Complex Challenges in an Urban World

From the Chicago School to the LA School to the argument of cities serving as nodes within global networks to postcolonial perspectives, urban theories critically interrogate notions of what constitutes the 'urban'. Or, what one means when referring to a 'city'. These discussions enrich understanding of the dynamic nature of social spaces that continue to evolve over time in varied ways.

Building on these debates, we explore how urban spaces serve not only as a lens but also as arenas of change in a world where multiple stresses are coming together. It is particularly true in this century of urbanization where cities are becoming convergence points for climate-related risks, internal and external migration, pandemics, and transnational crime-terror networks, etc. Not only that, interactions among these phenomena as well as with antecedent dynamics of cities are shaping (and have shaped) urban spaces. As governments and neoliberal logics respond in turn (some may point out that they played key roles in shaping these crises to begin with), they are contributing to or exacerbating this heady mix of challenges, deepening pre-existing fault lines in societies and creating new ones.

At the heart of it all are ordinary people, the most vulnerable while being at the front lines of uncertainty and risk. They are not passive entities, though. In fact, in their attempts to survive, local populations try their best to adapt to changing realities, thereby making an already complex situation even more complicated. It is in these interactions of stressors and the stressed, the formal and the informal, governments and the governed that new social, political, and economic landscapes are evolving, which in turn might be contributing to dynamics of governance across scales. Increasing marginalization of socially and politically disadvantageous groups, and social and political expressions of unrest direct our attention to the real-world implications of these discussions.

How the coming together of these phenomena contributes to dynamics of governance, inequality, and social and political processes presents a challenging puzzle for scholars. In many cities, access to basic rights (e.g., housing or water) is an arena of deep contestation; criminal and political violence shape (and are shaped by) political economies; and neoliberal economic and political policies have significantly entrenched inequality. In many places, governments have long-ceded space to makeshift coping mechanisms and independent entrepreneurs that serve and exploit the daily needs of residents. How emergent risks overwhelm these ecosystems is an open question. Equally, it is a dilemma for policymakers. Without a deep understanding of dynamic local realities, visions of sustainable and equitable urban futures seem elusive. Even worse, in the absence of holistic perspectives, policymakers are adopting dystopic visions that justify punitive policies. However, as the experiences of many cities illustrate, heavy-handed solutions fail to address deep-rooted problems, if not contributing to further complexity of the urban landscape.

Do we adhere to visions of human resilience or dismal futures where all is lost? We argue for neither. We do, however, raise the flag of interdisciplinary scholarship to make sense of emergent realities as opposed to siloed approaches that may be inadequate for the task.