"DISPLACEABILITY - A SOUTHEASTERN PERSPECTIVE"
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““My life as a seventh generation Jerusalemites is constantly uncertain; I cannot tell whether our unlicensed house will stay standing; I don’t know if my family’s unregistered land will be confiscated for ‘public use’; I don’t know if my residency can be extended; I will probably not be displaced but the threat is always there… “”
— Halla, East Jerusalem, 2017

The words of this Palestinian writer are apt to open this short essay as part of the timely MIT DRAN blog symposium. My piece converses with the other contributors and draws on three decades of work with displaced groups in Israel/Palestine, Australia and beyond. It highlights the value of a 'southeastern perspective'; points to the emergence of new urban colonial regimes; and introduces the concept of 'displaceability' as a foundation of contemporary urban citizenship.

A 'SOUTHEASTERN' PERSPECTIVE

Past scholarship has typically interpreted displacement as resulting from the exigencies of global capitalism, or as part and parcel of 'neoliberal urbanism'. Under this dominant view, displacement occurs through a relentless process of capital investment, speculation and redevelopment. It uproots people from their homes and communities as the new form of class war, and as part of ever-increasing control of capital over public policies. Loretta Lees labels this 'planetary gentrification' -- a condition that puts in train a ceaseless process of "accumulation through displacement".

There is much to this explanation, of course. Yet, from my perspective, it is too narrow, and at times distorted. On one level, simply, much displacement, eviction, expulsion and deportation, appear to be propelled by other forces, such as security, legal formalism, national identity, religious or gender domination, or environmental pressure. These are often not sub-sets of global capitalism or gentrification, and at times work against the interests of capital accumulation.
But more profoundly, this partial view - so common in the literature - derives from a dominant 'northwestern' scholarly perspective, which relies on the conditions and assumptions prevalent in the North America and Western Europe. These assumptions rely on the (ideal) model of liberal capitalist societies, often overstretched to account for societies, regions and cities which operate very differently. The dominance of 'northwestern' thinking has been criticized widely in recent years by critical scholars in most fields of the social sciences and humanities, led by feminist and post-colonial scholarship.

Moreover, urban displacement is (unfortunately) most common in the global southeast, and shows no signs of abating in the face of massive, often informal, self-constructed urbanization. Born out of harsh and trying circumstances, a southeastern perspective offers an opportunity to present new, multidimensional critical epistemologies of displacement. Such accounts may take seriously a factor often underplayed in 'northwestern' scholarship. Here I wish to stress two additional factors: the (neo) colonial nature of urban identity regimes, and the forms of encroachment, struggles and displacement which typify such regimes.

OLD AND NEW URBAN COLONIALITIES

Identity regimes are a sphere of power where the status, resources and visibility of groups are determined, negotiated and challenged. A southeastern perspective takes identity regimes seriously. It acknowledges the current rise of their centrality, as a response to increasing immigration, unprecedented refugee problem, and growing assertion of indigenous people and marginalized minorities.

Rather than 'celebrating diversity' as commonly advocated by liberal planning theories, cities of the global southeast deal with identity conflicts which often generate patterns of separation and oppression. The outcomes resemble the remaking of a colonial city, and are marked by deepening forms of exploitation, widening ethno-class disparities, civil and legal hierarchies, and hardening of essentialized group boundaries. Under such regimes displacement is rarely color blind. More often than not, it is related to ethnic, racial or other group boundaries and hierarchies, formed and reformed through uneven urban conflicts.

As Matt Hern's and Tania Li's interventions so vividly remind us, a fundamental and persisting 'vector' of colonization underlies the working of many contemporary cities and regions. In this process, indigenous groups have been thoroughly displaced, often through cultural and physical genocide, losing their lands, natural resources, economic self-reliance and culture. As Hern and Li show and as highlighted by my own recent research with Bedouin Arabs in Israel/Palestine, the colonizing process continues to this very day, albeit in forms which typically exploit the 'neutral' appearance of mechanisms of law, markets and planning. These are pervasively used by ethnocratic states to assert their domination over indigenous groups, their identities and resources.

Displacement, however, is hanging over far wider circles. The old system of settler-indigenous colonization has been augmented in recent decades by new processes that can be conceptualized as 'inverse coloniality'. Under this process the
vector of colonization is spatially reversed -- rather than the colonizing power expanding its control over new regions and groups, peripheral groups congregate in contemporary urban regions, where they are controlled by new forms of highly uneven colonial relations.

Under this emerging system, the status of the newcomers is often precarious and temporary, and subject to policies of eviction and marginalization. This is commonly flagged under an endless Orwellian list of titles, such as 'public health', 'urban amenity', 'slum clearance', 'city beautification' 'urban renewal' and 'the public interest' as perceptively shown by Guatam Bhan. Asher Ghertner and Loretta Lees also demonstrate well how market mechanisms typically amplify these tensions, focusing redevelopment of 'ripe' (that is neglected and cheap) urban areas. The patterns of development and displacement, as Ananya Roy shows, often amount to a process of 'racial banishment' backed by the violent power of the developmental state.

Displacement, under these settings, is a surface expression of urban coloniality, as it recreated in the 21st Century. Instead of holding a false vision of democratic liberal cities where all are equal, Southeastern scholars thoroughly portray the rise of the new urban regime, where the government, the law and planners, cynically use their version of 'the public interest' and 'rule of aesthetics' to force massive relocation and displacements. Violent (and 'legalized') displacement has therefore become a signifier of the new ways in which urban citizenship is re-constructed as 'separate and unequal', under a constant shadow of displaceability.

FROM DISPLACEMENT TO DISPLACEABILITY?

The documentation and analysis of evictions and displacements – important as they surely are – may not be enough for a new critical conceptualization of the contemporary city. I suggest here that an additional step should frame the phenomenon within the broader condition of displaceability. That is, the susceptibility of people, groups and developments to be removed, expelled or prevented from exercising their right to the city.

This concept expands the understanding of displacement from an act to a systemic condition through which marginalizing power is exerted through policy and legal systems. It derives from a realization that contemporary urban regimes do not only allocate, but also threaten, weaken and deny urban rights and capabilities. Within this allocation-erasure spectrum, a particularly potent tool in the regime’s arsenal of control tools is the threat of displacement. Given the recent global rise in housing, economic and political insecurity, this threat can be seen as a 'silent foundation' of contemporary urban citizenship. Accordingly, one may observe that the greater the threat of displacement, the weaker the urban citizenship. This is particularly so in urban regions of the global southeast (itself of course highly diverse), where formal citizenship is often secondary in importance to the actual, material, share in urban life.

Critical analysis in the current urban age can thus begin by mapping the depth of displaceability, as derived from patterns of ownership, possession, type of tenure, debt, invasion, legality, and relevant planning, housing and land policies. The depth of
threat may also be related to diverse issues such as territorial struggles between identity groups; mortgage and public housing policies; skyrocketing and speculative land prices, or threats of environmental disaster. The mapping of displaceability can thus provide a strong hint to the power of communities and urban areas to promote their rights and visions through the planning system, and identify the most susceptible areas where mobilization for rights and progressive intervention are most urgently needed.

The condition of displaceability also highlights the importance of timescapes to the understanding of urban society. 'Timescapes' refer to the manner in which urban rights and capabilities relate to the politics of past and future. These include historical roots or claims, current possession or legalities and future plans for urban continuities or ruptures. The study of urban timescapes is another strong contribution to emerge from engaged theorization of cities of the global southeast, where time is constantly contested, negotiated and reformulated. The struggle over urban timescapes is directly linked to patterns of displacement, typically associated with a denial of historical rights and/or secure futures. Under such circumstances planning emerges as a key player in the shaping of urban citizenship.

Finally, let us return to Jerusalem, where the rights of Jews and Palestinians and associated patterns of invasion and displacement are closely related to the city's timescapes. The current political geography of time gives Jews legitimacy, in their own eyes, to colonize the Palestinian city and deny Palestinian land and housing rights. This is well articulated by the leader of the Elad group that has been colonizing the Palestinian neighborhood of Silwan, through archaeological, housing and tourism projects. Here 'old' (ethnic territorial) and 'new' (capitalist and developmental) forms of colonialism merge into one.

"We are here to reconnect to 3,000 years of Jewish history. Exactly here King David built his biblical capital … Palestinians that lived here for a couple of generations have encroached what was, and will be, a Jewish city. We are also developing the city economically and bring hundreds of thousands of tourists to a previously neglected area, thus developing the entire city. In other words, we connect the past to the future of the real Jerusalem".
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