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Beyond globalized visions

Problematizing urban theory through spatial explorations of the Pearl River Delta

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Summary

Global networks, commercial paths, and global economic fluxes have become critical ethereal dimensions of urbanity that operate as indicators within the construction of contemporary urban theories. Such theories attempt to grasp the complexities of the urban realm by connecting urbanization, globalization, and capital accumulation with globalized visions of the urban that leave the physical dimension of space as elusive, unconsidered, and neglected. Such globalized visions, in the form of world cities, global cities, and global city-regions, operate indeed under the tendency of being general, detached, and intangible. Therefore, they fall into interpretations of urbanity that conceive it as abstract objects commanding the world's economic, social, and cultural order. Based on this issue that has invested urban studies during the past twenty years, this research starts from the hypothesis that following these global visions is not enough for understanding the complexity, variety, and heterogeneity of contemporary urban forms. Moreover, the research argues how it is necessary to infuse these distant theoretical constructions with the richness and dynamism of physical space. However, it is not any physical space approach, but one that recognizes and exploits subtle, mundane, obvious, and unexpected physical attributes as potential hints and revelatory aspects from where to extract and elaborate geographical knowledge.

Based on the idea of infusing urban theory with the geographical knowledge embedded within physical space, the thesis uses and inquires the Pearl River Delta in southern China, one of the largest, densest and most well-known contemporary global city-regions, to construct and argue through the use of visual methods, in-depth fieldwork and spatial explorations, the necessity of raising alternative interpretations of the urban that are ground-based. It does such operation not from the center of the Delta, as the vast majority of studies of the place have done, but from a peripheral point of view based in Zhaoqing City; the less economically and industrially developed municipality of the Delta and one of the few urban centers that remain detached from the central agglomeration. This displacement of the observation point represents a change of perspective capable of constructing a dual positionality that intersects both personal (embodied) and observational (geographical) positions into a single interpretative path that sharply differs from the interpretations of the place constructed so far.

In particular, this thesis organizes the grounded observations of the Delta on three macro layers, namely the *water system*, the *circulation space*, and the *built environment*. These are three layers not only scrutinized under a purely physical approach but instead understood as the most complex materialization of the social, economic, cultural, and political processes of the place in question. In that sense, the three layers operate as the bridge between the specificities identified in the field and the broader reflections that derive from them, therefore allowing to lift the global city-region etiquette and confronting global and grounded observations to evidence gaps, limitations, contradiction, and similarities.

Finally, the conclusive section of the thesis elaborates on how in the Pearl River Delta, the concepts of exception, fragment, and interstice hold ground. Furthermore, it argues how, contrary to what global theories suggest, the Delta's grounded narratives are characterized by the potential of the ordinariness and peripherality. In the process, it highlights the relevance of border spaces and connective urban fabric, in operating as an amalgam between the multiplicity of existing urban forms that compose the Delta. Such reflections oppose the robust vision of unit, progress, centrality, and power sustained by global visions. Moreover, they go in favor of the role of peripheries, neglected spaces, fragmentation, and heterogeneity in the reformulation of "global" city regions (and in this particular case Pearl River Delta Region) with its geography and space, instead of as completely economical and power commanding global entities.