Introduction – Urban Charisma

On Everyday Mythologies in the City

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Abstract ■ Cities are charismatic entities. Both in and of themselves by virtue of their history and their mythologies, but also as sites where charismatic figures emerge on the basis of their capacity to interpret, manage and master the opacity of the city. The specificity of the urban can neither be understood through the city's functions nor the dynamics of its social networks. The urban is also a way of being in the world and must be understood as a dense and complex cultural repertoire of imagination, fear and desire. We propose to understand the urban and its charismatic potential through three registers: the sensory regimes of the city; the specific forms of urban knowledge and intelligibility; and the specific forms of power, connectivity and possibility which we call urban infra-power.
Keywords ■ charisma ■ diviners ■ knowledge ■ space ■ underworld ■ urban sensorium

Urban spaces have spirits, and cities have souls. Some are dangerous, menacing, but also seductive; others are marked by beauty and excess; others again by their dreariness or spookiness. These are contagious qualities that are said to seep into the character of the people living in such cities. People speak with pride about being Londoners, being from Jozie (Johannesburg), or of being Bombaywallahs, Cairene, Madrilenos and so on. By invoking the name of the city as their own they also incorporate, and bring into existence, the myth of the city as something that lives within themselves. It is an urban habitus they do not entirely own because it is larger and more enduring than themselves, or any individual life.

Some urban spirits are global in reach, others mainly local or regional. They are reproduced in everyday stereotypes and mythologies. None of these are of course true in any sociological sense but the proliferating fantasmic and mythical qualities of cities and urban spaces are effective realities that shape the behaviour, cosmologies and desires of people in cities, or of those who visit them, imagine them, or describe them in narrative or imagery. The mythologies of cities, or single neighbourhoods, are remarkably durable and seem impervious to falsification by events or experiences that seem to contradict them. 'It' – the myth or the truth of the city – always exists somewhere else, or remains true in a more general way.

In his famous essay on walking in the city, de Certeau argues that names of cities and places never can hold their 'proper' meaning against the actual practices of city-dwellers. They can only hint at certain meanings: 'A

strange toponymy that is detached from actual places flies high over the city like a foggy geography of "meanings" held in suspension, directing the physical deambulations below' (de Certeau, 1984: 104). While we agree that demotic practice and language always improvise and often subvert official schemes of naming and function, we argue that the names and the associated myths of the city and its places are always potentially imbricated in the most mundane activities in the street. Some urban spaces are so heavily mythologized and enframed through circulating images and narratives that they suffuse, if not overdetermine, any empirical or sensory experience. Anyone walking in New York, Venice, Rio or central London on a summer's day will become drawn into crowds of visitors who all walk in the city, take pictures of its buildings, and the urban crowds – mainly tourists – while they engage in a strangely circular and fantasmic gaze upon themselves, and the gaze of other visitors doing the same thing. The city is here a monument and a living prop. The act of walking in the city is a collective, fantasmic re-enactment of a demotic, supposedly local everydayness that is only made possible by the presence of the tourists. Yet the awareness of this fundamental in-authenticity takes nothing away from the visitors' experience because they do not walk in the actual city. They are *flâneurs du fantasme*, walking in the fantasmic city whose symbolic weight and presence imbues everything occurring in the actual urban space, however banal and unexceptional, with a special significance.

This is one commonplace aspect of what we call urban charisma. By this term we mean two things: on one hand the charisma *of* a city as in its 'soul' or mythology that is emitted from its buildings, infrastructure, the historicity of its sites and its anonymous crowds. On the other hand, there is also charisma to be found *in* the city – in its crowds, in the styles and reputations of its people, their knowledge, and the special skills and extraordinary acts the city enables and necessitates. Quintessential urban figures – be they artists, taxi drivers, cops or those belonging to a more opaque popular world – may be charismatic by virtue of their actions and the knowledge and resources in the city they are rumoured to command. They, like their gestures, are suffused with that elusive spirit of the city, or the neighbourhood, itself.

We use the term 'charisma' liberally here by extending it to larger, and non-human, entities such as cities, sites, objects and collectivities. No longer merely a sociological concept, charisma has today entered mainstream popular and commercial culture. Charisma is no longer an inalienable quality of a select few individuals. Neither an effect of proper initiation, nor the property of an office, nor the 'mystery of ministry', as Bourdieu (1991) puts it, charisma is today radically democratized, at least in principle, in the marketplace, in the arts and in the world of everyday politics. Charisma, understood as unique, or the vaguely magical power of presence, style, seduction and performance is now a widely marketed and desired object of self-making, within the reach of those with sufficient skill and purchasing

power. Democratization of the aspiration to charisma has entailed a measure of objectification – standardization, definition and tangibility – and a commercial exchangeability of objects, attributes and skills that are assumed to produce charisma. Charisma is actively embraced as personal quality and as a collective spirit by evangelical churches, marketing strategists, self-help guides, motivational speakers, popular advice columns, makers of perfumes and much more. The dynamic social life of charisma stands in interesting contrast to the remarkably unchanging conceptualization of charisma in the social sciences.

In Weber's original formulation, charisma is defined as something unique, an 'anti-economical principle' attributed to individuals, who in their being and gestures articulate the hopes and aspirations that are entertained by large numbers of people. To Weber, this is a recurrent, if not trans-historical, quality found in some individuals who, when the time is ripe, can acquire large followings and political importance. Less spectacular forms of routinized charisma, often expressed through a founding myth or through memory embedded in institutions, are at the heart of the daily functioning of power and authority in many societies (Weber, 1978: 241–62). Subsequent scholarship on this enormously suggestive notion has offered surprisingly little conceptual development. Charisma is often deployed as a truncated shorthand for a range of processes, many of which are attached to extraordinary situations, mythical structures and objects rather than specific individuals. The concept itself, however, remains firmly embedded in the quasi-mystical relationship between the call of a leader and the responses of suggestible followers. This is true of even the most sophisticated attempts to transcend Weber's basic frame, such as that of Francesco Alberoni's suggestion that charisma is a product of specific social situations and milieus rather than individuals. Extending Freud's (1959) classical work on group psychology, Alberoni argues that new socialities and intense solidarities can arise when enough otherwise disconnected people experience social and cultural ruptures and seek a libidinal investment in a leader:

> The charismatic leader is first and foremost a strategist of moral behavior. . . . There is nothing magic or mysterious about his behavior [but] he is able to ensure salvation and social cohesion among the group's members and to overcome danger from without. (1984: 144)

Alberoni explores how charisma is produced through unequal exchanges of love: the leader is made to embody an ideal of completeness and competence. He needs no-one but loves all, which makes it possible for the followers to understand their own need for community (the movement, the neighbourhood) through their love for one, the leader.

For all its sophistication, Ernesto Laclau's long-standing work on populism also remains embedded in the same problem of charismatic leadership. Laclau argues that the construction of the 'people' as the most

pregnant and yet 'empty signifier' is the single most important element in the political imagination of modern societies. Political power and legitimacy flows from the ability to act in the name of the people, and to name oneself and one's followers as instances of the 'popular', as the ordinary people and so on (Laclau, 2005: 67–128). This structure of political desire – to become and embody the impossible identity as 'the people' – is indeed an essential condition of possibility for charisma, imputed, symbolic but always efficacious, to become a powerful political force.

Yet none of these works explores how charisma is attributed and distributed as unique powers and potentials embedded in people, things, places and situations. In its original Greek *kharisma* means a gift and thus something unique, non-trivial and powerful. But a gift can also be shared, transferred and exchanged. In the following, and in the contributions, we will try to translate this understanding of charisma as both portable and shareable, as a quality that can be conferred upon objects both material and fantasmic – such as cities, crowds and physical sites. But we also want to retain charisma as a name for specific registers of conduct, in this case conduct by different 'urban types', i.e. people whose gift it is to know the city and to act decisively, with style and without fear. These figures distribute certainty, they convince followers of their own special qualities and self-sufficiency and demonstrate new potential and possibility.

The production of this form of charisma is, as Peter Worsley pointed out many years ago (1968: 221–77), premised upon the ability to deal with taboo and abjected matter, and the ability to incorporate these dangerous situations or substances into one's own body. This is akin to the traditional healer or diviner who interprets a dangerous and powerful natural world but violates taboos in order to do so. A powerful charismatic figure is also allowed to break taboos as long as he/she can perform the key function of interpreting the present and giving a direction amidst an unknowable and ostensibly dangerous environment. Modern urban life is indeed characterized by a constitutive unknowability. No city can be fully known and interpreted because it, like its people, is one of modernity's most powerful 'empty signifiers': too multi-layered and overflowing in both histories and meanings to be fully captured by a single narrative or name, and yet an object of irresistible desires and identifications.[1] Historically, it was the emergence of the modern city, its squares and its densities, that made it possible for 'the people' to emerge as a concept, to name itself and thus be made visible to itself and to those who wished to represent the people as such.[2] Those who claim to know the urban world, its significant sites and physical layers, those who demonstrate abilities to manoeuvre and control the urban environment, and those who are able to create narratives about the city and its people, can thus draw on the latent charismatic potentials of urban life itself. Or rather, they are able to convert the opacity, impenetrability, historicity and latent possibilities of urban life into a resource in their own self-making.

We can now see that the everyday mythologies of urban life can give birth to our two forms of urban charisma. On the one hand, the charisma *of* the city, in the sense of the myth of a city which imbues its physical sites and objects, and thus the people who live in them, with unique capabilities and even magical forms of agency. This charisma of the city can easily be transferred, for instance through processes of naming, onto symbols and material objects that stand in for the city: to invoke and to name its styles, slang, music and ambience as they are reproduced in demotic discourses, in advertising, and official celebrations of an urban space expressed in endless series of commercial insignia and products. It also arises from multiple forms of reproducible maps, guidebooks, urban magazines and other tools that claim to capture and present the city to itself and its visitors. At the heart of the formulaic global tourist economy, it also has deeper effects on how the city becomes available for its own inhabitants as an objectified horizon that can envelop and subsume their own identities.

Charisma *in* the city rests on special forms of knowledge, networks, connectedness, courage and daring that enable some individuals – politicians, gangsters, business tycoons and the everyday hustler – to assume leadership, or to claim hidden and dangerous abilities and powers. These two forms of charisma, one mythical, the other performative, are mutually dependent and live off one another. The former charisma of the city functions as a reservoir of myth and narrative that can be re-interpreted, re-invented and re-enacted by those who claim charisma in the city in a variety of forms.

The city is not one

The spirits of cities have today moved to the centre stage of human life. In the richer parts of the world the 'souls of cities' inform the making of identities and the marketing of lifestyles – including design, art and music – that are taken as quintessentially urban. These forms of invocation often amount to a bourgeois celebration of the city as the quintessential space of self-making *ex nihilo*, of the city as an open space of endless possibility, driven by the desires and energies liberated by the intrinsic freedom and anonymity of urban life. Yet, no city is ever one, and its public spaces are neither fully public, nor equally inviting to everyone in the city. Neighbourhoods, central squares, thoroughfares and settlements of squatters all have discrete rule and discrete publics, whether formal and visible, or manifested through rumour and informal networks.

Across Africa, Latin America and Asia, cities are associated with enormous possibility but also with moral crisis and death.[3] Many of these cities are postcolonial cities that began their existence as colonial centres or trading entrepots. The cultural construction of life within these postcolonial urban spaces is deeply marked by a colonial legacy. This continues

in institutional exclusions, spatial separations and discrete economic networks that connect the formal economy with vast and flexible networks of services, labour and informal connections. Colonial cities were founded on a distinction between the proper colonial citizens, living in regulated and planned spaces, and the masses of urban poor and recent migrants who were concentrated in slums, favelas, souks and bidonvilles. The majority of the prevailing theorizations of urban life take little note of these specific historicities and different trajectories of the urban, and thus the different possibilities of what the urban means, in the colonial and postcolonial context.

Richard Sennett's insightful works on urban culture are instructive examples. 'Modern culture', he writes in *The Conscience of the Eye*, 'suffers from a divide between the inside and the outside . . . between the subjective experience and worldly experience, between the self and the city' (1990: 21). Sennett argues that the modern city is constructed around a 'fear of exposure' of the individual or of the inner life of communities because 'exposure more connotes the likelihood of being hurt than of being stimulated' (1990: 23). This produces what he calls 'a militarized conception of everyday experience' (1990: 30), warfare as the preferred trope for everyday life. Another result is that urban spaces are turned into bland, impersonal, homogenizing spaces that remove the threat of social contact: the mall, the gated community, the ever-moving highway. For Sennett, this is linked to Christianity and its stern moral injunctions regarding the sincerity of conviction, the autonomy of the soul and the inner life. This is undoubtedly a somewhat culturalist explanation that leaves out the persistent fear of the poor and the structure of the economy, the localization of labour and so on. It is also an idea of the urban that is essentially North American. It does not resonate with the urban realities of many parts of Europe, and even less so with urban spaces of the Middle East, South Asia, Latin America and Africa.[4]

In those latter parts of the world, the urban scene is not one of neutrality and blandness but one of intensity, heterogeneity and creativity visible in market places, streets, sounds and smells. This radical mixing is neither enjoyed nor appreciated by everyone in such cities and is the site of enduring conflicts. This is particularly visible in how cities are publicly represented. On the one hand, one finds in official rhetoric and the bourgeois celebration of the city a praise of the heterogeneous, the noisy and lively. At the same time, this very density is deeply resented among the middle classes and the elite for whom the lived city is but a burden of dirt and overflowing humanity. There is a drive across the world today to produce the situation Sennett describes: to fence off the poorer neighbourhoods, to produce impersonal and homogeneous spaces of the highway, the mall, and equally formulaic beach and harbour fronts. A relatively new development in South Asia and many parts of Africa, this effort has reached its highest development in North and South America (see Caldeira, 2001;

Davis, 2006). Today, as explored by both Jensen and Worby in this collection, the South African city is transforming into something else – not a free-flowing heterogeneity but a new and often creative way of using and appropriating an erstwhile racially defined set of urban spaces (see Mbembe and Nuttall, 2004).

Outside the offices of urban planners and strategists it is clear that there is never just one but many competing and often antagonistic understandings of the city. The streets full of hawkers that may appear so charming to the tourist and the middle-class shopper, appear to the hawker himself as streets of danger and fear: fear of the police and immigration authorities, or of the informal cartels and financers that regulate a great many of these street economies. For the impoverished, the central parts of cities are often seen as threatening and dangerous, not familiar or navigable like the popular neighbourhoods in which they live – however riddled by violent crime or insecurity such spaces may be.

The process of gentrification that takes place in many cities in the Western world and elsewhere depends on the appropriation of erstwhile industrial and popular neighbourhoods and buildings – now returned in a purged and sentimentalized *auratic* form as funky entertainment and urban charm. The charming diversity of cities is almost invariably highly *produced*, sanitized, cleaned up, purged of its real heterogeneity and replaced with gentrified and highly capitalized diversities of shops, cafes, renovated flats and factories. Meanwhile, the actual popular neighbourhoods are constantly being moved into the remnants of the 1960s cheap suburbs and *banlieus*, spaces devoid of economic activity except consumption and predatory economies of theft and drugs (see Wacquant, 2007).

Cities like Mumbai, Cairo or Nairobi are not completely governed by such dynamics and are taking other routes, in spite of massive ongoing attempts to reshape and reorganize their spaces along the lines of this contemporary urban matrix. These intense and dense cities derive enormous energy from a constant jockeying over space. This is an antagonistic battle between impoverished and respectable groups, between newcomers and entitled, between city planners and those battling for livelihoods, between cars, pavement-dwellers and pedestrians. The battle is about how to handle the legacy of constitutive separation of life-worlds of the city proper from that of the native quarters that was the main principle of colonial city planning (see Pellow, 1991; Robins, 2005; Thompson, 2000: 171–224). The demographic and political pressure on these cities means that these battles are antagonistic as the term is understood within medical science – as substances or muscle energies that counteract, mitigate or even neutralize each other's effects in the same space. Many of the grand urban plans will never materialize because of the popular forces that exist in these city spaces. These forces inhabit what Partha Chatterjee (2004) has called 'political society', that zone of negotiation and struggle between the state and the popular world that happen along not very civil lines,

often violent and almost invariably beyond a legal framework (see also Bayat, 1997).[5]

Re-imagining the urban

When one sifts through the literature on cities, the preponderance of work on planning and disciplining, and the physicality of space and architecture is striking. Decades of urban anthropology on forms of life *within cities* notwithstanding, relatively less attention has been paid to the urban as a kind of sociality, a mental condition but also a way of being in the world. The best depictions of the urban as a distinctive social and mental form of life remain literary, fictional and, most powerfully, cinematic depictions of the moral complexities and sensuous dimensions of urban life.

Why is urban life so difficult to capture? Why does 'the urban' itself often elude us? Is the experience of the city so dependent on the tactile, the senses and the visual that textualization itself appears hopelessly inadequate? Ranjani Mazumdar has recently argued that only the cinematic form can capture the lived realities of the city in India. Through the figure of the gangster, the *tapori* (vagabond/hustler), the marginalized but righteous avenger and the dangerous femme fatale, a 'disavowed vernacular archive of the urban in India' has emerged in low-brow Bollywood productions over the last two decades (Mazumdar, 2007). Only in the visual and narrative form, can the body language, the colloquial street lingo, and the moral complexities and dangers of the city emerge. The central figures in many of these films are people who somehow navigate and manage the city through networks and ways of knowing that are unavailable to the elite and to the official gaze. They represent an otherwise disavowed perspective on the city, the 'real' of the urban, a perspective that only with the greatest difficulty can emerge in a sociological register through court transcripts, police reports or the stories presented by social workers, and the odd anthropologist. In her contribution in this issue, Vyjayanthi Rao develops this point to show that in the world of fiction and cinematic narrative, the gangster and the terrorist have become something like a 'reading principle' through which a chaotic urban space acquires a structure of intelligibility and intentionality.

In the following, we reflect on how cities in both their fantasmic and physical forms are interpreted and acted upon by the people living in their midst. The issue we are concerned with is how one can produce a range of what Benjamin called 'profane illuminations' of urban life. Let us try to outline such illuminations along three axes. (1) Sensing the city, i.e. reading, reproducing and domesticating the urban soundscapes, the visual overflow, the styles, smells and a physical landscape that can be read through everyday mythologies of past actions, heroes, martyrs, events, danger. (2) Knowing the city in the sense of decoding it, managing its

opaque and dangerous sides, controlling and governing the urban land-scapes. (3) The capacity for 'urban gestures' and actions – acting, showing oneself and performing within registers that are known to, and understood by, people in specific neighbourhoods, whether as individuals or as crowds. We are interested in exploring the styles, the references and the use of the discursive and visceral archive of the city, or a neighbourhood, in such urban gestures. This last register pre-supposes a knowledge and familiarity with the two former and is at the heart of reproducing the charisma *of* the city, and charisma *in* the city. It is also crucial in creating and maintaining durable and informal networks of resources and connectivity which we tentatively have called *urban infra power.*

Sensing the city

If cities have souls, can it also be said that cities have bodies? Without wanting to reify cities in the way state apparatuses often are depicted as living, willing and acting organisms, there are perhaps two good reasons to explore the notion of cities as bodies. First, people might sense a bodily intimacy with particular urban spaces that goes beyond the mere fact that being in a city also implies a physical experience. That sensation, we suggest, may have something to do with the way urban spaces leave their traces on human bodies, that is, make a mark in the memory or unconscious of human beings through repeated sensory stimuli. For a visitor, a migrant or newcomer some of these may be overwhelming at first: the surplus of light at night, the deafening noise of mid-day traffic, the disorienting mixtures of smells in bazaars and other public spaces, or the tactility and physical density of human crowds. Such impressions are difficult to forget or be indifferent to and often morph into strong dislike or deep attachment. The city penetrates one's body and structures bodily functions to such an extent that city-dwellers visiting the countryside may have difficulty sleeping in complete darkness and silence.

Second, the physical nearness of the city – or parts of the city – may generate a fantasy of the city as a presence that transcends the notion of the city as a mere physical site. Although it is difficult to imagine people talking *to* the city, people may actually talk *about* their city as an organism they love, sympathize with or are having a row with. Cities are often gendered. In the collective fantasy of the inhabitants of Karachi, for instance, their city is definitely female in relation to the much more mascu-line city of Islamabad. This of course has everything to do with gendered representations of the dominant ethnic groups in both cities – Muhajirs and Punjabis respectively – and in that sense cities are, in a Durkheimian sense, anthropomorphic totems of self-representation. These imaginaries enable Karachiites to be ashamed of their city (for the way it has been 'raped' and 'molested' by recent migrants and indifferent administrators), to admire its humour, its capacity to survive and its refusal to surrender. Karachi may be a girl but not a submissive one.

If, however, cities can be imagined as bodies, they can also be depicted as being ill, as being attacked by disease-bringing vermin or as being in need of surgery. Stephen Graham (2004) and others have suggested that the modern city is the product of an ongoing process of large-scale urban destruction, carried out under the name of urban planning, and often justi-fied by images of spontaneously grown city parts as unhygienic, disorderly places that spoil the healthy nature and future of the city as a whole. Terror-ism, they argue, has only revived an already existing fear of the unknown and unruly neighbourhoods where state surveillance is incomplete or absent (Graham, 2004). Bombs and bulldozers – sometimes acting in concert – have been instrumental in these operations. Graham mentions the destruction of the old city of Algiers by the French colonial army in 1847 as one of the first examples of modern 'urban pacification', a model that continues to be followed in our days in places like Jenin and Baghdad. A deep-running theme in these counter-insurgency measures is the fear of disorder and rebellion, and disgust felt in relation to dirt, smell or noise. Hygiene is often the deciding incentive behind large-scale urban inno-vation projects.

Since the end of the 20th century, democratic processes generated by ethnic, religious and populist politics has brought new social groups into the political arena, into the heart of political power and into erstwhile bourgeois urban spaces across the globe. The modernist utopia of 'washing' the masses to make them civilized subjects is quickly giving way to an elitist dystopia that combines a nostalgic longing for an imagined past of decreed order and civility of the colonial city, with a growing fear of the poor and the associ-ated smells and noises. In his discussion on taste, Pierre Bourdieu (1984: 2) argued that the capacity to see (*voir*) is a function of knowledge (*savoir*). But what about the capacity to hear (*entendre*) and smell (*sentir*)?

As Martijn Oosterbaan (2006) argues in this issue, sound – like smell, and more than the visual – has a profoundly trans-local character. Sound in many ways dominates city life in Rio. This includes amplified sermons by Pentecostal pastors as well as the loud music of *baile funk* parties – often accompanied by the sound of gunshots and fireworks. Oosterbaan shows how the private or semi-private constantly intrudes upon the public space of the city. Religiously, ethnically or racially organized groups, as well as the urban poor, make their entrance into the public sphere of the city through sound. We find similar arguments in Hansen's work on taxis and *kwaito* music in South Africa (2005), in Charles Hirschkind's work on the Islamization of the public space in Cairo through *dawa cassettes* (2006) and – for smell – in Arvind Rajagopal's discussion on how the slum, through the stink of faeces and dead bodies, penetrates the public spaces of Bombay (Rajagopal, n.d.). In a sense, this jumble of noises, smells and signs only confirms the cosmopolitan and metropolitan ideal of speed, squalor and synthesis immortalized by great 1920s novels like John Dos Passos' *Man-hattan Transfer* and Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. Yet today, fusion

often seems to cause confusion, and private and semi-private measures against it, such as the high walls of gated communities or private homes, may keep out the people, but hardly their smell and never their sound.

Is our capacity to appreciate and make sense of sounds and smells equally dependent on how we have learnt to like some of them and dislike others? What we want to suggest is that what is now happening in cities today is less the fusion of sounds and signs and smells – a trope of the modern cosmopolitan city throughout the 20th century – than the democratization and fragmentation of taste regimes on aesthetic hierarchies ranging from the beautiful and meaningful to the unbearable and the absurd. In contexts that are politically charged, sounds and smells of other ethnic or religious communities may generate feelings such as fear and hate. The repeated conflicts over the *azaan* (call to prayer from the minaret) in Indian cities is an example of such politicization of competing taste regimes.

Sound signifies community in an immediate and visceral mode but, beyond such an insight, what could an anthropology of urban senses be like? The city appears as a place full of impressions that are often unintelligible beyond the fact that they signify the urban other, yet at the same time have a profound physical impact on city-dwellers. We are, in other words, surrounded by a multitude of sensory stimuli that cannot be ignored, yet which are meaningless – not only to us as anthropologists but also to urbanites themselves. Maybe we need to re-load Clyde Mitchell's (1956) classical arguments about the urban ad hoc classification of others, and suggest that the urban cacophony of sounds and smells and signs precisely demands easy stereotyping for it to be deciphered.

Knowledge and intelligibility

The slum, the township or the favela is often seen by anthropologist, and by many city-dwellers, as a site of impenetrable force, stubbornness and heroic resistance. This analytical matrix derives its force from a moral reversal whereby popular neighbourhoods are depicted as spaces of authenticity and humanity opposed to the blandness and brutality created by many city planners. Although popular neighbourhoods do appear to resist legibility, in James Scott's (1998) sense as a gaze of the state, such spaces are nonetheless navigated and interpreted by their residents on a daily basis. They are also home to men and women who claim superior knowledge of these densely populated spaces: the hustler, the hard man, the wheeler-dealer.

The issue of legibility and intelligibility is intimately tied to the question of governance and policing. Police departments across the world are deeply dependent on informers living in the neighbourhoods they police. What the police officers are interested in hearing, how they process the information and how this knowledge is governed by already existing frames is, of course, of interest to the anthropologist. The crime reporter is entirely

dependent on police officers, as are script writers from Bollywood to *NYPD Blue*. Detective novels revolve around the riddle of knowing the city. The dark hero of the classical detective novel – the man who knows the city in an unsentimental way – has today given way to the police drama and the police station as the essential urban site where the truth of the city – dirt, violence, greed and sexual perversion – is on display. In both cases, crime is the governing trope of the city – as a netherworld that must be faced and dealt with by hardened men with guns and numbed emotions.

But how can the urban anthropologist come to know the city, and its popular neighbourhoods? Are we bound to repeat the same story, to assume a similar cinematic gaze to that of the crime writer, or the diasporic re-discoverer of the mysteries and the heart of darkness within the city as when Suketu Mehta explores Mumbai in his *Maximum City* (2005)? In *Expectations of Modernity* (1999), Jim Ferguson suggests that we should understand the city as a performative space – a space that is only readable, and liveable, if one acquires a measure of 'performative competence' of the urban registers and an ability to read these performances. This is an important step away from the modernity–tradition dichotomy that has governed so much urban anthropology and we would like to take this a step further by asking the following questions: if the urban is opaque and difficult to decode for everybody, how do people make themselves at home in it?? What produces excitement and fear? Who do people turn to for favours, help or revenge?

We are interested in the 'urban specialist', individuals who by virtue of their reputation, skills and imputed connections provide services, connectivity and knowledge to ordinary dwellers in slums and popular neighbourhoods. We may call these figures hustlers, big men, community workers, brokers or even gangsters. These figures are supposed to be in the know, supposed to have access to resources and knowledge that are not readily available to ordinary people. The magicality of these connections derives from their extra-local connections to centres of power – a gangster king, powerful elite figures, high-level politicians, high-ranking bureaucrats, powerful religious institutions – sites and figures of an outside and radically different order, suffused with both benevolent and dangerous powers. The charisma of such figures is powered by a fantasmic surplus – rumours and circulating stories of certain deeds of these individuals, their past life and career and so on. These are semi-public lives akin to the classical images of the ritual specialist and the diviner whose powers derive from an invisible realm of the sacred and the dangerous. The full expanse and heterogeneity of the city can be read and interpreted through these figures. Riots, political machinations, accidents, killings, scandals . . . everything becomes intelligible through stories about the cunning of hidden powerful forces and their local and often excessively visible minions – the local hustlers and big men.

This is a realm of action and imagination that in a certain sense belongs to what de Certeau called dispersed and opportunistic *tactics* (as opposed to strategies infused with rationality and intent): 'a tactic is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus. The space of the tactic is the space of the other . . . it operates within enemy territory . . . in isolated actions, blow by blow' (de Certeau, 1984: 37). Yet this phenomenon also puts into question de Certeau's strict opposition between those who govern and plan, and those who evade, poach and improvise in the streets. The figures in question are indeed of the popular world, and they often define and represent this world vis-a-vis the powerful and the elite. But they are also important mediators, elements of rule and social order that were semi-institutionalized by colonial regimes, involved in nationalist politics as well as in the functions of the postcolonial order as Wilson Jacob (2007) shows so clearly in his work on Cairo.[6]

We propose to see the hustler, the street smarts and the local big men as diviners of urban space, as people needed for their knowledge and agility. Political organizations need credible mappings of localities in order to garner support and numbers. Police departments need local informers; civic authorities need spokespeople and representatives who can interpret and translate bureaucratic commands into local keys of distribution, eviction or punishment. The hustlers and the big man are thus figures that connect the administrative, the political, the illegal and the sphere of production and trade.[7]

Suspensions of order simultaneously invalidate and perpetuate these forms of power. A riot, the burning of homes, loss of life, all signify the failure of protection, the failure of divination and the failure to prepare for conflict. In these situations, local criminals or strongmen are seen as both the cause of violence and the only protective shield available. In the face of the crowd – that faceless and uniquely urban monster that is so dreaded and mythologized – the local strongmen can do little because the crowd transforms humans into a different categorical order, both animalistic and redemptive at the same time. The crowd is both human and non-human, both ourselves and something radically alien in our midst. As Canetti puts it: 'in the crowd the individual feels that he is transcending the limits of his own person' (1960: 20). In the crowd moral parameters and even ordinary calculations of risk or tactics cease to make any sense.

> [In the crowd] no risk is involved . . . the victim can do nothing . . . his permitted murder stands for all the murders people have to deny themselves for fear of the penalties for their perpetration. A murder shared with many others, which is not only safe, but indeed recommended, is irresistible to the great majority of men. (1960: 49)

Deepak Mehta's work on Dharavi, Mumbai's biggest slum, during and after the riots of 1993 shows how the failure of local figures to avert these

events was sidestepped in favour of an emerging narrative which put the blame squarely on outsiders, who were said to have arrived as a faceless mob. This in turn reproduced the idea of the interior of the community as both virtuous and knowable (Mehta and Chatterji, 2001). In slightly different terms we can argue that the metonymic proliferation of smaller stories of dispersed causes and 'dispersed evil' was replaced by a metaphorical cut that condensed all evil in an exterior force. This made it possible to retain the narrative of the local hustlers and warriors as the true, if overwhelmed, defenders of the community.

These men (and some women) know that their reputations and future livelihood depend on how they perform and appear in situations of crisis. They are unique to the city because they are self-made – living realizations of the possibility of the city, the act of self-creation and re-invention in the face of a constant possibility of failure and disappearance into deep destitution.

Is anthropology's new fascination with this world of the urban slum because it represents the new exotic, a radical alterity, or a darkness whose magical forms of communion and sociality we are trying to record and capture? Or should we regard the opacity of the popular world itself as an inevitable outcome of the encounter between the strategies of planning and regimentation, and the chaotic but incessantly creative force of everyday life, as de Certeau (1984) puts it? Let us turn to Deleuze and Guattari's opposition of the tree and the rhizome as two distinct logics of organization and being in the world to explore this question a bit further.

The tree and the rhizome – the cultural economy of urban gestures
'Thought lags behind nature', Deleuze and Guattari state in the introduction to their irreverent, meandering, indulgent and highly suggestive work *A Thousand Plateaus* from 1980. By this phrase, the authors meant that natural forms are much richer and more diverse than our ability to use them as metaphors and figures of thought. Their most compelling suggestion is to distinguish between the tree, with roots and a centre and an origin, as the dominant figure of social organization and thought, and the rhizome as the meandering, spontaneous, de-centred, creative as well as parasitical forms of 'wild' thought and 'wild social forms'. This is a compelling distinction that condenses an enormous range of similar oppositions from biology to linguistics – the molar vs. the molecular, the vertical vs. the horizontal, the metaphor vs. metonym, *langue* vs. *parole*, the proper name vs. the yet-to-be-named, and so on. These oppositions were developed in an even clearer form by de Certeau both in the realm of language (high/low, formal/demotic, etc.) and in terms of urban life – the irreverence of everyday practices and low-brow *flânerie* as opposed to the planned layout of the city, and the disciplines of work and government. In subsequent scholarship, the opposition often becomes both epic and moral, a perennial struggle between the spontaneous fullness and anarchy of life,

versus the impoverished, grey and disciplining forces of society, city and state. This is, however, a flawed reading of Deleuze and Guattari, who state that 'The rhizome is an anti genealogy. It is short term memory, or anti-memory', thus reiterating that the rhizome as a social form has no stability, no historicity, no independent life of its own. It is inconceivable without the arboreal form (1988: 21). The rhizome is not an essential property of the popular or even the urban, it is the inevitable and often highly unwelcome double of any form of regular or formalized organization of any stability and duration.

> ... there is no ontological dualism between here and there, no axiological dualism between good and bad, no blend or American synthesis. There are knots of arborescence in rhizomes, and rhizomatic offshoots in roots. Moreover, there are despotic formations of immanence and channelization specific to rhizomes, just as there are anarchic deformations in the transcendent system of trees, aerial roots and subterranean stems. The important point is that the root tree and the canal rhizome are not two opposed models. (1988: 20)

The authors go on to explain that the two always coexist: the arboreal is always an inherent potential within any rhizomatic form, just as rhizomatic forms inevitably shoot off from, penetrate and envelop arboreal systems with formal and historical properties. The two forms are not complementary but antagonistic in the medical sense we mentioned above – working against and neutralizing each other's effects – never producing a new balance or a higher synthesis, just frustrating, impairing and wearing down the other principle. Where there is a tree, there will always be rhizomatic organization. Formal organizations, in other words, are full of rhizomatic logics, networks of affect, conspiracy, evasions and informal help. Although these networks are what help make formal organizations work, they are not complementary, but invariably disavowed and parasitical, principles that are at war with each other, and yet reproduced in ever new forms.

To Deleuze and Guattari, the rhizomatic form is always tactical and mobile, a war-machine – a gang, a parasite, a dissenting band of lay-preachers moving in and out and through more crystallized institutions and practices, and so on. They draw heavily on Pierre Clastres' historical understanding of mobile societies in Paraguay as organized around a perpetual state of war and violence. War, Clastres argued, may justify the election of a war chief, but he would be deposed as soon as the battle was over and a state of acephelous normalcy would re-appear. The purpose of this permanent state of war, according to Clastres, was to remain an independent community, to live in permanent upheaval in order to prevent hierarchical, 'molar' and fixed forms of organization from appearing. These forms of organization, devoted to maintaining autonomy, small scale and equality of condition, reproduced themselves as a constant counterpoints to the more stable and hierarchical communities that appeared in and around Amazonia at regular intervals (Clastres, 1989).

It would be tempting to argue that the world of crime is the inescapable but antagonistic underside that makes the city work, but whose wild and predatory nature also obstructs the perfection of the city as a space of discipline and separate homogeneities. But even the world of crime and illegality is full of 'knots of arborescence' and despotic formations. Networks that seek to be permanently organized as gangs constantly break off at the edges when betrayed by disloyal number two men. Gangsters seek respectability and social recognition at any price, and rogue violence can be a shortcut to respectability, eminence and visibility. Yet none of this is quite possible because the rhizomatic logic always reproduces fuzzy edges, loose ends, porous institutional practices.

An example: when Indira Gandhi imposed emergency rule in India in 1975, she declared war on poverty and the lack of civic responsibility among ordinary Indians. The cities were the main theatres of the government's attempts to root out corruption, to clear slums, beautify the cities and to sterilize as many poor as possible. This was a war against rhizomatic formations of all kinds and it was marked by both brutality and appalling sociology. As shown by Emma Tarlo in her work on the Emergency, the bureaucrats in charge of flushing out corruption and meeting the sterilization targets were forced to rely on all the local 'busy-bodies', self-styled social workers, semi-legal big men that the same emergency decrees precisely were attempting to displace and remove (Tarlo, 2003). The authoritarian methods of the government were not defeated by popular opposition but by the de facto break down of many policies in the face of the indispensable and inevitable re-appearance of local big men, hustlers and busy-bodies. In accordance with the well-established patterns of governance of the Indian state, these figures provided the intelligibility, the actual force and the connectivity that enabled the bureaucrats to implement the decrees, however haphazardly. Such forces are at the heart of what we call urban infra-power.

Infra-power and urban charisma

Infra-power is a web of connections and structures of solidarity, fear, desire and affect that traverse communities and neighbourhoods. These are connections that are neither fully visible to an outside gaze, nor officially codified, but also neither concealed nor secret. Infra-power cuts across households and kin. It is 'brokerage' in that it enables and facilitates economic flows through connections, obligations or friendships. It works as exchange and distribution of favours, gifts, honour and protection. Infra-power is a rhizomatic connectivity that spirals in and out of formal organizations, formal economies, formal politics and bureaucratic structures of government and policing. It is not merely a compensatory logic, a set of functions that emerge in interstices and absences of modern state power – as Ernest Gellner (1977) explained clientelism and patronage. It is also not a form of organization that claims an independent ontological ground and

genealogy in kinship systems, caste or religious ethos – although such registers of affect and relatedness are rhetorically deployed by local hustlers or big people. The phenomenon of infra-power – the ostensibly self-organizing potential, informal 'government' and economic creativity of popular neighbourhoods – is one that has emerged with the modern city, especially the colonial and post colonial city. It is an ethos and form of regulation that was made possible by the colonial habit of government at a distance, of managing the popular and not easily intelligible enclaves in and around the colonial city. These neighbourhoods were tolerated because they provided essential forms of labour and services to the city proper, but they were always inhabited by disenfranchised populations and were never governed with the same intensity as that which began to be imposed upon the labouring classes in European cities in the 19th century. It was not an absence of government that gave rise to infra-power in the colonial and post-colonial world as a force of compensation, but the need for order and connectivity in poor neighbourhoods combined with colonial reliance on native forms of authority, self-styled leaders and popular big men.

Infra-power thus provides connections in cities marked by radical discrepancies and disconnections between adjoining and often antagonistic social and cultural worlds. Such spaces require mediators, charismatic diviners and competent translators. However, infra-power provides not just connections but 'wild connectivity' – unpredictable, often unlikely and improbable connections between otherwise disconnected worlds of economic exchange and/or political alliance. A good example is the contemporary South African township that for so long was cut off from economic functions and kept as a pure dwelling space, only devoted to the reproduction and spatial incarceration of cheap and expendable labour. In the new South African economy, the townships are beginning to become zones of complex economic and cultural activity, of complex political connections, of cultural production that spreads far beyond its own space. To realize this, new and petty entrepreneurs in the townships need connections: people who are in the know, who know the space of the township and its rules, lingo and dangers, as well as the world of money in the city centre, the formerly white world of plenty and excess, and the ambiguous world of fast cash, political connections and illegal transactions. The taxi operator is the almost perfect embodiment of this new form of charismatic operator and this new type of spatially liberated and versatile wild connectivity. Another example is the music producer, whose trade is to discover and give shape to the specific township sound, the new charismatic currency of the post-apartheid city.

But how can we understand such ever mobile, tactical, evanescent and morally ambivalent dynamics of power that seems to have no predictable ontology of its own? Let us propose two terms that are at the heart of charisma as exchange and distribution: potentiality and emergence. By potentiality we mean the actual capacity for action. Potentiality implies the

existence of a choice to realize, or put to use, some capacity in order to live out one's desire for something. But potentiality also implies the possibility of not doing it, of what Agamben in his essay on potentiality calls 'impotentiality':

> Other living beings are capable only of their specific potentiality; they can only do this or that. But human beings are the animals who are capable of their own impotentiality. The greatness of human potentiality is measured by the abyss of impotentiality. (Agamben, 1999: 182)

The city, and especially the postcolonial city with its enormously disconnected and discrepant worlds, is a massive theatre of charismatic potentiality and its opposite, the non-realization and destruction of capacities and talent. Infra-power, we submit, is a powerful symbolic enactment of human potentiality, a display of how one can read, master and 'work' the city to make it yield benefits, magical power and eros if one runs the risks and has the courage to 'play' – the central trope in urban politics, exchange and pleasure. The obverse is the possibility of non-action, the danger, predicament and shamefulness of impotentiality, of not realizing a capacity, of not 'playing' and sensing possibilities, of not performing as a hustler and not aspiring to become a big man.

How do we then know what infra-power is? By what marks can it be known – this informal connectivity and assemblage of potentialities that has neither formal structure nor predictable form? We can find it embodied in the figure of hustler or the big man, but also in others who are able to 'work' the city through playful and wild connections. Yet it is a form of power that can only be known in action, as an *emergent* form. By this we mean emergence as the complex realization of properties or potentialities of people and their environment through actions and events. None of these qualities exist prior to the action itself. The potential of the network, the connections and the capacities of the people involved, only show themselves in actions and outcomes. Instability and unpredictability are the heart of urban charisma, a property that cannot be permanently owned by anyone but is only made visible through performative action and exchange.

Infra-power as described by the contributions in this issue seems indeed to be rhizomatic but it also has a measure of historicity (as myths and narratives of famous big men/hustlers/tricksters) and a certain spatiality. Infra-power often originates in the popular neighbourhoods that defy legibility and an ordering gaze while spreading their logic of wild connectivity throughout the city. Yet these forms of power have no predictable form and no shared archive. Burton's sweeping and suggestive history of martyrdom, blood-letting and violence in Paris since 1789 suggests that stories and auras of violent deeds and misdeeds, conspiracies, sites of martyrdom (such as Père Lachaise) circulate throughout the city as symbolic archives of how street wars are fought and how the spilling of blood has created physical sites of great charismatic power (Burton, 2001: 265–346). These traces, sites

and memories in turn, structure the rituals of conflict and mobilization in the city – but never completely and never in a predictable way. The current conflicts in the *banlieus* activate fears and animosities that draw on older fears of the urban unwashed. But the actions, the burning cars and the logic of mobilization defy the interpretive schemes of authorities and social scientists alike and generate fears of hidden conspiracies and networks. This is not unlike the situation in Mumbai where random blasts and killings in the city produce their own ghastly theatre of a non-discursive politics that gives rise to endless conspiracy theories and generalized fear of clandestine and menacing networks.

Infra-power, we submit, is always re-invented in action. Its historicity is open and visible at the moment of its articulation through reiteration of certain mythological structures and certain spatial nodes. The articles in this collection all try from different vantage points to make urban figures, connections, play and fears visible through the three registers of the charismatic urban we have outlined – urban sensory regimes, claims of intelligibility, and the complex semiotics of action and gesture in the city.

Notes

1   This latter dimension is most powerfully captured in Berman (1982).
2   The theme of visibility as a precondition of the 'people' and a modern democratic imaginary is explored by Claude Lefort (1988), while the theme of the city as a site of public life is most powerfully explored by Richard Sennett in several works (e.g. Sennett, 1974, 1990).
3   This theme has been powerfully explored in recent work on African cities (see for instance de Boeck and Plissart, 2004; Simone, 2004; see also Christiansen et al., 2006).
4   It is striking, for instance, that even James Holston's brilliant work on urban planning in Brazil maintains a distinction between a pre-industrial/pre-modern city and a modern and modernist city like Brasilia. The question of the specificity of the colonial cities under discussion (Rio, Salvador) and the specific economies of racial and ethnic exclusion they were founded on is never raised (see Holston, 1989).
5   The continuities in the imagination of dangers arising from popular neighbourhoods are striking. Burton (2001) shows in compelling detail how notions of the bestial and animalistic recur in descriptions of the insubordinate Parisian poor from the sans culottes, through the Communards, the 'reds' of the Resistance, and now the youth of the banlieus.
6   Other examples of these popular local big men include the *badmash/dada* in Bombay (Chandavarkar, 1998; Hansen, 2001, 2005) and the *jawanmardi* in Teheran (Adelkhah, 2000).
7   The anthropologist often come to depend on such figures who are locally known to be 'in the know', and well-connected. The similarities are striking: the imputed command of the local nuances and stories, the supposedly effortless understanding of local inflections and connotations of words and events, and the possession of special and unfathomable powers by virtue of being connected to outside forces and specialized knowledge, and powers of 'seeing'

and divining. Often the alliance is mutually beneficial – it lends street-cred to the anthropologist and another potential outside connection to the local hustler who ceaselessly maintains his reputation.

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