

## Capitalist development, logistics and governance: In memory of Kalyan Sanyal. (Not) A report on the Kolkata Platform

«Capitalist underdevelopment has traditionally been seen, by liberal and Marxist theories alike, as a case of failure on the part of capital to revolutionize and transform the economy after its own image. Departing from this, this book extricates the post-colonial experience from the historicist narrative of transition and articulates it within a political economic framework that conceptualizes underdevelopment as endogenous to capitalist development in the post-colonial context».

[Kalyan Sanyal, *Rethinking Capitalist Development*, 2007]

The news of Kalyan Sanyal's departure reached us unexpected. Sanyal passed away on February 18<sup>th</sup> in a clinic of his town, Kolkata, at the age of sixty. We want therefore dedicate this note to the memory of a brilliant Bengali economist and intellectual with whom we had an intense dialogue. We had the opportunity to meet Sanyal several times, the last in September 2011 in Kolkata, during the roundtable on the chapter 24 of Karl Marx's *The Capital*, "The so called primitive accumulation". Sanyal was one of the speakers, together with Ranabir Samaddar, Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson. The roundtable aim was to open the *Critical Studies Conference on Development, Logistics and Governance*, the fourth of a series organized by the Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group– in a consolidated relationship with the University of Western Sydney and the University of Bologna – and was part of the Kolkata Platform of the transnational project *transit labour*, where a group of researchers coming from India, Australia and Italy explored some of the places at the core of the economic and governmental development of the Kolkata metropolitan space<sup>1</sup>.

The conference employed a wide concept of logistics, defined in relation with the functions of government, the organizational models of war and development, and the role of *planning* in the logistical rationality, producing a new sense of «urgency» in the governmental thinking. Is this urgency – that overcomes the traditional forms of negotiation associated with the Nation-States – that fosters the implementation of new technologies of control and communication, and points to the construction of new urban and industrial agglomerates as part of great investments<sup>2</sup>. The clash between this urgency and the opposition of large part of the affected populations is at the roots of an unpredicted and new situation for most of the leading theories of government.

Following this reading, two images stand still after the participation in the Kolkata Platform: first, the absolute diffusion of work, marked by the elusiveness of the frontier between the outside and the inside of the places of production. The area of Chadni Chowk, at the heart of Kolkata, is an example:

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<sup>1</sup>[http://www.mcrg.ac.in/dg\\_critical.htm](http://www.mcrg.ac.in/dg_critical.htm), <http://transitlabour.asia/>.

<sup>2</sup>On logistics, see B. NEILSON, N. ROSSITER, *The Logistical City*, Transit Labour Digest, no. 3, August 2001 and id. *Still waiting, Still Moving: On Migration, Logistics and Maritime Industries*, in D. BISSEL, G. FULLER (Eds), *Stillness in a Mobile World*, London and New York, 2011, pp. 51-68.

here, in a multitude of sweatshops and benches on the side of the streets, thousands of workers disassemble and re-assemble old electronic devices and household appliances, of every sort and coming from every place. In this landscape of thin shops and overcrowded lanes, one can witness the position of Kolkata as the door towards East of Indian development: in the linings and parcels labels, as in the known fact that lots of these *waste* came from China, seeking here a second life through the hands of Indian workers. Much more than mere marginal functions are carried out in this large and dispersed factory: on the contrary, the role of places like this is becoming increasingly crucial in the global dimension of the new Asian economy. Different tasks play different roles in the scale of the inclusion in the economic growth of recent years. If on the one hand everything is fixed, gaining thus a new use value, on the other hand brand new devices are exposed for the taste of the new middle class. Old mobiles, DVD players, computers, printers and Hi-Fi stereos enter again in the consumption cycle, bringing in new population strata formerly excluded from the use of technology. At the same time, new products as the wide mega screen LCDs, plasma TVs and smartphones, are sold at inaccessible prices for the large majority of the population of the metropolis.

What links these two poles is the recycle activity, something very different from the meaning that “recycle” has for the global civil society and the environmentalist discourse. We are indeed confronted with a new form of extraction of raw materials for the global industry. Rare and costly minerals and metals are hidden inside the *waste*, and the miners of the new extraction have the skills to identify, insulate and extract each valuable thing from an old phone as well as printers or PC screens. All that is exposed to enormous risks for the health or the environment, as the plastic devices are burned in makeshift ovens to extract metals, old refrigerators are broken to save the usable parts and everything is done bare-handed. As to the waste materials of the waste industry, they are handled together with the general city waste. Far from being an insulated enclave, Chadni Chowk is perfectly integrated in the global networks and circuits, and the raw materials extracted here feed the Asiatic countries economies, sustaining the electronic industry growth.

By using the generic name Asiatic countries we want to stress the paradigmatic dimension of places like Chadni Chowk, that mark the productive structure of the postcolonial world. Chadni Chowk is indeed not just a model, but also a transit place, included in a transnational network. The recovery of useful materials from different kinds of waste is a widespread activity playing an increasing role: other examples are the beaches where old ships are dismantled in order to extract iron and steel from their dead bodies, like Chittagong, the first source of iron for Bangladesh, Alang in Gujarat, India, or Gadani, Pakistan.

The second picture is a double image linking the *new town* of Rajarhat and Sector V, Salt Lake City, in the elusive north-eastern outskirts of Kolkata, where it has become more and more difficult to discern the rural areas from the mushrooming urban pockets. Sector V can be considered the opposite pole of Chadni Chowk: here many Indian and multinational *IT Industries* find young and qualified graduates to employ at a cheap salary in the R&D offices. At the same time, these industries take advantage from the economical regime of the *Special Economic Zones*, securing tax exemptions

and dispensations from the West Bengal labour laws. No wonder, then, that during the Durga Puja, the most important religious holiday in the State, Sector V remains fully operational. As inform the gigantic advertising boards that surround the arterial roads of Kolkata leading to Salt Lake and the airport, the new buildings offer clean, dry and cold working places behind their walls of glass and concrete, against the chaotic and unmanageable old Kolkata. The message is clear, and one can observe how it is becoming part of the new urban and social imaginary.

The prestige of these employments therefore hides a new model that quickly undermines every political discourse, where anything can be sacrificed on the altar of the economic growth. The same is happening in Rajarhat, where, following the model of the *new towns*, a built-up area for at least 500 thousands people is under construction. This plan is important for many reasons, and one can observe the definition of a new form of government throughout governance that most of the new town have in common, different from the traditional city government. If democracy and citizenship are traditionally related to the expansion from cities to larger territorial agglomerates, in postcolonial new towns the trajectory is looping towards a new shape. There are no effective representative bodies, neither *panchayats*. Instead, these agglomerates are managed by big corporations like the *West Bengal Housing Infrastructure Development Corporation* (HIDCO), born in 1999 and formally under the rule of the Urban Development Department of the West Bengal government. The HIDCO operates virtually outside the rules applied in the State: more than with formal procedures and consultations, these great projects proceed thanks to the use of force and imposing the “urgency” of development to the often-resisting populations. The materiality of development is thus fully exposed here, and the new town works affect the whole environment, in a countryside dominated by wetlands and largely settled by farmers and fishermen. The process of dispossession of the local population is producing resistance, violent clashes, deaths and forced migration towards the slums of Kolkata in a peculiar legal *assemblage*, following Saskia Sassen's definition in *Territory, Authority Rights*<sup>3</sup>.

The borders of the city, as well as the borders of legitimate politics, government and claim-making, are constantly blurring in this reality, originating *aurban dystopia* that demands new conceptual instruments<sup>4</sup>. We must then look inside the decisional centres of postcolonial development and the vocabulary here employed. Together with the concept of *new town*, thus, we find the use of the concept of *corridor*: after the pivotal Maputo Corridor Logistics Initiative, started in 1994 between South Africa and Mozambique, it has become a new form of imagination of the social, political and economic space, where each point is just a step in a network of informational, human and commodities flows<sup>5</sup>. Under this light Rajarhat can be positioned as a decisive knot towards East. The concept of *corridor* is nevertheless central beyond Rajarhat, and is becoming one of the leading forces behind Indian development. Take for example, on the opposite side of the Country, the Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor (DMIC), a joint project of Indian and Japanese

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<sup>3</sup> S. Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages*, Princeton, PUP, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> On *urbandystopia* in Rajarhat, see R. Samaddar, *Transit Labour Digest* #3 August 2011,

[http://transitlabour.asia/custom/uploads/transit\\_labour-digest\\_3-web.pdf](http://transitlabour.asia/custom/uploads/transit_labour-digest_3-web.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.mcli.co.za/index.htm>.

government that promises the construction of new industrial zones, airports and towns following the example of Gurgaon or Manesar, neighbouring New Delhi at the northern pole of the NH 8. The DMIC will cross eleven states and the official website foresees that at least 180 millions people will be affected<sup>6</sup>. Only to mention another example of this new imagination, consider the Italian project LEGEM, recently presented in India, a cartel of firms and architects proposing to Tamil Nadu, with the help of Italian government, a new *concept* “representing the need for a planned and human-centric approach to urban planning and cutting across spheres of infrastructure, environment, governance, energy and architecture”. LEGEM has thus a double meaning: on the one hand, is the acronym of the four core-functions of this model city *made in Italy*, Living Space, Energy, Governance, Environment and Mobility; on the other hand, it refers to the Latin word *Lex*, evoking “the idea of law and rules, in opposition with the deregulation”, as the new horizon for Indian development<sup>7</sup>.

The new form of governance embodied in the logistical rationality, far from being immaterial, needs land and human bodies to employ as workforce in order to be implemented. The old social landscape can only remain as marginal pockets, as in the so-called *service villages* that, like contemporary reservoirs, resists in the new topography drawn in Rajarhat and elsewhere by the postcolonial capitalistic development. Their inhabitants are in large part completely detached from their means of production, while only a small part of them can guess in a low qualified job in the *new towns*. These dynamics were at the core of Kalyan Sanyal's work, especially his most challenging work, *Rethinking Capitalist Development*, an important contribution to the debate on the contemporary meaning of the “so called primitive accumulation”<sup>8</sup>. Starting from a new reading of Marx, the category of primitive accumulation has been released from the historicist readings of large part of economic thinking, Marxism included. Disentangled from the description of a primitive stage of capitalism, the continuous repetition of primitive accumulation has become a way to describe the multifarious dimension of exploitation under capital. The different sites of work and the different forms of relation with land and information networks explored during the Kolkata Platform are thus not representing different stages of Capital but, instead, the structural heterogeneity of postcolonial capitalism and the coexistence of different forms of exploitation, governance and resistance. Rather than positioning itself against underdevelopment, the present capitalist development is exposing a new negotiation of time beyond the ‘contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous’, as in Reinhart Kosellek definition.

In this reality, logistical rationality organizes the penetration of capital in new domains, using different and multiple strategies making logistics *transformational*<sup>9</sup>, and producing new sets of rules. If we are confronted with the definition of a different law, as suggest the visionary proposers of

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<sup>6</sup>See <http://www.dmic.co.in/>.

<sup>7</sup>See the article on *The Hindu*, <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-tamilnadu/article2596584.ece>.

<sup>8</sup>K.Sanyal, *Rethinking Capitalist Development. Primitive Accumulation, Governmentality and Post-Colonial Capitalism*, London – New York – New Delhi, Routledge, 2007

<sup>9</sup>See <http://transformationallogistics.com/>.

LEGEM, then the question is whom law, who can enforce it and how. What we have seen in the outskirts of Kolkata, and what we have learned by meeting some members of the farmers movements in Rajarhat, are good starting point in order to answer these questions without hiding the materiality of this regime. During the several transfers from one site to another, the landfilling activities are perhaps the immediate image of the radical transformation of the social and natural ecology of these places. Turning *wetlands* in residential zoning is in fact a primary operation for every subsequent building site. The *land grabbing* and the forced *requisitions* of farmers' and tenants' land are other fundamental elements. A fourth component that needs to be mentioned is the growing of new communities, both inside and outside these sites. An army of workers living in improvised slums, mainly migrants masons from other Indian states, are the present of the future town of Rajarhat, while young underpaid clerks work behind the glass windows of Sector V. On the sidewalks, another army of unpredicted hawkers assures quick and cheap food and other essential goods that allow the machine to work. Will these communities become the ghostly presence of work in the new town, as in French photographer Philippe Chancel's portrays of the Emirates workers<sup>10</sup>, or will they interact with the dispossessed communities to negotiate a political society against this new regime of "law and rules"?

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<sup>10</sup> P. Chancel, *Workers Emirates*, Paris, Bernard Chauveau, 2011.