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Urbanization and poverty in the global “South”

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10. Models of growth and stagnation
Urbanization and poverty in the global “South”

Shahadat Hossain

The rural population operated subsistence economies maintaining only limited external contacts until the nineteenth century. The expansions of capitalist systems, however, underway for a half a millennium and accelerated by the Industrial Revolution, incorporated even more outlying regions into the emerging world-economy (Wallerstein 1989). Existing cities were integrated into the new system, their functions transformed. New cities were established to exercise political control and to channel resources to the metropolitan centers, and rural populations all over the world have been drawn into the urban nexus. This process of incorporation into the world-system has spread across the entire globe. The self-centered society that had only limited contact with the outside world has virtually disappeared. Rural populations have become subject to political control exerted from urban centers (Gugler 1992, 2004).

Massive changes are taking place in patterns of urbanization on a global scale and the South is urbanizing very rapidly. According to the UN Population Division (2004) the global urban population is set to double from 2.6 billion in 1995 to 5.1 billion in 2030. The South’s share of the world’s urban population has risen roughly in line with its total population share. Davis (2006) argues that the most celebrated result of urban transformation is the burgeoning of new megacities. In 1995, only one city (Tokyo) in the world had reached that threshold. By 2025, Asia alone could have ten or eleven conurbations as large, including Mumbai (33 million), Shanghai (27 million), Jakarta (24.9 million), Dhaka (25 million), and Karachi (26.5 million).

The issue of rapid urbanization is interlinked with massive poverty and the growth of informal sectors in the global “South.” On the basis of research in low-income urban neighborhoods in Ghana, Hart (1973) emphasized the great variety of both legitimate and illegitimate income opportunities available to the urban poor. Subsequently, McGee (1976) explored various approaches toward what he called the “proto-proletariat.” A great deal of research on the informal economy focused on a workforce that is typically under-enumerated and commonly characterized as unproductive in the 1970s (De Soto 1989; Castells and Portes 1989; Roberts 1995). These studies reveal that the informal economy is based on household labor and is therefore closely linked with household strategies.

Exploring social organizations of the urban poor is essential for understanding urban poverty and marginality. The traditional economic functions of marriage are not as important to poor communities as they are for other sectors of society. This is largely due to the poor economic prospects of the male and the corresponding fact that the male is not economically indispensable in the family. According to Roberts (1995), under conditions of poverty and job instability, men may
be unwilling to commit themselves to relatively permanent obligations; likewise, women may be unwilling to take on the liability of a permanent attachment when the man proves to be a drunkard, unable to earn a living, or prone to violence. This explanation for marital instability in cities of developing countries emphasizes the elements of rational calculation entering into arrangements that to the casual observer, may seem to be result of individual or social disorganization (Eames and Goode 1973).

The final type of marginality to consider is political marginality, or the extent to which low-income families are disconnected from urban or national political issues and are unable to organize themselves to influence decision-making. Perlman (1976) documents the complex political organization of the urban poor in Brazil and points out that the level of political awareness among the poor is higher than that found in rural areas. Their level of direct participation in politics, through demonstrations or political meetings, is comparable with local and national administrative agencies. Roberts (1995) also found that the poor are not politically marginal in the sense of not participating in or affecting urban politics. When the political structure permits, the poor enter readily into the electoral game, organizing on behalf of middle-culture candidates and extracting what benefits they can for themselves or their neighborhoods.

In recent times, most of the urban poverty research focuses on economics and policy issues that lack theoretical frameworks. Although huge numbers of studies were conducted in Latin America in relation to the “culture of poverty” debate during the 1960s and 1970s, very few were conducted in the context of Asian and African cities. A number of quality studies were conducted on urbanization in the Third World from political economic perspectives, which analyze inequality and poverty through macro-level data and often lack empiricism. Therefore, the existing gaps in literature justify more theoretically and empirically balanced research on urban poverty in the near future.

References


