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## Book Review: *Jakarta: Drawing the City Near*

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## Book review

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AbdouMaliq Simone

*Jakarta: Drawing the city near.* Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014. 320 pp. \$27 (pbk). ISBN: 9780816693368

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In *Jakarta: Drawing the City Near*, AbdouMaliq Simone has produced another insightful work which highlights the innovation, ingenuity, and dynamism of people living in cities. Building on his previous work in Africa and Asia (Simone, 2004, 2010), Simone explains how urban residents have emerged as active players in urban spaces. While many contemporary urban theorists rightly focus on the impacts of neoliberal structural processes of inequality (Brenner, 2004; Harvey, 2005), structural processes associated with capitalism's uneven development cannot explain the full range of experiences in cities and often minimize urban residents as passive victims. While Simone does not ignore the structural challenges which produce inequality and uneven development, the author's aim in this book is to reinsert city residents back into urban studies. Although urban residents' logics and strategies may seem less powerful than those of the state or capital, Simone argues that urban residents collectively shape the city of Jakarta in ways which are quite profound. As delineated in Simone's work, urban residents have not only developed livelihood strategies to confront the extreme social, economic, and environmental challenges in the city of Jakarta, they have also reshaped the way we understand the city.

To pursue his book's objectives, Simone completed ethnographic fieldwork in three different areas of Jakarta. Importantly, Simone explicitly states that he does not engage in a systematic research study to develop a replicable set of observable data to be tested in multiple locations. Additionally, he does not aim to produce totalizing generalizations where different details are placed in specific analytical boxes. As Simone states, "The task in (this book) is to use (urban residents) to discover the city that they were 'reaching' for ... when they continuously and incrementally tried to use their realities as a launching pad ... to bring something else to existence" (p. 150). For this reason, this book does not follow a teleological or linear progression; instead, the structure of this book reflects the author's variegated pathways utilized to navigate the city of Jakarta. Simone's work has a logic, but it is one which mirrors the "various experiments, provocations, studies, interventions, and advocacies" (p. xi) that are used to understand the city of Jakarta.

In this work, Simone uses four different lenses to understand how urban residents contest, negotiate, and reimagine city spaces through their daily routines and methods. These four concepts are the near-South, urban majority, devising relations, and endurance. As he states in the introduction of this book, these terms are lenses which “convey the oscillating, unstable, and vibrant sense of Jakarta” (p. 4) as always changing and becoming. Since these four concepts comprise the core of Simone’s work, each term is given its own chapter.

After a short Preface and Introduction which delineate the context, methods, motivations, and main intellectual arguments put forth in his work, Simone begins his discussion in Chapter 1 by analyzing the utility of his first conceptual lens, namely, the “near-South.” As discussed in the first chapter, Simone rejects binary distinctions such as the Global North and Global South as categorizations which overgeneralize and limit the geographical imagination, as the “here” and “there” are neither clearly defined nor fit places on the globe. In addition, these terms fail to encapsulate the ways in which different cities attained modernity or how the “North” and “South” exist within each other. In its place, Simone introduces the near-South concept to highlight how urban spaces within Jakarta and many other cities across the globe exist in a “closeness” to the Global South without really being part of it. It is this “nearness” that Simone argues is a key motivating force for many residents in the city, as urban residents in Jakarta invent methods to leverage risk and reoccupy seemingly non-democratic spaces in the city. In this way, residents of Jakarta find ways to “make the city work” (p. 82) even as it operates in ways which are sometimes antithetical to their own needs. As discussed by Simone, these contradictions are exemplified through urban residents’ staged raids of their own businesses to confuse government bureaucrats, cooptation of liminal spaces around mega developments as a way to operate with semi-legal status, and financial investment in non-sanctioned markets adjoining formal private markets without the guarantee of long-term stability, safety, or legality.

In Chapter 2, Simone introduces the urban majority concept to interrogate the strategies urban residents use to contest and negotiate daily life in Jakarta. Importantly, Simone uses the term “urban majority” to denote a set of urban relationalities, not demographic or political realities. In this way, the urban majority reflects the aspirations of many Jakartans to achieve a sense of territorial permanence even as the city’s lands often exclude them from “legitimate” residence. While this is sometimes articulated through middle-class aspirations, the urban majority more commonly operationalize their life’s uncertainties through what Simone calls “incrementalisms” (p. 92), “speculations” (p. 104), and “propositions” (p. 116) about the future. As Simone states, these livelihood strategies or “machines of support” (p. 114) operate differently in each community and household. In this way, while the surface level of urban life in Jakarta seems deceptively simple, complex networks and particular points of view are entrenched in the complex “relays, channels, and circuits” (p. 111) that operate below the surface of the city. In this chapter, Simone highlights the ways in which local residents leverage different propositions about the way they live and, in the process, develop and implement various mechanisms to create their ideal city.

In Chapter 3, Simone examines the “devising relations” lens to understand the ways that urban residents in Jakarta build sustainable livelihoods on the already existing sets of

people, materials, and places in particular spaces. To highlight the importance of these dynamic social relations, Simone extends this devising relations metaphor to include the concept of a “hinge” (p. 162) to explore the ways in which urban residents connect different material things through particular places with specific meanings to produce new spaces in the city. To do this work, urban residents intrinsically operationalize these networks to produce what Simone calls a “hodgepodge of the urban landscape” (p. 172). It is through this heterogeneity that relational economies are developed and urban residents connect seemingly disparate flows and narratives across time and space. As Simone states,

Much of the capacity and actuality of people being able to operate in concert is implicit in everyday relations of negotiating space and resources, of putting together individuated and particular spaces of maneuver in the midst of intensely heterogeneous histories, aspirations, and practices. (p. 206)

In Chapter 4, Simone discusses the lens of “endurance” to understand how the urban residents of Jakarta persist in what seemingly appears to be a never ending experience of extreme uncertainty. For Simone, urban residents’ perseverance is fundamentally tied to what he calls “deceptions as method” (p. 227) whereby the residents of Jakarta focus on the routine of daily life without critically thinking about their own identity or role in society. Moreover, as Simone explains, the residents of Jakarta embrace the uncertainty of urban living as ordinary in order to deceive themselves into working harder to achieve their ideal vision of the city. Yet, as Simone notes, this process of “living without a world” (p. 240) is a contradictory process as Jakartans utilize the lack of certainty to their advantage when they develop livelihood strategies; but it is also this same ambiguity which ensures that Jakarta “is not a world that puts everything in its place” (p. 241). As discussed by Simone, the urban majority employ deceptions as method when they emphasize the fluidity and dynamism of unstable informal livelihood opportunities rather than fixate on the possibility of higher paying stable jobs which may or may not be available, build relationships with surrounding social networks in return for daily services or safety even though these connections might be illegal or corrupt, and choose to live with and support big development projects and the commodification of land even as these trends may be at odds with their own livelihood strategies.

In Chapter 5 and the short Conclusion chapter, Simone completes his analysis of Jakarta through a discussion of this book’s contributions to policy and urban theory. Centrally, Simone argues against the highly rationalized top-down urban planning model which has driven development in Jakarta thus far. In its place, Simone argues for a framework where individual districts develop assessments about their own futures. As he states, policy is not just about the implementation of urban planning but is very much tied to the process of democratizing the process of development through the incorporation of the urban majority. While this can be accomplished through the publication of research reports, policies, and regulations in the public sphere, Simone argues that policy is more about the translation of the public’s will into concretized outcomes. As the author states, “Policy work is more a practice of active translation. It is ... a process whereby the present is ‘converted’ into a new present, where entities now appear and ‘speak’ in different ways, are repositioned in their relationships with each other” (p. 254).

In all, *Jakarta: Drawing the City Near* represents another strong addition to Simone's body of work on urban theory, urban informality, and the key role that urban residents play to reinvent urban spaces. As the author notes numerous times, the city and its residents are always in the process of becoming, as they aspire toward a new city, one that is more livable socially, environmentally, and economically. Arguably, the greatest strength of Simone's work is to introduce new ways of "seeing" the city and the role that urban residents play in reinventing urban spaces as sites of ingenuity and innovation. In this work, Simone has introduced new lenses and vocabularies to understand the city. Through his narrative prose, these concepts are understood with great precision and utility. In this way, Simone's work both highlights the specifics of urban life in Jakarta and new ways of understanding the cities more broadly.

Although Simone's work is clearly a strong contribution to urban theory, there are a few areas which deserve more critical attention. First, although it is clear that Simone utilized an ethnographic approach as stated in the preface of the book, an extended discussion of his methodology is notably absent. While Simone briefly discusses why he wrote this book, it is not clear how long he spent in each community or the number or type of interviews or research interactions he had with residents. In addition, assuming he worked with some collaborators, it remains unclear who was on his research team or how different researcher–subject dynamics impacted his findings along race, class, and gender lines. Also, it is difficult to place the different communities in Jakarta, since there are no maps of his study sites. Although I definitely recognize the value of his ethnographic fieldwork and non-linear study structure, more details on Simone's methodology are needed to help guide the reader.

Second, in both Chapter 5 and the brief Conclusion, Simone discusses the possibilities for an "inventive policy" (p. 251) that decentralizes and democratizes participation in the planning process. While this is clearly an enviable outcome, it remains difficult to conceptualize how this process would be different from the current planning system in Jakarta. Although Simone briefly discusses the need to "enroll residents in the work of the city" (p. 260), this policy and planning process is left unspecified. In this way, the author has provided an excellent critique of top-down rationalized planning structures and highlighted the value of urban residents in contemporary urban theory, but Simone has also left the reader without adequate direction as to the actual policy implications. In addition, while Simone has had a long-term interest in reinserting the role of city residents as critical players in their own cities' creation and reinvention (Simone, 2004), it remains unclear how the narratives of urban ingenuity and innovation help policy makers and planners produce changes in the urban landscape. Moreover, given the limited discussion of methodology, it is uncertain how interested scholars and students might utilize Simone's work in their own study contexts. Although Simone is not interested in producing a collectable set of observable data to be replicated elsewhere, it would be useful for scholars and students to have a clearer set of methodological processes and policy and planning procedures which could be used in other studies.

In all, even with these critiques, Simone's work constitutes a critical contribution to our understanding of Jakarta, cities, and urban theory. As is always the case with Simone's work, scholars, students, policy makers, and planners from a range of backgrounds will be captivated by *Jakarta: Drawing the City Near*. In short, this book is not only an

important read for anyone in urban studies, but it is also an engaging work that will not disappoint the most avid readers of the urban experience.

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