SYMPOSIUM

Recentering Southeast Asian Cities

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Abstract

For nearly two decades now, scholars have been heralding the arrival of new urbanisms. One debate in rapidly urbanizing Southeast Asia concerns the convergence of Western and Asian urban processes, and the riposte that interaction between globalizing processes and the historical momentum of local and regional forces make for complex Asian urbanisms. In recent years, attention has been drawn to the impact of decentralization, with consequences for the reorganization of the developmental state and the growing importance of private capital and urban social movements in driving urban processes and politics. This symposium offers the fresh lens of ‘recentering’ to discuss the urbanisms emerging from decentralization and the triangulating state–capital–social movement politics of the new urbanisms. Drawing on recent discussions of Manuel Castells’ (1983) The City and the Grassroots, we seek to expand the conception of urban activism not just by considering non-Western cases in the newly democratizing states of Southeast Asia, but also by considering cities as co-agents of activism. We see the recentering of Southeast Asian cities as referring to political actions that take the city not only as site and repository, but also reflexively as identity in itself to be fought with, for and over.

For nearly two decades now, scholars have been heralding the arrival of new urbanisms. Globalizing capital has been transforming Western and non-Western societies alike, pushing bulging cities to the forefront of political geographies that formerly revolved around nation-states. Urban theory has been focused on making sense of the new. Given the cultural and political heterogeneity of a region that has historically been the contact zone of Asian and Western civilizations, Southeast Asian cities provide an empirical touchstone for ongoing debates in urban studies.

One debate has seen the argument for the convergence of Western and Asian urban processes (Dick and Rimmer, 1998), and the riposte that interaction between globalizing processes and the historical momentum of local and regional forces make for complex Asian urbanisms (Ho, 2005; Leaf, 2007). In recent years, attention has been drawn to the impact of decentralizing governance on the cities of the global South (Shatkin, 2007; Beard et al., 2008) and East and Southeast Asia (Bae and Sellers, 2007; Douglass et al., 2007; Wu, 2007), with consequences for the reorganization of the developmental state and the growing importance of private capital and urban social movements in driving urban processes and politics. Scholarship on Southeast Asian urbanism has been...
dominated by what Bunnell and Maringanti (2010) call ‘metrocentricty’. This is a tendency in Anglophone urban theory to look at metropolitan regions — particularly so-called ‘global cities’ — as the leading edge of global urban change (Robinson, 2006). As a result, scholars have focused on large Southeast Asian cities with global economic connections that look like equivalents of Western metropoles as significant instances of urbanization. With the globalizing decentralization observed in recent scholarship, how can we move beyond the metrocentricity in urban theory to make sense of the diversity of urban experiences in Southeast Asia and indeed globally?

The origins of metrocentricity in Southeast Asian urban theory can be traced to Mark Jefferson’s (1939) ‘primate city’ law, which defined a primary city as having a number of times the population of that of the largest ‘secondary city’ in any country. Pioneering works by Norton Ginsburg (1955) and Terence McGee (1967) saw Southeast Asia as exemplifying the primate city law, as countries of the region featured a large and rapidly urbanizing capital city connecting the hinterlands to the West-centered global economy. Jakarta, Manila and Bangkok are often discussed as the pre- eminent primate cities in the region, with Kuala Lumpur and Singapore in tow. Others have since emphasized that their historical role as administrative centers and main regional port cities in the age of empire were important to the development of urban primacy by highly centralized states focused on modernization and industrialization in the postcolonial era (Sternstein, 1984; Basu, 1985; Dutt and Song, 1994). The historical diversity of urbanization has largely been ignored, though scholars are beginning to ‘discover’ the importance of smaller cities in driving urban change. One example of the latter is Penang and its historical role in facilitating urban political, economic and cultural exchanges in the Indian Ocean region (Yeoh et al., 2009).

In today’s era of globalization, with the region’s economies opening up to transnational capital and with extant democratization and decentralization, urban theorists have been slow to move beyond metrocentric perspectives. Instead, they have deepened it by arguing that Southeast Asia’s ‘primate cities’ have not only grown further, but have also begun hooking up as nodes in an expanding network of capital, resource and migratory flows covering large urbanizing regions. McGee and Robinson (1995) have termed this process ‘ASEAN mega-urbanization’ in reference to the post-cold war expansion of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the region’s transnational political umbrella. The ‘megacity’ has since emerged as the key term in discussing the globalizing primate cities of Southeast Asia. One sees the lineage clearly, for example, in Christopher Silver’s (2008: 18) work, which discusses Jakarta as a megacity exemplifying the ‘distinctive variation on primate city formation’ in Southeast Asia in the late twentieth century: explosive population, economic and spatial growth leading ‘within a very short time span, to truly enormous urban places’ (see also Jones and Douglass, 2008).

Recently, in a crucial move beyond metrocentricity, Rimmer and Dick (2009) have juxtaposed their discussion of the ‘global cities’ of Kuala Lumpur and Singapore with a consideration of the relationship between the ‘national cities’ of Jakarta, Manila and Bangkok and the respective ‘second cities’ of Surabaya, Cebu and Chiang Mai (plus Penang for Malaysia). However, we are concerned to advance Southeast Asian urban theory not by going down the pecking-order chain of primary, secondary and tertiary cities to see their role in the capitalist networks of globalization, thereby reinforcing the metrocentric presuppositions of the primate megacity perspective. Paradoxically, the primate megacity perspective has relegated the role of the city to that of an instrument in the hands of either the developmental state or transnational capital. One consequence is to split the city into formal and informal sectors (ibid.: 11). The city is reduced to a bifurcated space, in which scholars search for grassroots activism only in the slums of the informal sector (Evers and Korff, 2000), while other forms of urban grassroots activism such as those emphasized for Western cities are ignored. In this respect, our aim in this symposium is to begin a critique of metrocentricity by highlighting new forms of activism emerging from decentralization in Southeast Asia that puts urban agency center stage — new social
movements that are recentering Southeast Asian cities, be they primary or secondary cities. In this respect, we turn to a classic take on urban activism and a recent retrospective on it to frame our approach to emergent Southeast Asian urbanisms.

Recentering Southeast Asian cities

Reflexivity, the globalizing city and urban activism

The irony of using the term ‘recentering’ to criticize metrocentricity is fully intended. We adapt the concept from Robert Lake’s (2006) discussion in *IJURR*’s retrospective on Manuel Castells’ (1983) *The City and the Grassroots*. For Lake, Castells’ study of 5 centuries of urban activism recenters the city as an ontologically persistent site and mnemonic repository of strategies for political agency. The dialectical motor of historical change is how each ‘episode’ of activism ‘establishes a new context for the next encounter’ (Lake, 2006: 196). Culture or more precisely urban cultural contradictions lie at the heart of the dialectic. In Castells’ (1983: 303–4) formulation, cities are shaped by interrelated conflicts over ‘the definition of urban meaning’ (for instance, whether Jakarta is a global metropolis or a site of belonging for citizens), ‘the adequate performance of urban functions’ (whether Jakarta is able to facilitate the command and coordination functions of the central state administration or provide adequate and affordable housing for residents) and ‘the adequate symbolic expression of urban meaning and (or) function’ (whether Jakarta’s urban form expresses a postcolonial republic with monumental boulevards, global city with hypermodern skyscrapers or the place identity of home and heritage for citizens).

Despite its avowed cross-cultural comparative approach, Castells’ seminal work is limited to the Western hemisphere, where one could possibly make the argument that the democratic tradition is entrenched between its liberal and socialist articulations. For our symposium, we seek to expand the conception of urban activism not just by considering non-Western cases in the democratizing states of Southeast Asia, but also by considering cities as co-agents of activism. By focusing on Southeast Asian cities, we do not seek to posit the uniqueness of Southeast Asian urbanism or a model of urban activism for developing regions that emphasizes ‘community participation’ (Choguill, 1996) over ‘citizen participation’ (Arnstein, 1969).

We see the recentering of Southeast Asian cities as referring to political actions that take the city not only as site and repository, but also reflexively as identity in itself to be fought with, for and over. Rather than merely forming the context for political and economic activities by state or capitalist agents, the city gives rise to forms of grassroots activism that reflexively map and imagine the city in the process of acting to change it.

Reflexivity has been discussed as a key feature of contemporary globalization. Whether in its ‘second modernity’ (Beck *et al*., 1994) or ‘liquid modernity’ (Bauman, 2000) guises, it has been argued that reflexive modernization involving intensified flows of information between knowledge-producing institutions and transnational actors such as corporations and NGOs is causing the decline of the nation-state, electoral politics and traditional social institutions. Along with the party, the family and church, the city has been placed among the crumbling ruins of early modernity. In *Postmetropolis*, Edward Soja (2000: 11) defines ‘the urban imaginary’ as cityspace ‘conceptualized in imagery, reflexive thought, and symbolic representation’. Borrowing from Michael Storper’s (1997) economic geography, Soja (2000: 178) sees the urban imaginary to be at the heart of innovative regional urban agglomerations shaped by the ‘reflexive consumption’ of ‘reflexive urban consumers and customers’.

In his later work, *The Information Age*, Castells (1998: 379) casts these changes as the rise of the network society that promises to unleash ‘unprecedented productive capacity by the power of the mind’, except that it is built on ‘interests, values, institutions, and systems of representation’ that ‘limit collective creativity’. For Castells, there is a place...
yet for social movements that could engage the rich cultural materials and coordinates of the globalizing network society to build new identities for social transformation. However, in contrast to the centrality of the urban in *The City and the Grassroots*, movements built on place-bound ‘resistance identity’ must move out from defensive communes into decentered networks carrying out reflexive ‘identity projects’ to shape globalization (Castells, 1997: 362).

A decade into the new millennium, we are wiser about pronouncements on the decline of the state and the city. Janine Brodie’s (2000: 115) characterization of globalization as the deterritorialization of state sovereignty and its contested reterritorialization ‘sideways to the private from the public’ exemplifies the more nuanced view of the consequences of neoliberalism in the West. In response to criticisms for de-emphasizing the urban in *The Information Age* in the *IJURR* retrospective, Castells (2006: 222) has acknowledged the need to ground cultural movements proffering project identities in urban space, and remarked how this would reconnect his more recent work to *The City and the Grassroots*. But exactly how can we conceive the reflexive cultural movements of *The Information Age* as grounded urban social movements as in *The City and the Grassroots* without reducing them to binary local/global, place/network, centered/decentered, defensive/transformational moments?

Crucially, for Brodie, neoliberal reterritorialization takes place at the level of the local and involves decentralization, privatization and individualization. In other words, globalization advances on the reorganization of localities — the city returns, as Lake (2006) puts it, as an ontologically persistent site. However, criticizing the romanticization of urban grassroots democracy, highlighting in particular Warren Magnusson’s (1996) idealization of ‘municipal progressivism’, Brodie (2000: 118–19) identifies municipal governments as traditional agents of property interests and now neoliberal agents. Magnusson (1996: 10) admits that the municipality ‘is designed to provide an enclosure for popular politics, and so to render that politics safe for the state, the market, and the other forms of government to which we are subject’. On the other hand, the city is much more than the municipality, being a locality formed ‘at the juncture of movements’ of capital and social movements that are always overflowing its municipal enclosure (*ibid.*: 111). Municipal progressivism is achieved when the global city breaks the bonds of municipal containment and orientates itself towards the ‘politics of flows and connections’ between cities in a decentered world (*ibid.*: 302).

In a subsequent essay, Magnusson (2000: 300) has characterized the surplus of the global city as the ‘hyperspace of urbanism’ — the exterior space that defines the way social movements form their own interior political space by articulating spatio-temporal identities. This exterior space, produced by translocal flows, is dimensionally more complex than the movements’ four-dimensional interiority and is scarcely comprehensible, and even more so now that multiple urbanisms developing over millennia in different regions of the world are becoming ‘integrated with one another in the context of a developing global city’ (*ibid.*: 301). Clearly, the higher-dimensional exterior space produces the conditions of possibility for the interior identities of urban social movements. But the not so obvious implication is that effective social movements are those that seek to grasp the exterior space in thought and practice, creating for themselves, in Soja’s terms, urban imaginaries to build, in Castells’ terms, project identities to reshape both the interior political space and exterior urban space.

We have now arrived at a point where we can forge the connection between Castells’ earlier and later works on social movements. In *The City and the Grassroots*, Castells (1983: 305) describes an urban social movement as ‘a collective conscious action aimed at the transformation of the institutionalized urban meaning against the logic, interest, and values of the dominant class’. But transformative collective conscious action is made possible only when the movement reflexively shapes its interior space by comprehending the surplus of the exterior urban space beyond its institutionalized urban meaning (in Magnusson’s terms, the global city beyond its municipal enclosure). This surplus, in the
information age, is the networked global city and its sheer cultural diversity beyond
neoliberal capitalism and its reterritorialization in privatized localities.

There is one caveat. Neoliberal reterritorialization is uneven, not only globally
between the West and the global South or the East, but also within Southeast Asia. In The
City and the Grassroots, Castells (ibid.: 328) sees urban social movements as mobilizing
around ‘collective consumption, cultural identity, and political self-management’ against
‘the dominant logics of capitalism, informationalism, and statism’. Given his emphasis
on informationalism as the driving motor of globalization in The Information Age, we
can see why Castells (2006: 222) ‘privileged cultural movements over place-based
movements, and the continuing struggles over collective consumption’ in the later work.

The recentering agency of Southeast Asian cities

The three dominant logics of capitalism, informationalism and statism differ across
Southeast Asia in both proportion and quality. It has been a quarter of a century since
Mike Douglass (1988: 345) introduced the symposium on transnational capital and
urbanization on the Pacific Rim in this journal, observing that the globalization of
American capital had created ‘a new class of “world cities”’ in Asia functioning as
export-oriented nodes of production, trade, finance and business intelligence. In the
process, these cities moved on from their national economic role as the centralized
location of production to an international role as nodes for transnational capital. Citing
the two articles on Malaysia in the symposium (McGee, 1988; Salih et al., 1988),
Douglass (1988: 350) noted that this very dependence on transnational capital was used
in Malaysia, as in other emergent Asian economies then, to strengthen the autocratic
powers of the state against labor and democratic movements. While freed from the
national economic firmament, it would seem that the ‘world cities’ were still the
instrument of the developmental state hooking up to globalizing capital to achieve
national economic goals.

However, considerable decentralization and privatization has taken place in the
Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand, with democratization sweeping away authoritarian
regimes since the turn of the millennium. On the other hand, the state remains firmly in
control of the paradoxically liberalized market and privatized means of communication
in Malaysia and Singapore, though its authoritarian wings have been clipped. In
post-socialist Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Burma, the state struggles to balance
transnational capital, China’s increasing influence and resurgent Western NGO aid.
Whither the urban grassroots in this globalizing mosaic? But now that cities have
decoupled from national states, how are urban activists recentering cities across the
varied contexts? Now that the ‘world cities’ of developmental states have given way to
‘worlding cities’ of experimental and contested urbanisms (Ong, 2011), how do we move
away from metrocentricity to consider the agency of Southeast Asian cities?

Building on our critique of the primate megacity perspective, the middle two of the
four articles in this symposium focus on the classic cases of Jakarta and Manila, while
the first considers ‘secondary cities’ in Indonesia and the fourth deals with ‘secondary
cities’ in the mainland Southeast Asian massif region that have long been overshadowed
by Bangkok. However, all four articles focus on the transformation of urban activism in
the cities beyond the slums. The recentering agency of the city manifests itself in visibly
diverse ways, because it takes place on various scales, with various actors and through
various vectors.

The deterritorialization of state sovereignty and its reterritorialization on private and
other public sites has opened up the recentering agency of the city on various scales. On
the one hand, the agency of the city is located on the scale of the national and the global.
The symposium begins with Miller’s (2013, this issue) article on the emergence of
secondary cities as new urban ‘centers’ in decentralizing Indonesia. On one level,
Miller’s discussion of the novel autonomy of municipal authorities directly implicates the Brodie–Magnusson debate. Since street revolts in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis brought down the Suharto regime, Indonesia has seen high growth rates spurred on by economic privatization, market liberalization and political decentralization. However, as Miller shows, long overshadowed by Jakarta and with failing urban services provision, municipal governments are no mere tools of private property interests; many are recovering their cultural identities from rich pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial heritages and hooking up with non-state actors to deal with the new environment.

The last article in the symposium serves as a comparative foil to the Indonesian cases, not only between the secondary cities of the mainland Southeast Asian region to the cities of Indonesia, but also as a negative case where urban activism struggles to take off with globalizing decentralization. One longstanding criticism of *The City and the Grassroots* concerns the neglect of larger historical contexts in shaping both urbanism and urban social movements (Pickvance, 1985; Staeheli, 2006). Walsh and Amponstira (2013, this issue) discuss how transnational infrastructural development in the guise of the Asian Development Bank’s Asian Highway Network has opened up opportunities for Vientiane, Phnom Penh and Yangon/Naypyidaw in the strife-torn post-socialist states of Laos, Cambodia and Burma, not unlike those gained by the cities of decentralizing Indonesia. The comparison is not unwarranted, as these cities could be considered as secondary cities in this region long dominated by Bangkok. But as Walsh and Amponstira argue, the recentering of these cities is ambivalent compared to the Indonesian cities, as transnational class and ethnic divisions occasioned by Western NGO executives and Chinese migrants split the urban grassroots even before they had a chance to regroup after the ending of civil strife.

On the other hand, recentering agency is also located at the scale of the city. Working from inside the city, the urban activists compel municipal and central state authorities to also look inwards, such that the city becomes identity in itself reflexively fought over. In relation to the rising secondary cities discussed by Miller and the ambivalent recentering of the capital cities of Laos, Cambodia and Burma discussed by Walsh and Amponstira, the fate of the capital cities in decentralizing Indonesia and the Philippines is not that of decline in political significance but of contestation over changing urban meaning. We see this most vividly in Thailand’s sharp rural–urban, class and ethnic divisions playing out in street revolts in Bangkok (color-coded with yellow and red shirts). In calmer Jakarta and Manila, Padawangi (2013, this issue) and Guazon (2013, this issue) show that urban activism has surged with democratization. As the state surrenders the capital city to the collusion of transnational and domestic capital, the monumental urban form has given way to ghettoization, gentrification and privatized business districts. The monumental form does not disappear, but its function becomes relativized along with the increasing reflexivity of urban activism with regard to the changing city.

The second aspect of recentering agency varies with respect to the actors. This is linked to scale. On the national–global scale of recentering agency, the interaction between institutional actors comes into focus. For Miller, the jostling between municipal actors, private companies and central state agencies in decentralizing Indonesia draws attention to a new municipalism. Though they do not represent what Magnusson would call progressive municipalism, the municipalities are becoming activists in their own fashion. It remains to be seen, as Byron Miller (2006: 209) points out in his critique of Castells, whether municipal movements may turn out to be like conservative suburban politics in America, ‘based not on a politics of collective consumption and use value, but on the promotion of private consumption and exchange value’. Nonetheless, the new politics they have engendered have pushed the city into the forefront, recentered, as agent of change in Indonesia. In contrast, Walsh and Amponstira’s focus on the interaction between municipal and state actors, transnational corporations and NGOs, and the rising regional hegemon, China, suggests that the decline of national state sovereignty has gone too far in the cases of Laos, Cambodia and Burma. While the Indonesian state provides
a protective shell allowing Indonesian secondary cites to operate in a stable environment, the influx of foreign and transnational organizations into mainland Southeast Asian cities decenters rather than recenters the agency of the cities.

When we locate the agency on the scale of the city, citizen activists come into focus. The city becomes the site, the repository and the very identity of political agency, engendering creative and dynamic politics that breathe life into urban spaces. Padawangi shows how mass protests along the Thamrin-Sudirman corridor leading to the Medan Merdeka Park across from the Presidential Palace (where state ceremonies and festivals were enacted during the Suharto regime) have been replaced by diverse movements using the same place to explore new media communication tactics and global issues to redefine Jakarta as a cosmopolitan demopolis connected to the world. In the case of Manila, Guazon tracks the evolution of public art from the monumental murals celebrated by the Marcos regime to the contemporary critical and interventionist mediations of the city by activist artists. Sometimes supported by municipal authorities with a conservative agenda, the new public art nevertheless opens up the urban imaginaries of Manila that Guazon describes as ‘liberative and enabling’. In both cases, instead of the primate city or megacity presented to the world by the state or capital, citizens are taking ownership of specific urban sites to redefine their city for re-presentation to themselves and the world. The capital city comes to the forefront in and for itself rather than as political or economic node for the state or capital.

Lastly, the articles in the symposium show that the agency of the city works its way through various channels. Each article highlights a different vector: public funds in Miller’s Indonesian secondary cities, demonstrations in Padawangi’s case of Jakartan activists, public art in Guazon’s case of activists of Manila, and infrastructural development in Walsh and Amponstira’s mainland Southeast Asian cities. The diverse means by which recentering agency is enacted call for scholars of Asian urbanism to expand their traditional areas of research in order to keep pace with the new repertoires of activism by different actors at different scales.

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References


