
From 'Dangerous Classes' to 'Quiet Rebels'

Politics of the Urban Subaltern in the Global South

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abstract: A major consequence of the new global restructuring in the developing countries has been the double process of integration, on the one hand, and social exclusion and informalization, on the other. These processes, meanwhile, have meant further growth of a marginalized and deinstitutionalized subaltern in Third World cities. How do the urban grassroots respond to their marginalization and exclusion? What form of politics, if any at all, do they espouse? Critically navigating through the prevailing perspectives including the culture of poverty, survival strategy, urban social movements and everyday resistance, the article suggests that the new global restructuring is reproducing subjectivities (marginalized and deinstitutionalized groups such as the unemployed, casual labor, street subsistence workers, street children and the like), social space and thus a terrain of political struggles that current theoretical perspectives cannot on their own account for. The article proposes an alternative outlook, a 'quiet encroachment of the ordinary', that might be useful to examine the activism of the urban subaltern in the Third World cities.

keywords: developing countries ♦ everyday resistance ♦ globalization ♦ quiet encroachment ♦ street politics ♦ survivalist strategy ♦ urban social movements ♦ urban grassroots

Introduction

Notwithstanding some overestimated claims of the globalization thesis (such as the waning role of the nation-states, the breakdown of borders,

International Sociology ♦ September 2000 ♦ Vol 15(3): 533–557
SAGE (London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi)
[0268-5809(200009)15:3:533–557;014969]

the homogeneity of lifestyles, cultures, political systems and so on),¹ it is generally agreed that the economics of globalization, comprised of a global market 'discipline', flexible accumulation and 'financial deepening', has had a profound impact on the post-colonial societies (Hoogvelt, 1997). One major consequence of the new global restructuring in the developing countries has been a double process of, on the one hand, integration and, on the other, social exclusion and informalization.

The historic shift in the periphery from socialist and populist regimes to liberal economic policies, through the Structural Adjustment Program, has led to the erosion of much of the social contract, collective responsibility and welfare state structures. Thus, millions of people in the global South who depended on the state provisions must now rely on their own to survive. Deregulation of prices, on housing, rent and utilities, jeopardize many poor people's security of tenure, subjecting them to the risk of homelessness. Reduction of spending on social programs has meant reduced access to decent education, health care, urban development and government housing. Gradual removal of subsidies on bread, bus fares or petrol has affected radically the living standards of millions of vulnerable groups. In the meantime, in a drive for privatization, public sectors have either been sold out or 'reformed', which in either case has caused massive layoffs without a clear prospect of boosting the economy and creating viable jobs. According to the World Bank, in the early 1990s, during the transition to market economies in post-socialist, adjusting Latin American and Middle Eastern countries, formal employment fell by 5–15 percent (World Bank, 1995). In Africa the number of unemployed grew by 10 percent more every year throughout the 1980s, while labor absorption in the formal wage sector kept declining (Vandemoortele, 1990). By the late 1990s, a staggering 1 billion workers, representing one-third of the world's labor force, most of them in the South, were either unemployed or underemployed (CIA, 1992). A large number of once educated well-to-do middle classes (government employees and students), public sector workers, as well as segments of the peasantry have been pushed to the ranks of the urban poor in labor and housing markets.

Thus, accompanied with the development of highly affluent groups, the new structuring has given rise to the growth of a marginalized and deinstitutionalized subaltern in Third World cities. There are now an increasing number of unemployed, partially employed, casual labor, street subsistence workers, street children and members of the underworld – groups that are interchangeably referred to as 'urban marginals', 'urban disenfranchised' and 'urban poor'. Such socially excluded and informal groups are by no means new historical phenomena. However, the recent global restructuring seems to have intensified and extended their operation. Only in the recent 1998 financial crisis at least 2 million

people lost their jobs in South Korea, 3 million in Thailand and a staggering 10 million in Indonesia (ILO, 1999; McNally, 1998). What is novel about this era is the marginalization of large segments of the middle classes. Slum dwelling, casual work and street hawking are no longer the characteristics of the traditional poor, but have spread also among educated young people with higher status, aspirations and social skills.

How do these growing urban disenfranchised in the Third World respond to the larger social processes that affect their lives, if and when they do? Those who promote globalization suggest that the trickle-down of an eventual national economic growth will in the long run compensate for the inevitable sacrifices that the poor make in the transitional phase. In the meantime, social funds and NGOs are encouraged to create jobs and assist in social programs to alleviate hardship and avert possible social unrest. Indeed, some view the upsurge of the (NGOs) in the South since the 1980s as a manifestation of organized activism and grassroots institutions for social development. However, granting that the development NGOs vary considerably, their potential for independent and democratic organization of development for the poor has generally been overestimated. As Niel Webster (1995), reporting on India, has noted, advocates simply tend to expect too much from the development NGOs, and by doing so underestimate their structural constraints (e.g. organizational rationale, unaccountability and professional middle-class leadership) for a meaningful development strategy. My own work on Middle Eastern development NGOs supports this conclusion. The professionalization of the NGOs tends to diminish the mobilizational feature of grassroots activism, at the same time it establishes new forms of clientelism (Bayat, 2000).

Many on the left point to a number of 'reactive movements' (identity politics), which, they say, challenge globalization by appropriating technologies that this phenomenon is offering. While Melucci's 'new social movements' (1994) focus exclusively on the 'highly differentiated' western societies, others, like Manuel Castells and Ankie Hoogvelt, taking a southern perspective, suggest religious, ethnic and feminist movements as well as the Latin American post-development ideas as the backbone of the anti-globalization trend. Identity movements do take up some of the challenges of globalization in post-colonial societies. However, they reflect more the sentiments of middle-class intellectuals than the actual everyday practices of the ordinary people. What do the grassroots think or do? What form of politics, if any at all, do the urban marginalized groups espouse? This article attempts to address these questions. Critically navigating through the prevailing models, including culture of poverty, survival strategy, urban social movements and everyday resistance, I would suggest that the new global restructuring is reproducing subjectivities (marginalized and deinstitutionalized groups such as the unemployed,

casual labor, street subsistence workers and street children), social space and thus terrain of political struggles that current theoretical perspectives cannot on their own account for. I propose an alternative outlook – ‘quiet encroachment’ – that, I think, might be more pertinent to examine the activism of the marginalized groups in the cities of the global South. Quiet encroachment refers to non-collective but prolonged direct action by individuals and families to acquire the basic necessities of their lives (land for shelter, urban collective consumption, informal jobs, business opportunities and public space) in a quiet and unassuming illegal fashion. Although this perspective has emerged out of my observation of urban processes in the Middle East, nevertheless it might have relevance to other Third World cities.

Prevailing Perspectives

The sociological examination of urban ‘marginality’ dates back to 19th-century Europe. Problems associated with urbanization (urban crime, inner-city conditions, unemployment, migration, cultural duality and so on) acquired scientific treatment from the social science community. George Simmel’s ‘The Stranger’ dealt with sociopsychological traits of new urban settlers, and Durkheim was particularly keen on their ‘*anomie*’. Such a conceptualization later informed the work of the Chicago School of Sociology and Urban Study in the USA during the 1920s and 1930s when Chicago acted as the laboratory to examine the social being of many ethnic migrants who flowed into this city. For Everett Stonequist (1935) and Robert Park (1928), many immigrants were ‘*marginals*’ – a trait that was embedded in their social structure. Marginal personality was a manifestation of cultural hybridity, living on the margin of two cultures without being a full member of either.

Unlike the Chicago School functionalists, mainstream Marxism, however, did not take the issue seriously. Relative to the centrality of working as the agent of social transformation, Marxist theory either ignored or described the urban poor as ‘*lumpenproletariat*’, the ‘*non-proletarian*’ urban groups, a term used by Marx himself; but, as Hall Draper (1978: Vol. 2, 453) notes, it gave rise to ‘*endless misunderstanding and mistranslation*’. For Marx, *lumpenproletariat* was a political economy category. It referred to propertyless people who did not produce – ‘*non-working proletariat*’, obsolete social elements such as beggars, thieves, thugs and criminals who were in general poor but lived on the labor of other working people. Due to such economic existence, they were said to follow a politics of non-commitment which in the end may work against the interests of the producing classes (Draper, 1978: Vol. 2, Ch. 15). It is this uncertain politics that renders *lumpenproletariat*, for both Marx and

Engels, the 'social scum', 'refuse of all classes', the 'dangerous classes'. Although Marx theorized them later in terms of the 'reserve army of labor', thus a segment of the working class, nevertheless controversy continued as to the relevance of this concept in the current capitalist structuring as it does not leave much chance for these people to be re-employed. Some suggested that far from being on 'reserve', the urban disenfranchised were integrated into the capitalist relations (Worsley, 1984). Even with Frantz Fanon's passionate defense of lumpenproletariat as the revolutionary force in the colonies (Fanon, 1967), the Communist parties in the Third World did not go beyond looking at the urban disenfranchised as the 'toiling masses' who might have the potential for alliance with the working class.

However, the continuous prominence of the 'informals' (which in many developing economies clearly outweighed the industrial working class) and their assumed threat to political stability in the developing countries brought back them to academic analysis. Against the descriptive term of 'informals' and the derogatory one of 'lumpenproletariat', McGee (1979) and Cohen (1982) opted for the notion of 'proto-proletariat', and Peter Worsley (1984), 'urban poor' – concepts that recognized some degree of agency.

Yet, the more serious studies on the social conditions and the politics of the urban subaltern in the Third World emerged as a major field for US social scientists during the 1960s. Modernization and urban migration in the developing countries had caused a dramatic expansion of impoverished urban settlements; and the growing urban 'underclass' was thought to provide a breeding ground for the spread of radical guerrilla movements, which in the midst of the Cold War were perceived to jeopardize the political interest of the USA and those of the local elites. The Chinese Revolution of 1949, the Cuban Revolution of 1959 and the growing guerrilla movements in parts of the Third World were taken as convincing proof by political observers. Latin America, however, acted as a laboratory for the much debated theories about the social and political behavior of the urban underclass. Studies by Samuel Huntington and Joan Nelson, among others, reflected the concerns of the time (Huntington, 1968; Nelson, 1970; Huntington and Nelson, 1976). Here the prevailing attention of scholarship focused on the poor's 'political threat' to the existing order. Scholars, mostly political scientists, were preoccupied with the question of whether the migrant poor constituted a destabilizing force. Joan Nelson argued that there was 'no evidence that the new migrants are either radical or violence-prone' (Nelson, 1970: 393–414). Such preoccupations then overlooked the dynamics of the poor's everyday life. Many viewed the politics of the poor in the binary terms of the revolutionary/passive dichotomy, consequently limiting the possibility of

looking at the matter in a different light. Essentialism informed both sides of the controversy. The ensuing debates were galvanized into four identifiable perspectives: the 'passive poor', 'survival strategy', 'urban territorial movement' and 'everyday resistance' models.

The Passive Poor

While some observers working in the functionalist paradigm still viewed the urban poor as essentially disruptive and imbued with the sentiments of anomie, many still considered the poor as a politically passive group struggling simply to make ends meet. Oscar Lewis's theory of the 'culture of poverty', based upon ethnographies among the urban poor in Puerto Rico and Mexico, offered a scientific legitimacy to such notion (Lewis, 1959, 1961, 1966). Highlighting certain cultural/psychological essentials as components of a culture of poverty – fatalism, rootlessness, unadaptability, traditionalism, criminality, lack of ambition, hopelessness and so on – Lewis unintentionally extended the notion of the 'passive poor'. With an underlying emphasis on identifying the 'marginal man' as cultural type, the 'culture of poverty' remained a dominant perspective for many years, informing much of anti-poverty discourse and policies in the USA as well as the perception of Third World elites toward the poor.

The conceptual weaknesses of 'culture of poverty', despite Lewis's empathy with the poor, became clear before long. Simply, Lewis essentialized the culture of the poor, since his 'culture of poverty' was only one type of culture among many. Lewis's generalization disregarded the varying ways in which the poor in different cultures handle poverty. Critiques such as Worsley (1984) charged Lewis as a middle-class scholar who blamed the poor for their poverty and passivity (Worsley, 1984: 190–4).² Interestingly, Lewis's conceptualization shared many traits with those of the Chicago School urban sociologists such as Stonequist and Robert Park and even the thinkers of the earlier generation like Simmel. Janice Perlman's (1976) powerful critique of *The Myth of Marginality*, together with Manuel Castells' (1983) critical contributions, undermined this outlook in academia, if not among officialdom. They demonstrated the myth of marginality as an instrument of social control of the poor, and the marginalized poor as a product of capitalist social structure.

The Surviving Poor

As such the 'survival strategy' did not directly deal with the politics of the poor, but a relevant, implicit conceptual assumption underlies this perspective. The survival strategy model goes one step forward, implying that although the poor are powerless, nevertheless they do not sit around

waiting for their fate to determine their lives. Rather they are active in their own way to ensure their survival. Thus, to counter unemployment or price increases, they often resort to theft, begging, prostitution or the reorientation of their consumption pattern; to respond to famine and war, they choose to leave their home places even if emigration is discouraged by the authorities. In this thinking, the poor are seen to survive and live their lives; however, their survival is at a cost to themselves or their fellow humans (Scott, 1986). While resort to coping mechanisms in real life seems quite widespread among the poor in many cultures, nevertheless, an overemphasis on the language of survival strategy, as Escobar (1995) notes, may contribute to maintaining the image of the poor as victims, denying them any agency. The fact is that the poor also strive to resist and make advances in their lives when the opportunity arises. Beyond that, evidence in many parts of the world does indicate that they also create opportunities for advancement – they organize and get involved in contentious politics. John Friedmann's (1992, 1996) notion of 'empowerment' is just one indication of such opportunity-creating tendency of the poor. It describes poor people's self-organization for collective survival through the institution of the household as the central element for the production of livelihood, the principle of moral economy (trust, reciprocity, voluntarism) and the utilization of their 'social power' (free time, social skill, networking, associations and instruments of production).

The Political Poor

Critiques of 'passive poor' and 'culture of poverty' models opened the way for the development of an outlook in which the urban subaltern emerged as political actors – the 'urban territorial movement' standpoint. Perlman, Castells and some other scholars of Latin America insisted that the poor were not marginal, but integrated into society. Rather, they argued, the poor were 'marginalized' – economically exploited, politically repressed, socially stigmatized and culturally excluded from a closed social system. Not only did the poor participate in party politics, elections and mainstream economic activities, more importantly, they established their own territorial social movements. Thus community associations, *barrios*, consumer organizations, soup kitchens, squatter support groups, church activities and the like were understood as manifesting organized and territorially based movements of the poor who strive for 'social transformation' (according to Castells, 1983), 'emancipation' (according to Schuurman and Van Naerssen, 1989), or an alternative to the tyranny of modernity, in the words of John Friedmann (1989). In their immediate day-to-day activities, the poor struggle for a share in urban services, or 'collective consumption'.

The territorial character of these movements results from the mode of existence of the agents – the urban poor. Although quite differentiated (in terms of income, status, occupation and production relations), the urban poor nevertheless are thought to share a common place of residence, community. Shared space and the needs associated with common property, then, offer these people the possibility of ‘spatial solidarity’ (Hourcade, 1989). The attempts to highlight contentious politics as well as non-contentious cooperation among the urban poor undercut drastically both the ‘culture of poverty’ and ‘survivalist’ arguments, granting a significant agency to the urban disenfranchised. However, the ‘urban movement perspective’ appears largely to be a Latin American model rooted in the sociopolitical conditions of this region. Not surprisingly, it is a perspective that has been offered primarily by the scholars working on Latin America (e.g. Stiefel and Wolfe, 1994). Local soup kitchens, neighborhood associations, church groups or street trade unionism are hardly common phenomena in, say, the Middle East, Asia or Africa (with the exception of countries like India and South Africa). In the Middle East, for instance, the prevalence of authoritarian states (of despotic, populist, or dictatorial kinds), which are wary of civil associations, together with the strength of family and kinship relations, render primary solidarities more pertinent than secondary associations and social movements (Bayat, 2000). While collective entities such as the charity organizations and mosque associations do exist, they rarely lead to political mobilization of the popular classes. Although associations based upon neighborly relations, home people or traditional credit systems are quite common, nevertheless, social networks which extend beyond kinship and ethnicity remain largely casual, unstructured and paternalistic (Bayat, 1997a, 2000). Some scholars tend to present the Islamist movements in the region as the Middle Eastern model of urban social movements. A few functional resemblances notwithstanding, the fact remains that the identity of Islamism does not derive from its particular concern for the urban disenfranchised. Islamism in general has broader aims and objectives. Unlike the Catholic Church, in particular the Liberation Theology Movement, the Islamist movements tend to mobilize often not the poor but largely the educated middle classes, which they view as the main agents of political change (Bayat, 1998). So, it is mainly in exceptional circumstances (e.g. crises and revolutionary situations) that some degree of mobilization and contentious politics are encouraged, as in revolutionary Iran and the crisis-stricken Algeria. It is true that the Islamist Rifah Party in Turkey mobilized slum dwellers, but this was so primarily because Turkey’s free electoral system had granted the urban marginals voting power and thus bargaining leverage which the Islamists as a legitimate political party could utilize.

Still, it must be realized that the prevalence of urban movements in

Latin America varies considerably. As Leeds and Leeds have shown, due to the multiplicity of competing interest groups (government, private interests and others) the poor have had more opportunity for collective action in Peru than in Brazil, where the extremity of constraints forced the poor to 'seek their betterment through the paternalistic, individualistic channels of favors and exchange of interests' (Leeds and Leeds, 1976: 211). In Chile, in the episodes of political openness and radical groupings, the poor have been organized more extensively.

The Resisting Poor

The dearth of conventional collective action – in particular contentious protests among the subaltern groups (the poor, peasants and women) in the developing countries – together with a disillusionment with dominant socialist parties, pushed many radical observers to 'discover' and highlight different types of activism, however small-scale, local or even individualistic. Such a quest, meanwhile, both contributed to and benefited from the upsurge of theoretical paradigms, during the 1980s, associated with poststructuralism which rendered micro-politics and 'everyday resistance' a popular perspective. James Scott's departure, during the 1980s, from a structuralist position in studying the behavior of the peasantry in Asia (which explained the reciprocal relationship between his subsistence peasantry and landlords that he called the moral economy) into a more ethnographic method of focusing on individual reactions of peasants contributed considerably to this shift of paradigm (Scott, 1985). In the meantime, Foucault's 'decentered' notion of power together with a revival of neo-Gramscian politics of culture (hegemony) offered a key theoretical backing for micro-politics and thus the 'resistance' paradigm.

The notion of 'resistance' came to stress that power and counter-power were not in binary opposition, but in a decoupled, complex, ambivalent and perpetual 'dance of control' (Pile, 1997: 2). It based itself on the idea that 'wherever there is power there is resistance'; although the latter consisted largely of small-scale, everyday, tiny activities which the agents could afford to articulate given their political constraints. Such a perception of resistance penetrated not only the peasant studies which until then had remained atheoretical, but a variety of fields including labor studies, identity politics, ethnicity, women's studies, education and studies of the urban subaltern.

Thus multiple research discussed how relating stories about miracles 'gives voice to popular resistance' (Reeves, 1995); how disenfranchised women resisted patriarchy by relating folk-tales, songs or by pretending to be possessed or crazy (Abu-Lughod, 1990); how the extension of familyhood among the urban poor represented an 'avenue of political

participation' (Singerman, 1995). The relationships between Filipino bar girls and western men were discussed not simply in terms of total domination, but in complex and contingent fashion (Pile, 1997); and the veiling of Muslim working women is represented not in simple terms of submission, but in ambivalent terms of protest and cooptation – hence an 'accommodating protest' (Macleod, 1991). **Indeed, on occasions, both veiling and unveiling were simultaneously considered as symbols of resistance!**

Undoubtedly, such an attempt to grant agency to the subjects that until then were depicted as 'passive poor', 'submissive women', 'apolitical peasant' and 'oppressed worker' was a positive improvement. The resistance paradigm helps to uncover the complexity of power relations in society, in general, and the politics of the subaltern, in particular. It tells us that we may not expect a universalized form of struggle; that totalizing pictures often distort variations in people's perceptions about change; that the local should be recognized as a significant site of struggle as well as a unit of analysis; that organized collective action may not be possible everywhere, and thus alternative forms of struggles must be discovered and acknowledged; that organized protest as such may not necessarily be privileged in the situations where suppression rules. The value of a more flexible, small-scale and bureaucratic activism should, therefore, be acknowledged.³ These are some of the issues that critiques of poststructuralist advocates of 'resistance' ignore (for example Cole and Hill, 1995).

Yet a number of conceptual and political problems also emerges from this paradigm. The immediate trouble is how to conceptualize resistance, its relation to power, domination and submission. James Scott seems to be clear as to what he means by the term:

Class resistance includes *any* act(s) by member(s) of a subordinate class that is or are *intended* either to mitigate or deny claims (for example, rents, taxes, prestige) made on that class by superordinate classes (for example, landlords, large farmers, the state) or to advance its own claims (for example, work, land, charity, respect) vis-a-vis these superordinate classes. (Scott, 1985: 290; emphasis added)

However, the phrase 'any act' blocks delineation between the qualitatively diverse forms of activities that Scott lists. Are we not to distinguish between large-scale collective action and individual acts, say, of tax dodging? Do reciting poetry in private, however subversive sounding, and armed struggle have identical value? Should we not expect unequal effectiveness and implications from such different acts? Scott was aware of this, and so agreed with those who had made distinctions between different types of resistance – for example, 'real resistance' referring to organized, systematic, preplanned or selfless acts with revolutionary

consequences, and 'token resistance' pointing to unorganized incidental acts without any revolutionary consequences, and which are accommodated in the power structure (Scott, 1985: 292). Yet, he insisted that 'token resistance' is no less real than 'real resistance'. Scott's followers, however, continued to make further distinctions. Nathan Brown (1990), in studying peasant politics in Egypt, for instance, identifies three forms of politics: atomistic (politics of individuals and small groups with obscure content), communal (a group effort to disrupt the system, like slowing down production and so on) and revolt (just short of revolution to negate the system).

Beyond this, many resistance writers tend to confuse an awareness about oppression with acts of resistance against it. The fact that poor women sing songs about their plight or ridicule men in their private gatherings indicates their understanding of gender dynamics. This, however, does not mean that they are involved in acts of resistance; nor the miracle stories of the poor urbanites who imagine the saints to come and punish the strong. Such an understanding of 'resistance' fails to capture the extremely complex interplay of conflict and consent, and ideas and action operating within the systems of power. Indeed, the link between consciousness and action remains a major sociological dilemma (Giddens, 2000).

Scott makes it clear that resistance is an intentional act. In Weberian tradition, he takes the meaning of action as a crucial element. This intentionality, while significant in itself, obviously leaves out many types of individual and collective activities whose intended and unintended consequences do not correspond. In Cairo or Tehran, for example, many poor families tap electricity and running water illegally from the municipality despite their awareness of their illegal behavior. Yet, they do not steal urban services in order to express their defiance vis-a-vis the authorities. Rather, they do it because they feel the necessity of those services for a decent life; because they find no other way to acquire them. But these very mundane acts when continued are followed by significant changes in the urban structure, social policy and in the actors' own lives. Hence, the significance of the unintended consequences of agents' daily activities. In fact, many authors in the resistance paradigm have simply abandoned intent and meaning, focusing instead eclectically on both intended and unintended practices as manifestation of 'resistance'.

There is still a further question. Does resistance mean defending an already achieved gain (in Scott's terms denying claims made by dominant groups over the subordinate ones) or making fresh demands (to 'advance its own claims'), what I like to call 'encroachment'. In much of the resistance literature this distinction is missing. Although one might imagine moments of overlap, the two strategies, however, follow different

political consequences; this is so in particular when we view them in relation to the strategies of dominant power. Lenin's *What Is To Be Done* (1973) is devoted to the discussion of these two strategies, termed 'economism/trade unionism' and 'social democratic/party politics'.

Whatever one may think about the Leninist/vanguardist paradigm, it was one that corresponded to a particular theory of the state and power (a capitalist state to be seized by a mass movement led by the working-class party); and, in addition, it was clear where this strategy wanted to take the working class (to establish a socialist state). Now, what is the perception of the state in the 'resistance' paradigm? What is the strategic aim in this perspective? Where does the resistance paradigm want to take its agents/subjects, beyond 'prevent[ing] the worst and promis[ing] something better' (Scott, 1985: 350)?

Much of the literature of resistance is based upon a notion of power that Foucault has articulated, that power is everywhere, that it 'circulates', and is never 'localized here and there, never in anybody's hands' (Foucault, 1972). Such a formulation is surely instructive in transcending the myth of powerlessness of the ordinary and in recognizing their agency. Yet, this 'decentered' notion of power, shared by many poststructuralist 'resistance' writers, underestimates state power, notably its class dimension, since it fails to see that although power circulates, it does so unevenly – in some places it is far weightier, more concentrated and 'thicker', so to speak, than in others. In other words, like it or not, the state does matter and one needs to take that into account when discussing the potentials of urban subaltern activism. While Foucault insists that resistance is real when it occurs outside and independent from the systems of power, the perception of power which informs the 'resistance' literature leaves little room for an analysis of the state as a system of power. It is, therefore, not accidental that a theory of the state and the possibility of cooptation is absent in almost all accounts of 'resistance'. Consequently, the acts of resistance, cherished so dearly, float around aimlessly in an unknown, uncertain and ambivalent universe of power relations, with an end result of an unsettled and tense accommodation with the existing power arrangement.

Lack of a clear concept of resistance, moreover, leads writers in this genre to often overestimate and read too much into the acts of the agents. The result is that almost any act of the subjects potentially becomes one of 'resistance'. Determined to discover the 'inevitable' acts of resistance, poststructuralist writers often come to 'replace their subject' (McAdam et al., 1997). While they attempt to challenge the essentialism of such perspectives as 'passive poor', 'submissive Muslim women' and 'inactive masses', they tend to fall into the trap of essentialism in reverse – by reading too much into the ordinary behavior, interpreting it as necessarily

conscious or contentious acts of defiance. This is so because they overlook the crucial fact that these acts occur mostly within the prevailing systems of power.

For example, some of the lower class's activities in the Middle East, which some authors read as 'resistance', 'intimate politics' of defiance or 'avenues of participation', may actually contribute to the stability and legitimacy of the state (Singerman, 1995; Hoodfar, 1997). The fact that people are able to help themselves and extend their networks surely shows their daily activism and struggles. However, by doing so the actors may hardly win any space from the state (or other sources of power, like capital and patriarchy) – they are not necessarily challenging domination. In fact, governments often encourage self-help and local initiatives so long as they do not become oppositional. They do so in order to shift some of their burdens of social welfare provision and responsibilities onto the individual citizens. The proliferation of many NGOs in the global South represents a good indicator. In short, much of the resistance literature confuses what one might consider as coping strategies (when the survival of the agents is secured at the cost of themselves or that of fellow humans) and effective participation or subversion of domination.

There is a last question. If the poor are always able to resist in many ways (by discourse or actions, individual or collective, overt or covert) the systems of domination, then what is the need to assist them? If they are already politically able citizens, why should we expect the state or any other agency to empower them? Misreading the behavior of the poor may, in fact, frustrate our moral responsibility toward the vulnerable. As Michael Brown (1996: 730) notes, when you 'elevate the small injuries of childhood to the same moral status as the suffering of the truly oppressed', you are committing 'a savage leveling that diminishes rather than intensifies our sensitivities to injustice'.

The Quiet Encroachment of the Ordinary

Given the shortcomings of the prevailing perspectives – that is, the essentialism of the 'passive poor', reductionism of the 'surviving poor', Latino-centrism of the 'political poor' and conceptual perplexity of 'resistance literature' – I want to assess the politics of the urban marginals in the developing world from a different angle, in terms of 'the quiet encroachment of the ordinary'. I believe that this notion might overcome some of those inadequacies, and capture better the essence of urban subaltern politics in the conditions of globalization.⁴

The notion of 'quiet encroachment' describes the silent, protracted but pervasive advancement of the ordinary people on the propertied and powerful in order to survive and improve their lives. This is marked by

quiet, largely atomized and prolonged mobilization with episodic collective action – open and fleeting struggles without clear leadership, ideology or structured organization. While the quiet encroachment cannot be considered as a ‘social movement’ as such, it is also distinct from survival strategies or ‘everyday resistance’ in that, first, the struggles and gains of the agents are not at the cost of fellow poor or themselves, but of the state, the rich and the powerful. Thus, in order to light their shelter, the urban poor tap electricity not from their neighbors, but from the municipal power poles; or to raise their living standards, they would not prevent their children from attending school in order to work, but rather squeeze the timing of their formal job, in order to carry on their secondary work in the informal sector.

In addition, these struggles are seen not necessarily as defensive merely in the realm of resistance, but cumulatively encroaching, meaning that the actors tend to expand their space by winning new positions to move on. This type of quiet and gradual grassroots activism tends to contest many fundamental aspects of the state prerogatives, including the meaning of order, control of public space, of public and private goods and the relevance of modernity.

I am referring to the life-long struggles of the floating social clusters – the migrants, refugees, unemployed, squatters, street vendors, street children and other marginalized groups, whose growth has been accelerated by the process of economic globalization. I have in mind the long processes in which millions of men and women embark on long migratory journeys, scattering in remote and often alien environs, acquiring work, shelter, land and living amenities. The rural migrants encroach on the cities and their collective consumption, the refugees and international migrants on host states and their provisions, the squatters on public and private lands or ready-made homes, and the unemployed, as street subsistence workers, on the public space and business opportunity created by shopkeepers. And all of them tend to challenge the notions of order, modern city and urban governance espoused by the Third World political elites.

The concrete forms of encroachments vary considerably. Post-revolution Iran saw an unprecedented colonization, mostly by the poor, of public and private urban land, apartments, hotels, street sidewalks and public utilities. Between 1980 and 1992, despite the government’s opposition, the land area of Tehran expanded from 200 to 600 km²; and well over 100 mostly informal communities were created in and around greater Tehran (Bayat, 1997b: 79). The actors of the massive informal economy extended beyond the typical marginal poor to include also the new ‘lumpen middle class’, the educated salary-earners whose public sector position rapidly declined during the 1980s. In a more dramatic case,

millions of rural migrants, the urban poor and the middle-class poor have quietly claimed cemeteries, roof tops and state/public lands on the outskirts of Cairo, creating well over 100 spontaneous communities which house over 5 million people. Once settled, encroachments still continue in many directions. Against formal terms and conditions, the residents then add rooms, balconies and extra space in and on buildings. Those who have formally been given housing in public projects built by the state, illegally redesign and rearrange their space to suite their needs by erecting partitions, and by adding and inventing new space (Bayat, 1997a; Ghannam, 1997). Often whole communities emerge as a result of intense struggles and negotiations between the poor and the authorities and elites in their daily lives (Kuppinger, 1997).

At the same time, the encroachers have forced the authorities to extend urban services to their neighborhoods by otherwise tapping them illegally, using them free of charge. However, once utilities are installed many simply refuse to pay for their use. Some 40 percent of poor residents of Hayy-Assaloum, a south Beirut informal community, refuse to pay their electricity bills. The cost of unpaid water charges in the Egyptian city of Alexandria amounts to US\$3 million a year. Similar stories are reported in urban Chile and South Africa, where the poor have periodically refused to pay for urban public services after struggling to acquire them, often against the authorities' will. Hundreds of thousands of street vendors in Cairo, Istanbul and Tehran have occupied the streets in the main commercial centers, infringing on favorable business opportunities the shopkeepers have generated. Thousands of inhabitants in these cities subsist on tips from parking cars in streets which they control and organize in such elaborate ways as to create maximum parking space. Finally, as in many Third World cities such as those in South Korea, the encroachment of the street vendors on copyrights of labels and trademarks has caused inevitable protests by the multinational companies.

These actors carry out their activities not as a deliberate political act; rather, they are driven by the force of necessity – the necessity to survive and improve a dignified life. Necessity is the notion that justifies their often unlawful acts as moral and even 'natural' ways to maintain a life with dignity. Yet, these very simple and seemingly mundane practices tend to shift them into the realm of contentious politics. The contenders get engaged in collective action and see their actions and themselves as political chiefly when they are confronted by those who threaten their gains. Hence a key attribute of the quiet encroachment is that while advances are made quietly, individually and gradually, the defense of their gains is often, although not always, collective and audible.

Driven by the force of necessity (effects of economic restructuring, agricultural failure, physical hardship, war and displacement), they set out

on their ventures rather individually, often organized around kinship ties, and without much clamor. They even deliberately avoid collective effort, large-scale operations, commotion and publicity. At times the squatters, for instance, prevent others from joining them in specific areas; and vendors discourage their counterparts from settling in the same vicinity. Many even hesitate to share information about their strategies of acquiring urban services with similar groups. Yet as these seemingly desperate individuals and families pursue similar paths, their sheer cumulative scores turn them into an eventual social force. This is another feature of the quiet encroachment.

But why individual and quiet direct action, instead of collective demand-making? Unlike the factory workers, students or professionals, these people represent groups in flux and structurally operate largely outside institutional mechanisms through which they can express grievance and enforce demands. They lack an organizational power of disruption – the possibility of going on strike, for example. They may participate in street demonstrations or riots as part of a general expression of popular discontent, but only when these methods enjoy a reasonable currency and legitimacy (as in immediate post-revolutionary Iran, Beirut during the civil war, or after the fall of Suharto in Indonesia in 1998), and when they are mobilized by outside leaders. Thus, urban land takeovers may be led by left-wing activists; and the unemployed and street vendors may be invited to form unions (as in Iran after the revolution, Lima or in India). This, however, represents an uncommon phenomenon since more often than not mobilization for collective demand-making is prevented by political repression in many developing countries where these struggles often take place. Consequently, in place of protest or publicity, these groups move directly to fulfill their needs by themselves, albeit individually and discretely. In short, theirs is not a politics of protest, but of redress, a struggle for an immediate outcome through individual direct action.

What do these men and women aim for? They seem to pursue two major goals. The first is the redistribution of social goods and opportunities in the form of the (unlawful and direct) acquisition of collective consumption (land, shelter, piped water, electricity, roads), public space (street pavements, intersections, street parking places), opportunities (favorable business conditions, locations and labels), and other life chances essential for survival and minimal standards.

The other goal is attaining autonomy, both cultural and political, from the regulations, institutions and discipline imposed by the state and modern institutions. In a quest for an informal life, the poor tend to function as much as possible outside the boundaries of the state and modern bureaucratic institutions, basing their relationships on reciprocity, trust

and negotiation rather than on the modern notions of individual self-interest, fixed rules and contracts. Thus, they may opt for jobs in self-employed activities rather than working under the discipline of the modern workplace; resorting to informal dispute resolution rather than reporting to police; getting married through local informal procedures (in the Middle East under local sheikhs) rather than by governmental offices; borrowing money from informal credit associations rather than modern banks. This is so not because these people are essentially non- or anti-modern, but because the conditions of their existence compel them to seek an informal mode of life. For modernity is a costly affair; not everyone can afford to be modern. Since it requires the capacity to conform to the types of behavior and mode of life (adherence to strict disciplines of time, space, contracts and so on) which most vulnerable people simply cannot afford. So, while the disenfranchised wish to watch color television, enjoy clean tap water and possess security of tenure, they are weary of paying their tax, bills or reporting to work at specified times.

But how far can the urban subaltern exercise autonomy in the conditions of globalization, amid expanding integration? The point is that not only do the poor seek autonomy, they also need security from state surveillance. For an informal life in the conditions of modernity is also an insecure life. To illustrate, street vendors may feel free from the discipline of modern working institutions, but they suffer from police harassment for lacking business permits. The struggle of the poor to consolidate their communities, attain schools, clinics or sewers would inevitably integrate them into the prevailing systems of power (that is, the state and modern bureaucratic institutions) which they wish to avoid. In their quest for security, the poor then are in constant negotiation and vacillation between autonomy and integration. Yet, they continue to pursue autonomy in any possible space available within the integrating structures and processes.

Becoming Political

If the encroachment begins with little political meaning attached to it, if illegal acts are often justified on moral grounds, then how does it turn into a collective/political struggle? So long as the actors carry on with their everyday advances without being confronted seriously by any authority, they are likely to treat their advance as an ordinary everyday exercise. However, once their gains are threatened, they tend to become conscious of their doings and the value of their gains, often defending them in collective and audible fashion. Examples may be the mobilization of the squatters in Tehran in 1976, street vendors in the 1980s and street riots by the squatters in several cities in the early 1990s. Alternatively, the

actors may retain their gains through quiet non-compliance without necessarily engaging in collective resistance. Instead of collectively standing by their businesses, the mobile street vendors in Cairo or Istanbul simply retreat into the back streets once the municipality police arrive, but immediately resume their work as soon as they are gone again. At any rate, the struggle of the actors against the authorities are not about winning a gain, but are primarily about defending and furthering the already won gains. But they almost invariably involve the state power.

The state's position vis-a-vis this type of activism is affected, first, by the extent of its capacity to exercise surveillance, and, second, by the dual nature of quiet encroachment (infringing on property and power, and, at the same time, being a self-help activity). Third World states seem to be more tolerant of quiet encroachment than those in the industrialized countries such as the USA, where similar activities, albeit very limited, also take place. The industrial states are by far better equipped with ideological, technological and institutional apparatuses for applying surveillance over their populations. In other words, people have more room for autonomy under the vulnerable and 'soft states' of the South than in the advanced industrialized countries, where tax evasion, infringement into private property and encroachment on state domains are considered serious offenses.

On the other hand, quiet encroachment, although it is an infringement on public property and power, may in many ways benefit the Third World governments. For it is a mechanism through which the poor come to help themselves. It is no surprise then that these governments express often contradictory reactions toward these kinds of activities. The 'soft' and vulnerable states, especially at times of crises, tend in practice to allow the encroachment when the latter still appears limited. On their part, the encroachers attempt constantly to appear limited and tolerable while in fact expanding so much that resistance against them becomes formidable. They do so by resorting to tactical retreats, becoming invisible, bribing officials, or concentrating on particular and less strategic areas (for instance, squatting in remote areas or vending in less visible locations).

However, once their real expansion and impact are revealed, when the cumulative growth of the actors and their doings passes beyond a tolerable point, the state crackdown becomes expected. Yet in most cases, the crackdowns fail to yield much result, since they are usually launched too late when the encroachers have already spread, becoming visible and passing the point of no return. Indeed, the description by officials of these processes as 'cancerous' brings home the dynamics of such movements.

The sources of conflict between the actors and the state are not difficult to determine. First, the often 'informal' and free-of-charge distribution of public goods exerts heavy pressure on the resources which the state

controls. Besides, the rich – the real estate owners, merchants and shopkeepers – also lose properties, brands and business opportunities. The alliance of the state and the propertied groups adds a class dimension to the conflict. On the other hand, the actors' drive for autonomy in everyday life creates a serious void in the domination of the modern state. Autonomous life renders the modern states, in particular the populist versions, rather irrelevant. Moreover, autonomy and informality (of agents, activities and spaces) deprive the states of the necessary knowledge to exert surveillance. Unregulated jobs, unregistered peoples and places, nameless streets and alleyways and policeless neighborhoods mean that these entities remain hidden from the governments' books. To be able to control, the states need to make them transparent. Indeed, programs of squatter upgrading may be seen in terms of this strategy of opening up the unknown in order to be able to control it. Conflict between these encroachers and the state, therefore, is inevitable.

Nowhere is this conflict more evident than the 'streets', this public space par excellence. Since the 'streets' serve as the only locus of collective expression for, but by no means limited to, those who generally lack an institutional setting to express discontent, including squatters, the unemployed, the street subsistence workers, street children, members of the underworld and housewives. Whereas factory workers or college students, for instance, may cause disruption by going on strike, the unemployed or street vendors can voice grievances only in the public spaces, the streets. Indeed for many of these disenfranchised, the streets are the main, perhaps the only, place where they can perform their daily functions – to assemble, make friends, earn a living, spend their leisure time and express discontent. In addition, the streets are also the public places where the state has the most evident presence, which is expressed in police patrols, traffic regulations and spatial divisions, in short, in public ordering. The dynamics of the power relationship between the encroachers and the authorities is what I have termed 'street politics'. By 'street politics', I mean a set of conflicts and the attendant implications between a collective populace and the authorities, which are shaped and expressed episodically in the physical and social space of the 'streets' – from alleyways to the more visible street sidewalks, public parks and public sports places. Street politics signifies an articulation of discontent by clusters of different social agents largely outside modern institutions, without a coherent ideology or evident leadership (Bayat, 1997b).

Two key factors render the streets an arena of politics. First is the use of public space as a site of contestation between the actors and the authorities. In this sense, what makes the streets a political site is the active or participative (as opposed to passive) use of public space. This is so because these sites (sidewalks, public parks, intersections and so on) are

increasingly becoming the domain of the state power which regulates their use, making them 'orderly'. It expects the users to operate in them passively. An active use challenges the authority of the state and those social groups that benefit from such order.

The second element shaping street politics is the operation of what I have called the 'passive network' among the people who use and operate in the public space. By 'passive network' I mean an instantaneous communication among atomized individuals, which is established by a tacit recognition of their common identity, and which is mediated through space. When a woman enters a party full of male guests, she would instantaneously notice another woman in that party. Vendors in a street are most likely to recognize one another even if they never meet or talk. Now when a threat occurs to the women in the party or the vendors in the street, they are likely to get together even if they do not know each other or have not planned to do so in advance. The significance of this concept lies in the possibility of imagining mobilization of atomized individuals, such as the quiet encroachers, who are largely deprived of organizations and deliberate networking. 'Passive network' implies that individuals may be mobilized to act collectively without active or deliberately constructed networks. Street as a public space has this intrinsic feature that makes it possible for people to get mobilized through establishing passive networks. Once the individual actors, the encroachers, are confronted by a threat, their passive network is likely to turn into active communication and cooperation. That is how an eviction threat or police raid may immediately bring together squatters, or street vendors, who did not even know one another. Of course, the shift from passive network to collective resistance is never a given. Actors might feel that tactical retreat would yield a far better result than confrontation, a tendency so common in today's Cairo streets, but which was uncommon in revolutionary Iran where on-the-spot collective resistance prevailed (Bayat, 1997b).

Conclusion

I suggested at the outset that a major consequence of the new global restructuring has been a double process of integration, on the one hand, and social exclusion and informalization, on the other. Both processes tend to generate discontent on the part of many urban grassroots in the Third World.

First, there are many among the urban disenfranchised who find it difficult to function, live and work, within the modernizing economic and cultural systems characterized by market discipline, contracts, exchange value, speed and bureaucratic rationale. These people attempt to exit from such social and economic arrangements, seeking alternative and more

familiar, or informal, institutions and relations. Second, globalization also has a tendency to informalize through the programs of structural adjustment, rendering many people unemployed or pushing them to seek refuge in informal production, trade, housing and transportation. Transnational street vendors (circulating, for instance, between the new Central Asian republics and Istanbul, or between Jamaica and Miami) are a latest product of this age. In short, the new global restructuring tends to intensify the growth of subjectivities, social space and terrain of political struggles that are coming to characterize the cities of the developing world.

Although the prevailing perspectives (survival strategy, urban social movements and everyday resistance) provide useful angles to view the activism of the urban subaltern, they do, however, suffer from some major drawbacks. The latter are reflected in the essentialism of the 'passive poor', reductionism of the 'surviving poor', Latino-centrism of the 'political poor' and conceptual perplexity of 'resistance literature'. I suggested that the 'quiet encroachment' perspective might offer a way out of those conceptual problems. Looking from this perspective, the poor struggle not only for survival, they strive in a life-long process to improve their lot through often individualistic and quiet encroachment on the public goods and on the power and property of the elite groups. In this process, the poor do not directly challenge the effect of globalization. Rather, in their quest for security, they get involved in constant negotiations with globalization to maintain or seek autonomy in any space remained unaffected. At the same time, in this process, the unintended consequences of their daily encroachments and negotiations beget significant social changes in urban structures and processes, in demography and in public policy. We discussed earlier how crucial such a strategy is in the lives of the urban grassroots. Yet the question remains as to how far this quiet encroachment can take these actors?

Given their existential constraints (poor skills and education, or meager income, connection and organization), quiet encroachment serves as a viable enabling strategy for the marginalized groups to survive and better their lot. However, this non-movement is neither able to cause broader political transformation, nor does it aim for it. The larger national social movements have the capacity for such a transformation. Yet, compared to global/national mobilization, these localized struggles are both meaningful and manageable for the actors – meaningful in that they can make sense of the purpose and have an idea of the consequences of these actions; and manageable in that they, rather than some remote national leaders, set the agenda, project the aims and control the outcome. In this sense for the poor, the local is privileged over the global/national.

It is true that urban grassroots succeed relatively in extending their life-chances often through lifetime struggles, nevertheless crucial social spaces

remain out of their control. The poor may be able to take over a plot of land to build shelters, may tap running water or electricity illegally from the main street or neighbors; they may secure a job on the street corner by selling things and may be able to bribe or dodge the municipality police every now and then. But how can they get schools, health services, public parks, paved roads and security – the social goods which are tied to larger structures and processes, the national states and global economy? In other words, the largely atomistic and localist strategies of the disenfranchised, despite their advantages, render a search for social justice in the broader, national sense poorly served. The disenfranchised are unlikely to become a more effective player in a larger sense unless they become mobilized on a collective basis, and their struggles are linked to broader social movements and civil society organizations.⁵ Yet, it is crucial to remember that until this is realized and its results are tested, quiet encroachment remains a most viable enabling strategy, which the urban grassroots pursue irrespective of what we, social scientists, think of it.

Notes

This article was originally presented at the World Congress of Sociology, Montreal 1998, in a panel on Globalization and Collective Action. I would like to thank Professor Jan Nederveen Pieterse for organizing the panel, and for his valuable comments and criticisms. I am also grateful for the comments made by the anonymous reviewers of this journal.

1. For a critique of the exaggerated version of the globalization thesis, see Gordon (1988).
2. For a broader critique of the culture of poverty thesis, see Leeds (1971) and Valentine (1968).
3. Something that Piven and Cloward (1979) wished the America's poor people's movements had.
4. I have elaborated on this perspective in full detail in my book *Street Politics* (1997b). Here, I only briefly discuss some major points.
5. For an example of such a broader alliance in Peru, see Arevalo (1997).

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