



SWEDISH
COLLEGIUM
for ADVANCED STUDY

PLENARY SESSION # 8

Sunday, 19 February. 09:00 – 10:30. Room: IHC – Stein Auditorium

Session: The Future of Cities

Chair: Sujata Patel, University of Hyderabad

Telescopic Urbanism and the Poor

Ash Amin, University of Cambridge

Rethinking Urban Governance: Lessons from China and India

Xuefei Ren, Woodrow Wilson Centre, Washington D.C.

When Cities Become Extreme Sites for our Major Challenges

Saskia Sassen, Columbia University, New York

ABSTRACTS

Telescopic Urbanism and the Poor

Ash Amin, University of Cambridge

It is widely accepted that the majority of the unborn 3bn who will take the world population up to 9bn by 2030 will be living in the slum, squatter or informal settlements of megacities, mostly in the global south, if current trends continue. Between a third and half of the world's population will be leading a precarious, and often abject, life in the neglected urban interstices. Urban scholarship is beginning to turn to this eye-watering problem, and to questions of sustainable urban competitiveness and growth, but interestingly without referencing one to the other. This paper claims that the 'endless city' is being looked at through the wrong end of the binoculars, with 'business consultancy' urbanism largely disinterested in the city that does not feed international competitiveness and business growth, and 'UN-Habitat' urbanism looking to the settlements where the poor are located for bottom-up solutions to human well-being. The paper muses on the implications of such an urban optic on the chances of the poor, their areas of settlement, and their expectations of support from others in and beyond the city. While acknowledging the realism, inventiveness and achievements of effort initiated or led by the poor, the paper laments the disappearance of ideas of mutuality, obligation and commonality that telescopic urbanism has enabled, in the process scripting out both grand designs and the duty of distant others to address the problems of acute inequality and poverty that will continue to plague the majority city.

Rethinking Urban Governance: Lessons from China and India

Xuefei Ren, Woodrow Wilson Centre, Washington D.C.

The world population hit the 7 billion mark in 2011, and in China, the most populous country in the world, for the first time in its history more than half of the national population now lives in cities. The Chinese urbanization presents a theoretically interesting case for rethinking urban governance in the global South. After three decades of market reform, urban governance in China today is characterized by “competitive decentralization,” a process in which power, authority, and resources have been largely devolved from the central to municipal authorities. Municipal governments engage in competitions of all sorts in order to place their cities ahead of others and to attract capital investment. This talk critically examines how Chinese urban governance has assumed its current form of decentralized competition. Examples from Indian mega cities will be drawn as well to illustrate the fragmented urban governance structure in India. In the end, I will discuss both the obstacles and opportunities embedded in the current modes of Chinese and Indian urban governance for building a sustainable urban future.

When Cities Become Extreme Sites for our Major Challenges

Saskia Sassen, Columbia University, New York

Cities have long been sites for conflicts – wars, racisms, religious hatreds, expulsions of the poor. And yet, where national states have historically responded by militarizing conflict, cities have tended to triage conflict through commerce and civic activity. But major developments in the current global era signal that cities are losing this capacity and becoming sites for a whole range of new types of conflicts, such as asymmetric war, urban violence, and acute environmental challenges. Further, the dense and conflictive spaces of cities overwhelmed by inequality and injustice can be sites for a variety of secondary, more anomic types of conflicts, from drug wars to the major environmental

disasters looming in our immediate futures. All of these challenge the traditional commercial and civic capacity that has allowed cities to avoid militarizing conflict, and, importantly to expand the incorporation of diversity of class, culture, religion, ethnicity.