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Politics of the Urban Poor: Aesthetics, Ethics, Volatility, Precarity

An Introduction to Supplement 11

by Veena Das and Shalini Randeria

Based on longitudinal ethnographic work, the authors of this special issue on the politics of the urban poor examine how regional events as well as scholarly traditions in these places have influenced the way the categories of the urban poor and of politics have emerged in both scholarly and public discourse. As the discussions that follow make clear, the relation between urban processes and city forms is a volatile one, and this volatility in turn has a decisive effect on how the poor emerge as political actors. Further, liberal forms of citizenship are but one form among others that become materialized through the claims that the poor make on the state. More importantly, the essays show that the socialities that undergird the lives of the poor are constantly being shaped by the experiences of precarity that go beyond material scarcity.

The theme of this special issue is the politics of the urban poor examined through the lens of longtime ethnographic work in four regions—Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. However, none of the authors treat the urban poor and politics as prefabricated categories that might be applied uniformly across these regions. Rather, the aim of putting together these essays was to see how regional events as well as scholarly traditions in these places might influence the salience of these categories. As the discussions that follow make clear, the relation between urban processes and city forms is a volatile one, and this volatility in turn has a decisive effect on how the poor emerge as political actors. Further, liberal forms of citizenship are but one form among others that become materialized through the claims that the poor make on the state. More importantly, the essays show that the socialities that undergird the lives of the poor are constantly being shaped by the experiences of precarity that go beyond material scarcity.

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At the outset we emphasize that there are not only different histories of political and social formations in the regions we have focused on but also that regional histories of social theory assign the construct of the urban poor in different ways. For example, the social-movement literature (e.g., Tilly 2004) is unable to address what Asef Bayat (2015) in his contribution here calls the quiet everyday "social nonmovements," or "the collective action of noncollective actors" that often characterize the politics of the poor in situations of social upheaval as in ordinary times. In (neo)institutionalist arguments that continue to focus primarily on state structures, attention to the poor has largely focused on understanding the historical emergence and current functioning of measures to ameliorate poverty in western Europe and North America (state social support, unemployment benefits, or insurance schemes). Action-theoretical approaches ranging from rational choice to symbolic interactionism tend to disregard the larger institutional context so that the poor remain a generalized category with the social location of actors and their action being bracketed in favor of universal pronouncements.

In their monumental work translated into English as *The Weight of the World* (*La misère du monde* in French), Bourdieu (1999) and his collaborators capture the wretchedness of lives on the margins of French society through biographical interviews that situate their subjects in their specific social context. Yet the argument of the authors is that the misery (*misère*) they document is neither to be associated with a particular (biographical) time in the lives of these individuals nor with the (social) space they inhabit. Further, there is no identifiable social group of "the poor" that could be defined using any universal criteria of material deprivation.

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Making audible the plight of those "sprawled underfoot" of the "triumphal procession" of the dominant (to use Benjamin's phrase), Bourdieu (2000:241) suggests that losing the symbolic struggle for recognition may be the worst form of dispossession, and privation for material hardship, he argues, is inextricably entangled with the injustice of being denied social-symbolic value. As Bourdieu's work emphasizes, there is no Archimedean point from which the diverse, subtle, and often imperceptible forms of social marginalization and discrimination, stigmatization and exclusion, can be reduced to measurable categories of absolute or relative poverty or made commensurable with Galbraith's (1979) famous distinction between so-called case poverty, which afflicts a minority in affluent societies, and "mass poverty" in the rest of the world.

The literature on the urban poor has been intimately connected with discussions and interventions in public policy that generated such internal divisions as those between the "deserving" and the "undeserving" poor or between the proletariat seen as the engine of history and the rest (e.g., lumpenproletariat), who were regarded as unable to engage in politics at all (Rancière 2004). Concepts such as social capital moved from academic theorizing to the policy world in the context of framing of policies to help the poor move out of what was called the "poverty trap" (Collier 2002). One of the consequences of this way of seeing the poor is that while agency is given to some kinds of poor, others are seen in policy discourses as populations to be managed through both policing and paternalistic interventions by the state. In one influential tradition of conceptualizing the poor, the very emergence of the poor as a distinct social category of those who are neither fully included nor fully excluded from society is seen to be a product of the relief provided them by others (Simmel 1965 [1906/1908]).

In Simmel's view the poor are constituted as a sociological category by their being at the receiving end of ameliorative assistance, which binds them to and within society through a particular form of interaction or reciprocation (*Wechselwirkung*). For Simmel, then, poverty is a social relationship and not merely the lack of material means, a matter of the social relationships engendered by want. It is this understanding of the poor and of poverty that leads Simmel to conclude that despite similarities of individual fate, the poor cannot but fail to act collectively; not only do cultural differences in ways of life make reciprocal identification difficult among them, they also come to play their particular social role as the poor only when and to the extent that others react to their condition through the apparatus of welfare measures. As long as societal assistance is not provided, we are faced with personal fate but not poverty pace Simmel.

Although theoretical interventions such as subaltern studies did much to reclaim collective agency on behalf of those defined as subordinate, there was a concentration on the extraordinary, or on moments of rebellion (Das 1989). As far as everyday life was concerned, there seems to be an implicit agreement in the literature with Hannah Arendt's (1965) position that the poor are not capable of politics; they are so caught up in ensuring basic survival that they cannot exercise the freedom that Arendt sees as a necessary condition for collective action or deliberation that defines (for her) the domain of politics. From this perspective the problems relating to the poor are seen as confined to problems of administration (see Das and Walton 2015). Even at certain specific moments such as elections, when it is apparent that the electoral participation of the poor exceeds that of the rich (as in India), the theorization emphasizes the projection of other sensibilities (e.g., that of the religious or of the sacred) to the poor to explain their enthusiasm for, say, electoral politics (see Banerjee 2007). These positions assume that the poor do not have the conceptual means of understanding what a vote might mean for determining their political futures.

We have no wish to romanticize the poor or to underestimate the ways in which poverty might corrode the capacity for collective or individual action, but it seems to us that an understanding of poverty must see it in relation to the tight alignments with other conditions of life, such as the possibility of democratic participation, the erosion of infrastructure, the denial of citizenship as in the case of refugees, the effect of race and policies of incarceration, or the way in which livelihoods might become embroiled in the drug trade or addiction or are willfully destroyed in the name of either development or the functioning of the free market. In each of these constellations we can discern the different ways in which poverty is experienced and how far the potential for political action (seen as the effort to bring about a different kind of everyday) is realized.

In the rest of this introduction we give a brief account of the major issues in the five sections into which the papers are divided. We examine the relation between the city form and urban processes and also the waxing and waning of politics in relation to volatile and mercurial changes brought about by events on global and national scales. Simultaneously we want to pay close attention to the way in which politics, ethics, and aesthetics make up the texture of the everyday. The existential stakes in thinking about the poor, we contend, are not about (or only about) the distant poor and the obligations to them as in classic moral theory or about exercising choice (e.g., Who is the most worthy recipient of aid?). Instead, we are summoned to give our full attention to the relation between expression and action, to track when and how words are deployed, and to follow the embodiment of discourses through which the struggle with insecurity and precarity is engaged in a given form of life. There are no overarching superconcepts that will resolve the differences in conception and sensibilities that these papers bring out. Instead, we hope that the overlapping concerns expressed in these essays will show the different paths that we hope will remain open as one tries to register the multiplicity of life forms and track the paths that the poor take to make their worlds inhabitable in hope and in disappointment or despair.

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The Urban Process: Volatility, Improvisation, and Seizing the Moment

The three papers in this section are set in the context of the precarity of the life of the poor, yet they all argue that there is no straightforward way in which we can decipher how relations of power, advantage, and dispossession are stacked against each other. For instance, in the case of Jakarta, AbdouMaliq Simone (2015) argues that the poor are enmeshed in close relations with the nonpoor whether through spatial intimacy or through networks of work and service relations and through the constant search for information that those living in precarious circumstances actively gather about conditions outside their immediate environment. This aspect of the lives of the poor is evident in several other papers (e.g., Amarasuriya and Spencer 2015; Das and Walton 2015; Procupez 2015), all of which point to the heterogeneity of the category of the urban poor and the capability for political action they create through the very conditions of crowding, the mobilization of the poor by the nonpoor as vote banks or for political action, and their own aspirations to create a diversity of publics within which their expressions and actions can be brought together and articulated (see also Weinstein 2014). This is a theme we will see repeated in many of the papers, including those in the section on cultural production.

Much social theory assumes a fundamental break between everyday life (a time of passivity) and times of heightened intensities (as during street protests and revolutions). However, the poor are not passive spectators in everyday life, as all the papers argue; in fact, they have to struggle within the given economic and political structures to ensure that they have access to housing, water, work, and medical assistance; they manage to craft some arrangements, however fragile, within the legal and administrative structures that are at hand. Bayat's (2015) paper, set in the context of the Arab Spring in Egypt, argues that it was the slow encroachment into the ordinary by the state that undid these fragile arrangements. The changing milieu of the revolutionary moment when activist groups actively mobilized the poor helped translate their frustrations into collective protest. It is thus that along with the "big revolution" in Egypt, there were also many "minirevolutions," or protests in which local issues pertaining to housing or work were joined to the larger national issues, such as the demand for democracy. As in the case of the French revolution, where historians asked whether it was a single revolution or many revolutions, in the case of Egyptian and Tunisian mass protests, too, we could ask how aspirations of different sections of people were articulated through joining more local themes with national ones. However, Bayat does not think that such processes "doomed" the revolution; instead, he is interested in the preconditions through which solidarities across classes could be forged (cf. Leibner 2015). The city form is implicated in the events described by Bayat in that the silent encroachments in the everyday that he talks about are also about rights to the city. The issues in the end cannot be simply posed as those of the success or failure of the revolutionary events in Egypt—they also invite us to understand the conditions of possibility as well as the limits of political action in this changing milieu.

The paper by James Williams (2015) takes us into the world of refugee and migrant youth in the city of Cape Town. Like the other two papers here, Williams, too, is attentive to the volatility of the city, the temporal rhythms in which there are wild oscillations between the opening and closing of opportunities. He shows us how improvisations by migrant youth in Cape Town work till they do and then they dissolve, as did the domestic and work arrangements network of the youth that he followed.

The vulnerability of the migrant youth with whom Williams worked stems less from abject poverty and more from the tenseness in the cityscape in which these migrants have achieved relative success in the underground economies of counterfeit goods, drugs, and varied service provisions. Thus, we are not positing the city as an actor independent of the historical context. In fact, Williams delineates the complex politics of postapartheid South Africa that led to the building of a slow resentment among local black communities against foreign nationals, who were seen to siphon off precious resources from the South African poor, whereas the elites saw the migrants as contributing to "crime" in the cities. The terrible riots against immigrants in South African cities in 2008 show the limits of a politics of sympathy.

It is very interesting to compare Williams with Perdigon (2015). In the case of Perdigon's field site, we see that ties of kinship provide a framework in which hardship can be addressed in the refugee camps in Lebanon, whereas the migrant youth in Cape Town evince very different life trajectories in which their survival depends on improvisation within new networks of relations among peers because no continuity with families and ties of kinship can be assumed. We get a very different picture of the coupling and decoupling of vulnerability and poverty in the three cases discussed in this section, reminding us once again that the city is not the neutral site on which politics are played out. The youth whose tactics of survival, as well as the wild movements between wealth and scarcity, lead them to embody different affects of defiance, fear, and anger show us how the city is itself an actor.

There are three important issues that we wish to flag as points for elaboration and/or contestation in the other sections. First, poverty and vulnerability are differently conjoined in different social and economic milieus, which opens possibilities but also sets limits to the kind of politics that the urban poor might engage in. Second, the waxing and waning, the different intensities with which politics are engaged, brings out the role of milieu and its volatility not as the stable context but as constituted by a contingent coming together of different cascading scales at various points in time in the lives of the urban poor. Third, seen from the perspective that they themselves provide on their lives, the urban poor are not a closed category

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defined from above, say through the administrative imperatives of providing welfare pace Simmel, but are enmeshed within networks that include the nonpoor, who help them marshal information and resources, provide contacts, and mobilize themselves for action. In what direction these networks will be propelled depends on the character of space and time—the densities and rhythms that characterize city life—so that Jakarta, Cairo, and Cape Town are not neutral sites on which action happens but are themselves agents or participants in the political life of the poor.

Building, Dwelling, and the Politics of Governmentality

Who can make her dwelling in the city? The question is both political and existential. In his famous essay on building, dwelling, and thinking, Heidegger posits an intimate relation between building and dwelling, arguing that even buildings that are not dwelling places are in the domain of our dwelling. Our aim here is not to get into a metaphysical discussion but to take the insight that the domain of our dwelling includes the various activities through which we make a place for ourselves in a particular world. Seen from this perspective, we see struggles over housing and security of tenure as crucial activities through which the urban poor establish their rights to dwell through a building of material sites, relations, and networks through which they can find a secure habitation in the city. Here, too, networks with the nonpoor are very important, but unlike the case of Mumbai, where it is the advocacy of activists with global connections that is seen as crucial to help slum dwellers stay put (Appadurai 2001; Weinstein 2014) against a global consortium of developers, in the cases described here it is local leaders who use party politics, law courts, or bureaucratic connections to forge strategies to counter evictions or to establish rights over housing.

Perhaps the notion of rights itself invites further reflection in the light of the papers in this section. While much debate in political theory centers on discussions of formal versus substantive rights, what emerges from these papers is the notion of incremental ways in which rights and entitlements are established. The poor see this kind of action through which they secure documents, file petitions in courts, and cultivate the resources opened up by the spatial density of the city (as in Jakarta) as well as electoral politics as action they can undertake in the light of the ambiguous and fragmented landscape of housing laws, court decisions, and administrative orders. Though a specter of uncertainty always hangs over how secure the rights they can establish are, these strategies fit into the overall experiences of temporality with which they live.

The comparison between the two low-income localities that Veena Das and Michael Walton (2015) offer shows that like the city, the slum, too, is a dynamic entity. The internal heterogeneity of the low-income localities in terms of control over assets or access to political connections translates into different outcomes. Thus, the taut and tense affiliations and lines of conflict within each locality show an intense engagement with democratic politics that goes beyond the activity of voting on election day. As Das and Walton conclude, the interesting issue is not whether democracy serves the poor well but whether the engagement of the poor in the political processes, even if driven by immediate needs, nevertheless provides the opportunity for the democratic process to become more deeply enmeshed into the social than would be the case if the poor had merely remained closeted as clients within a politics of patronage.

The category of need emerges again in Valeria Procupez's (2015) contribution on the housing crisis in Buenos Aries, where she shows the tension between state efforts to treat needs as discrete (e.g., for housing, for food, for medical emergencies), taking the individual as the locus for whom aid is targeted, and the emergence of collective action through the mediation of NGOs or housing societies confronts the state with a different imagination of need—that of addressing the poor as a collective entity. It is important to underscore that the housing cooperative whose work Procupez describes grows organically through the efforts of the squatters. There are other cases in which the role of the NGOs, even when they are catalysts in the mobilization of the poor, remains ambivalent, for they not only take over some functions of the state (e.g., counting and identification of those forcibly displaced) but are also enmeshed in practices of governmentality (Cammett 2015; Chatterji 2005; Chatterji and Mehta 2007). The involvement of NGOs is also often at the behest of international donor agencies financing urban restructuring programs, which turn both the NGOs and international organizations such as the World Bank into addresses of protests by the poor (Randeria and Grunder 2011).

Writing on postwar Sri Lanka, Harini Amarasuriya and Jonathan Spencer (2015) capture the temporal properties of a particular moment in the history of the city when speculative capital and military force combined in an attempt to bypass the well-worn channels of urban politics (as also shown by Bayat [2015] for Egypt). The milieu is also marked by Buddhist nationalist rhetoric and by wild rumors as the targets of hostility shift from the "Tamil terrorists" to Muslims. It is within this milieu that postwar reconstruction of Colombo takes on the form of demolition of slums and relocation of slum dwellers to more peripheral areas. The new beautification drive is mapped on the ethnic and sectarian map of the city and its suburbs so that areas marked for redevelopment involve shifting of Muslim populations. Ethnic and sectarian tensions are thus constantly in danger of spilling into attacks on mosques and churches. The most interesting feature in the urban politics in Sri Lanka is the emergence of the military as a major actor in real estate development that gives urban politics a distinctive form. The relative novelty of the involvement of the army in the proj-

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ects means that the shape of urban politics around housing and the composition of the city itself has been shifting in unpredictable ways further underscored by the defeat of the ruling party in 2015.

The collapse of state provisions for welfare in the long civil war (1975–1990) in Lebanon led to the emergence of sectarian organizations taking on the role of providing benefits and services that might not otherwise be available to those in need. Thus, sectarian organizations emerge from the politically volatile religious divisions, but they also contribute to the hardening of boundaries between religions by making service provision a reward for loyalty rather than a right stemming from citizenship. Melani Cammett's (2015) work also raises important comparative questions, such as to why the politics of the poor seems to have taken housing as a need that can be made the subject of political and legal action to a far greater extent than health. Although there are examples of the political agitations around demand for antiretroviral drugs in Latin America and South Africa (Nguyen 2007) and there is a history of AIDS activism, much of the politics around health has taken place at the level of those who act in the place of the state, such as the sectarian organizations Cammett describes or various international NGOs dealing with specific health conditions. Movements such as patient rights movements have been organized much more around particular biological conditions rather than around the poor as consumers of health provisions. The intense politicization of the issue of tenurial security and the relative neglect of health as a political issue is an important subject for future research.

This is perhaps a good point at which we can ask how centering the notion of need (including which needs) as the basis for political action helps us conceptualize the institutions of the state and of citizenship in relation to the entitlements of the vulnerable city populations that overlap with the poor but not as a stable category of urban life. It is notable that the state holds a crucial place in the papers in this section—even Cammett's (2015) use of the category of "nonstate" actors alerts us to the imaginary of the state as responsible for addressing urban vulnerability and insecurity. In earlier work, Das and Poole (2004) had argued that the state is not so much absent on the margins, as many suppose, but is rather redone in a different modality. Randeria, too, has drawn attention to what she called the cunning of the state in shifting accountability to the World Bank for policy making and to the NGOs for the implementation of massive evictions within an urban infrastructure project in Bombay that led to a spate of petitions to the Inspection Panel of the World Bank by those displaced rather than the use of courts for adjudicating their rights (Randeria and Grunder 2011). What emerges from this section is the porosity of the boundaries between state and nonstate, or formal and informal, or public and private. Moreover, governance and politics are also not two distinct domains but are deeply made up by the relation they bear to each other. The lines between international and domestic law, law and policy, soft law and credit conditionalities get increasingly blurred in the way that governance works on the ground. This makes it very difficult for the poor to hold the state accountable or to know when and whether to address their protest to the regional or central government, to the local municipal authorities raising private finance in an entrepreneurial mode, to the city administration or to courts or special tribunals, to the parastatals implementing urban restructuring projects or the international donors financing these, or to "private" actors such as NGOs in charge of housing surveys and identification documents or builders, about who should provide alternative housing.

Should we then speak of the state in the singular at all (Hansen 2005; Spencer 2007)? The relation between multiplicity and singularity is not a straightforward one (Hacking 1972; Humphrey 2008); for instance, we see different shades of red but do not hesitate to assign the same name to them. Thus, what matters here is to think of the manner in which the network of actions and effects is materialized with reference to the notions of need, claim, urgency, patiency, waiting, defiance, supplication, and various other dendrite-like tentacles that reach into social life and allow the concept of the state to be extended.

Politics of Relatedness: Ethics and Aesthetics

Claims over the state emerged as a major theme of politics of the urban poor in the previous section. In this section the problematic shifts to forms of life that are being made or remade within a space of devastation (see also Han and Das 2015), when the state has itself been dismantled or is deeply implicated in the destruction of life through its structural violence. Indeed, as Sylvain Perdigon (2015) puts it, another world or another way of being in which politics, poverty, and sovereignty are differently aligned without the scaffolding concepts of citizenship and claims over the state is already present in many parts of the world. Is it possible to imagine what politics might be in such worlds? First of all, we note that this is not so much a scenario of society contra state (Clastres 1997) or of stateless societies (Das et al. 2014; Evans-Pritchard 1940) but of enclaves of exclusion and destruction brought about by the actions of the state and of new forms of warfare. Thus, refugees in Tyre in Perdigon's paper, who protest that it is "otherwise" for them, are not enacting freedom from the state but showing what it is to be bound within the tight legal structures of refugee encampment. Hayder Al-Mohammad's (2015) privileging of everyday life as in itself a form of moral being-together comes in the wake of the complete destruction of Basra in Iraq. Fiona Ross's (2015) paper on the way a genealogy of raw life can be constructed from within the lifeworld of the poor in postapartheid South Africa is offered as a critique of state practices from the perspective of inhabitants outside its norma-

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tive order. And Carlos Forment's (2015) account of the incredibly complex transactions within one of the largest "informal" markets in Argentina shows a form of plebeian politics that seeks to deal with vulnerability not through any standing languages of civil or economic rights but through a different kind of market ethics. In all these cases, the discussion of ethics and aesthetics does not stand in opposition to politics but might be seen as a way of expressing a different kind of politics than that which takes the presence of the state for granted.[1]

Perdigon (2015) reads the delicate aesthetics of refugee life in Palestinian refugees' reticence in talking about poverty even though the precariousness of lives in the camps is evident. Yet, his respondents also maintain that in enduring the terrible conditions of refugee life, they are performing the religious duty of providing witness to the political oppression to which they are subject. Thus Perdigon perceptively remarks that talking about a sick body or a child who has lost interest in education in the camps is also a way of talking about politics, about the long history of Palestinian suffering that is a direct consequence of political actions by an occupying state.

Al-Mohammad (2015) asks for an analysis that would look at the multiple imbrications of violence, struggles, poverty, and care in the everyday in the light of the multiple collapses in Iraq following sanctions and occupation. None of these can be rendered intelligible if taken one by one as if these were discrete experiences. Like Perdigon, Al-Mohammad, too, speaks of an ethics of being-together that is quite different from the dominant paradigms of self-cultivation or obligation. Calling it an ethics of the "rough ground" (after Wittgenstein), Al-Mohammad shows that the multiple imbrications produce a dynamic understanding of life whose horizon is neither determined by nor limited to the established categories of kinship, tribalism, Islam, or sectarianism. If what we think of as the normal paths to political engagement are closed here, an ethics of the rough ground seems to open up the paths to criticism, such as that voiced against the occupying forces and against Iraqis themselves for what are seen as complicities with the practices of the Ba'athist regime, going back even farther for some, asking, after all, who killed Imam Husain? How our modern understandings of what constitutes politics might become responsible to these multiple forms of critique from those who have been excluded forcibly because of the darker side of the global politics of war and occupation is the challenge that Perdigon and Al-Mohammad pose, turning the mirror back to modernity.

It is not the violence of war but of the slow knife of erosion of the everyday of which Ross (2015) speaks, tracing the complex relation between "raw life" as it emerges from within the life forms of people from the largely Afrikaans-speaking community in Cape Town. "Raw life" implies rough, crude, indecent, vulgar, and other such synonyms as against decent, respectable, and living in accordance with social norms. Yet it is within this rawness of life that she shows how communities or households came into being organically, precariously perched around care of children left orphaned by the high AIDS mortality before antiretroviral drugs were available or around care of the dying. Rawness and decency then are shown here to be two forms of life and not simply the sovereign power's distinction between qualified life and bare life as in Agamben (1998). In all these cases we see an ethics of care that in its determined commitment to sustain life shows paths other than that of liberal citizenship through which life comes to be sustained.

Forment's (2015) paper offers important insights into how the working poor in a district in the vicinity of Buenos Aires, pauperized by the economic reforms of the mid-1990s, reinvented a form of plebeian citizenship through the creation of a mass market for the poor. La Salada, although characterized by the European Union as a market in counterfeit goods that was steeped in illegality, evolved an everyday ethics of being-together through which dispossessed workers could recreate a form of life in which they could claim rights without having to take the position of victims of slave labor. This right "to have rights" bypasses the mediation of NGOs or human rights organizations and evolves a different modality of transacting work and payments. There is a fascinating discussion here of how practices of governance changed as legal and fiscal measures were redesigned to convert the Salada residents into willing "tax payers." We realize that plebeian energies are often viewed with suspicion as they are hard to contain and are often considered suspect (Thompson 1974), but both Bayat (2015) and Forment in different ways show how the role of plebeian energies might be crucial for rethinking urban politics.

Together, the papers in this section open up different paths for thinking of the urban poor and rethinking what constitutes politics outside the frame of the liberal and neoliberal notions of citizenship and of sovereign individuals. In all these cases the relation with the state might be characterized as a moving, shifting, unstable relationship (a point made by all the authors in one way or another). In some cases the everyday life honed out of the conditions in which poverty and violence are imbricated depends on an ethics and aesthetics carved through improvisations and innovations on the given categories of kinship or community. In other cases there is an attempt to remake the networks of relations that include the transactions with street-level bureaucrats or other brokers and instruments of the state. In all these cases there is a critique generated from within these life forms of the possibilities and limits of formal politics that deserves utmost attention as itself a form of politics in order to recognize the work that the poor do in the affirmation of life.

1. The idea of aesthetics we evoke here is about the style of doing things and its relation to ethics as developed in Das (2012), Han (2012, 2014), and Lambek (2010).

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Aspiration, Cultural Production, and the Claims over the City

Much of the work on cultural production has been influenced by Bourdieu's (1993) compelling analysis of the autonomization of the field of artistic and intellectual production. Indeed, Bourdieu's analysis of the emergence of art as an independent domain of social life reflected in the distinguishable category of professional artists and intellectuals, emergence of art markets, and the democratization of the viewing public through such spaces as museums has been attentive to the separation of art from religion and from its feudal underpinnings. The two remarkable papers in this section ask a different kind of question: might we think of a different direction in which social theory might go if the artistic and media productions by those who are poor or are otherwise marginalized is moved to the center of our attention? It is true that in recent years the spaces (physical and social) that the poor inhabit have become subjects of popular cinema (e.g., *Slumdog Millionaire*) or television series (*The Wire*) that have received critical scholarly attention (Bardhan 2011; Jameson 2010; Marrati and Shuster 2012; Potter and Marshall 2009), especially with regard to the specificity of local politics in a serial such as *The Wire*. One might ask whether this change in public mood might be read in part as the result of a greater assertion of new cultural forms that have grown out of the lives of the poor, for better or for worse.

The two papers in this section take up the issue of cultural production and problematize the category of the poor in different ways. Peter Brown's (2005) work on the place of the poor in the aesthetic of society suggests that the concern with "the poor" as a bounded category emerges in early modernity in Europe as a result of changes in the conception of charity. The ancient and medieval conceptions of charity, argues Brown, defined the poor as fellow citizens, members of the city. The transformation in early modernity was not to incorporate the poor within one's sociality—they were seen as eminently forgettable—but to solve a social problem that the poor posed not as fellow citizens but as marked purely by the fact that they were recipients of charity. In other words the aesthetic of society excluded the poor, which necessitated the injunction to "remember the poor," pronounced by religious figures who had themselves lost their prominence.

In present day Zambia, the ubiquity of antipoverty programs and the presence of international development NGOs that dominate public discourse on poverty means that the "poor" as a category are constantly made present—there is no need to remind anyone of their presence. As Harri Englund (2015) says, most Zambians have come to think of a majority of their fellow citizens as the poor, as those who are in need of aid or charity in some form. Within this dense discourse, the intervention of Gogo Breeze, a prominent radio personality, manages to insert a different aesthetic altogether. Gogo Breeze's radio program converts the stories of misery into comedy, but the parodies are softened, for he also creates a persona for himself as the grandfather who can chide the grandchild/listener. Thus, he does not allow the listeners to approach him as if they were asking for charity from the state or the NGOs but rather as an elder kinsman who can advise them, making mass mediated kinship do the work of dissolving the overdetermined category of "the poor." Through a close analysis of a dispute between casual laborers and a Chinese-owned cotton company and Gogo Breeze's intervention, Englund shows that ironically, an aesthetic of "forgetting the poor" is produced, converting them into kinsmen with all the implications of solidarity, conflict, hierarchy, and the complex affective connotations of being junior kinsmen.

There are interesting resonances between Englund (2015) and Perdigon (2015) in that in both contexts there is an aesthetic of refusing the position of recipients of charity or welfare based on liberal notions of sympathy and charity. However, the differences are also important, for in the case of Zambia, it is the public domain in which the contests are staged, whereas in the case of Tyre, the delicate negotiations through which poverty remains unspoken (but not unacknowledged) take place between kin and neighbors.[2] This contrast might lead us to ask how cultural productions of the sort described in this section might be helpful to think further on the separation and linkages between different kinds of publics within which the problematic of "the poor" is crystallized or dissolved.

Teresa Caldeira's (2015) paper shows the complexity of spatial transformations in the organization of the city of São Paulo, where (as in many other places) peripheries have played a central role in the development of the city and yet residents of these peripheries are often fenced off from the more affluent parts of the city. Caldeira suggests that important changes in living conditions in the peripheries along with generational shifts led to a new youth culture marked by the production of musical forms such as rap music and popular art forms such as graffiti and pixações. These new cultural forms together with what she calls marginal literature simultaneously embodied the conditions of the peripheral areas and expressed aspirations for rights to circulate and even possess parts of the city that were inaccessible to the youth from the peripheries (Carvalho 2013; Sá 2014). Are these primarily transgressive practices to be rendered as

2. Compare Clara Han's (2012) subtle discussion of how the official characterization of one as poor in Santiago and eligible to receive aid also makes one a subject of surveillance and compels one to perform one's poverty. In contrast, the neighborly acts of kindness based on what she calls catching "critical moments," when a family on the edge of a precipice might be supported (similar to the cases described by Al-Mohammad [2015]), must be performed in a manner that the dignity of the other is maintained.

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crimes against property, or are they forms of popular protest against established institutions or simply plebeian energies that have no better outlets? Caldeira argues it is all of these, yet she suggests that such artistic forms imply a crisis in the relations between men and women (the art is clearly marked as masculine) as well as between the generations. Unlike Englund's case, the idiom of kinship appears frayed in this form of cultural production. As we shall see, this theme of broken kinship comes up as an explicit theme in the discussion in the next section as we look at the forms of social violence produced by and in the city.

Urban Precarity, Forms of Violence, and Fading Hopes

In this final section we circle back to the issues of volatility, temporality, and vulnerability with which we started our discussion in the first section. The three papers in this section (Auyero 2015; De Boeck 2015; Leibner 2015) offer a hard, even clinical look at the ways that the lives of the urban poor are deformed by the violence, exclusion, and crumbling infrastructure in poor neighborhoods in Kinshasa, Tel Aviv, and Buenos Aires, respectively. How should we understand the experience of limits and the failure to bring projects for better infrastructure or enhanced security in the poor neighborhoods to fruition?

One way to interpret the three papers in this section is to ask what we can learn about the state as a political institution from these fragile attempts, often doomed to failure, but nevertheless undertaken repeatedly by the poor? What understanding of politics might we generate by confronting the stark facts of interpersonal violence, disorders of addiction, or high rates of crime that characterize the slums and other such neighborhoods where the poor reside? The fact that these very factors often lead prominent policy makers or the media to characterize the slums as violent and disorderly poses the challenge, can social scientists use these words and mean otherwise?

Filip De Boeck (2015) provides a sensitive description of the experience of being poor in Kinshasa in terms of daily improvisations and strategies that become necessary to meet the simplest of needs. He thinks of poverty in terms of rhythms of syncopation and suspension (as we described earlier) and of the narrowing of opportunities. Indeed, for the poor, time has to be carefully calibrated so that every opportunity might be seized—disaster averted in the nick of time. The main idea that comes across in De Boeck's analysis is the provisional and truncated character of life, the impossibility of accumulation, and the shrinking of the milieu in which people operate. He is not suggesting that this form of life is intrinsic to the city but argues that economically disastrous policies of the Mobutist state led to a crumbling of what infrastructure was available, creating a city that secretes violence with signs of decay dominating the senses.

Here we must pause and ask a comparative question. The crumbling infrastructure, or the lack of access to basic services, which De Boeck (2015) describes, and what he perceptively calls the provisional character of life in Kinshasa, is found in many settings described in this special issue and in other works on the city. Yet there are very interesting differences in the way that inhabitants of slums or unauthorized colonies in Delhi or Colombo seem to use the networks with politicians and bureaucrats, or how they use the law courts that enable them to take some steps in ameliorating their conditions, or at least to keep an immediate crisis in abeyance. The detailed work done by economist Collins et al. (2010) on detailed economic diaries of the poor who live on less than US$2 a day show the complex financial transactions that the poor engage in through extremely calibrated networks of debt, credit, gifts, pooling of incomes, and management of expenditures. Should we then be looking more closely at the tight-knit texture of networks and their absence or at the way in which poverty, violence, market strategies, neoliberal reform, war, crime, and a host of other conditions are nested in each other? Just as to be poor in São Paulo in the 1950s is not the same thing as to be poor in 2014 (Caldeira 2015), so it would seem that an understanding of the milieu as a dynamic entity is essential for understanding how different possibilities of action open up or close within the context of overall want and precarity.

Gerardo Leibner's (2015) work in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Tel Aviv, where he and his activist colleagues tried to support the struggles for housing, delineates the plateaus, the ascents, and the descents that mark such a movement of forging collective action across class, ethnicity, and gender. Undergirding these movements is also the stable architecture of normal politics. For instance, the history of dispossession of land that belonged to Palestinians means that encroachment over government land, or even privately owned land, under the Israeli state is seen equally as a protest against such dispossession. The Ashkenazi-Mizrahi divide plays out not only as one of social distinctions but also of different evaluations of citizen subjects along lines of ethnicity. Finally, Leibner's paper—along with Ross's contribution on the blacks who are living outside the townships in South Africa—addresses the gender dimension of these housing struggles as well. Women, who are organizing for housing as single parents, also have to counter the gender-based interpersonal violence in their lives. There is some fading of hope as the protest movement in HaTikva gets co-opted in the structure of political patronage, but as we see in the fine-grained analysis offered here, it is not that the poor do not protest because they are too constrained by their survival needs; rather, they protest precisely around questions of immediate needs. However, the political architecture ends up in dissipating these moments of rebellion against the injustice of state practices to realign them within politics as usual—the politics of patronage, of political bosses, and xenophobia against African migrants or other even more vulnerable populations (see also Williams 2015).

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Javier Auyero (2015) takes up the theme of interpersonal violence, crime, and the ambiguous nature of the state in Argentina in the final paper of this special issue. He argues that not all violence is redemptive (as in Fanon's [1967] famous analysis) and that chronic low-key violence can corrode the possibilities of life for the urban poor. Pointing to the rising rates of homicide, drug related crime, and persistent fear that stalks people in their everyday lives (cf. Gayer 2014), Auyero feels that forms of localized politics provide an important lens with which to view the functioning of the state as a political entity. First, he argues that the contradictory character of the state comes out in stark relief, as we see that policemen and street-level bureaucrats are actively engaged in the production of the violence through which the drug trade and consumption is organized. Yet they are also the ones who families sometimes trust to even help control and reform the youth who are becoming impossible to manage within the domestic setting (see Das, Ellen, and Leonard 2008 for comparable situations in the case of addiction and interpersonal violence in African American families in Miami). Second, seeds of political protest might, nevertheless, be sown in the community, making room for the emergence of collective action. Yet so strongly does fear act as a mode of social control that it is hard for residents to organize themselves for fear of reprisals from political bosses, local mafia, and the police.

If interethnic conflicts and interpersonal violence acted to corrode the solidarity of the poor in the case described by Leibner, in Auyero's case we realize that it is not poverty in itself but its social correlates of what Das and Kleinman (2001) called the slow knife of everyday structural violence that create the limits to what kind of politics may be possible. We might also note that while political action in the way it is recognized in political theory might not be possible, other paths open up for engaging the other through proximity—a mixture of a new kind of stranger sociality (Al-Mohammad 2015) and neighborly attention (Han 2012) that scholars have written about in similar spaces of everyday devastation. Simultaneously such spaces might enable other kinds of social actors (nonstate actors, as Cammett [2015] calls them in her paper) to become service providers giving some relief against the urgency of having to meet needs and also crystallizing new kinds of conflicts, say along sectarian or ethnic divides.

Concluding Thoughts

We have privileged the practices of the urban poor, irrespective of the unstable nature of this category, for an understanding of the city by foregrounding the categories of need, ethics, aesthetics, and relatedness in their lives. We started by asking how we might render the relation between the category of the poor and the city form to understand the participation of the poor in politics as well as its limits. We conclude by giving a brief account of how our understanding of the three terms in question has evolved through the papers presented here and the importance of temporality, varying intensities, and the movement between everyday rhythms and the effervescence of daring, revolutionary fervor, or other moments at which an act of daring might defy the everyday.

It is notable that all our authors are agreed that the category of the poor comes to be defined as a composite category primarily as recipients of assistance (charity or aid) through the eyes of another institution (such as the church or the state). Writing in the field of literary criticism, Jones (2003:766) asks, "Is there a theory of poverty which would help us interpret modes of literary production that have grappled integrally with the ethical, cultural, and linguistic difficulties of defining poverty as a substantive category of social being?" We hope that the papers in this special issue show that part of the difficulty arises from treating the poor as a category separable from other social forms and defined through violence, care, kinship, neighborhood, state, ethnicity, gender, or class. The category of the poor is thus dissolved through the density of relatedness that enmesh the poor in the highly heterogeneous networks, as the contributions to the special issue amply demonstrate.

Just as the urban poor live in many heterogeneous networks, they also live and act in multiple heterogeneous temporalities, individually and together. The analyses reveal how much work goes into crafting or holding on to fragile relationships over time or into simply maintaining the status quo in the face of the ever-present threat of demolitions and forced eviction and defending the ground that has been quietly encroached on (see esp. Ross). De Boeck's marvelous concept of the "politics of syncopation" portrays how poverty modifies not only the very rhythm of daily life but also of language, truncating the temporality of the day, by constantly generating time- and energy-consuming deviations, and thereby it limits and reduces options on all levels of everyday life. Yet others show that the time of emergency is punctuated with other rhythms, such as that of patience, which we want to argue becomes a way of doing politics, a point we take up a little ahead.

In American social theory, the poor were seen to develop a subculture, a "way of life" (Harrington 1981); Oscar Lewis (1969) in his comparative analysis of Mexican and Puerto Rican communities stated that the "culture of poverty" goes beyond regional, racial, or national distinctions. On the other hand, there are the theses of poverty as noble or purifying as in some strands of Gandhian thinking. The papers here show that we cannot ascribe essences in relation to either divide—there might indeed by a way of containing the erosive effects of material want and recasting it as attraction to frugality (Jackson 2011; Singh 2011) as comes out in the ethnography of Perdigon or a waxing and waning between the insecurity of hunger and the exuberance of temporary access to money (Williams). Much depends on who is doing the representing

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or the counting, so that the poor might crystallize as a category in government records and be reassembled through the imbrications of global, national, and local histories of governance and of the order and disorder generated through war, violence, or market reforms.

This is not the place to rehearse various theories of what constitutes politics in any detail. We would like to note, though, the tension between the pragmatists, who think of politics in terms of instrumental rationality and the art of strategizing to see who gets what, and an idealized notion in the genealogy of Nietzsche that the foundational question of politics is what humankind ought to become (Comway 1997). It is very interesting that we find strands of both conceptions in the ethnographies presented here. Certainly the struggles around infrastructural needs that many authors take up are about strategy and about being able to use the tools of citizenship and social movements, but ideas about social justice, sustaining life, and the right to improve one's inhabitation are also posed as ethical issues (see Das 2014). Even the refusal of certain subject positions as the poor, who are entitled to charity, or the contests over depiction of one's neighborhood as one of thieves, or of one's labor as slave labor, shows that ideas about what it is to achieve one's humanity outside the discourses of human rights or the apparatus of humanitarian governance are present within the most pragmatic of actions driven by need. Also, if we consider the questions of state and sovereignty as integral to questions in political anthropology (see Spencer 2007), then we see the state here not as a regulatory institutional configuration standing over and above the population it governs but as being made and remade at the margins (Das and Poole 2004).

The category of time again becomes relevant when we consider how time becomes an important resource in the hands of the state (or of nonstate actors who are using the same apparatus of governmentality) to discipline those who make claims on it. Waiting is the mode through which citizens experience the modern state temporally, a point underscored by both Auyero and Procupez in their respective papers, though toward different conclusions. By pointing to bureaucratized time as the privileged exercise of power, Bourdieu had suggested that waiting implied "submission" (2000:8). Auyero (2012:2) has similarly observed in his earlier work that the poor are disciplined into becoming "patients of the state" by being "temporarily neglected, unattended to, or postponed." The poor are not only made to wait longer (Corbridge 2004:18) but are also granted shorter appointments with officials, if and when they are given one at all. Local middlemen facilitate such contacts to bureaucracy and elected officials but also assist in reducing waiting time. But often citizens are not made to wait because of state cunning, corruption, or inefficiency but because of the unpredictability and complexity created by the coexistence of a plurality of overlapping rules, regulations, and normative frameworks (Randeria 2007*a*, 2007*b*). If waiting generates anxiety and despair because of the uncertainty of outcomes and the maze of addressees, it also keeps alive a semblance of hope. It is in the interstices of the duration of postponements and delays that we can discern some of the politics of the poor (Randeria and Grunder 2011). As Procupez shows, if one moves from the individual to the collective level, a different temporality of "patience" comes to nestle within this temporality of waiting. Often the poor move the courts in an effort to stretch time through the delays this inevitably entails (Randeria and Grunder 2011). Yet as Al-Mohammad's ethnography shows, the need to respond immediately or to postpone an action might turn out to be a matter of life and death (a point made by Auyero too), showing how many different kinds of durations the poor and those made vulnerable by a combination of violence and want have to calibrate in order to survive.

The papers assembled here clearly invite us to rethink the way need and want might be seen as political categories and not simply those relevant for administration. As the papers, especially those in the sections "Politics of Relatedness" and "Aspiration, Cultural Production, and the Claims over the City" (but also in other sections) make clear, the forms of expression that knit the political and the ethical are also ways of providing critical commentary on one's conditions—they might not correspond to a Habermasian notion of discursive public sphere, but they show that such fundamental notions of politics, such as consent to political community, are not to be assumed as given simply because of the precarious conditions in which the poor live and work.

Finally, the discussion of the city form offers fascinating possibilities to consider the shape that politics takes in relation to spatial and temporal configurations. The literature on the anonymity of subjects and stranger sociality in the making of publics in the city is a rich literature (Tonkiss 2005), but it has also led to a division between the anthropology of the city and the anthropology of neighborhoods. The papers show that the poor have established different relationships in different cities, so even such a basic question as who built different parts of the city and under what circumstances yields entirely different microhistories of built space in the same city. It is of course a truism that spaces of social life are social products. Yet it seems important to realize how solid, how concrete, and how objectively different various spaces in the city—be it the street, the boulevard, the walls with graffiti, or the buildings—are. It seems, therefore, interesting that the ethnographies show not only how social life in the neighborhoods we have characterized is tied with the material processes of encroachment, building, disintegration, and rebuilding but also with inscribing signs of different kinds that establish the presence of the vulnerable spaces right on the city. Indeed, in many cities of the global south, the poor cannot be seen as tucked away in the peripheries, for even if they are physically confined, their presence organizes the sensory experience of the city as a place of experience and imagination.

Recent work on the city characterizes it as the "illegal" city (Datta 2012) or the "informal" city (Roy and Sayyd 2004)

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even as most authors recognize that the lines between the legal and the illegal or the formal and the informal are extremely blurred. From the perspective of the poor or the residents of the peripheral areas, it is often the case that it is their labor that has built the city. Here, too, the passage of time makes even solid objects such as houses and buildings unstable. For instance, the volatility of real estate speculations in global markets means that some neighborhoods in the city (e.g., Dharavi in Mumbai) have become the subject of intense negotiations as builders try to have valuable land vacated by the slum dwellers. The specificity of Mumbai as a city, its history of activism, and the reach of the Shiv Sena (a Hindu right-wing regional party) cadres into the slums as well as in the police force makes it hard for power to be exercised on the slum dwellers in a unilateral way (Weinstein 2014) despite attempts to develop it as a "world class city." There are other cities and other neighborhoods in which the balance between negotiation and coercion is quite different, as the fate of different neighborhoods in Colombo show. Still others have to face police violence and gang violence, making circulation in the city a fraught affair, as in the cases described for South Africa and Argentina. It would seem that the relation between the experience of the city and that of the neighborhood asks for reconceptualization of the relation between position and movement as it is constituted by the fluctuating regimes of legality and illegality.

In the end, we hope that the Wenner-Gren symposium produced enough ammunition for anthropologists to ask how we may further develop a critical vocabulary to address the life of the (un)poor as one of an existence within a milieu in which it is never fully at home.

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