Comparative study of Urban Aspirations in Global cities

This conference is to kick off a five year project studying the effects of the urban environment in global cities on the formation of ethnic and religious aspirations. It is a comparative project on primarily Asian cities. MPI has signed an MOU with NUS to start work on Singapore and we are preparing an MOU with TISS and Pukar to start work on Mumbai. I hope we will find ways to start work on Hong Kong and/or Shanghai. Finally, we would like to connect to work that is being done on New York, London, Frankfurt/and or Berlin. I will use this keynote to highlight the central research issues, key theoretical concepts, and methodologies that guide our thinking.

Global Cities

Cities are important, because of the urbanization of the globe, and global cities in particular because they provide an important angle for the study of globalization. It is not that globalization cannot be studied in small cities or in rural areas, but global cities occupy a particular position in economies and fantasies of scale. The concept of global cities is developed in the literature, especially in Saskia Sassen’s path-breaking work, to highlight how processes of globalization shape urban economies, especially service economies, unmoor them from the nation-state, at least to a certain extent, and relate them to other global cities in urban networks. We have a much looser use of the term that is closer to the older concept of world cities of a certain scale and history. We also are not convinced about either the decline of the nation-state or the unmooring of global cities from the nation-state. Nationalism is still one of the most important ideological forces in the world and the terrorist attack on New York is responded to by the nation-state and not by a global network of cities or a supranational entity. Sassen’s work is very much focused on economic processes, understood from an urban
sociology of the service economy, especially the financial sector. This is important and we do not want to lose the insights gained here. On the other hand, it is also clear that we are in a phase of globalization, in which Asia has again become central to the world economy and consequently Asian cities like Singapore, Hong Kong, Mumbai, and Shanghai will demand attention besides cities like New York, London, and Tokyo that were studied by Sassen. The nation-state has different histories in different parts of the world and in Asia this is a colonial and post-colonial history that has some specific elements that have to be taken into account. Singapore is a global city and at the same time a nation-state that has been separated from Malaysia; Hong Kong has been a British crown colony till recently and still enjoys a special status within China; Shanghai has been long seen as a city tainted by foreign influences and is again becoming a place with a large foreign presence. Mumbai is India’s most modern city, but also the site of huge slums and some pernicious ethnic and religious strife, some of which has to do with regional politics rather than with a global network of cities. The extent to which these cities are truly separated from their rural hinterlands as well as from other cities in their region is an important question. Perhaps global city region is a better term today for Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Hong Kong or Shanghai-Nanjing-Hangzhou or Mumbai-Pune. Migration to these city regions is huge and part of a world wide phenomenon of urbanization, in which already the majority of the world’s population lives in cities. The creation of ever larger urban conglomerations is a pronounced phenomenon in Asia.

More importantly, however, while we agree that the financial sector is central in processes of globalization, we would argue that it is about time to provide a more culturally inflected approach to that sector, considering the failure of economist reasoning to provide reasonable accounts of our current crisis. We want to combine this cultural analysis of finance with the study of urban religiosity and ethnic mobilization. This provides an angle that is markedly different form other studies that see urbanity as a sign of secular modernity. The concept we want to explore in our studies is that of uncertainty.
In prior studies of global processes, the dominant tendency has been to associate concepts like *innovation, risk and uncertainty* exclusively with the economy and market phenomena. This tendency was in tune with a more general emphasis on political economy in processes of globalization. When the study of patterned human experience (i.e. culture) is institutionally divorced from the study of money, market and industry, this can create an unproductive divide between our understanding of what Albert Hirschman called the “passions” and the “interests”, and what he showed to be embedded in moral understandings of the world. It thus deepens the divide between modern (neo-classical) economics and anthropology, with serious consequences for the solution of some of the central questions that face us in the new financial crisis today. Certainly, cultural activities have also been studied by economists, but more often than not from a rational choice perspective that flattens the understanding of social life and underestimates the importance of moral understandings of “interest”.

We propose to supplement (not replace) the emphasis on economy and market by looking at *innovation, risk, and uncertainty* as central features of the cultural life of common people in global cities. These concepts have been understood in the work of Max Weber in terms of the connection between calculation and redemption. While this line of thought that brings together wager, chance and divine design has deep roots in European philosophy it is still productive in recent historical and anthropological writing on credit, accounting and accountability, and on money and exchange, as well as on sociological work on risk and calculations. As Frank Knight pointed out long ago, while calculating risk is central to any economic enterprise, uncertainty cannot be measured.

Max Weber, in his study of the Protestant ethic, laid enormous emphasis on uncertainty, not primarily as a technical feature of the economy but as a feature of Protestant
religious life, and his entire analysis of the Protestant ethic as a source of methodical capitalism turned on his analysis of the Calvinist doctrine of *certitudo salutis*, of the certainty of salvation in the face of the radical uncertainty about who was already one of God’s elect. This proposal seeks to reunite the analysis of the culture of risk and calculation with the analysis of the culture of uncertainty and redemption. It does so in the context of global cities that are experiencing the new financial crisis.

For Weber magic is an irrational way of dealing with uncertainty. In his understanding of the development of moral or (“ethical”) religions magic had to be marginalized and eventually removed. In recent theoretical work on religion and secularism, following Weber, the notion of magic does not play any significant role, but this project wants to give it back its proper place in the understanding of uncertainty. Evans-Pritchard has already in his classical study of witchcraft and magic among the Azande shown that magic, as a set of concepts, practices, and techniques, has to be understood within a wider range of moral understandings. This argument has given rise to a debate about relativism and rationality in the 1970s and 1980s, but only recently have social scientists started to analyze magical practices as integral and essential part of global capitalism. These practices are premised on a general, absolute and apparently transcendent faith in the market, which appears both in the daily discourses of traders in the financial markets and in the rhetoric of the former American President George W. Bush, when in response to the decline of credit, he spoke about “the faith-based economy”. The magical practices that flow from this faith cover a range of terrains, including the manipulations involved in the evolution of the large class of financial products called ‘derivatives’, all of which have in common the sequences of metonym and metaphor identified by Evans-Pritchard as primary properties of magical practices. After the most recent financial crises we are now officially living in a world where faith, risk and trust have completely redefined their relationship to one another. Capitalism itself in the last
decades of the twentieth century has been observed to be tied up with numerous forms of hysteria, panic and mystery. Local entrepreneurs in financial centers as different as New York and Hong Kong connected new forms of gambling, speculation and scam to the related languages of salvation and millennial profit. These new forms of re-enchanted capitalism have generally been tied to traditions of fetish and phantasm that have frequently surrounded money and its reproduction, giving rise to many brands of casino capitalism, Ponzi schemes, legal and illegal lotteries and evangelical entrepreneurship

*Comparison*

This project understands global cities as a central element in globalization and is firmly comparative. Does globalization make comparative sociology redundant? Some might argue it does, since global forces shape societies everywhere at the same time and it is these forces that have to be studied. But we want to argue that they shape societies in very different ways that need to be compared. For example, the IT revolution has shaped societies in important ways worldwide, but very differently in Europe and in India, and even very differently in Bangalore and Mumbai. In an earlier phase of globalization imperialism shaped Britain and India simultaneously, but quite differently and the differences and similarities now and then call for comparative analysis.

Our work is always within a comparative frame. Some of us are acutely aware of this, others less so. However, in general there is not enough reflection on the extent to which our approaches depend on arguing and comparing with the already existing literature on a topic (my early work on pilgrimage was entirely framed by the comparison of my field results with those of Louis Dumont, Jonathan Parry and Chris Fuller), on the use of terms that have emerged in entirely different historical situations and thus carry in them implicit comparison (like middle class or bourgeoisie, like religion), and also on the ways in which those we study
themselves are constantly comparing the present with the past or their situation with that of others. To therefore claim that one is a sinologist or indologist or africanist and think that specialization in a region and subject, given sufficient linguistic and cultural competence, is enough to claim mastery over a subject, as if one is not standing constantly in a reflexive relation to both discipline and subject, gives perhaps a certain psychological fortitude, but is untenable.

In my view comparison is at the heart of cultural analysis and I will reflect on that in relation to our conference topic. I should make clear at the outset that I see comparison not primarily in terms of comparing societies or events, or institutional arrangements across societies, but as a reflection on our conceptual framework as well as on a history of interactions that have constituted our object of study. One can, for instance, say that one wants to study church-state relations in India and China, but one has to bring to that a critical reflection on the fact that that kind of study already presupposes the centrality of church-like organizations as well as the centrality of Western secular state formation in our analysis of developments in India and China. That critical reflection often leads to the argument that India and China (and other societies outside the West) should be understood in their own terms, and cannot be understood in Western terms. However, Indian and Chinese terms have to be interpreted and translated in relation to Western scholarship. Moreover, such translation and interpretation are part of a long history of interactions with the West. In the Indian case it is good to realize that English is also an Indian vernacular and in the case of China it is good to realize that communism is not originating from the Song dynasty. This field of comparison has been widely democratized by modern media, so that everyone is in a mediated touch with everyone else and has views on everyone else, mostly in a comparative sense.

Comparison, as I understand it, is thus not a relatively simple juxtaposition and comparison of two or more different societies or cities, but a complex reflection on the
network of concepts that both underlie our study of society as well as the formation of those societies themselves. So, it is always a double act of reflection.

A good instance of the value of the interactional approach towards historical formations that I propose is precisely the emergence and application of the generic term ‘religion’ as purportedly describing, but in fact producing a distinctive social field that shows the value of comparison or, perhaps better, the need for comparative reflection. It shows the central importance of the interactions between Europe and its civilizational Others in understanding the emergence of this social field. This is not an argument for the centrality of Europe in world history, but one for the centrality of the interactions between the West and its Others despite the obvious marginality of Westerners in Asia in terms of numbers and otherwise. What I am arguing for here is an interactional approach in which the interactions between Europe and Asia are seen as central to the emergence of modernity in both Asian and European societies. For our understanding of religion and identity politics this approach is fundamental.

In my view the ideological demarcation and opposition between modern and traditional is very much a nineteenth century phenomenon, although it has a prehistory from the 16th century onwards and a post-history, in which we realize, to quote Bruno Latour, that we have never been modern. It is in the period of empire-building that the interactions between Europe and Asia are most significant and that the concept of religion comes to play such a central role in the understanding of modernity. In the nineteenth century Asian religions like Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, and Hinduism are manufactured, constructed, invented in interactions between China and Europe as well as between India and Europe, while at the same time Christianity and Islam are being re-imagined in their image. It is of course not the case that these civilizational traditions did not exist before, but that they are inserted in emerging global understandings and thereby fundamentally changed. In that sense
religion both in Europe and in Asia is a modern phenomenon, despite the long existence of the Catholic Church in Christianity and the authority of the scriptural tradition and its interpreters in all the other religions mentioned. All these religions are gradually nationalized and become part of national identity as well as globalized and in part of world culture. This is a crucial part of becoming modern. Nationalism is an important social and political force everywhere that transforms the traditions that are found in the nation. As both a cultural and political force nationalism is the most important connection between religion and politics. Nationalism itself is never self-sufficient, but always relates to an emerging world order of nation-states, even in the imperial phase. The transformation of traditions in the construction of national identity is such a radical rupture in history that it justifies my suggestion that religion is a modern phenomenon. Religion and secularity are simultaneously produced as connected aspects of modernity. Previous scholarship has often opposed the secular and the religious as modern against traditional, but this perspective should be recognized as secularist ideology, as an ideological claim within a particular historical configuration. In that sense it may have quite real and significant effects, not from the unfolding of a Rational World Spirit but as produced by historical movements and institutions like the state.

Aspirations

This is not another project that surveys and compares quantitatively urban ethnicity and religious identity. The concept of “identity” with its static connotations has had limiting effects on the study of urban transformations, somewhat similar to the concept of “kinship” in earlier studies of society.¹ We use the concept of “aspiration” to point at the ideational character of many of the processes that effect cityscapes and urban movements.² This is true for city planning, squatting, migration, gentrification, as well as for the extraordinary role played by religion, media and creative arts in global cities.
The project takes the recent renewal of interest in secularism and secularization in social science and social philosophy as its starting point. However, it quite explicitly refuses to make pre-conceived oppositions between secular and religious, both theoretically and empirically. Western European development of secular societies, although quite variable and often already ill understood, are regularly taken as a model for developments in the rest of the world. This will simply be impossible for the current study that compares cities which belong to societies with strongly differing understandings of what in the nineteenth-century comes to be called “religious” and “secular”. In this project religion is not “a thing” that can be easily distinguished from other aspects of the flow of social life in cities. It is rather a “lens” through which one can get a better view of what urban aspirations are, regardless of whether they are called secular or religious. In the past the urban has often been seen as a space of secularity, almost equating urbanity with secular modernity, but this is a misunderstanding mainly arising from by now outdated modernization and secularization theories. Unfortunately, cultural studies as well as urban sociology have tended to ignore religion in global cities taking a certain form of secular modernity for granted. However, it is precisely global cities that experience large scale immigration and related patterns of religiosity that are new and innovative. They are fuelled by transnational movements that are particularly strong in urban contexts.

It is evident that religion is not on the retreat and that migration and globalization in general encourage an aspect of religious revitalization. It is also clear that these movements do not have to be “fundamentalist”, “anti-western”, “anti-modern” or violent. As migrants carry their religious affiliations with them through the Internet, television, telephone and the press, many world cities, from London to Mumbai, from Berlin to Istanbul, from Singapore to Hong Kong began to be the sites of multiple religious movements, conversions, cults and churches, representing every variety of global evangelism and many varieties of indigenous tradition.
In earlier social science paradigms, cities were often seen as sites of breakdown, anomie and alienation, while at the same time, as Henry James put it, being sites of “dreadful delight”. While this may still be to some extent true, we are impressed with the ways in which the world’s global cities are providing social materials for the innovation of new religious institutions, aspirations and experiments, partly because they contain unexpected combinations of media images and demographic shifts. These global cities sometimes seem highly volatile and prone to riots, rumors and epidemic social fears. At the same time they also appear to generate surprising new solidarities, new visions of the good life and new ideas about friendship and conviviality. These paradoxical outcomes are not random but there have been few attempts to recognize them precisely and explain them with fresh ideas and models.

Besides the exploration of the concepts of innovation, risk, uncertainty and productivity in relation to urban life the project will further focus on the development of two concepts that are heavily employed in the social sciences: context and design. The idea of context is weakly developed in the social sciences, though it is a primary term on which many different kinds of analysis regularly rely. In the field of linguistics, the study of the context of utterances is virtually the raison d’etre of the entire field of inquiry. Yet the study of context as such is not much advanced, except in a few initial efforts (Duranti and XXX). In history, though great thinkers like E.P. Thompson have stressed “the ruthless tyranny of context”, they have not really developed clear ideas about what context is and how it is to be recognized, since not every element in the environment of an event can be considered to be part of its context. In literally studies, with the move to deconstruction, we have likewise not made much progress beyond such aphoristic observations, such as those of Jonathan Culler to the effect that everything is context, but context is boundless. In the debates about area studies, old battles
between ideographic and nomothetic approaches have been resolved by invoking the idea of context-sensitivity, so as to get away from bounded and racialized ideas of place, identity and ethnicity, yet the question of context has not been clarified. In short, in many kinds of inquiry in the human sciences, context is regularly invoked favourably, as a foundation for good interpretations, but its own structure, logic and form remain strangely unexamined.

The urban context can also be truly endless. And so it is for the fields of design and planning which have a deep interest in the context of objects (ranging from tea-cups and foundation-pens to buildings and cities) but design and planning tend to focus on the thing itself rather than its context as an object of design. We might say that while designers recognize the context of design, they do not actually think about the design of contexts. The issue, then, is to deploy the term context strategically and look for the design of context for ethnic and religious aspirations. This entails a close attention to spatial arrangements, to transport and connectivity, to housing and spaces for work and worship. Beyond that there is the global context of firms, financial exchanges, and trade. Although these global networks seem to transcend locality, they are in fact specifically located in global cities. The localization of these networks depends on informal knowledge economies that are wired into the city.

These global cities are far from being the same, although they are tied into overlapping global networks. Their economic and socio-political history is of central importance in the economic choices, aspirations, and uncertainties that are faced in each of them. The role of the car in transforming cities is widely different in the cities under study. Transport is clearly a crucial element in what makes a city. Also in cities where the car has historically not been crucial the development of public transport systems has been essential. The old question of the relation between informal and formal sectors of the economy turns up here in new forms. The place and costs of labor in these cities, the nature of work, the space given to workers to live, the relation between the established and the outsiders, the costs of transport, all these elements are intricately related to the world of high-tech global exchanges. Religious movements and
institutions, while are themselves also deeply involved in high-tech communications, are at
the same time also locally tied to communities and networks of migration. Urban governance
in terms of the regulation of utilities, housing, and transport is deeply contested in constantly
shifting political formations that are not easily understood as either democratic or
undemocratic.

This project also aims to explore the notion of design, both in terms of practices of
designing buildings, streets, temples as in terms of the utopian or dystopian imaginings of
ideal cities, ideal communities, and ideal relations to divine design. One of the elements to
be researched here is real estate speculation that is in interesting ways connected to “signature
architecture” and “local branding”. Slums and other “eye-sores” are not part of the politics of
representation in which the city’s architecture is meant to signify anything but the city’s
poor. The huge conflicts about city planning, for example in relation to Dharavi in Mumbai
or areas in Shanghai, show what it takes to project utopias of so-called “world-class cities”.
Also plans like inviting the Olympic Games to town, as London is doing for 2012, are
designed to draw attention to the special significance of a city as metropolitan member of the
community of sports, although London may not need that, but they will inevitably also draw
heavily on the city’s resources and its capacity for transportation. Of interest also are the ways
in which cities design their archives and their collective memories. Especially, the
experiences of World War II are tailored in widely varying ways in the cities that are being
studied in this project. The city is a space for many narratives, some grand-historical, some
concerning every-day life; stories of decay as well as development. These stories are
indeterminate and incomplete and can only be recorded or imagined through a wide spectrum
of media practices, including cinema, photography, video, radio and television. Thus media
can have a critical role in “mediating” trust, risk, and conviviality. In order to explore this
puzzling two-way traffic between aspirations and their contexts in megacities, we
conceptualize urban aspirations as built on social imaginaries of the context. That is, rather
than seeing these aspirations as primarily composed of specific religious, ethnic and aesthetic
content, we view them primarily as designs for the urban context. One example should
suffice: the Shiva Sena, the right-wing Hindu chauvinist movement which has dominated the
politics of Mumbai for more than four decades, has been largely analyzed through the content
of its beliefs about Muslims, Tamils, Hindi-speakers and other non-native groups, or through
its ideologies of nationalism, nativism and renascent Hinduism. We would suggest that it
might be more fruitful to ask about the Shiva Sena’s underlying design for Mumbai as an
urban context. This perspective would draw our attention to their focus on a certain ideas of
urban order and commerce, certain images of legitimate and illegitimate traffic, certain
preoccupations with masculinity and power and certain ideas about the nature of urban
politics as a form. This approach to urban aspirations has the advantage of highlighting the
struggle between different designs of the context, which underlies each urban identity
movement, and whose very contestation defines the material context for all such
movements. Such an approach redefines the relationship between the context of design and
the design of contexts, by recognizing that aspirational strategies are not only about some
distant future, but in their mutual struggles and contestations, together shape and define the
urban context as a whole. This approach to design forces us to recognize that the ideas and
aspirations of professional planners and designers in fact operate not in a tabula rasa but in a
prior context which is itself defined by the contestation of design imaginaries.
Thus, this study will focus on the urban context of religious aspirations, recognizing that
religion is not a thing but a lens. At the same time, we will pursue the way in which the urban
context is not a pre-existing “externality” but is itself a product of struggle, friction and
negotiation between different designs of the context. This approach breaks down the artificial
contrast between aspirations, images, hopes and plans, and the material urban environment
within which they compete or collaborate, Rather, aspirations, viewed as designs on and for
contexts, are placed in the same plane as other material forces, such as buildings, bodies and technical infrastructures.

**methodologies**

global cities constitute constantly transforming arenas for the risk taking of capital and religion in various instances of spatial contestation. Since they are constantly in flux they are hard to study and thus require innovative methodologies. We use the term “observatory” in our project to refer partly to the theory-inflected long-term quasi field-biological method of observing behaviour, with the caveat that behaviour is understood here as the meaningful practices of humans and thus cannot easily be subjected to statistical surveying. Partly we also refer with this term to our emphasis on processes of mediation in combining the neighbourhood with the larger city and with global networks. We are proposing to build teams comprising anthropologists, urban sociologists, scholars of urban planning, architects, media-specialists. These teams will “map” the issues discussed above.