers 2009). In other words, the urban subaltern, the majority of urban inhabitants, are structurally disempowered by the capitalist logic, the power of the state, and global economic structure. On their own, the poor can do little. Solutions perhaps lie in the mobilization of broader national or global social movements, such as Social Forum, transnational NGOs, or even supra-state bodies.

Quite distinct from this position, such thinkers as Mike Davis seem to actually sense a stiff resistance on the part of the dispossessed in the “planet of slums.” Indeed, for Davis (2004), slums are like “volcanoes waiting to erupt,” and their explosion might herald the emergence of “some new, unexpected historical subject” carrying a “global emancipatory” project. Even though slum dwellers do not constitute a Marxian proletariat, they are believed to have the potential to wage radical actions. Indeed, slums already constitute the highly volatile collective where the “gods of chaos,” the dispossessed, the outcasts, deploy their remarkable strategy of chaos—suicide bombing and “eloquent explosions”—to counter the “Orwellian technologies of repression” (Davis 2006). Other analysts like Joe Beall and Dennis Rodgers view the spectacular gang violence in Latin America as representing the response of the dispossessed to their excluded status. Gangs, in fact, correspond to vanguard forms of what James Holston (1999:148) calls “insurgent citizenship” attempting through violence to carve new spaces for possible
alternative futures within the context of their wider exclusion. Slums, in short, herald the “urban wars of 21st century” similar to Eric Wolf’s peasant wars of 20th century. Yet since the effect of violence extends beyond the rich and officials to wreak also the poor, Dennis Rodgers concludes, the subaltern has basically lost this war to neoliberal political economy and its henchmen (Rodgers 2009; Beall 2007).

While these analyses offer valuable insights for our understanding of the predicament of the subaltern in these new liberal times, they also raise some important questions. For instance, if in Harvey’s views, the solution to counter the process of dispossession lies in forging large scale global social movements to undo or stop the neoliberal onslaught, how are the poor to carry this responsibility? If the dispossessed are to wait for a social revolution to reverse the course of the capitalist encroachment, what are they to do in the meantime, what strategy should they pursue in their daily lives? In other words, for the foreseeable future, the urban disenfranchised are trapped in the structural web of the current capitalist system and the states that uphold it. Mike Davis, however, appears to be more optimistic, as noted earlier. He seems to state that a formidable resistance is already taking place, one that is couched in the language and violent practices of radical Islam in the Middle East (i.e. suicide bombings and spectacular explosions) and the rapid spread of Pentecostalism in African and Latin American slums.

This, however, is a difficult argument to sustain. As I have attempted to show elsewhere, radical Islam is hardly the ideology of the urban dispossessed. Rather it builds on the attitudes and expectations of the broadly educated middle classes who feel marginalized in the prevailing economic, political, and international domains (Bayat 2007). What Davis seems to refer to when he speaks of spectacular violence emanating from slums are, in fact, the exceptional cases of Baghdad and Palestinian Gaza where poverty and exclusion are mixed with a blatant foreign occupation (US in Iraq and Israel in Palestinian territories). The fact is that in almost no other places in the global south, including the Middle East, do we observe the same type of violence as developed at times in Baghdad’s Sadr City or the Gaza Stripe. And Pentecostal Christianity, while it has certainly unfolded fast in Latin America and Africa since the 1990s, it has had little impact on mobilizing the slum dwellers, and the Pentecostal political parties enjoy little support from the very poor (Rodgers 2009; Coleman and Stuart 1997). In Africa, Pentecostal ethics, “wealth as a spiritual virtue,” correspond well with the spirit of aspiring middle classes who hear from their Church that “you can be both rich and redeemed” (Gandy 2005). Finally, the accounts offered by Joe Beall and Dennis Rodgers on slum wars and violence remain by and large Latin American-centered. Their analysis of urban violence as the “function of the economic and political relations” remains a-cultural. It is indeed a question as to why such a high scale of violence in many Latin American cities has little resonance in, say, Middle Eastern slums, despite more or less similar economic and political exclusion? It becomes then imperative to contextualize poor people’s politics within the respective political
cultures, in relation to their specific subjectivities, and the possible alternative venues which different dispossessed groups in different countries often deploy to address (or not to address) their exclusion.

In fact an exclusive focus on such post-conflict social violence as gangs, or on conventional large-scale mobilization and social movements may detract us from paying adequate attention to the intricate processes of “life as politics” among the subaltern in the cities of the global South. An exclusive preoccupation with such categorical dichotomies as passive-active, or win-lose, can entrap our conceptual imagination, preventing us from exploring beyond and discovering much intricate ingenuities that the subaltern may discretely and quietly deploy to assert themselves and defend their lots. In this framework, I like to see (beyond constraints) what possibilities the neo-liberal city may unintentionally furnish for subaltern struggles, not only those of the poor but also women and the young. I draw on the cities of the Middle East where neoliberal urbanity has been developing against the backdrop of illiberal regimes and conservative social and religious trends. I like to suggest that this new urbanity, the city-inside-out, not only it exhibits a profound process of exclusion, it also generates new dynamics of publicness that can have important implications for social and political mobilization in terms of what I have described as “street politics” and “political street” (Bayat 2010). While the subaltern groups may lose much of their traditional right to the city, they tend in response to discover and generate new escapes where they reclaim their right to the city in a different fashion, and in some cases compel the elites to retreat. The social dimensions of the neoliberal city-inside-out in the context of illiberal (authoritarian) states engender the type of grassroots mobilization which I have called “social non-movements.” The social non-movements reinforce and deepen both street politics and the political street.

Street politics

When people are deprived from, or do not trust electoral power to change things, they tend to resort to their own institutional power to exert pressure on adversaries to meet their demands (like workers or University students going on strike). But for those (such as the unemployed, housewives, and broadly the “informal people”) who lack such institutional power/settings, streets become a crucial arena to express discontent. For such subaltern groups, however, the centrality of streets goes beyond merely the expression of contention. Rather, streets may actually serve as an indispensible asset/capital for them to subsist and reproduce economic as well as cultural life. In both of these arenas, the actors are involved in a relation of power over the control of public space and public order. They are involved, in other words, in street politics. Street politics, then, describes a set of conflicts and the attendant implications between certain groups or individuals and the authorities, which are shaped and expressed in the physical and social space of streets—from back alleys to the main avenues, from invisible

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city escapes to main squares. The attendant conflict arises because the subjects get engaged in an active use of public spaces in the conditions where under the modern states they are supposed to use them only passively, in ways that the states prescribes through regulation. Street vendors who spread their business in the pavements, poor people who extend their lives into the sidewalks, squatters who take over public lands, or protestors who march in the streets are all involved in street politics (Bayat 1997).

But streets are not just places where conflicts are shaped and/or expressed. They are also venues where people forge collective identities and extend their solidarities beyond their immediate familiar circles to include also the unknown, the strangers. What facilitates this extension of solidarity is the operation of some latent or passive networks between individuals who may be unknown to one another even though share common attributes. Passive networks are instantaneous communications between atomized individuals that are established by tacit recognition of their commonalities and are mediated through real or virtual space. Thus street vendors, who might not know each other, can still recognize their common position by noticing each others’ push carts, vending tables, or chanting. Similarly young people with common hairstyle, blue jeans, or modes of behavior connect to one another and recognize their shared identities without necessarily establishing an active or deliberate communication and without necessarily being part of an organization (Bayat 1997).

There is still one more thing. Aside from shaping, expressing, extending discontent and serving as asset/capital for livelihood, streets also signify a powerful symbolic utterance, one that goes beyond the physicality of streets to convey collective sentiments. This signifies “political street”, as in reference to the “Arab street” or “Muslim street.” By political street, I mean the collective sentiments, shared feelings and public opinions of ordinary people in their day-to-day utterances and practices which are expressed broadly and casually in urban public spaces, in taxies, buses, shops, streets sidewalks, or in mass demonstrations (Bayat 2010).

Now this process of the city-inside-out becomes a crucial moment in street politics and the political street. For the reclamation, by the poor people, of public space through encroachment, stretching out, functioning, and subsisting constitutes an expression of street politics, while simultaneously feeding into and accentuating the political street. In other words, through this encroachment, the dispossessed are constantly engaged in struggles in and about the urban space. They become a party in the contest over shaping the urban form, and molding the urban texture, the domains of the social, the cultural, and the sensory: noise, smell, and sight. This life-driven and constant nature of spatial politics among the Middle Eastern poor (or the homeless in San Francisco) distinguishes it from that engendered by the Occupy Movements whose presence in the public space, the streets, was essentially deliberate and transitory, rather than structural and enduring.

How do these contestations in and about urban texture take place in the conditions where the authoritarian states in the Middle East curtail
the organized and sustained challenges to political and economic elites? I have proposed that the political constraint under the authoritarian rule compels the urban disenfranchised to resort to a particular form of mobilization, the unorganized and unassuming non-movements. The non-movements, or the collective actions of non-collective actors, describe the shared practices of a large number of fragmented people whose similar but disconnected claims engender important social change in their own lives and in society at large, even though such practices are rarely guided by an ideology, recognizable leadership, or organization (Bayat 2010). In broad terms, the non-movements may reflect how, for instance, such groups as Muslim women, youths, or the urban disenfranchised in the Middle East may succeed in making their respective claims for gender equality, citizenship, and the right to the city, despite their being dispersed, unorganized and atomized. But the notion of non-movement is particularly pertinent to the way in which the urban dispossessed gets engaged in street politics and political streets.

The dispossessed in street politics

The non-movements represent perhaps the most salient features of the urban dispossessed activism in the Middle East, and by extension comparable areas in the global South. I am referring to the quiet, pervasive, and enduring encroachment of poor people on the propertied, the powerful and the public in their quest for survival and bettering their lives. Devoid of a clear leadership, articulated ideology, or a structured organization, these dispersed efforts represent the largely individual, everyday, and life-long mobilizations that only at times (times of retreat) involve collective action (Bayat 1997). In the primate cities of the Middle East, this is expressed in the way in which millions of rural migrants embark on long migratory journeys to escape from misfortunes and in search for better livelihoods and new lives. They inaugurate their new existence by grabbing plots of land to put up shelters in the seemingly abandoned, unnoticed, and opaque urban escapes, in the back streets, under the bridges, on the roof tops, or somewhere in the outer space of the megacities. Once families settle, then comes the effort to acquire electricity by connecting their homes to the nearby power poles, and then securing running water often ingeniously by installing underground pipes or make-shift hoses from a neighbor or public pipes in the vicinity. Phone lines are obtained more or less in similar fashion. As more neighbors gather around, they build roads, places of worship, and manage garbage; efforts that of necessity become collective (Bayat 1997a; Bayat and Denis 2000). In the domain of livelihood, currently some 180 million Arab breadwinners in such habitats, mostly without regular work and urban skills, strive to earn a living by encroaching in the thousands on the main streets, sidewalks and squares as hawkers and street vendors who then take advantage of favorable business opportunities that the shopkeepers and rich traders have created. They often freely market their diverse but affordable merchandise, including globalized but fake trade
labels: Nike shoes, Gucci shirts, or variety of Levi’s jeans. In South Korean Seoul, Louis Vuitton’s Pusan outlet could stop a pushcart vendor from selling counterfeits of its bags in front of the shop only by purchasing the spot that the vendor had occupied. Nike International and Ralph Lauren have had similar problems (Far Eastern Economic Review 1992). In their lifeworlds, these disenfranchised groups manage their daily collective lives, by coexisting, resolving disputes, and handling the outlaws and criminals who tend to nest in the ecology of such illegible spaces. Yet they cannot help enduring constant insecurities of debt, illegal existence, and uncertain destinies (Bayat 1997a).

Such daily practices, the encroachments, by multitudes of people have virtually transformed the cities of the Middle East and by extension the developing world. Over time, they have created massive communities with millions of inhabitants, complex lifeworlds, economic arrangements, cultural practices and life-styles (Sims 2011; Yonder 2006; Bayat 2010a). In these largely illegible urban outer-spaces, the poor strive to live relatively autonomous lives basing their relationships more on self-reliance, reciprocity, flexibility and negotiation. Their lives stand against and yet negotiate with modern notions and institutions of bureaucracy, fixed contracts, and discipline. They carve off, claim, and even push back elites from sizeable pieces of the urban universe. By so doing, they pose a question as to who owns, manages and exerts power over cities and who the players are in urban governance.

I do not intend to depict a romantic vision of a resisting subaltern, even though I realize that there is, as in the New Urbanism School, a temptation to romanticize street and sidewalk life, or to see in informality a panacea for urban ills (Duneier 1999). It is certainly valuable to recognize the agency of the dispossessed in distributing social goods and opportunities for life chance, and in creating their vibrant communities. But who can deny that the neoliberal onslaught has brought much slum demolition, gentrification, and removal of street markets? How can one dispute the fact that the logic of control in the modern state conditions the political authorities to turn any illegible and opaque space—the slums, informal markets, underground lives, or unregistered humans—into transparent, legible, and quantifiable entities? Indeed, demolishing spontaneous settlements, or deliberate ablaze of street markets, and even programs of slum upgrading can serve to resurrect a transparency and knowledge that can ensure social control (Bayat and Biekart 2009). Yet the truth is that the very logic of the neoliberal urbanity carries in itself the force behind generating such parallel, unknowable, and opaque lifeworlds. It renders both dispossession and repossession a simultaneously parallel process, thus turning the urban physical and social space into the site of a protracted battle for hegemony. To the structural dispossession, the poor respond by not letting go easily; they often resist slum clearance and demolition, or otherwise make these measures politically costly. President Mugabe did destroy the poor people’s habitat, but this brought him massive resentment and opposition (Wines 2005). In Cairo during the early 2000s, selective demolitions caused the furious settlers to wage
street protests and demand resettlements, and in Tehran, the poor in the early 1990s agreed to move out only after being compensated. In general, slum clearance and demolition do happen, but people still move to different, more remote, less visible, and less strategic locations to reclaim what they have lost, and begin life all over again. In this long war of attrition, power reveals its limitations.

Poor peoples’ encroachment concerns not merely physical control over land, street corner, or public parks. It is extended also to social and political spaces—to domains of culture, urban order, mode of life, the sensory domain, in a word urban texture. In the city-inside-out, the subaltern are seen and felt to be almost everywhere. In fact they are everywhere. As carriers of a certain habitus—mode of being, behaving, and doing things—the poor are present in the main streets, public parks, and alleyways; in buses, tea houses, hang-out squares, and on the sidewalks. Where else can poor youngsters play soccer other than in the streets, neighborhood alleyways, or any possible open spaces? Where else can they enjoy an affordable respite, when their cramped shelters allow little physical movement? So, they wander, do business, sit about, hang around, and squat or sleep on any green spot left for rest. In Cairo, the mass of the poor colonize public space greeneries, Nile side pavements, squares, public parks, and every inch of green spaces in which they can rest or picnic. Fences are installed around green patches, but they are unable to withstand the encroachment of the poor into public greenery, especially when their neighborhoods are likely to become infested by garbage, factory wastes and pollution. Thus, through their overwhelming presence in the public arenas with their overpowering physic, looks, gaze, behavior and through their life-style, noise, and smell, the subaltern unintentionally compel the disgruntled elites to retreat into their own safe havens.

Such subaltern mode of spreading-out in the cities of the global South reminds one of the ways in which illegal migrants manage their movement and life at the international level. There exist now massive border control, barriers, fences, walls, and police patrols. And yet they keep flooding through the air, sea, road, hidden in the back of trucks and trains, or simply on foot. They spread, expand, and grow in the cities of the global North. They settle, find jobs, acquire homes, form families, build communities, and struggle to get legal protection. Indeed, the anxiety and panic that these subaltern groups have caused amongst the elites at national and international levels are remarkably similar. The Cairo elite lament about the “invasion” of fallahin (peasants) from the Upper Egyptian countryside; and the Istanbul elite warn of the encroachment of the “black Turks,” meaning rural poor migrants from Anatolia, who, they say, have altogether ruralized and distorted “our modern cities” (Bartu and Kolluoglu 2008). In a strikingly similar tone, white European elites, for instance in the Netherlands, express profound anxiety about the “invasion of foreigners”—Africans, Asians, and in particular Muslims—who they see as having overwhelmed Europe’s social habitat, distorting the “European” way of life by their physical presence and
cultural modes, their behavior, hijab, mosques and minarets (Erlanger 2011). Truth is rhetoric notwithstanding, the encroachments, both at the local urban and global levels, is real and is likely to continue. These protagonisms are more than some benign practices of everyday life by the urban subaltern. They follow unintended political consequences. They are involved in appropriating opportunities and social goods, and asserting the right to the city. They are engaged, in sum, in struggles for citizenship. Thus, while the neoliberal city deprives many of its inhabitants from urban citizenship, it is also true that the disenfranchised do force the elites into socio-spatial retreat and enclosure, to the gated communities, private security guards, locked vehicles, partial governance, and parcelized hegemony. So, in response to the neoliberal strategy of “accumulation by dispossession”, the subaltern may resort to “survival by repossession.”

The logic of repossession

Why and how can such response, that is, survival by repossession, happen? Two factors are crucial in this process. The first has to do with the particular characteristics of the non-movements; and the second with the nature of the political settings (state forms) within which non-movements operate. As pointed out earlier, non-movements represent the collective action of non-collective actors, who are oriented more towards action than being ideologically-driven; concerned more with practice than protest (Bayat 2010). Unlike the conventional forms of activism, which by definition are extra-ordinary practices, non-movements are merged into, and in fact are part and parcel of the ordinary practices of everyday life. Thus, the poor peoples’ resolve to migrate, build shelters, or work, live, function and stroll in streets; and the illegal migrants’ acts of crossing borders, finding work and looking for livelihoods all represent instances of the ordinary practices of daily life (which unlike the extra-ordinary acts such as attending meetings, marching or demonstration) have the capacity to remain immune from repression. What grants power to these non-movements is not the unity of actors, which may cause disruption and uncertainty on the adversaries. The power of non-movements lies in the consequential effects on norms and rules in society of many (dispersed) people simultaneously doing similar, albeit encroaching, things.

This, however, cannot happen under any circumstances and state forms. Non-movements usually work under the state forms which can not, do not, or are perceived not to meet the social and material needs of the disenfranchised, who are then compelled to resort to direct action. Thus, instead of forming collective protests to demand jobs or housing, poor people simply go ahead and acquire them by themselves through direct action. They succeed in doing so largely because the states under which they operate are the “soft-states,” in that despite their often authoritarian disposition and political omnipresence, they lack the necessary capacity, the hegemony and technological efficacy, to impose full
control over society. So, there remain many escapes, spaces, and uncontrolled holes that the innovative subaltern can utilize to their advantage. Thus, even though these states produce many strict rules to govern people, the laws are often easily broken. Even though bureaucrats treat the poor harshly, they are often not difficult to bribe. Consequently, despite the seeming omnipresence, the reach (let alone the hegemony and legitimacy) of the state remains acutely limited which leaves many free zones which the non-movements can utilize to thrive and be effective (Bayat 2010).

Equally crucial is the actors’ civic virtues, their perseverance and innovative ability to assert their presence in society. I am referring to the subaltern capacity to recognize their limitations, and yet understand and discover opportunities and inventive methods of practice, in order to take advantage of the available spaces to resist and move on. This art of presence signifies the ability to assert collective will in spite of all odds, to circumvent the constraints, utilizing what is possible, and discover new spaces within which to make oneself heard, seen, felt, and realized. The art of presence serves as the medium through which the subaltern may achieve survival by repossession as a response to their status of dispossession in the neoliberal city. And the city-inside-out becomes the spatial expression of subaltern politics in the current neoliberal urbanity.

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