**Problematizing the Urban: Violence and Invention**

**Edited by AbdouMaliq Simone**

City-regions will undoubtedly be the epicentres of new centralities that will structure and suture a new emergent global system. The full implications of this challenge must be clarified because city building (and retrofitting) is by definition a generational undertaking that can only but be entangled with profound and deep societal cultural shifts. These shifts raise the prospects of violent ruptures and prolific invention, with both dimensions entangled in hybrid forms whose political and ethical implications are likely to be not easily understood. From gridlocked traffic, the lack of affordable land and housing, the sheer volume of infrastructure requiring repair or adaptation, the dissipation of collaboration among neighbours, or the lack of necessary finance and capacity for needed developments, urban inhabitants are feeling that the work of managing everyday life is becoming harder. This dissatisfaction is particularly significant since it was in the realm of the everyday that many inhabitants of cities sought to make the city work for them, where they could assess the efficacy of their efforts. How might this intensifying dissatisfaction, coupled with the efforts of inhabitants of all backgrounds to position themselves for the “best deals”, manifest themselves in the concrete reshaping of urban regions?

Too often contemporary urban studies mobilize a range of theoretical manoeuvres simply to make the case that cities and urban regions are ineluctably complex, multidimensional, differentiated, unique, unpredictable, emergent, and relationally dense. How might we think more specifically about how to act in domains where such complexity is both a resource for the imagination and an impediment to action? What kinds of dilemmas do residents face and what kinds of practices do they engage in order to continuously gather up the tools and possibilities to endure in volatile urban conditions, where volatility seems a critical force in the simultaneous undoing and remaking of life, as well as in providing assets and opportunities to inhabitants? What kinds of circumvented histories and experiments can be drawn upon to live the city differently? How might it be possible to exceed the normalizing work that urban violence does when, as Katherine McKittrick points out, it acts as an index of how human life is constituted?

Given these issues, this special issue of *Theory, Culture and Society* will attempt to address some of the following considerations:

1. Urban violence is one of the most written about issues in both popular and academic form. As violence, in various modalities—physical, psychological, institutional, and political—has been an integral practice of urbanization processes everywhere, what is it about the structuration of the urban itself which makes violence endemic to it? Urbanization is a process that has been caught in crossfire since its inception. On the one hand it makes possible a circulation of things across any border that would delimit them—such as habitats, niches, territories or scales. Bodies, things, machines, and institutions brought together in dense interactions not only operate as a gravitational force, drawing materials inward, but also constitute platforms for making materials move, whether in the shape of resources, commodities, or information. For the widespread interaction of things not only creates different kinds of space, and thus multiple fields of attraction, but changes the potential and values of those things that are put in motion.

As such, urbanization entails not just circulation but stability and security as well, securing populations into territories that operate as domains proper to the particular characteristics of their inhabitants. For too much circulation poses a danger to the ability to know who people are, what they are capable of doing, and what can be demanded of them. So urbanization points to continuously revisable structures of working out relationships between circulation and security. Who and what should move under what circumstances then always is an issue that entails relations of force, constraint, and contestation.

Throughout urban worlds today these relationships are changing at unprecedented speeds and in ways that are difficult to track. Clearly most everything circulates more extensively and rapidly, while, at the same time, the available platforms on which to make use of that circulation—to plan, to settle, to cultivate over time, to trace an ongoing story of a coherent life—diminish, or become formatted in narrower terms. Cities everywhere may begin to look more alike, but urbanization itself weaves its way across multiple strange patchworks connecting what we used to consider to be rural areas, forests, deserts, oceans, and so forth to population centres of various sizes and economic concentrations. It is difficult to know where the urban begins or ends. In this regard, what is particularly “urban” about specific modes of violence and to what extent does violence itself continue to mark out specific instantiations of the “urban”?

2. As imaginaries, empirical realities, aspirations, and hype, urbanities have been proffered as enactments of the heterogeneous. Cities are places where differences are both invented and are to intersect. Urban literature is replete with disputes about both the intensity and extensiveness of actual intersections among the heterogeneities that supposedly compose cities. It is difficult to establish clear measures of neighbourhood effects, pluralism, or cosmopolitanism, for example. If people from different walks of life deal with each other, then through what sensory, technical, and institutional devices do these interactions take place? If there are critical ambiguities or ellipses in the very invention and materialization of social intersections, how then is violence framed? If we don’t know how the important social transactions are actually “delivered”, how do we know what constitutes ruptures, dissolutions, pathologies, and so forth, or whether and how violence is productive or facilitative of certain kinds of endurances?

3. When violence is consensually seen as an impediment to the productive and judicious consolidation of social and political life or the continuously negotiated and provisional calibration of differences and disparities, how does it operate to conceal and/or reveal the underlying conditions that give rise to it? To what extent does violence operate as a “trickster of orientation”, of incessant self-referentiality, something that both shapes figure and ground and, at the same time, confounds any clear sense of what is going on? How does violence obscure the various manoeuvres and practices that keep things together or apart? With few prospects of greater equanimity and economic redistribution on the horizon, and with the looming prospects of global violence articulated through climate and geological media, what constitute the ethical and political imperatives of urban life? In a world “gone violent” in so many ways, with life itself subject to accelerated “deformation”, what are the values or criteria through which urban governance are to refer in terms of decision-making and planning?

4. Urban history is replete with experiments of all kinds, with different ways of living in and using the city. Sometimes traces of these experiments endure, albeit in distorted fashion; other times, they are repressed and completely effaced. For example, what are we to make of the histories of black Chicago and Detroit that were the sites of some of the most dynamic, inventive figurations of urban life in American history? How is violence tied to efforts to “keep the city in line”? Given the incessant renovations of life and urban form, what constitutes practices of collective invention, which can emerge from and for a heterogeneous urban populace?

**List of contributors**

***The productivities of urban violence in Central and South America.***

**Dennis Rodgers**, Professor of Urban Social and Political Research

University of Glasgow, has written extensively on the politics of urban violence across the Americas and is considered one of the most prominent researchers in this field.

***What could have happened to the Black Metropolis, Chicago***

**Mary Pattillo**, Harold Washington Professor of Sociology and African American Studies, Northwestern University. Perhaps the most incisive analyst of the generativity of blackness of in urban U.S.A., and global dynamisms in race-class connections. She will examine possible aftermaths of one of the most important experimental phases in American urban history. It has been proposed that this piece is written in collaboration with:

Zandria Robinson, University of Memphis

Marcus Hunter, Yale University

Keeanga Taylor, Northwestern University.

***Infrastructures of Violence in Karachi***

**Laurent Gayer** Senior Researcher, CERI. Explores the"productivity" of Karachi's violent infrastructure, particularly as far as the taming and handling of the workforce in the city's largest trading estates is concerned, in far-reaching alliances of muscle power and industrial capital. He has written extensively on the various forms of intrastate conflict in South Asia.

***Propulsive Kinshasa: endless horizons***

**Filip de Boeck,** Professor of Anthropology, Institute for Anthropological Research in Africa, Leuven University. Engaged with Kinshasa for decades, in many publication he has examined the spectral dimensions of urban life, and in this piece examines how the world’s poorest megacity expands far beyond any discernible economic logic and how massive territorial expansion unravels and disperses long-honed sociability while reinventing it as “shattered glass.”

**(***Some rendering of his lectures on urban life at Harvard University, Jan-May 2013)*

**Achille Mbembe,** Research Professor, University of Witwatersrand. A prominent theorist of the intersections of race, the postcolony, and urbanity.

The following may also be approached for contributions:

**Sally Sargeson**, Australia National University, on violence as urban development, reflected in various experiments with land expropriation and popular resistance in China.

**Neferti X.M. Tadiar**, Barnard College, on temporalities of disposability

**Derek Pardue**, Wesleyan University, on hip-hop as an oscillating means of detachment, engagement, militancy and cooption across urban Lusophone worlds—Rio de Janeiro, Lisbon, Luanda, Praia.

**Katherine McKittrick**, Queens University, on plantation futures and the secret histories of Black urban America.

**Teresa Caldeira**, University of California-Berkeley. She wants to do something on the relationships between the persistent killing of young men by police and the sexual abuse of young women by young men in Sao Paolo. She is not sure whether it will be possible given current commitments.

**Kelly Gillespie**, University of Witwatersrand, on lynching and vigilantism in South Africa.

**Danny Hoffman**, University of Washington, on the intersection of urban violence and architecture in Monrovia.

**Ravi Sundaram**, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, on the proliferation of a new cities in India; what happens after “pirate modernity.”

**Nikki Jones**, University of California-Berkeley, how black men attempt to use prison experience as a way of mobilizing community organization.

**Mona Abaza**, American University of Cairo, art and social media in urban transformation.

**Steffan Jensen**, Roskilde University, on violence in the barangay of Manila as contestation over the terms of ensuring community cohesion and on policing as a tactics to dismantle such cohesion

**Tilman Baumgärtel**, Royal University of Phnom Penh, the new urban realism in Southeast Asian cinema

**Editor Bio:**

**AbdouMaliq Simone** is an urbanist with a particular interest in emerging

forms of social and economic intersection across diverse trajectories of

change for cities in the Global South. Simone is presently Research

Professor at the University of South Australia and Visiting Professor

of Urban Studies at the African Centre for Cities, University of Cape

Town. Key publications include In Whose Image: Political Islam and

Urban Practices in Sudan (University of Chicago Press, 1994), For the

City Yet to Come: Urban Change in Four African Cities (Duke University

Press, 2004) and City Life from Jakarta to Dakar: Movements at the

Crossroads (Routledge, 2009).