

# Table of Contents

The Sudden Stardom of the Third-World City : Why is the Third-World metropolis suddenly taking over western culture? . . . . . 1



# **The Sudden Stardom of the Third-World City : Why is the Third-World metropolis suddenly taking over western culture?**

By Rana Dasgupta

A recent essay, posted by Rana Dasgupta to Nettime, deliberately sweeping and polemical, on the sudden prominence of the Third-World city in Hollywood and big publishing. Debate on Nettime follows this text

Tsotsi, a film about Johannesburg gangs released in the UK this month, took the 2006 Oscar for best foreign-language film. Another Oscar went to The Constant Gardener, an account of the dark forces at work in Nairobi, whose director, Fernando Meirelles, shot to international fame in 2002 with his portrait of a Rio favela, City of God. The Raindance Film Festival last October climaxed with a screening of Secuestro Express, a film about abduction gangs in Caracas. And at the end of 2004, two best-selling books explored the fiercely competitive under- and over-worlds of Mumbai: Suketu Mehta's Maximum City and Gregory David Roberts's Shantaram, which will be released next year as a major Hollywood motion picture directed by Peter Weir.

My feeling is that these are early symptoms of a huge shift in the west's picture of the world: the Third-World metropolis is becoming the symbol of the "new". This is all the more thrilling for its utter improbability: surely those suffocating piles of slums and desperation are too exhausted, too moribund, to bring forth futures? But it seems to me this is exactly what is happening. If, for the better part of the 20th century, it was New York and its glistening imitations that symbolised the future, it is now the stacked-up, sprawling, impromptu city-countries of the third world. The idea of the total, centralised, maximally efficient city plan has long since lost its futuristic appeal: its confidence and ambition have turned to anxiety and besiegement, its homogenising obsession has constricted the horizons of spiritual possibility and induced counter-fantasies of insubordination, excess, and life-forms in chaotic variety. Such desires flee the West's surveillance cameras and bureaucratised consumption to find in the Third World metropolis a scope, a speed, a more fecund ecology.

Why would it be so? For a start, the rumours crackling in from the Third World have ceased to be quaint. Indian and Chinese business people rattle assumptions by buying up major corporate assets in America and Europe; there are stories of Asian billionaires buying houses at record-breaking prices in Belgravia. There is a dim awareness of something monumental happening far away, of extraordinary wealth creation that goes beyond mere imitation. More perceptive observers see something awe-inspiring in outsourcing: for a western, metropolitan outlook could not have imagined a world so devoid of centre, so un sentimentally flattened out, with no cultural boundaries to stand in the way of absolute technology and capital. They see other histories coming to the fore, they remember those networks of Asian families spread out over four continents, patiently comparing prices and moving goods across the globe from where they are cheap to where they are expensive. Some have heard rumours of "medical tourists" flocking from the UK to Delhi and Mumbai to get operations that the National Health Service could not provide; and, simultaneously awed and appalled, they wonder what kind of minds, what kind of scale must exist in those places for such plans to be dreamed up. All that was "backward" swings round to the front, full of vast and uncanny promise.

But the stories do not just come from far away, for even the most intimate and secure of western refuges is now fully infiltrated by the Third-World city. Dismissive talk of Chinese "sweatshops" that would never meet EU regulations does nothing to dispel the sense of a stupendous fertility, for the

contents of every western household are "Made in China", and most Europeans and Americans are so entirely ignorant about how things are made that the production of the objects in their lives seems a kind of Asian alchemy. There is more: the Third-World city has many economies, not just one, and even this they are exporting. Large parts of western cities are now gleefully given over to an international pirate economy of CDs, DVDs, computer software and branded goods manufactured in Lagos or Shenzhen at almost the same time as the Parisian and Californian originals, and almost to the same quality.

There are other, less delightful, infiltrations. While "Louis Vuitton" bags have obvious charms, who can say the same of illegal immigrants? Or terrorists? Was there not a time when the West seemed to enjoy total immunity from the violence of the Third World, and is that absolute division not becoming a trifle blurred? Did not the fascination of *Dirty Pretty Things*, Stephen Frears' 2002 drama about illegal immigrants in London, rest on our troubling sense that the Third World organ stealing industry might plausibly interface, now, with the cool order of western healthcare systems? Good or bad, however, it is all the same: the image of the Third-World city floats insistently behind the most startling new formations in the life of the west, and the secret of everything "we" are turning into seems increasingly to be held not "here", but "there".

All of this would be less disruptive to thought if Third-World cities had got to such a place by following the rules. According to the time-honoured process of 'development', cities and states attain maturity only when they have standardised the population into one language and cosmology, contained poverty, made clear divisions between different kinds of land use, humans and animals, factories and residences, and imposed a unified code of law. Clearly, these things have not happened in Mumbai or Shanghai, and even so those places are producing things that anyone can look up to. Western tourists have been commenting for decades on the ingenuity they find on third-world streets "I never knew there were so many ways of making money" but now they see the improvisational ethos of these bricolage cities elevated into a form of global ambition, and realise that the unlikely potential of the third-world city was never unlikely at all. It is conceivable, in fact, that the cities from which the grand thoughts of the future will flow may look entirely unfamiliar to Americans and Europeans.

This seems more likely still when you contrast the intense vulnerability of western, especially European, cities to blasphemy and difference with the radical variety of third-world cities. The happy fiction of Europe's robust liberalism is in severe doubt as it fails even to accommodate a single group of dissenters: politically articulate Muslims who wish to assert a different vision of social life and law. Compared to this, my adopted city of Delhi, which has its own disputes and violence, seems positively tranquil when one reflects that it must balance the life demands of 15 million people with so many languages and cosmologies, and such varied notions of commerce, law, healthcare and education, that they are not a "population" in the European sense at all. "When will all the camels and cows depart, when will all these strange human varieties finally be banished and India become modern?" tourists ask. They forget two crucial truths -- first, that Europe's centuries-long project to banish all life forms it could not understand or empathise with was a destructively violent process; second, and most importantly, that Delhi already is modern, and this -- all this -- is what it looks like. It is an alternative kind of modernity: a swirling, agglomerative kind that seems, at this point in history, to be more capable than the western version of sustaining radical diversity -- to be better equipped, perhaps, for the principle of globalisation.

This brings us to the most perverse suspicion of all. Perhaps the Third-World city is more than simply the source of the things that will define the future, but actually is the future of the western city. Perhaps some of those tourists who look to the Third World for an image of their own past are reflecting uneasily on how all the basic realities of the Third-World city are already becoming more pronounced in their own cities: vast gulfs between sectors of the population across which almost no

sympathetic intelligence can flow, gleaming gated communities, parallel economies and legal systems, growing numbers of people who have almost no desire or ability to participate in official systems, innovations in residential housing involving corrugated iron and tarpaulin. Is it going too far to suggest that our sudden interest in books and films about the Third-World city stems from the sense that they may provide effective preparation for our future survival in London, New York or Paris?

Our fast-moving media culture, groping always for any image of the "new " that can be used to produce more astonishment, operates in a zone slightly ahead of knowledge. The "rise of China" may remain for many a fantastical rumour, but as the blind sense of such large-scale shifts accumulates, it becomes possible for the media to peddle a new form of futurism: a strange and dazzling hypermodernity that bewilders western understanding but that seems to harbour the plenitude of ideas and aspiration that the west no longer finds within itself.

But the images we see in these books and films are not uniformly pretty. Far from it. The media's grandest and most successful spectacles are invariably full of danger; and this one is no different. In the erotic delectation of these yawning life forms, which rise up with such titanic ambition, with such indifference to the history of western ethics and aesthetics, is the terror, the exhilaration of a death wish.

Comments from

I think Rana is right to insist that her polemical essay was concerned with the depiction of Third World cities in recent western films, not with the sociology of an actual 'planet of slums' (Davis). Yet perhaps there was an implicit triumphalism in her notion that this might represent an unconscious recognition that 'the west' is on the slippery slope to oblivion or at least to a situation where we can no longer expect to run the world economy as a source of massive unearned income.

I recall Gandhi's visit to London in 1931 when, faced with the appalling housing conditions of London's East End, he declared that imperialist ideology was hiding from England's working class that their conditions of living were lower than those of the average Indian peasant.

But I truly wonder where Benjamin got the material for his riposte:

>I think you have a point about Westerners' changing perceptions, but  
>perhaps you ought to have mentioned the vast gulf between those  
>commodified images and the ways many who live in third-world  
>megacities perceive their own environment: not as a vibrant,  
>irrepressible source of unlimited creativity, but as a prison to which  
>they resign themselves or from which they long to escape. The lack of  
>clear rules and the labyrinth of informal, parallel economic and  
>political systems, with their merciless logic of nepotism and bribery,  
>ruling over masses of disposable people, tend to breed Kafkaesque  
>despair rather than the thrill of unfettered, improvised ingenuity.  
>Perhaps this helps explain why, in those countries where popular  
>movements have been most successful, as in Bolivia's recent elections,  
>they seem to have relied heavily on the mobilisation of rural  
>populations.

All this stuff about prisons and longing for escape is pure ideology. Do you know any people who live under these conditions, Ben? Where do you get your information on Bolivian politics?The Guardian?

Rana's essay was a provocation, a line, if you like. I happen to think that Mireilles' Constant Gardener was a more vivid and realistic depiction of urban life in Africa than Sauper's nightmare documentary on how everything is dying there. But the main point of Rana's piece is how is the America and Europe coming to terms imaginatively with the slippery slope? The depiction of city life there in stereotypically negative terms is precisely what you would expect from people in denial about this momentous historical transition. Extermninate all the brutes, I say.(See Sven Lindqvist).

Keith Hart