

## CHAPTER 23

# GRASSROOTS STRUGGLES FOR THE CITY OF THE MANY: FROM THE POLITICS OF SPATIALITY TO THE SPATIALITIES OF POLITICS



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### 1 INTRODUCTION

Particularly during the last two decades of her career, Doreen Massey concerned herself with the politics and ethics in and of cities. In some ways this begins in her classic essay “A Global Sense of Place” (Massey 1991a), set in London’s Kilburn neighbourhood where she lived. Yet some prime interventions are the little-known critique (with Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift) of Blairite urban policy in the United Kingdom, *Cities for the Many Not the Few* (Amin *et al.* 2000), and her final monograph on London: *World City* (Massey 2007). These writings emanated from her own active engagement in London’s politics and policy-making, as a close advisor to “red” Ken Livingston, both as Leader of the Greater London Council until Margaret Thatcher abolished it (1981–6), and as the newly created Mayor of London (2000–8).<sup>1</sup>

Yet, for all her interest in urban politics, Doreen paid relatively little attention to its raggedy edges of urban activism and social movements, such as more-than-capitalist urban commoning. From her writings, her interest seems to have been in empowering the rights to the city for the many by primarily engaging with formal politics. In this brief chapter, we critically interrogate the implications of her relational conceptualization of place and spatiotemporality, and of the politics of spatiality, for urban activism. Endorsing her argument that “you can’t [just] take a theory off the shelf and use it” (Hoyler 1999: 73), we write back to her theoretical reflections from our own studies of urban commoning in Los Angeles and Jakarta. From this perspective, we argue that

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1 It is perhaps no coincidence, paralleling former Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez’ interest in Doreen’s concept of power-geometries, that the reinvigorated progressive Labour coalition, under the leadership of London politician Jeremy Corbyn, titled their 2017 election manifesto “For the Many not the Few”.

spatialities and politics are dialectically interrelated, implying that her politics of spatiality should be extended to embrace the spatialities of real world politics (realpolitik). The chapter is organized as follows. We summarize those aspects of her rich body of sociospatial theory of particular relevance here (section 2), introduce the two urban commoning case studies (section 3), and critically reflect on and extend her politics of spatiality (section 4).

## 2 TOWARDS A POLITICS OF SPATIALITY

Doreen's explicitly relational theorization of spatiotemporality, distinct from, yet resonating with David Harvey's more capitalocentric dialectical approach to relational space and Ed Soja's socio-spatial dialectic (Sheppard 2006, 2018), has issued a profound challenge to the kind of place-based thinking that seems natural from the perspective of social theory. We wish to stress two aspects that clearly inform her thinking on urban politics and policy, one flowing from the other: The relationality of place, and power-geometries. Using Kilburn High Road as her case study, Massey (1991a) advocates for a progressive, outward-looking approach to place as a space of heterogeneity – against the kind of enclosed, conservative, defensive and homogenizing thinking mobilized, for example, in claims about “making America great again”. Yet she also seeks to critically interrogate that relationally produced heterogeneity, arguing:

Different social groups have distinct relationships to this anyway differentiated mobility: some people are more in charge of it than others; some initiate flows and movement, others don't; some are more on the receiving-end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it. (Massey 1991a: 26)

She mobilizes *power*-geometry (Massey 1991a: 25) to draw out a much larger argument; against those seeking to reduce globalization to space-time compression and the annihilation of space by time, she shows how flows and movement can work to empower select bodies – and places – at the expense of others.

Power-geometry, filled out in subsequent essays (Massey 1993b, 1999b), amounts to a fundamental spatial critique of those promoting capitalist globalization as the means to development for all – as a rising tide that lifts all boats. Without elaborating in detail here (other contributors to this volume no doubt [elaborate this](#)), the nub of Doreen's argument is that the asymmetric connectivities linking places under capitalist globalization, whereby some grow wealthy at the expense of impoverishment elsewhere, are a primary

vector of uneven geographical development. This undermines stageist conceptions of development (Rostow 1960), based on place-based thinking (Sheppard 2016), which aver that the differences that matter between countries can be reduced to temporal position, measured by how far they have advanced along the only possible development trajectory. Thus, from political economy, via feminist and poststructural theory, Doreen arrived at a postcolonial sensibility:

this different imagining of globalization – in my terms, a truly spatialized understanding... – would refuse to convene spatial differences under the sign of temporality. It would reject the tales of inevitability that necessarily accompany such singular narratives.... It would in other words hold open the possibility of the existence of alternative narratives.

(Massey 1999b: 43)

In an essay published that same year, written for a series of lectures at the University of Heidelberg, Doreen turns to the political implications of her approach to spatiality. She begins with three propositions about space (Massey 1999e: 28):

1. Space is a product of interrelations. It is constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny....
2. Space is the sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity; it is the sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist; it is the sphere of the possibility of the existence of more than one voice. Without space, no multiplicity; without multiplicity, no space. If space is indeed the product of interrelations, then it must be predicated upon the existence of plurality. Multiplicity and space are co-constitutive.
3. Finally, and precisely because space is the product of relation-between, relations which are necessarily embedded material practices *which have to be carried out*, it is always in a process of becoming; it is always being made. It is never finished; never closed.

The political implications are likewise threefold. She argues that proposition one aligns with a politics committed to anti-essentialism and the constructed nature of identities and things. Proposition two underwrites political themes of difference, multiplicity and the importance of granting space to diverse, differently positioned voices. Proposition three, with its focus on uncertainty and becoming, stresses the importance of political discourses that challenge notions of inevitability and progress, approaching the future as genuinely open.

The implications of this for urban politics are taken up in *Cities for the Many not the Few* and *World City* (Amin *et al.* 2000; Massey 2007). Noting that neoliberal politics prioritizes the wealthy few, while rendering invisible the many who make urban life possible, “for the many” runs as a leitmotif through both books. The former, co-authored with Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift, is written as a progressive policy response to Blairite policies targeting cities and communities, in particular the Rogers Report (Urban Task Force 1999). Their recommendations advocate for advancing rights to the city (Lefebvre 1968) for those made invisible, focusing on “recovery of the commons in our cities” (Amin *et al.* 2000: 36). These proposals are framed in terms of advancing capabilities through lifelong education and learning, socialization (a knowledgeable and discursive political community, fostering sociability, inculcating civic values), transversal city politics (forging solidarities across heterogeneous urban communities, a level playing field for agonistic, direct democracy), and creating breathing and stopping places in cities for the many, enabling them to escape the drudgery of everyday work lives. In this chapter we show how the urban majority on the ground is attempting to advance their rights the city, and the struggles, trials and tribulations this entails.

*World City* lays out Doreen’s views on urban politics through the case study of her adopted hometown, drawing on her almost fifty years of engaging with it. We focus here on her ethico-political conclusion, framed around the question of what it means to be a Londoner and the politics of place beyond place. Drawing on her relational thinking about place, she works through the notion that London, as a global/world city (Massey 2007), profoundly shapes what happens across the world, advancing the notion of a politics of place beyond place. In her view, what it means to be a Londoner is that living in this place is connected with life elsewhere: “[t]he brilliance of today’s London ... is ... dependent for its ordinary, daily, social reproduction on an array of workers from the rest of the world” (100). She advocates for making Londoners conscious of their responsibilities to the people and places affected by and affecting London:

the identity of this place must take account not only of the outside within, the internal hybridity, but also, as it were, of the inside without;... the question “where does London (or any city) end?” must at least address the issue of those recruited into the dynamics of the urban economy and society by the long lines of connections of all sorts that stretch out to the rest of the country and on around the planet.... And this in turn raises questions of unequal interdependence, mutual constitution, and the possibility of thinking of placed identity not as a claim *to* place but as

the acknowledgement of the responsibilities that inhere in *being placed*.

(Massey 2007: 216, italics in original)

These two books take up different issues, one asserting rights within the city of the many and not just the view, the other asserting a cosmopolitanism that highlights responsibility towards distant others, whereby residents of a world city take account of the impact of their actions on those people and places connected to that city.

### 3. URBAN COMMONING IN LOS ANGELES AND JAKARTA

Doreen's thinking on urban politics, as articulated in *Cities for the Many Not the Few*, focuses on nudging the UK New Labour government in order to facilitate and promote various forms of solidarity: political community, sociability and civic values. This explores the question of how citizens can be socialized into forms of citizenship based on solidarity. From our perspective, however, this focus on engineering conditions of possibility for solidarity overlooks the significance of grassroots actions creating auto-constructed spaces beyond the state, where solidarity is constructed/enacted through commoning, and from which claims can be launched for rights to the city. Thus in this section, we clear ground for reflecting critically on her approach through case studies of such initiatives, taken from our fieldwork in Los Angeles and Jakarta. Focusing on the marginalized outside within, that is, those immigrants who are yet to be acknowledged as full and proper urban residents, we examine both strategies of commoning and struggles for rights to the city.

Los Angeles is frequently invoked alongside London as a global or world city (Abu-Lughod 1999; Knox and Taylor 1995), but Jakarta is larger (28 million in the greater metropolitan area vs. 19 million) and just as globally connected – albeit in a much less empowering way (Robinson 2006). Population growth in both cities (much faster in Jakarta, which still receives 200,000 annually) has been shaped to a large degree by longstanding vectors of in-migration, including substantial marginalized populations with delimited rights – undocumented international migrants in the case of Los Angeles, and low-income domestic migrants moving into Jakarta from across Indonesia. Both groups face restricted rights due to their political status, placing in question their status as someone with the right to inhabit and work in the city. For undocumented immigrants in Los Angeles the challenge is obtaining a driver's licence that serves as an ID card; in the case of Jakarta, migrants face difficulties in qualifying for a Jakarta ID – the Indonesian identity card

(Kartu Tanda Penduduk). Beyond political marginality, their status as urban residents is complicated by other factors. They face economic precarity and denigration from wealthier residents (many of whom also stem from migrant families). They also actively maintain connections with the households and extra-metropolitan places they left behind.

In both places, albeit in variegated ways, commoning has enabled these residents to claim rights to the city. In the case of Jakarta, auto-constructed kampungs (informal settlements) have long functioned as spaces of refuge for new immigrants, where migrants can set foot in the city in order to secure livelihoods and make broader citizenship claims. In Los Angeles, auto-constructed spaces such as worker centres and other immigrant organizations have provided immigrants with much needed services, representation, care and solidarity, from where they have launched important social justice campaigns asserting the right to live and work in the city.

### *Los Angeles' worker centres*

In Los Angeles, the needs of low wage, mostly immigrant workers, who were unwelcome in unions, were the immediate impetus for the self-organized creation of worker centres. Organized around workers in a particular industry (e.g. The CLEAN Car Wash Campaign), of a particular ethnicity (e.g. The Pilipino Workers Center) or place/community based (the Korean Immigrant Worker Alliance), centres focus on four spheres of action: service (e.g. legal assistance), education (e.g. English as a Second Language classes, vocational training courses, popular education and leadership training and development), organizing low-wage workers, and general advocacy for immigrants' and workers' rights. More abstractly, worker centres can be seen as attempts to construct solidarity and engage in commoning practices to enact rights to the city. They are characterized by a flat, inclusive governance structure that encourages and allows active participation and the equal voice of members in defining agendas and service needs, as well as in organizing, skill and leadership development.

Beyond practising flat governance, worker centres are spaces of care. Female directors, who in 2016 made up the majority of centre directors in Los Angeles, have made care and care-work, usually associated with the private sphere of the family, an integral element in the running and everyday operation of worker centres. This also includes designing the physical space of centres, bringing elements of domestic space, such as a kitchen, into the public space of the worker centre. The care-work in the centres helps foster an affirmative atmosphere for negotiations across differences. These are facilitated through learning about the Other, e.g. their life histories, their experiences of hardship,



discrimination – thus allowing connections to be made across difference. Yet worker centres are also sites where difficult conversations about racism, sexism, homophobia and religious intolerance within the group are discussed and addressed head-on through sustained conversations, rather than being avoided. As one centre director highlighted, it is not enough to talk about racism, sexism, homophobia and religious intolerance, and to learn about the other. Rules of conduct with the Other – such as the banning of racist and sexist talk, religious intolerance, and expressions of homophobia – are important in guiding conduct with the Other and facilitating negotiations across differences.

The inward space of the worker centre – the “withdrawal” dimension that attempts to construct solidarity through commoning practices – is complemented by their outward, “agitational” dimension: spaces of publicity through which campaigns for social justice are launched often in collaboration with other worker centres. It is in these spaces of publicity that claims to the right of the city are most visible. In Los Angeles, worker centre campaigns have ranged widely from single centre and issue campaigns to coalitions of several worker centres and other social justice and civil rights organizations, including legal aid clinics, making demands on the local and national state. Many of these campaigns have pushed the city of Los Angeles to pass new ordinances. Innovative campaigns include the Forever 21 Campaign (an effort to organize garment workers), and the \$15 minimum wage campaign.

The most recent success story is the multiracial campaign to pass a \$15 minimum wage ordinance, which was approved by the Los Angeles City Council in March 2016. Key to this success was the Raise the Wage Campaign, spearheaded by a coalition of labour groups, faith-based organizations, worker centres, day labourer centres, labour unions, and other advocacy and community organizations. Within the campaign, worker centres were instrumental for the wage theft and enforcement provisions. Wage theft, the practice of employers not paying workers their full wage by violating minimum wage laws, stealing tips, withholding overtime pay, and forcing workers to clock out and continue working, is a pervasive problem amongst the low-wage workers who participate in the worker centres, and Los Angeles has particularly high rates of wage theft (Milkman *et al.* 2010). Yet the success of this campaign, like its origins, was far from a simple matter. Paralleling how the space of worker centres is often one of encounter and negotiation across social difference, the solidarity required for a successful campaign could not be taken for granted (see Leitner and Nowak 2018). Indeed there were intense debates amongst worker centres over the meaning of wage theft and the precise nature of the demands to be made on the state. From the perspective of the Black Worker Center, discrimination of black workers on the job market and their unemployment was conceived as the ultimate wage theft, whereas

other worker centres were arguing that the ultimate wage theft is unpaid work (Leitner and Nowak 2018).

The campaign against wage theft became not only a moment for political action, but also a claim for equality. Through extensive discussions, demands were amended and commitments to common objectives were enshrined in a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) among the leaders of the different organizations before the start of the campaign. The MOU, which made each organization on the steering committee accountable to work in good faith towards passing the full package agreed upon, was itself, of course, the outcome of intense negotiations across differences (for further details see Leitner and Nowak 2018).

### *Jakarta's kampungs*

If commoning is a rare exception to private property and possessive individualist norms in Los Angeles, the opposite is the case in Jakarta. Sharing the experience of cities across the postcolony encountering (rather than promulgating) development (Escobar 1995), Indonesia's and Jakarta's peripheral positionality within globalizing capitalism has meant that the pace of immigration into the capital city has long overwhelmed its formal (capitalist) labour and housing markets. *Kampungs* as urban residential spaces (the original Bahasa Indonesia meaning is village) date back to Dutch colonialism: spaces tolerated by the Dutch, between their European thoroughfares, where the "natives" could live in their own way. After colonialism, *kampungs* flourished as autoconstructed spaces where migrants could live, raise a family, and from which they could find and undertake informal employment. We adopt Abdoumalig Simone's term "the urban majority" (Simone 2014b) to describe *kampung* residents. Estimates of the proportion of greater Jakarta's residents currently living in *kampungs* range between 30 and 60 per cent: 9–18 million (Leitner and Sheppard 2018). Jakarta's urban majority occupies *kampung* spaces dominated by informal land tenure arrangements, with the bulk of the population employed in the informal sector. Individual *kampung* districts often house migrant populations from a particular place in the Indonesian archipelago who reproduce here ways of life, culture and politics they carried with them, which over the years become hybridized with Indonesia's, Java's and Jakarta's cultural, economic and political norms. They are quiet, and can be green spaces by Jakartan standards: The majority of the alleyways are too narrow for cars (although the explosion of motorbikes has created some traffic), and families work to green the alleys and grow food in whatever open spaces are available. They are also spaces of sociability, where families



are expected to help one another in difficult times and where much time is spent socializing outside. Indeed, the better-off kampungs are attractive spaces of alternative urban living – of urban commoning.

Yet the auto-constructed spaces of kampungs are not pure commons, “off-limits to the logic of [capitalist] market exchange and market valuation” (Harvey 2012: 73). Rather, as Simone has analysed at length (Simone 2014a), they “embody both commoning and competition, collective and self-interest, with the balance between these continually in motion” (Leitner and Sheppard 2018: 441). Individual residents are quick to create and take advantage of opportunities to acquire money and power, social relations are shot through with gender, ethnic and political power relations, and kampungs actively seek to take advantage of market opportunities they can provide to those working in nearby factories, shopping centres and highrise office blocks, such as cheap rents and food.

Kampungs also range widely in terms of quality of life and political status. Some, dating back to the 1950s, are occupied by families who have secured their urban place and livelihoods, some of whom are middle class, with formal employment and freehold home ownership (Hak Milik). The Jakartan government tolerates them, has invested in upgrading infrastructure in some through a series of kampung improvement programmes, and provided political legitimation by designating them as “legal” kampungs. At the other end, are desperate and unhealthy kampungs occupied by recent immigrants trying to set foot in the city and with little access to the all-important Kartu Tanda Penduduk for Jakarta. The Jakartan government withdraws legitimacy for these kampungs by designating them “illegal”, on the grounds that they occupy locations deemed off-limits to housing, such as within 10 metres of waterways, along railway lines and under highway overpasses (based on regulations passed often long after these kampungs were founded).

There are different ways in which these auto-constructed urban commons can help secure and advance their residents’ rights to the city, albeit involving continuous struggle. First, kampungs are not simply settlements providing shelter, but support everyday practices necessary for securing material means of livelihood. Designating a kampung as legal reinforces these possibilities for its residents, even if some, such as renters, possess no land rights or cannot establish legal residence in the city. Yet legal kampungs are disappearing, particularly in locations of high land value where residents are selling their land rights to Indonesia’s large and influential land developers, who replace kampungs with modern high-rise commercial and residential developments. Rejecting offers by some developers to relocate into the new projects, residents by and large move to other, cheaper and more peripheral kampungs – an indication of the importance of such spaces for securing rights to the city for the urban majority (Leitner and Sheppard 2018<sup>8</sup>).

The picture is very different for residents of those kampungs designated as illegal: accelerating again in the last three years, a number of these kampungs have been razed at very limited notice, with residents who are not fleet of foot losing all they possess. The putative rationale for eviction is that these kampungs stand in the way of flood mitigation and urban greening projects, and violate public order laws. Compensation is uneven (only available for those with a Kartu Tanda Penduduk for Jakarta), and limited to relocation into public housing blocks that are by and large inimical to the informal livelihood practices and social networks of those evicted (Leitner and Sheppard 2018). In the face of these challenges, social movements and NGOs are working closely with residents of illegal kampungs to push back against the erosion of whatever informal rights to the city they have been able to secure (Padawangi 2014). For example, Rujak ([www.rujak.org](http://www.rujak.org)) has helped residents propose alternative rehousing designs that meet their needs (to little avail to date), the Jakarta Legal Aid Institution (Lembaga Bantuan Hukum Jakarta) has documented and publicized evictions and helped residents take their concerns to court, Ciliwung Merdeka (<https://ciliwungmerdeka.org/>) has deployed community mapping and surveys ~~worked~~ to make the case for de facto rights of occupancy, and thus legal status, of the “illegal” Kampung Pulo and Bukit Duri, and the Urban Poor Consortium has helped the urban poor support themselves and protest eviction. Success stories may be few and far between, but contestations continue.

#### 4 REFLECTIONS

Concluding, we reflect on the politics of spatiality enacted through the urban majority in LA and Jakarta, arguing that Doreen’s politics of spatiality (Massey 1999e) can and should be extended to consider the spatialities of politics. Examining these struggles we have shown how the outside within – undocumented immigrants of colour in LA and in-migrants to Jakarta in informal settlements – lays claim to rights to the city while maintaining connections with their places of origin. In part, these struggles confirm the relevance of Doreen’s three principles for a politics of spatiality. First, commoning is crucial for the construction of solidarity and equality, granting space to diverse, differently positioned voices. Second, commoning is riven with uncertainties as it rubs up against larger political-economic structures; it is always in the process of becoming – or better, always needs to be struggled over and reaffirmed in the urban everyday.

While Doreen derived her political principles from her theorization of space, strangely she did not embed spatiality within these principles, thereby overlooking the spatialities of politics – although this does make an

appearance as politics beyond place in *World City*. As our case studies also show, while urban commoning brings out aspects of her politics of spatiality, there are also distinct spatialities to the politics shaping these struggles. In short, our claim is that spatialities and politics are dialectically interrelated. These spatialities are explored in greater detail elsewhere (Leitner and Nowak 2018; Leitner and Sheppard 2018), but we provide two examples here. First, in order to create space for the differently positioned voices of the urban majority, it is vital to create, maintain and defend material spaces (worker centres, kampungs) where alternative modes of politics can be developed and enacted, and from which broader claims to the right to the city can be advanced. Second, the urban majority does not restrict itself to place, but also engages in a politics beyond place. Thus immigrants in Los Angeles draw on organizing experiences in their home country, but also engage with their places of origin through Hometown Associations. Similarly, Indonesian NGOs actively connect kampung initiatives within and across cities, but also internationally. Even if world cities might bear a particular responsibility towards distant others (Massey 2007), questions of a politics beyond place are relevant across the globally interdependent world of ordinary cities (Robinson 2006).

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