

Colombo's Gentrification: The 'Right to the City' during Neoliberalism

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Introduction

One thing that classical economists seem to agree on with their colleagues of a more leftist persuasion is that cities are all about spatial concentration, with a view to optimising economic efficiency (Storper and Scott 2016; Henderson and Venables 2008). According to Harvey (1985), the capitalist (and especially neoliberal) city is a result of space being annihilated by time, for the efficient accumulation of capital. It is designed with the primary aim of limiting the physical spread of production and consumption, thereby facilitating a speedier circulation of money. Harvey explains this as the reason for the high concentration of labour, infrastructure, restaurants, shops, and other such amenities in cities. When the circulation of money speeds up in an economy, consumption and production also speed up proportionately and cyclically.

As a result, the physical space in neoliberal capitalist cities is designed with the purpose of attracting those classes with ownership of (or privileged access to) the means of production, who can contribute in greater capacity to the generation of more wealth. This process is known as 'gentrification'. It is a key trend in many contemporary urban spatial planning processes across the world, and is a term laden with class connotations. It denotes 'rehabilitating' those areas in the city in which the working class resides, to fit the aesthetic palette of those higher up in the ladder (Smith and Williams 2013). Engels (1970 [1872]) has defined urban planning geared towards gentrification as a process that conceals "from the wealthy ladies and gentlemen with strong stomachs and weak nerves the misery and squalor which are part and parcel of their own riches and luxury" (as cited in Goonewardena 2012: 87). As such, evictions and relocations of working class people are often found at the heart of gentrification processes.

Colombo is no exception, as evidenced most recently by Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa's directive to the Urban Development and Housing Ministry to expedite the construction of low-income housing projects in and around Colombo as part of his earlier policy vision as President, to replace urban informal settlements in Colombo with apartments.

In this essay, I argue that the post-war beautification and development of Colombo as a 'world class city' involved the acceleration and strengthening of a process of gentrification designed to benefit one class of citizens of the city over another. Land has been central to this project, as its aggressive commodification is easily identifiable as the key driving force behind the displacements that signify gentrification. The marketisation of space this denotes then circles back to efficient capital accumulation through skyrocketing real estate prices (Brenner *et al.* 2012: 3). My intention here is to briefly consider the implications of Colombo's recent – and dramatic – commodification of space for the 'Right to the City' of many.

Background

Instances of Colombo's spatial alterations and their attendant exclusions are found from the time of the colonial days. The 1915 Housing Act stands out in this regard because it marks the official beginning of viewing low-income houses as a problem. A year later, in 1916, the Kochchikade area was classified as unhygienic, which provided an excuse for the colonial government to intervene to take 'corrective' action (Perera 2005). It was Patrick Geddes who in 1919 set in motion a process of deliberately redesigning Colombo's urban space to be more beneficial for the privileged classes (Perera 2006). Therefore, these developments should not be understood as being of modern origin. What is different about the changes unfolding a century later

is primarily economic: we have transitioned into an economic system in which spatial planning exercises especially in and around Colombo have taken on a more markedly capitalist outlook, geared almost exclusively towards “the attraction and unrestricted consumption of foreign capital” (Perera 1999, as cited in Nagaraj 2016: 431), rendering Colombo more a ‘city of capital’ than a ‘capital city’ (ibid: 430). This shift of priorities to wealth and profit generation has specific ramifications for how space is organised and how the urban is envisioned; ramifications that largely obtain through the commodification of space.

More recent urban dislocations unfolded when the government sought to evict those living and selling goods on railway reservation lands, as well as in the evictions that took place in preparation for the 2008 SAARC summit (Perera 2020). However, the post-war Rajapaksa Colombo beautification project stands out in this regard, as it is the most visible, glaring, and aggressive one of its kind. It was also driven by longer term aims than its predecessors, rather than by ad hoc situational demands. It aimed to refashion Colombo into a ‘world-class’ city, which in turn promoted a vision of a slum-less and beggar-less Colombo, starting on 1 January 2018 (CPA 2017; Perera 2020; Amarasuriya and Spencer 2015). These measures clearly sought to treat the symptoms and not the causes of the illness. Perera (2020) notes how the vision for a slum-less rather than a poverty-less Colombo throws light on the specific interests driving these changes. Nagaraj (2016) similarly argues that the vision for a ‘slum-free’ Colombo was directly connected to the city’s world class aspirations (432) geared towards catering to a “visual regime premised on world-class aesthetics” (citing Ghertner 2011: 291).

It is reported that many who were relocated are unhappy about having been suddenly cut off from their social relationships, being forced into a space of 400 square feet despite having gotten accustomed to using more extensive spaces by way of common areas and sometimes larger houses, and being made to pay off a loan for a house they did not ask for in the first place (Abeyasekera *et al.* 2019). Housewives who stay at home during day-time complain of how they feel “like being stuck in a chicken coop during the day” (Perera 2015: 24). Security concerns abound as well, given how most of the residents now find themselves in a new social setting, without many of their previous neighbours and the support structures that came with them (ibid).

Perera, Uyangoda, and Tegal (2017) report as to how many among those who were thus relocated, or were told they would be relocated, have protested by way of

public demonstrations, filing cases with the Supreme Court, or simply refusing to vacate. In Wanathamulla, a community who filed a petition with the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka about forcible evictions had their Housing Protection Society secretary abducted (and later released) (Perera 2015: 26). On numerous occasions thereafter, legal objections were raised by various affected parties against the Urban Development Authority which was in charge of these changes in relation to the valuation of properties, quality of the new apartments, and even the use of force to ensure eviction (ibid: 27). Even though the parties agreed to a settlement in September 2014, whereby the petitioners accepted two apartments each from a nearby housing complex, by the end of the year they were said to be highly dissatisfied with their new environment (Perera 2015). If the concerned population’s wellbeing was really the issue, as claimed, their preferences should have been taken into account, and they should most definitely not have been evicted using physical force (Centre for Policy Alternatives 2014).

What implications do these evictions, and the priorities they signify, have for our Right to the City? Answers to this need necessarily be framed within the larger reality of neoliberalism, since our daily experience unfolds against that backdrop.

Neoliberal Urbanisation and the ‘Right to the City’

Neoliberalism is a slippery concept that has evaded definition to the extent that some have claimed it doesn’t exist. For Harvey (2007), neoliberalism is a politico-socio-economic theory as well as a set of social practices that have as their core value individual freedom exemplified by a strong system of private property, a free market, and a free environment for commerce. In this view, the role of the State is to satisfy the required macro conditions to these ends. They include the establishment and maintenance of the necessary military and legal structures for the preservation of the system of private property and the free market, maintaining the value of the currency, and introducing an element of competition for sectors that lack it, among other things. Matters beyond these, however, most particularly those of the competitive, ‘free’ market and the enjoyment of private property require the State to keep itself well out (Harvey 2007: 2).

Neoliberalism is also widely deployed to “characterize the resurgence of market-based institutional shifts and policy realignments across the world economy during the post-1980s period”, technically referring to “a set of doctrines regarding the appropriate framework for economic regulation” (Brenner and Theodore 2005: 101-2). As Monbiot (2016) succinctly puts it;

Neoliberalism sees competition as the defining characteristic of human relations. It redefines citizens as consumers, whose democratic choices are best exercised by buying and selling, a process that rewards merit and punishes inefficiency... Attempts to limit competition are treated as inimical to liberty. Tax and regulation should be minimised, public services should be privatised. The organisation of labour and collective bargaining by trade unions are portrayed as market distortions that impede the formation of a natural hierarchy of winners and losers. Inequality is recast as virtuous: a reward for utility and a generator of wealth, which trickles down to enrich everyone. Efforts to create a more equal society are both counterproductive and morally corrosive. The market ensures that everyone gets what they deserve.

However it is defined, then, it is clear that neoliberalism serves the affluent classes more than others: it is the affluent classes that can afford to conceive freedom and rights as a result of 'non-interference' of the State, and it is them that benefit out of an arrangement where the State minimally 'intervenes', allowing the uninterrupted continuation of profit generation and accumulation at the expense of the rights and freedoms of many. The moralising of this narrative as 'reward for merit – punishment for inefficiency' effectively conceals the highly unequal relationship between profit generation and appropriation. If neoliberalism is predicated upon such a classed structuring of society and its activities, obviously the neoliberal city cannot be for everyone either.

Colombo's recent spatial changes are a case in point. Are the aforementioned evictions and relocations not illustrative of the ruling class's vision for the city, in which there is only a peripheral place for the marginalised that is reinforced through the continuous reproduction of their conditions of marginality in social (and therefore spatial) terms? It is well known that the forcible relocation of those living in informal housing was motivated by commercial interests that sought to acquire those lands and profit off them (Perera 2016). "Land is a particularly complicated factor in capitalism, as it is both a precondition for all commodities' production and circulation, and a strange sort of commodity in and of itself" (Stein 2019: 27). Stein observes this reality becoming manifest in the recent boom in real estate across the world, whereby investments have largely been channelled to property that is hardly even used, pushing prices up by as much as 50% (30-31). Commenting on how real estate price patterns largely reflect existing social dynamics, Stein remarks that "[r]eal estate's rise is not a tide that lifts all boats, but a force that feeds off long-standing structural inequalities" (32).

According to Harvey (1985), even though in cities space is contracted to make capital accumulation more efficient, the surplus this arrangement generates cannot possibly be consumed within the market within that space. Therefore, the market continuously and incessantly expands. Capitalist (and particularly neoliberal) cities, therefore, simply spread out the crisis of continuous capital accumulation, without necessarily resolving it. In all urban spaces designed on this logic, these patterns of accumulation and the class structure necessary to maintain them are reproduced, thereby continuing the exploitation and displacement of the working class. In spatial terms, what this means is that the need of the capitalist class to deploy space to commercial ends minimises prospects for the working class to consume such space for direct use (Brenner *et al.* 2012: 3-4).

The state is a central actor [in gentrification], marshalling investment, boosting land values, attracting desired residents and industries, chasing away threats to profits and rolling out the welcome mat for developers and investors. Gentrification, then, is a political process as well as an economic and social one; it is planned by the state as much as it is produced by developers and consumed by the condo crowd. (Stein 2019: 38)

This has been termed the tension between 'exchange value' and 'use value', or the determination of the value of a space not in relation to the direct uses it yields, but rather in relation to its commercial value – that is, the rates at which it is bought and sold. According to Lefebvre (2003) this process commoditises not just the land and buildings of the city, but rather the entire city space itself. In other words, the opportunities and experiences of the urban space are all deployed for commercial benefit. Private interests start dictating public spaces, using them for consumption and the profits of it. In such a system, any productive deployment of space amounts to its use for commercial purposes. Since public activity is not deemed commercially productive, they do not figure much in spatial planning and acquisition exercises of the neoliberal city. The clash here, then, is essentially between the dominance of capitalist interests and self-determination of the use of space (Lefebvre 1991). Colombo's relocations and the dissatisfactions behind them speak to this underlying reality.

Engels (1970) has reflected quite extensively on relocations of this kind. He opines that old buildings in areas deemed to be of high commercial value are demolished because they do not reflect (or add to) the market value of the lands they occupy. They actually contribute to the reverse, i.e. bringing down the value of the land. They are, therefore, a burden for such

high-value plots. Working class housing complexes are usually early casualties of these processes, which are then replaced by shopping malls and office complexes. The resultant gentrification process signifies the larger reality of 'accumulation through dispossession' (Harvey 2009; Caldeira 2016). That is, realisation of the profit motive at the expense of many people's 'Right to the City'. Skyrocketing real estate prices make such profit possible, resulting in incentives "to drive out anything that is understood to reduce property values: types of buildings, businesses, land uses or even people." (Stein 2019: 33)

For Colombo's evicted, their new environments are hardly a reflection of how they would have had it; the cramped yet isolated, insecure, and mostly inconvenient new surroundings are, as the experiences reproduced above show, far from one's own choosing. One may argue that the earlier surroundings of those relocated were not exactly enviable, but the point is not in the aesthetics; it is in the mutual support structures, livelihoods, commuting expenses, and community more than anything else; a whole way of life, in other words. Once cut off from it, their ability to experience and participate in urban life is considerably compromised. As Perera (2015) notes, in the new neighbourhoods, parents advise their children to stay indoors until they come home; interaction between residents is minimal, given unfamiliarity and potentially mutual suspicion; residents have to work harder than ever before, to finance increasing expenditure that high rise living has introduced by way of monthly instalments for the property and repayment of the initial down payment which most people borrowed money for, eating in to the time they would usually have spent with community. The lands that were wrangled away from them, in the meantime, are made ready for commercial use and investment (ibid).

That the worth of the neoliberal city is based not on use, but rather exchange-value has already been discussed. In this situation, those who are excluded from these spaces are those who cannot efficiently contribute to the money circulation process, i.e. those positioned from the middle-middle class downward in the social hierarchy. This does not mean they do not participate in the process of generating wealth. Quite the contrary. In fact, they are indispensable to wealth generation. But they participate in the process by way of contributing labour (physical or mental, including skills and intellectual labour), which is ascribed far less a value as compared to capital. Its devaluation in relation to capital has to do with creating a relationship of dependence of labour on capital. This exalts the

position of capital in society, such that a near-consensus has emerged that one has to earn before one is able to do anything else at all in life, and skills and abilities are simply a means to this end.

In the resultant great rush to earn, there is hardly any time to worry about one's mental or even physical health, let alone ponder on questions of redistributive justice and the Right to the City.

Conclusion

The struggle for the 'Right to the City' seeks to establish equitable access for all, to the spaces, activities, and opportunities offered by the urban experience. In Harvey's opinion, this necessitates "greater democratic control over the production and utilisation of the surplus" produced within the city (2009: 328). In a context of the 'Right to the City' of many marginal groups being violated in processes of neoliberal urbanisation, this line of reasoning has come to command increasing attention.

In the case of Colombo, urban spaces are being designed more for profit than for the welfare of the people. This logic has normalised money's mediating role in the use of these spaces. It is within this framework of thinking that it is not a problem to ascribe exchange values to lands that are massively disproportionate to their actual use values, act on the profit motive it introduces, and consider it an inevitable outcome of urbanisation.

The monopoly of a small minority over the massive surplus produced in cities has strictly limited the ability of many to enjoy and exercise their 'Right to the City'. This minority has claimed public spaces for profit generation, and privately appropriated the yield of such action. The exclusion of the owners of labour from enjoying the greater part of the fruits of the surplus they produce, to an extent, happens with their [not-very-conscious] participation. This has been achieved through making these spaces into fantasies using the very act of exclusion, leading to the working poor dreaming of accessing these spaces one day, rather than questioning why they cannot do so in the present.

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