URBAN ASPIRATIONS IN MUMBAI AND SINGAPORE

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Introduction

The city is generally seen as modern and secular. The story behind this notion runs roughly as follows. People get away from the social constraints of their rural backwaters when they move to cities. Then they are free to choose urbane life-styles that are fashionable, au courant, civilized. This storyline of urban migration as a liberation from backwardness can be found again and again in the social sciences. It is a storyline that often not only celebrates liberation but also provides a cautionary tale against anomie, anonymity and other social evils that are the result of the urban decay of social cohesion and other aspects of the move from Gemeinschaft to Gesellschaft. A similar storyline can be found in literary and cultural studies in which the excitements of the modern city, brought about by new spaces of consumption, public displays of fashion, cinema and other forms of entertainment, are celebrated by paying close attention to the threat of prostitution, the nausea (Sartre's Nausee) created by the lonely crowds in urban life, the destitution of the urban poor. All of this is captured by Henry James's description of London as a City of Dreadful Delight.

Religion does not play much of a role in any of these accounts. In the older modernization theories it is a category that has lost its significance in cities and is thus not worthy of investigation. So, even in the celebrated street-corner ethnography of the Chicago School, there is little to be learned about urban religion. Nevertheless, we know from historians like Hugh McLeod that European cities in the nineteenth century offered ample opportunities for religious innovation and new community formations, while, obviously, there is no way one could conceivably understand American cities in the past or today without studying the role of Black churches and immigrant religious activities (McLeod 1994, 1996). In cultural studies, that peculiar hybrid of the humanities and social sciences, religion does not signify fun, is old-fashioned, and thus cannot be deemed worthy of discussion. In short the study of urban religion has been neglected, yet it is important to engage seriously with it, since cities are important and they are not easily understood as either secular or fundamentalist.
The study of religion in cities has already become important because of the urbanization of the globe, a world-historical process that forces the majority of the world's population to live in cities. Global cities are even more important because, in their particular combination of high finance, huge immigration and entertainment services, they are fantasy spaces that bring together desires of various kinds. It is not that globalization cannot be studied in small cities or in rural areas, but that global cities occupy a particular position in economies and fantasies of scale. The concept of global cities has been developed in the literature, especially in Saskia Sassen's path-breaking work, to highlight how processes of globalization shape urban economies, especially service economies, unmoor them from the nation state, at least to a certain extent, and relate them to other global cities in urban networks (Sassen 2001). However, I want to revert to the older, cultural concept of exciting world cities as against boring, provincial cities. It is the opposition of excitement and boredom in an economy of desire and consumption that needs to be analysed, besides the usual analysis of opportunity structures, wages and labour shortages, to account for the push and pull factors. Moreover, I am not convinced by Sassen's notion that global cities become relatively unmoored from the nation state and more connected to a network of other global cities.

The nation state has different histories in different parts of the world, and to assume a particular relationship between it and global cities tends to erase those histories and produce a false, universal model. If one looks at Asian world cities, the similarities and differences are readily observable. Singapore is a global city and at the same time a nation state that has been separated from Malaysia. Its history of separation from Malaysia and its geographical location in South-East Asia are crucial to the nature of its globality. Mumbai is India's most modern city, but also the site of huge slums and pernicious ethnic and religious strife, some of which has to do with regional politics rather than a global network of cities.

This chapter moves from the focus on financial markets and service economies to aspirations, desires and fantasies of another kind, primarily religious and civil. I want to compare the location of religion and the construction of belonging in two world cities, Mumbai and Singapore.

One needs quite explicitly to refuse to make pre-conceived oppositions between the secular and the religious, both theoretically and empirically. The Western European development of secular societies, although quite variable and often already ill understood, is regularly taken as a model for developments in the rest of the world. This will simply be impossible when one compares cities which belong to societies with strongly differing