

# Introduction

## *Neo Delhi as an image of thought*

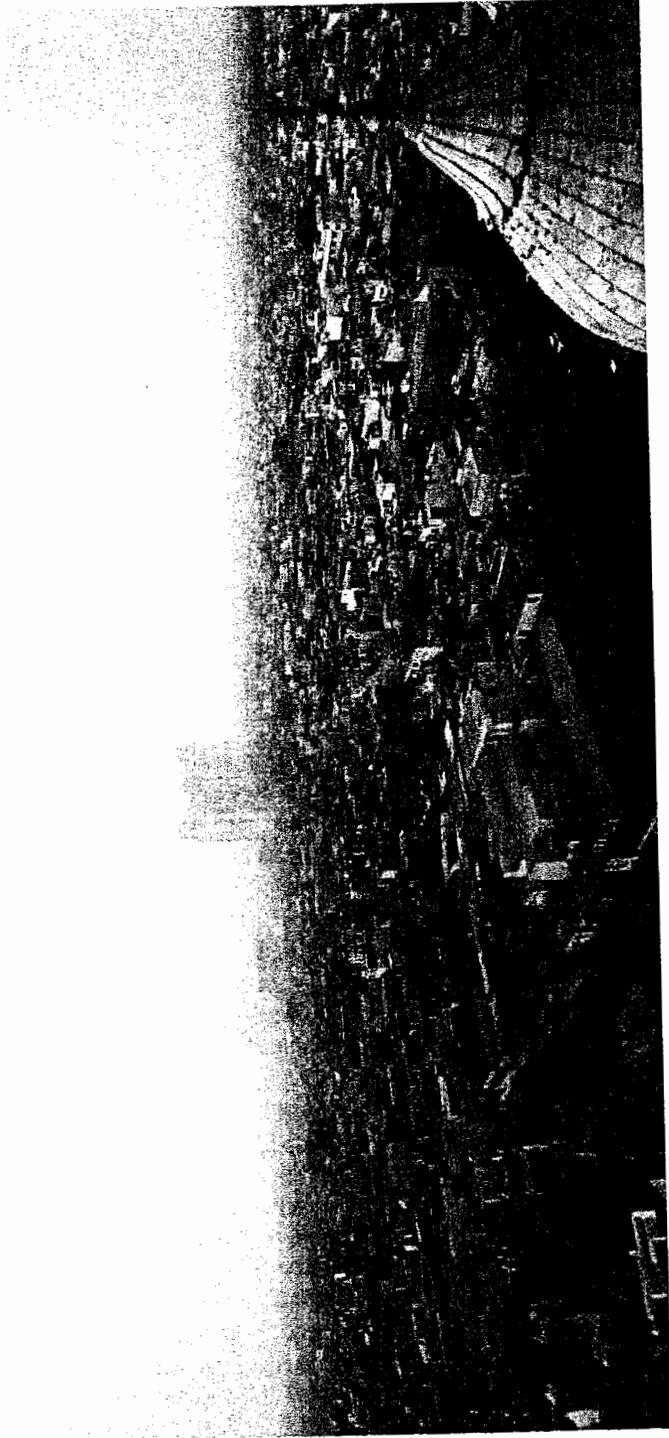
This book is augmented by an interactive website ([neodelhi.net](http://neodelhi.net)). During research trips to Delhi and Gurgaon between 2008 and 2015 the author produced a multi-media urban archive that includes full color photos, an essay film, ethnographic videos, field notes and more pertaining to the arguments and ideas presented in this book. The reader is encouraged to actively engage with the website alongside this text.

### **The integrity of the image**

We are said to live in a post-analogue era of “computational photography,” in which the very idea of an “original” exposure becomes an increasingly suspect notion.<sup>1</sup> Thus the “integrity of the image” is called into question, as avenues for digital manipulation multiply with each new generation of digital photography and visual art. So let me begin with a (perhaps redundant) warning before settling into this book’s main thesis: do not get too enamored with the image you see in Figure 0.1. There is both more—and less—to the image than meets the eye.

The image is very much an illusion, and not just in the sense that all images are merely visual representations and not the thing-in-itself. A friend of mine, proficient with digital photographic editing software, merged together four separate images that I had captured with a camera back in 2008, at the beginning of my fieldwork in Delhi.<sup>2</sup> From the top of a minaret at Jama Masjid, the exquisite seventeenth-century mosque located in the heart of Shahjahanabad (now commonly called Old Delhi), I took photographs in the four cardinal directions, enchanted by the city’s dense and seemingly limitless urban horizon.<sup>3</sup>

I had just arrived in the city, having returned to the country of my parents’ birth after a gap of around ten years, and for the first time as an adult. In the meantime, growing up in the U.S. I had read of India’s economic “miracle” from a distance, following “liberal” reforms announced by the central government in the early 1990s. Many of the effects of these reforms, I had read, were especially visible in India’s large and growing National Capital Territory of Delhi (NCTD), and the high-tech suburb of Gurgaon in the bordering state of Haryana. The last



*Figure 0.1* Panorama of Delhi as seen from minaret at Jama Masjid.

Source: Photo taken by author, edited by Lorenzo Rinelli.

time I had been to the region I was fourteen, and all my life before that I had visited about once every two or three years. On these trips I would note the myriad complex and simple changes taking place in a landscape that was so starkly different from the suburban New Jersey town in which I had grown up. Some of my earliest childhood memories were as this kind of amateur ethnographer in Delhi and Haryana, the state from where my family traced its ancestry.

That day at the top of the minaret at Jama Masjid, my eyes were caught by the endless urban sprawl of Delhi. There was an allure to this visuality, the seduction of epistemic mastery and independence, however naïve and momentary. The four landscape images I took that day comprise the digital panorama you see above.

The image is an illusion at multiple levels. First, there is a sense of the image as a seductive fiction. Michel de Certeau wrote about this kind of experience on the 110th floor of the World Trade Center, before those twin towers were ultimately felled.<sup>4</sup> Upon reflecting on the view of Manhattan afforded from such heights, de Certeau pondered:

To what erotics of knowledge does the ecstasy of reading such a cosmos belong? Having taken voluptuous pleasure in it, I wonder what is the source of this pleasure of “seeing the whole,” looking down on, totalizing the most immoderate of human texts.<sup>5</sup>

The view from 1350 feet rendered the city a “gigantic immobilized mass.” But what exactly was erotic about this view from the top? For de Certeau it bespoke of a “scopic and gnostic drive: the fiction of knowledge is related to this lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more.”<sup>6</sup> Visual knowledge was tied to power, to be sure, but both knowledge and power were mediated by something else: by desire, carnal and impure.<sup>7</sup>

De Certeau thus described the panoptic image of Manhattan as a “fiction of knowledge.” But wasn’t the city that was visible from the top of the World Trade Center *real*, as geographical and historical as any other? De Certeau responded by suggesting the existence of two separate orders of urban reality that were put into stark relief from this aerial view of the city. First, there was the “panorama-city” which gained visibility from the top floor. The ability to perceive the city as a whole was a privilege once reserved for power and authority. Their desire was to visualize and understand the city as a whole in order to better rule over it. The panorama-city could be contrasted with the city “down below,” belonging to “ordinary practitioners ... below the threshold at which visibility begins.”<sup>8</sup> In contrast to the “all-seeing power” of the “eye/I” that gazed at the city from high above, de Certeau presented the walkers of the streets who experienced a different city altogether, one that was perceived through everyday movements and immersive encounters, in improvised instants and interactions. Here “bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban ‘text’ they write without being able to read it.”<sup>9</sup> These two orders of reality—the panoramic-city and the city of everyday life—were obviously related and overlapped, yet what was significant for de Certeau was that,

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perhaps for the first time, ordinary people on the streets of New York could come up and access the visual position of power, at least temporarily. They could forget about the now-invisible realities “down below.” Perhaps this was part of its seduction, that the panoramic-image could help one experience anew the everyday, the mundane, the ordinary, paradoxically through escape.

This brings me back to the digital photograph of Delhi in Figure 0.1. With its inherent privileging of a top-down, static representation of the city—Delhi in its panoptic totality—did the image not reveal itself as a modernist illusion in precisely the same way that de Certeau decries above? Did it not reproduce the fictional knowledge of the voyeur-god who sought universal knowledge in and through the visual? It did this, I’ll allow, but it also did something else, something far more mysterious and unexpected.

One day I accidentally discovered an entirely new level of deception in the panoramic image of Delhi, something that had previously escaped my attention. It had to do with the spatial juxtaposition between the mosque’s central dome in the foreground of the panorama and the distant skyscrapers far off in the background. I wondered if the visual contrast wasn’t a bit too convenient. What were those tall buildings on the horizon doing *there*, positioned as if directly behind the dome? This main dome was on the western side of the mosque. If one were up in the minaret looking at the space behind the dome, one would see not the skyscrapers around Connaught Circus and central New Delhi, which were actually positioned a few kilometers to the south. Rather, one would witness the dense low-rise sprawl of west Delhi: the rough and tumble neighborhood of Paharganj just past the Old Delhi Railway station, stretching out to the middle-class colonies of Karol Bagh and Rohini, extending as far as visibility spreads out on the hazy horizon. Clearly there was something strangely amiss about the image.

I went back to the raster graphics software that my friend used to combine the separate stills into one panoramic image. For Photoshop’s “photomerge” effect to work, in order for it to produce a single image from several disparate photos, there should ideally be no spatial gaps between the images that are being merged together.<sup>10</sup> Rather, portions of each image should overlap so the algorithm can match up similar visual content. Of course, I did not think of this when I was up on the minaret at Jama Masjid taking the original photos back in 2008. Instead I simply fired off shots in what seemed to be the four cardinal directions, with the idea of printing them out later and arranging them in a kind of disjointed collage. As a result the gaps in between these images were filled in *virtually* through the software’s algorithm, which searched for overlapping visual data but approximated and even distorted this content, albeit nearly imperceptibly, when there were significant gaps. The images thus appeared to blend together in a seamless, yet impossible panoramic whole, one that could never exist in “actuality.” That is, the visage could never exist independently of the camera and the digital imaging technology that rendered it an image.

But while there might have been a certain infidelity, or a noticeable “flaw,” in the visual representation of Delhi, perhaps there was also a kind of power

immanent to this very act of imaging and distorting. The image staged a temporal drama that was false yet nevertheless insightful, namely, the visual and spatial juxtaposition of medieval Old Delhi (symbolized by Jama Masjid's marble dome in the foreground) with the modernist skyscrapers of New Delhi in the background. This "false" juxtaposition generated an image of thought that was to become the central argument of this book. Between foreground and background, mosque and skyscrapers, there emerged a "depth of field" within the image. But the depth was no longer merely spatial, it was temporal. The image became, following Deleuze, a "time-image."<sup>11</sup>

I'll return to the concept of time-images and the "powers of the false" they engender before the end of this Introduction, underlining their implication for the study of cities like *Neo Delhi*. But for now let it suffice to assert that after we falsify the actual image of Delhi we can move from a strictly spatial analysis of the city to one that is decidedly inter-temporal. As I'll show in different scenes within contemporary Delhi and Gurgaon, dominant projections of the city perpetually privilege the "erotic" visuality of the panoramic-city at the expense of the radically heterogeneous times of the city "down below," the city of everyday life. How can we produce images of changing urban life in cities like Delhi that render both orders of reality simultaneously, while analyzing the inherent tensions, exclusions and mediations between them?

In this book I propose to study a virtual city, that is, a city that does not exist in actuality. I call it *Neo Delhi*. But it is not that *Neo Delhi* does not exist as such. Rather *Neo Delhi* names a field of possible urban experiences, spaces and times which come to shape and structure the actuality of the city and urban region. It is this actuality that constitutes the dominant image of cities like Delhi as they are usually approached in contemporary urban studies. To study the virtual city is to think beyond this actuality, to think with the possibilities and impossibilities which structure the actual.

My purpose in writing this book and producing the visual media featured on the accompanying website ([www.neodelhi.net](http://www.neodelhi.net)) is to help generate alternative images of thought regarding world cities like Delhi.<sup>12</sup> As I argue in this Introduction, what I call an "image of thought" is not necessarily a visual construct. It is first and foremost a way of critically rendering the abstract presuppositions that go into the production of knowledge, power and desire within common sense discourses of cities, particularly non-Western or "developing" ones. The dominant image of thought for cities like Delhi, expressed in discourses of development and globality, as I show in Chapter 1, portray these cities more in terms of what they are *not*, or not *yet*—that is, properly "developed" cities—than in terms of what they *are*, or what they might be in the process of *becoming*. The substantive chapters in this book are experiments in how we might study changing urban life, its potentialities and its limits, in ways that challenge existing ideas of cities, urbanism and even globalization. But *Neo Delhi* only becomes intelligible as a virtual city once we let go of some of the abstract presuppositions that mainstream urban studies, such as it is, continues to hold. This introductory chapter explores how cities become visualized and conceptually

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imagined within contemporary urban theory. In particular, I present eight images of thought that are simultaneously sites of contestation and intellectual exchange among theorists in four broad fields: (1) mainstream/liberal urban studies, (2) radical urban theory, (3) assemblage urbanism and (4) postcolonial theories of cities. Rather than each image representing a separate school of thought, I stage eight conceptual encounters between contrasting urban theories that are sequenced so as to build upon the ground work laid by the previous images. This Introduction thus elaborates increasingly complex images of thought that crystallize into a virtual city: *Neo Delhi*.

One last note before beginning this conceptual montage, the images vary in terms of the emphasis they each give toward viewing the city primarily as “place” versus as “process.” As we will see, this duality remains a major tension within contemporary urban studies. In practice these binary approaches are not always mutually exclusive. And it is certainly not impossible to generate a critical image of thought regarding cities like Delhi that is both at once, that is, place-based and process-oriented. In fact this will be one of my major tasks in the chapters ahead: to render a theoretical image of the city that is conceptually stereoscopic: place and process, actual and virtual, spatial and temporal, at once. To render this image of thought, I employ a decidedly cinematic strategy for mediating between space and time, place and process, in the postcolonial city. This strategy yields what I call an “urban depth of field,” which I’ll define toward the end of this introduction and elaborate in the chapters that follow. In the contrast and sequencing of these dominant and critical images of thought, then, I clear a conceptual space for *Neo Delhi*.

### The global city

Sometime in the first decade of the twenty-first century it became commonplace to read about our increasingly “urbanized” world. For the first time, we were told, a majority of the planet’s population resided in what could be called, for lack of a better term, “cities.”<sup>13</sup> This produced a sharpened focus on cities and urban regions and what was happening to them in an era marked by global urbanization. The paradox of these seemingly unrelenting processes—globalization and urbanization—famously examined by the likes of Saskia Sassen and Manuel Castells, was that the geographic dispersal implied by globalization required the place-based labor of coordination and management in order to function efficiently.<sup>14</sup> Such specialized service-labor would inevitably take root in certain “global cities,” where the requisite human capital and material infrastructure were in place. Thus global dispersal entailed spatial concentration in cities.

Equally inevitable, however, was the reality that for less historically privileged cities seeking to become “global” in this way, existing urban infrastructures would have to be greatly modified in order to accommodate “global city” functions, like playing host to multi-national corporations and their white collar workers. The resulting conflicts between white collar and working-class residents



*Figure 0.2* Interior, Ambience Mall, Gurgaon.

Source: Photo by author.

led to popular debate about the effects of gentrification and “urban renewal,” local identity versus capital mobility, property speculation, income inequality and the right to the city.<sup>15</sup>

In the so-called “developing world,” global urbanism as intensified spatial concentration was marked by a somewhat different trend. Here globalization entailed the proliferation of “informal” spaces in the form of dense slums, favelas, shanty-towns and illicit or non-legal economies in sprawling “mega-cities.”<sup>16</sup> These new formations consisted mostly (but not exclusively) of a growing under-class of under-employed workers and socially marginalized groups, displaced by globalized agriculture.<sup>17</sup> Much of the world experienced widespread enclosures of farm and pastoral lands, which were sold off to powerful resource-extraction companies and big agricultural businesses.<sup>18</sup> This process of “accumulation by dispossession” sent displaced farmers and rural workers into rapidly expanding urban regions.<sup>19</sup> Once there, they often struggled to improvise a day-to-day existence in a city that was woefully unprepared for their arrival. Moreover, these urban migrants were greeted by an entrenched civil society (comprising middle and upper classes) that often despised the former’s low-grade presence, even if it quickly became reliant on their low-cost labor.

These two relatively new forms of spatial concentration—of intensifying high-end agglomeration in “global cities” and low-grade informality in “developing cities”—were obviously connected, even deeply entangled. “Global cities” like New York or London, for example, contained not only highly specialized labor in the form of financial, legal and technological services, but also lower-wage local and informal economies (including underground sweat shops and black markets) that were often “under the table” or otherwise hidden in plain sight.<sup>20</sup> Even as “globalized” as cities like London or New York were, the vast majority of their urban economic activity still occurred within national boundaries.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, so-called “developing cities,” ever eager to “catch up,” increasingly sought out foreign direct investment in order to produce their own “global” enclaves and accumulation zones within cities or just outside of them.<sup>22</sup> In this way even these peripheral and historically distant places began forming financial, industrial and commercial links with other, more central capitalist cities and regions.

### **An urbanized planet**

But beyond this intensifying concentration of so-called “global” and “developmental” city-spaces across the capitalist world, a second branch of theoretical research on global urbanism focused less on the new place-based realities associated with this phenomenon and more on the expansive economies of scale and networks of exchange that structured this spatially dispersed process, albeit ambivalently and always at a distance.<sup>23</sup>

This contrasting approach moved away from theories of spatial concentration and agglomeration in *place* in favor of a more de-territorialized analysis of urbanization as *process*. Researchers foregrounded the emergent properties of many of the same kind of new commercial spaces highlighted by the Global Cities camp, but the theoretical emphasis was different. Thus process-oriented scholars too highlighted sprawling urban/suburban regions, new technological corridors, and zones of de-territorialized economic production, but their focus was simultaneously on the networked infrastructures that virtually synchronized these disparate sites at multiple scales—local, regional, national, global—into a singular process. This process effectively brought the entire planet into relation with a single, albeit uneven and frayed, urban fabric.

Critical urban theorists like Neil Brenner called this process “planetary urbanization,” containing “two dialectically intertwined moments—concentration and extension.”<sup>24</sup> Thus, the more existing cities and towns grew and intensified as centers of attraction for people, capital and technology, the more the “urban process” of necessity expanded outwards in the search for increasingly remote bio-chemical “supply zones” that could fuel and sustain it. These connections over vast geographic expanses were not merely synchronically structured through digital networks and markets, as Global Cities scholars had already argued. They were simultaneously to be thought of diachronically, that is, in terms of the production process that connected geographically distant supply zones with the city’s present and future. Since the production of the city as place



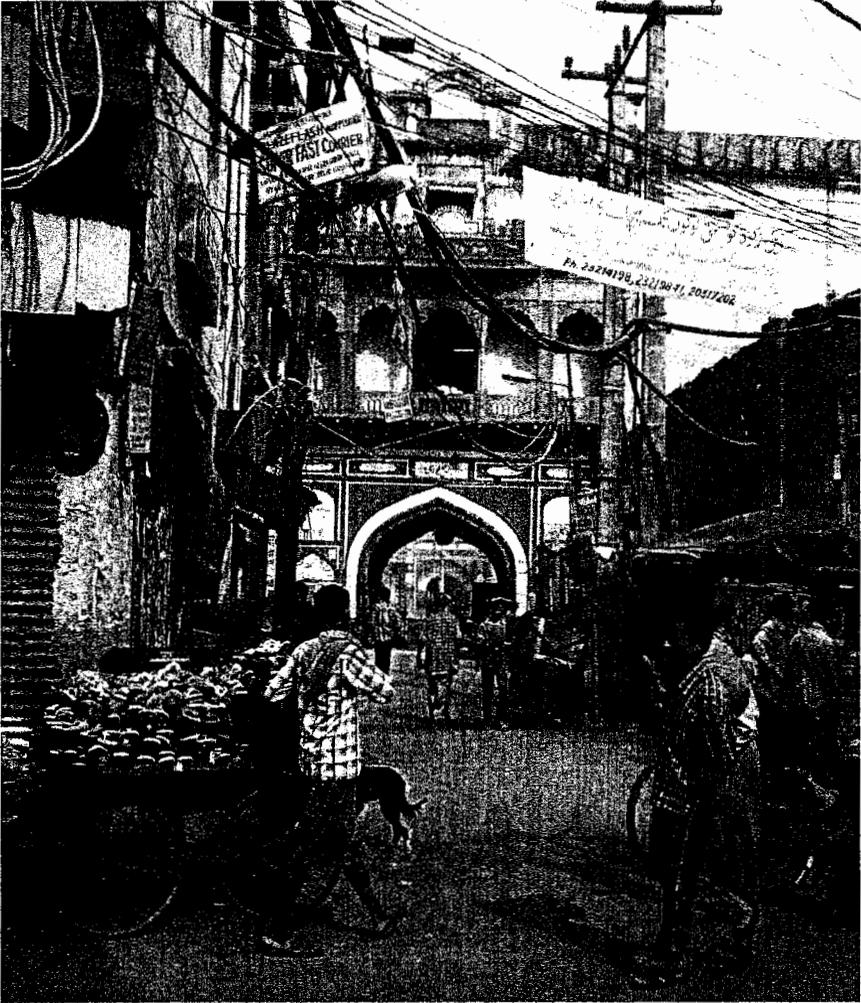
*Figure 0.3* Chaupal, Chakkarpur Village, Gurgaon.

Source: Photo by author.

entailed a direct impact on these geographically distant but temporally connected zones, the latter had to be thought of as part of the same planetary “urban” process. In this way, according to Brenner, “the urban can no longer be viewed as a distinct, relatively bounded site.”<sup>25</sup> The precise line that once marked where “the city” as such began and ended was now being blurred beyond recognition.

### **The essence of cities**

Such expansive, de-territorialized theories of planetary urbanization, if taken to their logical conclusion, questioned the very coherence of the idea of “the city.”



*Figure 0.4* Street scene in Old Delhi.

Source: Photo by author.

If the whole planet was now effectively “urbanized,” as theorists like Brenner argued, then what were we to make of the idea of the city as such? Was it time to move beyond spatial conceptions of cities as the confluence of territory, demography and density in a specific geographic place, as had been the tradition in mainstream urban studies since Louis Wirth’s famous 1938 essay “Urbanism as a way of life”?<sup>26</sup> Was it time to move toward a de-territorialized focus on dispersed global or planetary processes that shaped urban formations and their proliferating supply zones?

Answering forcefully in the negative, Michael Storper and Allen Scott critiqued the work of Brenner and others for dissolving the very idea of the city "into a sort of overarching global plasma as theorists of 'planetary urbanism' proclaim."<sup>27</sup> In contrast these authors argued for an essentially territorialized conception of cities as the unambiguous object of urban theory and knowledge production. That is, they proposed, or re-proposed, a fairly common sense conception of cities as "a very specific scale of economic and social interaction generated by agglomeration processes and focused on the imperative of proximity."<sup>28</sup> For Storper and Scott urban theory had to "capture the essence of cities as concrete social phenomena" in order to "shed light on the observable empirical diversity of cities over space and time."<sup>29</sup> For them, this essence boiled down to what they called the "urban land nexus," which was a confluence of political, economic, ecological and cultural forces that acted as a sort of geohistorical center of gravity for cities over long periods of historical and pre-historical time. They defined the urban land nexus as "a spatially extensive lattice or patchwork, but one whose overall logic is still structured by agglomeration, convergence, and the need for proximity."<sup>30</sup> As an analytical concept, the urban land nexus was both broad enough to handle the rich diversity of world historical cities, but robust enough to tell us something specific and analytically useful about what cities were, what precisely happened in cities and why. This concept thus "provides a distinctive place for urban analysis in the academic division of labor and ... together with the appropriate analytical machinery, endows it with a central mission."<sup>31</sup>

But in their desire to defend the distinctive "place" of urban analysis within academia and perpetuate a place of employment in statist knowledge production, mainstream theorists betrayed a classically modernist impulse to assert epistemic mastery over social reality through distinction, classification and enumeration. At some level this was inevitable given the analysts' intended audience, but it ended up freezing cities in their "nominal essence," taking this current geohistorical form as necessary, pre-given and more or less immutable. It thus removed the city and its built environment from its constitutive essence, or the various processes through which urban topographies were made and unmade. Thus mainstream urbanists effectively limited knowledge production to the optimization requirements of cities in their current capitalist spatial form, with the presumed dominance of private property and the capitalist state. This sanctioned ignorance came at the expense of alternative conceptions of urban productions that corresponded not to what cities were in their present capitalist form, that is, how they functioned and how to optimize them for "the market," but rather how they could be imaged and lived otherwise. Knowledge production about the urban was in this way profoundly political.

Rather than beginning with a pre-constituted urban essence and limiting the political to its effective management and control, Ash Amin approached urban regions as processes undergoing multi-layered transformations. These transformations could not be approached merely spatially; they had to be interpreted in ways that were sensitive to the many temporalities of changing urban life, including

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everyday rhythms (social, biological, ecological) and the historicity of the city as such. Amin suggested a different agenda for urban studies that assumed neither a universal definition of the urban, nor a singular epistemological ground from which to study the politics of the urban. Amin argued instead for

a politics of place that works ... by bringing into play sentiments, ethics, emotions, aesthetics, ambiguity and uncertainty into the field of what counts as political. It becomes an act of developing a sense of place and place attachment that works with difference and distance, assuming no indigeneity or privileged set of claims.<sup>32</sup>

Amin's was a "non-territorial reading of the politics of place."<sup>33</sup> He argued against theorizing urban regions, cities and towns as more or less permanent settlements, "places" that urbanists took for granted and whose management they sought to optimize. Amin argued "against the assumption that there is a defined geographic territory out there over which local actors have effective control and can manage as a social and political space."<sup>34</sup> For any nominal urban "essence" was always already shaped in innumerable ways by forces, relations and conditions that were distant from the urban present of the analyst, distant not only in space but in time. It was thus necessary to inquire into what haunted the nominal essence of cities. What escaped inclusion into "the urban" and was relegated to the "non-urban"? What happened when these exclusions "returned" to the urban scene (from which they never really left) in order to make their spectral presences known, albeit at a haunting distance? These distant relations were not necessarily intelligible as such to analysts despite their best efforts at holistic theorizations of cities. They were untimely presences that had no name inside the nominal essence of the city.

### Urban productions

Process-oriented urbanists like Brenner and Amin probably owed much in their thinking to the French Marxian philosopher Henri Lefebvre. In his 1970 book *The Urban Revolution*, Lefebvre began with the following provocation: "An urban society is a society that results from a process of complete urbanization. This urbanization is virtual today, but will become real in the future."<sup>35</sup> Lefebvre's work here foreshadowed the process of planetary urbanization that Brenner would later pick up on and theorize along with other urban researchers some four decades later.<sup>36</sup> For Lefebvre this virtual urban society would be "post-industrial" in a specific sense. Rather than industrial capitalism driving the growth of cities and urbanization more broadly, the process would be reversed. The urban would not only dominate the rural as it had done since the advent of industrialized farming, but the urban would emerge as a mode of production in its own right, one whose proper scale was the planet itself.<sup>37</sup>

In his next book, *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre theorized this process of urbanization within a more complete philosophical framework. Lefebvre's major

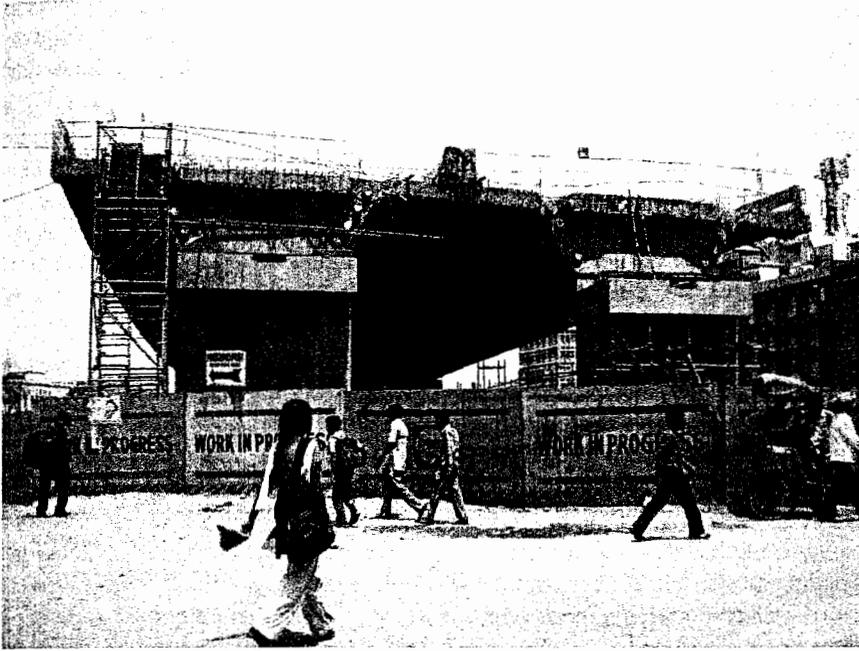


Figure 0.5 Street scene in New Delhi.

Source: Photo by author.

thesis here was that space was not a pre-given, neutral, static entity, as long presupposed after Newtonian physics and Cartesian geometry.<sup>38</sup> Rather, space was socially produced. This social production happened “in two ways, as a social formation (a mode of production), and as a mental construction (a conception).”<sup>39</sup> Lefebvre offered his now-famous conceptual triad that complicated this dialectical process: (1) representations of space (i.e., conceived spaces), (2) representational spaces (perceived spaces) and (3) spatial practices (lived spaces). Conceived, perceived and lived spaces did not designate mutually exclusive topographies, but rather overlapping processes and ways of theorizing, encountering and producing space.

Conceived spaces were abstract representations drawn up and projected by powerful institutions, including urban planners and policy makers. They composed a “far order,” as Lefebvre described it elsewhere, that materialized through spatial practices on the ground. The far order was projected onto diverse everyday spaces, public plazas, residential and commercial districts, traffic codes and transportation infrastructure, historical monuments and formal institutional spaces. These “bureaucratic” conceptions of space projected an abstract, impersonal, rationalized distance that state institutions required in order to be seen as functioning legitimately and authoritatively, that is, at a distance.<sup>40</sup>

Perceived spaces, on the other hand, composed what Lefebvre would elsewhere call the "near order."<sup>41</sup> They were representational insofar as they included "complex symbolisms, sometimes coded, sometimes not, linked to the clandestine or under-ground side of social life, as also to art."<sup>42</sup> That is, representational spaces were spaces that ordinary urban dwellers interpreted in their everyday lives, coding these perceptions in terms that made sense to them. They were the narratives and common discourses that people used to make sense of the spaces around them. These common sense discourses were shaped, but not legislated by the conceptual "far order" of the state, for there was always some room for creative subversion and invention in spite of the dominance of conceived spaces in the city. Artists explored and reveled in this subterranean layer of changing urban life.

In the gap between the far order of state institutions (conceived space) and the near order of everyday social life (perceived space), there intervened the crucial third term of Lefebvre's conceptual triad: spatial practice, or lived space. For Lefebvre spatial practice rooted the urban encounter between perceived and conceived spaces on firm materialist ground: the built environment or urban fabric of the city itself. Thus, spatial practice "embraces production and reproduction, and the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each formation. Spatial practice ensures continuity and some degree of cohesion."<sup>43</sup> Spatial practice mediated between abstract conceptions of space and more quotidian perceptions of space in daily life. It was the "practico-material reality," as Lefebvre called it elsewhere, upon which the "far order" was projected and the "near order" perceived.<sup>44</sup> Yet the continuity and cohesion tied to spatial practice did not preclude the possibility for alteration, subversion and creative appropriation of socially produced space. The potential for counter-uses and non-normative practices served to politicize the production of space. This was a key point for Lefebvre, who famously argued, "there is a politics of space because space is political."<sup>45</sup>

Lefebvre's major philosophical contribution in *The Production of Space* was to challenge the long-held Newtonian image of space as passive and empty. He replaced this static conception of space with a more dynamic and emergent image of spatial production that was actively mediated by the practices of powerful institutions and everyday urban dwellers alike. As Doreen Massey argued, in Newtonian conceptions of space, "space is a passive arena, the setting for objects and their interaction."<sup>46</sup> Such conceptions were also indebted to Cartesian ideas of geometrical space. As Elden noted, "Descartes importantly suggests that all problems in geometry can be reduced to the angle of some straight lines, to the values of the roots of the equations, thereby turning space into something that is quantitatively measureable, calculable, numerical."<sup>47</sup> For Massey, such abstract concepts of space as merely a neutral container for social activity were problematic, for they "effectively depoliticize the realm of the spatial."<sup>48</sup> Worse, space came to be defined simply as "not-time," where "time is defined by such things as change, movement, history, and dynamism; while space, rather lamely by comparison, is simply the absence of these things."<sup>49</sup> Space became,

by implication, the realm of stasis, structure, repetition, ordered movement and the like, that is, outside the realm of History.<sup>50</sup>

Yet in Lefebvre's *Production of Space*, as well as in his earlier *Urban Revolution*, it became clear that, far from being the mere passive setting for the progression of History, space was actively made and remade "through social relations and material social practices."<sup>51</sup> This active construction of space became especially visible in the modern context through what David Harvey called "the urbanization of capital."<sup>52</sup> For Harvey, capitalism had to purposively "urbanize" space in order to stabilize itself as a surplus-producing economic system seeking to avoid over-accumulation. Thus the urbanization process mapped "how capital flows into the construction of the built environment," providing opportunities for over-accumulated capital in profitable sectors of the economy to be absorbed into "public" investments that stabilized economic growth over the long-term.<sup>53</sup> These included investments in public goods that no private capitalist would be willing to finance (because they were most likely unprofitable) like urban infrastructure (roads, electrical grids, sewage systems) and social services (schools, hospitals, prisons). Yet for whatever stability was achieved through this "spatial fix" (i.e., reinvestment of surplus capital into the built environment for continued capitalist growth), "the structure of social relations prevailing in a capitalist society" meant that the achievement of truly "balanced growth" was never ultimately realized.<sup>54</sup> So that the history of the urbanization of capital was beset with instances of over-speculation and over-investment in the built environment, leading first to property-market inflation and inevitable market crash. If urbanization mediated this otherwise turbulent process of capital accumulation, it did so only at the cost of great social violence and instability that could always lead to political revolution.<sup>55</sup> For Harvey, this revolutionary potential in the modern capitalist city was what continued to make it a key site of class struggle in the early decades of the twenty-first century.

### The city as assemblage

For scholars like Brenner, Harvey and others, the underlying process that structured urbanization was unquestionably that of capitalism, defined as a historically specific set of social forces and relations of production in which the interests of private property occupied the commanding heights of both the state and the economy.<sup>56</sup> In contrast, assemblage urbanists held onto a slightly altered conception of capitalism and its relation to modern cities. They held that capitalism was but one of the many social and political processes and sets of relations through which cities and urban formations were made and unmade. This contributed to an image of thought that rendered the city as process, only now that process was conceptualized as much more open-ended and heterogeneous than the universal becoming of capitalism on a (now) planetary scale.

Disrupting the Marxian image of the urban as belonging to a pre-defined "social totality," urban assemblages were conceived as contingent part-whole relations that worked at multiple-scales of urban life, where neither part nor

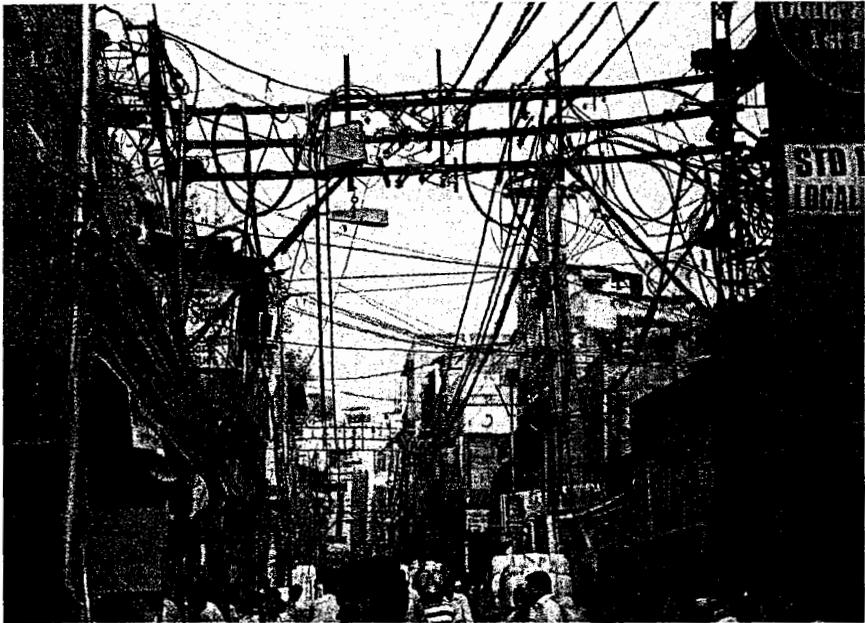


Figure 0.6 Wires and visible infrastructure in Old Delhi.

Source: Photo by author.

whole was taken as a pre-given and immutable identity. Rather both were formed through a process of interaction among heterogeneous elements, including humans, organizations, tools, objects, technologies, texts, organisms and other cities.<sup>57</sup>

This mode of thinking owed much to the work of Mexican-American philosopher Manuel Delanda. Drawing on the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, Delanda argued that “all that exists in the actual world is singular individual entities (individual atoms, cells, organisms, persons, organizations, cities, and so on) whose main difference from each other is spatio-temporal scale.”<sup>58</sup> But what *assembled* these heterogeneous elements into particular part-to-whole relations in any given scale? For Delanda, there was no essential causal agent or universal structure at work here, only singular entities whose affective capacities (i.e., capacity to affect and to be affected) could be mapped at multiple overlapping scales. Thus “wholes that are both irreducible and decomposable are referred to as assemblages.”<sup>59</sup> Assemblages were decomposable insofar as they were formed out of the myriad interactions of parts, and did not precede these interactions. They were irreducible insofar as any whole could simultaneously interact with other wholes and thus become the parts of a larger assemblage. Thus “lower scale entities form the working parts of a larger scale whole, a whole which emerges (and needs to be continuously maintained) by the interactions between the parts.”<sup>60</sup>

Delanda conceptualized these multi-scalar assemblages of parts and wholes as “nested sets,” in which “wholes at one scale are the parts of wholes at the next scale.”<sup>61</sup> Thus “interacting persons yield institutional organizations; interacting organizations yield cities; interacting cities organize a space in which nation-states emerge and so on.”<sup>62</sup> Here we might note the contrast with the image of the ancient city as a “whole” found in Aristotle’s city-state. Aristotelean conceptions of the city and political community began from the top—an essential form or metaphysical ideal—and subsequently moved down to particular manifestations of this essence on the ground.<sup>63</sup> Thus the city was a whole that existed prior to and independently of its individual citizens and households. This a priori status was necessary for the metaphysical conceits of justice to obtain as an eternal philosophical truth. In contrast, Delanda’s ontology worked in the opposite direction. By locating part-whole relations at multiple scales of existence (including human and non-human life), Delanda’s bottom-up approach allowed for a view of reality as composed of increasingly complex assemblages with different affective capacities that related to multiple larger and smaller-scale “wholes.” This ontology resisted reductive analysis of cities to their “nominal essence” or their economic structure, that is, to some foundational and immutable “whole.” The assemblage was derived not from its immutable essence (as a metaphysical ideal) or its location within the structural totality (of capitalism), but from its “emergent properties,” where the latter was “a property of the whole that is caused by the interactions among its parts.”<sup>64</sup>

Delanda’s conceptualization of cities as multi-scalar assemblages has found resonance within contemporary urban theory. In the scholarship of Ignacio Farias, for instance, assemblage theory changed the focus of urban research “from ‘the’ space of the city to the multiple urban assemblages in which urban topologies are made and remade.”<sup>65</sup> For Farias, assemblage theory helped theorists “unfreeze” the idea of the city or the urban form from some unchanging place-based essence. It also dislodged the city from the determinist relationship it was so often posited as being in with capitalism, creating the possibility for understanding cities as both part of the capitalist world, yet not determined by the totality of this structure. “By looking at cities,” Farias argued, “we can learn more about capitalism as a form of life, although not as a global abstract logic imposing its forms into local spaces, but as a concrete process assuming multiple forms even within a city.”<sup>66</sup> From this perspective, cities were more than economic units or the products and/or facilitators of capitalist production. They were virtual objects that had shifting, contingent borders and belonged to multiple nested sets of part-whole relations, comprising interactive networks at different scales.

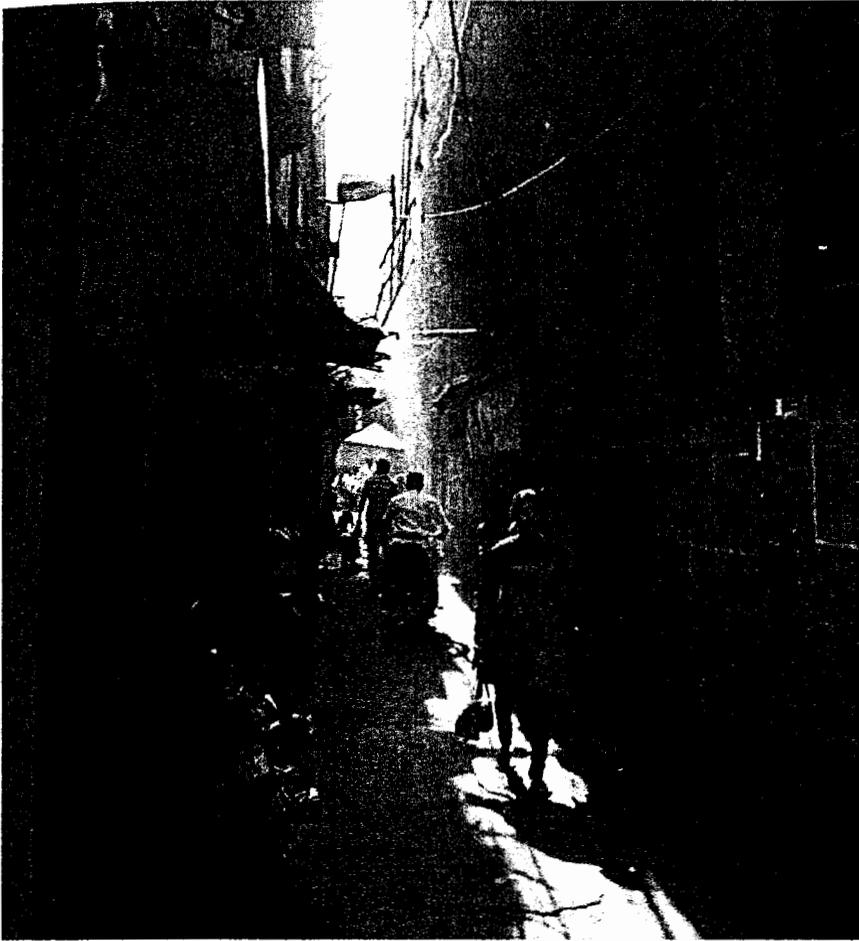
Critical urban theorists like Brenner, although supportive of efforts to move beyond strictly territorialized or place-centric theorizations of cities and urban life, nevertheless criticized assemblage urbanism on a number of issues: its seeming obsession with objects and the multiplicity of space, the prioritization of non-linear histories over historical processes of capitalist development. Above all Brenner opposed the “theoretical indeterminacy” of the very concept of

assemblage, whereby “the concept of the urban is attached to an extraordinarily diffuse array of referents, connotations, and conditions, all too frequently derived from everyday categories of practice, which are then unreflectively converted into analytical commitments.”<sup>67</sup> As a critical urban theorist with a Marxian orientation, Brenner was interested in the (capitalist) process that produced the urban as an ideological effect, giving the urban the appearance of a geographically bound, demographically condensed, historically stable entity. But for Brenner, part of the problem with assemblage urbanism was that it took these heterogeneous processes too far, uncritically embracing multiple de-centered part-whole relationalities at the expense of a clearer analysis that could pave the path to revolutionary class-based struggle.

Among the assemblage urbanists, Farias furnished the strongest rebuke of this kind of criticism. Farias responded that the political project of assemblage theory “is certainly radical, but not in the sense critical urban scholars imagine radicalism to be.”<sup>68</sup> The difference was in the analytical task that assemblage theorists set for themselves, in stark contrast to critical urbanists like Brenner and Harvey. Assemblage theory was more about open-ended “inquiry” vis-à-vis the urban than about the “critique” of the capitalist mode of production as such. For Farias, this “is connected with a redefinition of democracy towards participatory practices that might eventually recognize and represent humans and nonhumans as political actors.”<sup>69</sup> Such a redefinition of the politics of urban democracy challenged dogmatic conceptions of the political in mainstream and critical theory. For mainstream theorists, the urban was a unit-like entity to be managed and optimized for market competition. The task of urban theory was to produce knowledge that could turn the city’s use-values into exchange-values, even if this meant policing the border between the urban and the non-urban. For critical urbanists, the city was an expression of the social totality of capitalism, a now-planetary mode of economic production and social reproduction that was the driving force of global urbanization. While not denying the influence of capitalism as a global force, assemblage theory allowed for the possibility of theorizing plural normative horizons that kept the question of the political open to its radical democratic potentialities. It was open to the unexpected arrival of new political actors and subjectivities, expanding the domain of the political beyond an exclusive focus on class-based struggle.

### **Postcolonial cities**

Postcolonial urban theorists shared with assemblage urbanists a desire to pluralize the normative horizons of cities. These theoretical approaches framed the immanent relationality of cities for an anti-essentialist analysis. In other words, postcolonial and assemblage urbanists not only wanted to resist reducing cities or urban formations to their nominal essence; they also resisted enclosing the city and its theoretical possibilities within a constitutive essence, that is, within the social totality of capitalism as a global process. But postcolonial theory had slightly different reasons for this resistance to orthodox Marxian analytics. At



*Figure 0.7* Lane in Old Delhi.

Source: Photo by author.

the risk of over-generalization, postcolonial theory held Marxian analyses of capitalism as a world historical process to be necessary yet insufficient, particularly with regard to the analysis of capitalism and economic transformations in the “postcolonial” world. The fact that Marxian theory remained to some degree necessary was a testament to the enduring legacy of Euro-centrism, as not only an intellectual project but a materialized set of trans-continental political economic relations and social practices. This was a legacy that postcolonial theory, broadly conceived, took as the focus of its critical scholarship. Before describing this project in more detail, with particular emphasis on how postcolonial theory conceptualized cities and urban processes, a few words of clarification on the

term “postcolonial”—for I have already oscillated between two quite different connotations, and this was precisely the problem found in many contemporary critiques of postcolonial scholarship.

First, there was a relatively straightforward, historical sense of the postcolonial, whereby it referred to the time period of a specific nation or community in the period following its decolonization from European colonial rule. This strictly temporal sense of the postcolonial was of limited value since it included such a wide range of ostensibly “decolonized” nations (from those in the Americas that gained independence from European empires in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to those in Africa and Asia that were decolonized only in the middle decades of the twentieth). Moreover, such a concept of the postcolonial had little to offer those peoples and places of the world that remained colonized by more powerful “outside” entities, such as Hawaii or Palestine.

The second, more critical sense of the postcolonial was defined less by the supposedly by-gone period of colonialism from which it proceeded as a “post,” and more by a critical engagement with the legacies of “coloniality” in the present.<sup>70</sup> In this second sense, the postcolonial referred not to the historical period of time beginning after decolonization in those particular societies that were once colonized. Rather, it referred to a political project of critique that began in the immediate wake of the colonial encounter itself and was thus not “after” colonialism but coterminous with it. This sense of the postcolonial performed an immanent critique of modernity itself, except instead of locating modernity’s origins squarely in Europe, modernity was defined as the constitutive encounter between “the West” and what became “the non-West.” That is, both colonizer and colonized were jointly created as modern subjects through the colonial encounter, though in radically different ways. This ongoing coeval and coextensive—albeit historically differentiated—relationship defined the condition of coloniality and was directly evoked in each recitation of the postcolonial.<sup>71</sup>

Two implications followed from this critical insight. First, there was no longer any question of a linear trajectory that posited non-European societies as “historically behind” Europe and thus meant to “catch up,” an implicit temporality most often projected in social theories of development and modernization. Rather, the processes we called “development” (of modern economic, political and social institutions) and “under-development” (of the same) were essentially coeval. That is, Europe “developed” thanks in significant part to wealth extraction from the colonies and empires and the uneven transformation of many of the latter into vast external supply zones over the course of several centuries. This only served to ensure that the colonies themselves were actively and intentionally kept “under-developed.”<sup>72</sup> In many cases, robust civilizations in Africa and Asia moved from being relatively self-sufficient and industrious in their own right to becoming not only economically dependent upon European colonizers but politically subservient to them as well in the neo-imperial post-war international arena.

The second implication was that all the philosophical concepts and social theories exported from Europe and imported to non-European lands had to be

critically interrogated and reassessed. Part of the legacy of Euro-centrism, as postcolonial theorist Dipesh Chakrabarty powerfully argued, was the idea that non-European subjects and nations felt compelled to employ theories derived from specifically European experiences in order to interpret social processes unfolding outside of Europe.<sup>73</sup> In contemporary social theory these included, most prominently, the normative models of the liberal democratic state and free-market capitalism as progressive historical forces or even end points of history, universals that were usually translated intact into life-worlds that were never part of the empirical material that informed these theories in the first place. At a minimum, any practice of applying such "universal" European models outside of Europe necessitated a critical practice of cultural translation in which the models themselves were seen as simultaneously indispensable (since they had already been internalized and institutionalized on a global scale) yet inadequate for fully understanding life-worlds that existed outside of their historical provenance, or even within it. This critical practice informed Chakrabarty's now well-known idea of "provincializing Europe."

Chakrabarty made his argument by locating a critical tension in Karl Marx's own writings on capitalism's historical expansion. Chakrabarty found that there were "two histories of capitalism" suggested in Marx's work: History 1 and History 2. The first was the familiar history of capitalist transition, where capitalism was posited as a universal, progressive, if also disruptive, force. This History 1 of capitalism originated in Europe and subsequently came to structure the world, as Marx and Engels famously declared in *The Communist Manifesto*. This universalizing transition was materialized through colonial expansion, imperialism and now economic globalization, or what many call neo-colonialism. For Chakrabarty, History 1 was nominally "universal" but materially "global." In the gap between the universal and the global, one found traces of capitalism's alternative histories, namely those of what Chakrabarty called History 2. For History 1's universalizing narratives produced exclusions in the very act of "creating the world after its own image."<sup>74</sup> These exclusions formed the material substance of History 2, or what Chakrabarty theorized as capitalism's "historical difference." These were alternative histories that drew strength from their capacity to resist becoming "forms of [globalizing capitalism's] own life-processes."<sup>75</sup>

Why did this distinction between capital's "two histories" matter for the study of postcolonial cities and their histories? In Chakrabarty's reading of Marx, capitalism could be seen as a world historical force that worked through a particular hermeneutic, or mode of interpretation. This was a hermeneutic that interpreted human and social activity through the post-Enlightenment concept of "abstract labor." This concept in turn allowed capitalists to draw up abstract equivalences between things that were historically different, such that these differences could be subsumed into expanding "market" relations of production and commodity trade. History 2 was the excess that was left unabridged in these interpretive processes of production and exchange because it posited a subtle, often invisible resistance to the abstract labor of capitalist subsumption.

## 22 Introduction

Thus, if History 1 was “the universal and necessary history we associate with capital” as a universalizing economic structure guided by a global logic of abstraction, History 2 constituted a history of resistant substrates that “does not belong to capital’s life-process,” that is, “it does not contribute to the self-reproduction of capital.”<sup>76</sup> The point was that “History 2s are thus not pasts separate from capital; they inhere in capital and yet interrupt and punctuate the run of capital’s own logic.”<sup>77</sup>

Between History 1 and History 2 lay a whole field of interpretive politics and mediation that was largely ignored in modern social thought. Yet it was not that History 2s were absent in these analyses, rather they were surreptitiously repressed, hidden from view, and rendered unrecognizable as such. History 2s that appeared suddenly within the temporal optic of History 1 had to now be framed as “anachronistic” or otherwise untimely. Their difference became anathema to world historical progress. For Chakrabarty rendering History 2 as archaic in this way was a part of the larger practice of “historicism,” or “the idea that to understand anything it has to be seen both as a unity and in its historical development.”<sup>78</sup> It made the historical difference represented by the untimely appearances of History 2s as so many appearances of “pre-modern” practices that were bound to disappear in time, following the universal historical trajectory of “the West.” Historicism in the context of Euro-centrism thus operated under a very specific interpretive schema: “first in Europe, then elsewhere.”<sup>79</sup> In this way, historicism was “what made modernity or capitalism look not simply global but rather as something that became global *over time*, by originating in one place (Europe) and then spreading outside it.”<sup>80</sup>

The practice of historicism was common in mainstream social theory, including urban theories pertaining to the so-called “developing” world. Jennifer Robinson argued that a problematic division of intellectual labor existed in contemporary urban theory between cities that were seen as “theoretical” sites of knowledge production and those that were treated as merely “empirical.” The latter were often seen through the rubric of “developmentalism, an approach which broadly understands these places to be lacking in qualities of city-ness, and which is concerned to improve capacities of governance, service provision and productivity.”<sup>81</sup> The problem with this theory/development binary was that it conceived of non-Western cities in terms of their derivation and deviation from ostensibly “theoretical” Western norms, telling us more about what the former were *not*, rather than what they were, or could become.

Adopting Chakrabarty’s aforementioned strategy of “provincialization” within urban theory, postcolonial scholars of cities sought to “demonstrate the parochial character of universal knowledge claims” regarding world cities and histories of urban development in the global South.<sup>82</sup> Global urbanism as an academic subfield within urban theory broadly valorized History 1s at the expense of History 2s. Sheppard et al. suggested the modified Geohistory 1 (GH1) and Geohistory 2 (GH2), combining insights from critical urban theory, assemblage urbanism and postcolonial theory:

Geohistory 1 imagines places as bounded territorial units progressing at different speeds along the same linear development trajectory, following the advice of those ahead of them. Interactions between these places are imagined as mutually beneficial and reinforcing ... accelerating the convergence of backward towards advanced territories, and culminating in a flattened geography of equal opportunity. In contrast ... geohistories 2 entail differentiated places interpenetrated by uneven, emergent connectivities. These relational, contingent geographies tendentially reinforce pre-existing inequalities, interrupted on occasions by qualitative shifts in power relations ... differentiation emerges at every scale, shaped by how residents of any place, living prosperously or precariously, are differently positioned within and through the trans-local processes.<sup>83</sup>

GH2s incorporated the history of colonial under-development that continued to affect nominally "postcolonial" nations and their largest cities in the present. They framed such inter-temporal processes of under-development not as evidence of "incomplete transition" to modernity, but as alternative, co-existing forms of the modern that had to be understood in their own terms, through non-Euro-centric and non-metro-centric analyses. The difference between Chakrabarty's and Sheppard et al.'s approaches was that GH1, unlike History 1, was not merely an abstract mode of interpretation regarding the historiography of "the past." Geohistories were concretized abstractions of capitalist "development" or state-led "modernization" in contemporary urban landscapes. They were performative in their spatio-temporal presence and duration in the urban present. Within the field of postcolonial urbanism, scholars began to explore the performative frictions between GH1s and GH2s in the context of non-normative urban developments, like slums, underground economies, but also special economic zones and special export processing zones. These were all spatial formations that stood in radical difference, that is, out of time, with global norms of "city-ness" and spatio-temporal continuity derived largely from the now-mythologized experience of urban modernity in "the West."<sup>84</sup> In the chapters that follow, I map several sites and processes of mediation between GH1 and GH2, rendered through what I call an urban depth of field.

### Urban depth of field

My concept of "image of thought" is adapted from Gilles Deleuze's complex philosophy. Though eclectic in his treatment of artistic, scientific and philosophical materials, Deleuze employed the concept-metaphor "image of thought" throughout his oeuvre to critique dogmatic presuppositions within Western philosophy.<sup>85</sup> Similarly, the eight images of thought presented in this introduction could be understood as critiques of dogmatic urban theory in its dominant and critical iterations.

More specifically, Deleuze differentiated between two images of thought. The first was that of "common sense," or *doxa*. This was the unquestioned

recognition of a reality that existed prior to and independently of its various representations (for example, the image/idea of a person or a city). This image of thought was dogmatically expressed through the familiar expression, "Everyone knows ..." (for example, "Everyone knows that is a city").<sup>86</sup> But for Deleuze this image of thought was never simply given as "common sense." Rather, common sense was an achievement in itself. For it included not only the recognition of what was supposedly already common, but all the abstract presuppositions that were necessary in order for common sense to actually *make* sense, that is, to generate such recognition in a world that was in reality quite indifferent to our sense of it. This led Deleuze to a second, more "critical," image of thought. It was an image that confounded the various presuppositions through which dogmatic representation, commonly recognizable to "everyone," was achieved.

In his later work on the history and philosophy of cinema, Deleuze argued that movies constituted their own image of thought, one whose potential exceeded the affective capacities of all the other arts. One of the most vivid examples of cinema's radical artistic potential was the deep focus or depth of field shot developed in the middle of the twentieth century. This innovative cinematographic technique produced one of the first self-conscious "time-images" in the modern cinema, marking an evolution from the more spatially-oriented "movement-images" which characterized the era of classical cinema.<sup>87</sup> Through non-linear story-telling and montage editing, through recurring flash-backs and symbolic foreshadowing, for instance, but most radically through the depth of field shot, which I describe below, time-images began to crystallize in post-war European and non-European cinema alike. These "un-timely" images presented unexplored regions of the past, invisible lives in the present, and potential pathways toward the future, articulating a specifically cinematic "politics of now-time."<sup>88</sup> The time-image emerged not just as a progression within the history of modern cinema but became part of an immanent critique of modernity that was potentially radical in its political implications.

In *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* Deleuze argued that it was Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941) that served as a major pivot point between the two ages of cinema, from the movement-image which dominated pre-war films and the time-image which increasingly reigned thereafter. In the movement-image time was represented indirectly and thus chronologically. It was derived from the movements of bodies or objects across more or less homogeneous and static cinematic space. But in the time-image "time became out of joint and reversed its dependent relation to movement; temporality showed itself as it really was for the first time, but in the form of a coexistence of large regions to be explored."<sup>89</sup> *Citizen Kane* famously dramatized the coexistence of the past and present as heterogeneous regions of time that came into virtual contact in inter-temporal cinematic space. In one famous depth of field shot the viewer saw the film's main protagonist, the reporter Jerry Thompson, obscured in shadows but firmly planted in the foreground of the frame.<sup>90</sup> Thompson is positioned very much in the film's present, even if he is "in the dark" regarding his investigation into the mysterious life and times of the recently deceased Charles Foster Kane.

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Meanwhile, Thompson's interview subject in this scene, Kane's erstwhile lover Susan Alexander, is well lit but positioned at some distance in the background, sitting quietly at a table weeping. But it was not the spatial distance between Thompson and Alexander that marked the significance of the deep focus or depth of field shot here, rather it was the temporal distance between Thompson, positioned very much in the narrative present of the film, and Alexander, lost in memories of the past, that rendered this a time-image. As Deleuze would put it, between Thompson and Alexander, foreground and background, "the unbridled depth is of time and no longer of space."<sup>91</sup>

In the context of the contemporary postcolonial city, what I call the "urban depth of field" is useful for theorizing the productive encounters between GH1s and GH2s, revealing how cities are shaped by forces that are near and far, where distance and proximity are no longer merely spatial but temporal. The depth becomes spatial because the "here" and "now" of the city, any city, is always structured by an "elsewhere," whether this elsewhere is near or far.<sup>92</sup> So the city is always about the distance (imagined or real) between the foreground, or the "immediate" sensory experiences of the city, and the background, that is, the distant infrastructures and logics, the invisible supply zones, markets and social relations that fueled the city's urban ecology.

But an urban depth of the field is also temporal in the sense that "elsewhere" isn't always a geographical or physical place. Sometimes it is a vivid memory that is collectively shared, sometimes it is lodged in the more distant past, already half-forgotten. Sometimes "elsewhere" is not in the past at all but belongs to the future, a distant one that may one day become more proximate. The point of the urban depth of field perspective is to bring these relations of distance and proximity into analytical view, and to define the city and its political life through this changing set of spatio-temporal relations. That is, the politics of the city is manifest in the ongoing mediations between near and far orders in everyday city life, mediations that become visible through an urban depth of field lens in which the depth or distance is both spatial and temporal at once. My cinematic approach allows me to theorize *Neo Delhi* as a *virtual* space and time that immanently critiques dogmatic ways of theorizing cities within the field of urban studies.

## ***Neo Delhi***

Thus what I call *Neo Delhi* is several things at once. First, it is the national capital territory (NCTD) and metropolitan region of an economically "reborn" India. That is, it spatially and symbolically represents an India that has incrementally shifted its postcolonial economy over the past three decades: from state-led development to state-mediated globality. As I will argue in Chapter 1, the post-economic reform state increasingly mediates between the domestic economy and the newly accessible "global" economy.<sup>93</sup> *Neo Delhi* is a useful place to deploy an urban depth of field analysis that looks at the inter-temporal space between existing discourses of "development" and incipient ones of



*Figure 0.8* Panorama of Chakarpur Village and surrounding areas, Gurgaon.

Source: Photo by author.

“globality.” These contrasting discourses embody heterogeneous temporal logics that are rarely, if ever, treated in mainstream or critical urban studies. *Neo Delhi* is an apt entry point into a larger conversation that would likely include other Southern cities with complex pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial pasts co-existing in the present, like Cairo, Hong Kong or Mexico City. For like these other large postcolonial cities *Neo Delhi* is not a singular entity but rather a multitude of times, spaces and urban experiences, each with their own rhythms and durations.

The NCTD is located in the north Indian gangetic plain, just south of the sloping foothills of the Himalayas. For centuries the triangular area between the Yamuna river to the east and the Aravalli hills to the west has served as a center for commerce and trade in the region. It has also long served as a political center. Before becoming the capital of independent India in 1947 New Delhi was made the capital of British India in 1911, and before that became the capital of the Mughal Empire in 1639. But even prior to this walled-city of Shahjahanabad, Delhi was the location of numerous ancient kingdoms and settlements. Remnants of some of these older sites are still discernable today.<sup>94</sup>

Compared with other Indian cities, *Neo Delhi* takes on a singular political and economic importance for merely contingent reasons. First, as India’s political capital, its space both symbolically and materially “represents” the nation in ways that are unique, as I will show in Chapter 1. Second, Delhi is also an intellectual and artistic hub. It is home to dozens of colleges, universities and research institutes, national museums and performance arts spaces. This concentration of intellectual and artistic activity in Delhi results in the prodigious output of material *about* Delhi. I will treat some of this vast output in the chapters ahead. But Delhi is also much more than merely the sum of its images and representations. The whole metro area—which includes parts of Uttar Pradesh and Haryana—is a sprawling metropolitan region comprising more than twenty-four million residents, the largest urban agglomeration in India today and still growing (Table 0.1 outlines the population growth [1901–2011] in the NCTD alone). By some estimates, over the next two to three decades Delhi’s National Capital Region (NCR) will surpass the Tokyo metropolitan region as the largest conurbation in the world.<sup>95</sup>

The name “New Delhi” officially refers to the central bureaucratic district of the world’s largest democracy, as well as the diplomatic enclaves and consulates of foreign emissaries. The name “Delhi” refers to a Union Territory (i.e., National Capital Territory of Delhi—NCTD) that is akin to a city-state. This territory has its own level of government, but is complexly intertwined with higher national branches of federal government and local informal systems of power and authority at the neighborhood and street levels. Including New Delhi, this Indian union territory is spread out over some 570 square miles (for comparison’s sake New York City—all five boroughs—adds up to around 300 square miles). This territory is relatively wealthy, having the third highest per capita income among India’s twenty-eight states and four union territories.<sup>96</sup> But the NCTD is not evenly urbanized. Rather, conventionally “urbanized” lands are

Table 0.1 Population of Delhi (Union Territory) 1901–2011

Year	Population	% variation since preceding decade
1901	405,819	–
1911	413,851	+1.98
1921	488,452	+18.03
1931	636,246	+30.26
1941	917,939	+44.27
1951	1,744,072	+90.00
1961	2,658,612	+52.44
1971	4,065,698	+52.93
1981	6,220,406	+53.00
1991	9,420,406	+51.45
2001	13,850,507	+47.02
2011	16,787,941	+21.21

Source: Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi, *Statistical Abstract of Delhi 2014* (Delhi: Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Delhi, 2014).

surrounded by vast open spaces, abandoned historical relics and ruins, pre-existing agricultural villages and rustic farmhouses that serve to make up Delhi's patchy and parched terrain. The urban landscape includes planned and unplanned residential settlements, a sprawling military cantonment and international airport, national parks, diplomatic enclaves and government administrative spaces, corporate campuses, industrial zones and factories, parks and commuter hubs, street markets and underground economies and much more.

"Delhi" also refers to the even more spread out National Capital Region (NCR) that exceeds the boundaries of the union territory. The NCR includes the NCTD but also several additional ring towns located in the neighboring states of Haryana and Uttar Pradesh. Because of this territorial heterogeneity, multiple political institutions, operating according to different jurisdictions and scales of representation, different protocols and procedures, resource-allocations, governing intelligences and spatio-temporal logics, administer the Delhi metropolitan region. These institutions often work at cross-purposes, as we will see frequently in the chapters ahead.<sup>97</sup>

This book is not an exhaustive account of the metropolitan capital region. Rather, it is interested in the collection of parts and wholes at ascending and descending scales that make up a virtual city called *Neo Delhi*. This is a city that is an urban assemblage in Delanda's sense of the word, except that this assemblage is conceptualized not merely spatially but temporally, that is, through the concept of geohistorical difference. *Neo Delhi* shows how geohistorical difference mediates the distance between near and far orders at different spatio-temporal scales: between society and state, but also between private and public spheres, rich and poor, urban and rural, autonomous and regulated zones, spaces of development and spaces of globality. Thus the study foregrounds multiple scales of mediation within the Delhi conurbation—the urban, the neighborhood,

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- 5 Ibid.

the district, the enclave, the village—analyzing socio-spatial and temporal relations between different near and far orders at each scalar site/intervention. These relations in turn map a virtual city, one that is defined not by what it *is* or *is not* or *is not yet*, but by its potentiality.

The chapters that follow are composed cinematically, that is, as dynamic juxtapositions between near and far orders at different scales of changing urban life: they jump from the *urban* region of Delhi itself (Chapter 1) to the slum *neighborhood* of Shadipur in central Delhi (Chapter 2). These first two chapters comprise Part I. Part II cuts between the *district* of Gurgaon (Chapter 3), some of the private *enclave* spaces within it (Chapter 4) and an urbanized *village* called Chakkarpur (Chapter 5). Each scale of investigation and analysis thus stages urban mediations between higher-scale far orders and lower-scale near orders. To study these mediations I combine analytical tools and concepts from the literatures reviewed in this Introduction. The resulting studies are necessarily experimental, but collectively articulate a virtual city I call *Neo Delhi*.<sup>98</sup>

## Conclusion

After returning to Delhi in 2008 following an absence of nearly a decade, I began to visit the city and region more frequently over the next several years as a researcher. But I remained haunted by the inadequacies of time, my limitations as a scholar, my geohistorical distance from the sensible milieus of Delhi and Gurgaon. The chapters that follow are experiments in studying cities that seem to defy disciplinary understanding. For this reason, augmenting the chapters ahead are a collection of artistic and ethnographic media interventions that can be engaged alongside the book at the website ([www.neodelhi.net](http://www.neodelhi.net)). This site contains videos, images, blog posts and commentaries that more or less follow the arguments and sites presented in the chapters. Collectively, they tour a virtual city whose online presence is both an extension of the analysis contained in this book and a contribution to Delhi's cultural archive.

## Notes

- 1 David Campbell, *The Integrity of the Image: A World Press Photo Research Project* (Amsterdam: World Press Photo Academy, 2014).
- 2 Special thanks to Dr. Lorenzo Rinelli for stitching together these four images to create the virtual panorama of Delhi.
- 3 These images can be seen on the book's accompanying website, [www.neodelhi.com](http://www.neodelhi.com). This website contains additional photographs, videos, commentaries, blog posts and music that are part of the multi-media assemblage I call *Neo Delhi*. In whatever small and probably insignificant way, I wanted to not merely study, but participate in changing urban life in Delhi from 2008 to 2015. The book's website documents from alternative perspectives many of the scenes of investigation opened up in the chapters ahead.
- 4 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 92.
- 5 *Ibid.*

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- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (London: Routledge, 1994), 34.
- 8 De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 92.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 For more on this “photomerge” feature, see, accessed September 23, 2014, <https://helpx.adobe.com/photoshop/using/create-panoramic-images-photomerge.html>.
- 11 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).
- 12 This website features videos, photographs, field notes and maps that augment the material presented in this text: [www.neodelhi.net](http://www.neodelhi.net).
- 13 Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (New York: Verso, 2006), 1.
- 14 See Saskia Sassen, *Global Cities: New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001) and Manuel Castells, *The Rise of Network Society: The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture* (London: Wiley Blackwell, 2011).
- 15 David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (London: Verso, 2012).
- 16 Davis, *Planet of Slums* and Janice Perlman, *Favela: Four Decades of Living on the Edge in Rio de Janeiro* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
- 17 See James Ferguson, *Give a Man a Fish: Reflections on the New Politics of Distribution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).
- 18 See Vinay Gidwani and Amita Baviskar, “Urban commons.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 46.50 (2011), 42–43.
- 19 David Harvey, *Spaces of Global Capitalism: Towards a Theory of Uneven Development* (London: Verso, 2006), 41–50.
- 20 Saskia Sassen-Koob, *New York City's Informal Economy*. ISSR Working Papers 4.9 (1988).
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- 23 David Harvey, “Between space and time: Reflections on the geographical imagination.” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 80.3 (1990), 428.
- 24 Neil Brenner, “Theses on urbanization.” *Public Culture* 25.1 (2013), 102.
- 25 Neil Brenner, “What is critical urban theory?” *City* 13.2–3 (2009), 206.
- 26 See Louis Wirth, “Urbanism as a way of life.” *American Journal of Sociology* 44:1 (1938), 1. Wirth famously defined the city as “a relatively large, dense and permanent settlement of socially heterogeneous individuals.” In addition he defined urbanism as “a way of life” that was made possible by the city and its physical, social and ideological characteristics.
- 27 Michael Storper and Allen Scott, “Current debates in urban theory: A critical assessment.” *Urban Studies* 53:6 (2016), 1119.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Ibid., 1116.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Ibid., 1118.
- 32 Ash Amin, “Regions unbound: Towards a new politics of place.” *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 86(1) (2004), 40.
- 33 Ibid., 33.
- 34 Ibid., 36.
- 35 Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003 [1970]), 1.
- 36 Neil Brenner (ed.), *Implosions/Explosions: Towards a Study of Planetary Urbanization* (Berlin: Jovis, 2014).
- 37 Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution*, 13.

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- 38 Doreen Massey, "Politics and space/time." *New Left Review* (1992), Online version.
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- 40 Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 101.
- 41 Ibid.
- 42 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991 [1973]), 33.
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- 48 Massey, "Politics and space/time."
- 49 Ibid.
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- 51 Ibid.
- 52 David Harvey, *The Urbanization of Capital: Studies in the History and Theory of Capitalist Development* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).
- 53 Ibid., 5.
- 54 Ibid., 11.
- 55 Harvey, *Rebel Cities*.
- 56 Brenner, "What is critical urban theory?" 198–207; Harvey, *The Urbanization of Capital, Spaces of Global Capitalism, and Rebel Cities*.
- 57 Jane M. Jacobs, "Urban geographies I: Still thinking cities relationally." *Progress in Human Geography* 36.3 (2012), 412–422.
- 58 Manuel Delanda, "Parameterising the social." *Architectural Design* 86.2 (2016), 124.
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- 60 Manuel Delanda, John Protevi and Torkild Thanem, "Deleuzian interrogations: A conversation with Manuel Delanda and John Protevi." *Tamara: Journal for Critical Organizational Inquiry* 3.4 (2005), 68.
- 61 Neil Leach, "The limits of urban simulation: An interview with Manuel Delanda." *Architectural Design* 79.4 (2009), 53.
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- 85 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).
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- 89 Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 105.
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- 91 Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 108.
- 92 Jane Jacobs, *Cities and the Wealth of Nations: Principles of Economic Life* (New York: Vintage Press, 1985), 59–71.
- 93 See Himadeep Muppidi, *The Politics of the Global* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).
- 94 Romila Thapar, "Rambling through some of the pasts of Delhi," in Romi Khosla (ed.) *The Idea of Delhi* (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 2005), 22–31.
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- 97 Sheila Dixit, "Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi Speech of Smt. Sheila Dikshit, Chief Minister, Delhi at National Development Council Meeting," December 9, 2006 in New Delhi.
- 98 See for instance, Ahmed Kanna, *Dubai: The City as Corporation* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011). See also Gyan Prakash, *Mumbai Fables: A History of an Enchanted City* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010). See also Abdoumalig Simone, *City Life from Jakarta to Dakar: Movements at the Crossroads* (London: Routledge, 2010).

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