



FIGURES 1-3 Majority Districts, Mumbai.





FIGURES 4-6 Majority Districts, Jakarta.

Counting the Uncountable: Revisiting Urban Majorities

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One of the paradoxes of the COVID-19 crisis is that total lockdowns once again exposed the vulnerabilities of contemporary economies dependent on a 24/7, always-on urban infrastructure geared toward cultivating valued human capital, while the interrupted, cobbled-together infrastructure of the cities of the global South are said to have displayed an unusual resilience. Of course, this paradox is based on a set of assumptions that have been maintained in the face of enormous evidence to the contrary. Resilience, in our view, is a false and redemptive norm that masks the extreme turbulence and flux that are considered “normal” in Southern cities. However, the thick, amorphous social collectives that have emerged to provide care and self-reliant mutual assistance are hard to ignore as evidence of emerging forms of collective life even if they are largely invisible to the protocols and programs developed to track and trace the virus.

The collectives through which the virus passes or travels may be largely accidental, but data aggregation and integration programs only have limited use in the absence of civic infrastructure that addresses actually existing and emerging collectives, as Paula Kift points out in her essay in this issue. Data-aggregated populations of symptomatic and asymptomatic sufferers are not necessarily connected through any set of collective values or shared practices; rather, they exist as patterns picked up by software. And yet, they are assumed to possess a transcendent quality of collectivity merely as disaggregated individual users of collective infrastructure who can be assembled into data sets and analyzed to make various forms of undesirable behavior easier to track.

The authors are grateful to *Public Culture's* editors in chief, Arjun Appadurai and Erica Robles-Anderson, for their support and their investment in this piece. Built on our own long-term research work and observations in Jakarta and Mumbai, this essay is part of a larger collaboration that began with the publication of “Securing the Majority: Living through Uncertainty in Jakarta” in the *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* in March 2012. Several other works have influenced our thinking here and the bibliography acknowledges the inspiration they have provided. We include some of our own previous work to trace the itineraries referenced in our essay.

Nearly ten years ago we posited the notion of the urban majority in order to think with processes of urbanization that we felt were underdeveloped and undervalued. We aim to expand that idea of the majority in this essay, as a counterpoint to the flatness of network-based connectivity and sociality based on a form of counting without contextualizing, or rather counting with the barest hint of the rich contexts within which individuals are embedded. At best, big-data integration positions those traced as elements of a set or as data points within databases whose parameters change continuously, depending on who is viewing the data, with what other databases these individual points are being linked, and for what specific, instrumental purposes those links are being forged. We contend that our current fascination with big data for its ability to reveal hidden patterns and thus to act as a solvent for social problems has obscured other forms of narrative and media infrastructures that remain closer to an analog analytic frame, more suited to our emerging hyper-local worlds.

In our previous work, we presented the *urban majority* not so much as an empirical construct or figure of imagination but rather as encompassing a way of operating in concert—all the practices and configurations that made the multitude of individual and collective lives of the poor, the working class, and the lower-middle class intersect with each other, form intricate webs of interdependency and reciprocity. While directed toward urban contexts of the global South, the notion was not intended to account for any defining specificities of the South, but instead to propose a means of interurban comparison among Southern cities and urban regions that need not “pass through” considerations of Northern contexts that frame cities through rational planning and functioning infrastructure.

Additionally, the urban majority as a “mode” of collaboration was not meant to detract from all the conflicts, inequities, and differing aspirations that exist among distinct segments of urban populations, but instead to reframe contestations and differences as both generative of and impediments to specific kinds of mobilizations and cooperation. It was, in other words, a way of capturing the deeply agonistic and ambivalent modes of collaboration that are required to operate in these contexts, sometimes yielding surprising alliances that would not be possible from the perspective of ideologically purist analyses. More recently, we have begun to see how these forms of cooperation and mobilization are occurring in the contexts of Northern cities, whose fractured neighborhoods, failing infrastructure, and dense pockets of inequality harbor conditions similar to the working-class districts of Southern cities.

If the notion of “majority” implies a mathematical connotation—in the sense that “most of” the urban populations in the South are characterized by a specific

kind of person, household, or community—we sought to move away from this and rather emphasize a mathematics of recombination. Here the ways in which different economic practices, demeanors, behavioral tactics, forms of social organization, territory, and mobility intersect and detach, coalesce into enduring cultures of inhabitation or proliferate as momentary occupancies of short-lived situations make up a kind of algorithmic process. Such a process continuously produces new functions and new values for individual and collective capacities, backgrounds, and ways of doing things. So, majority was never a static entity nor a class-in-the-making. It was never so much a sociological or political entity as it was a manifestation of the possibilities and affordances that urbanization “lends” to inhabitants bearing the structural onus of having to largely make “their own way” in urban life.

It pointed to a situation where even when states provided the basic conditions for livelihood and residence—land, shelter, public employment, support for private enterprise—the conditions were usually insufficient for making a life worth living. While the poor, working, and lower-middle classes had different kinds of access to resources and opportunities, each had to take matters into their own hands in such a way that numerous arrangements had to be made to cross class divides in order for everyone to endure. It is these processes and arrangements, then, that made up our notion of the urban majority. In other words, the *majority* of the urban majority—its styles of operation and modes of production, occupation, and distribution—was both determined by and, in turn, structured the so-called possibilities and affordances that urbanization, modernization, and other allied processes are supposed to engender for most of the world.

Households of different income levels often lived in close proximity to one another; the workshops of the poor and working class often provided affordable objects of consumption for the lower-middle class, as they often, in turn, ran interference for the irregular economic activities that complemented their more formal channels of employment. Far from the vernaculars of “community life,” collaborations were products of hard bargains. They were based on the shared assumptions that bettering lives could not be entirely staked on “doing the right thing” or demonstrating self-discipline and adherence to modern norms of achievement, but rather on the volatile mixtures of impulse, speculation, trial and error, and sleight of hand. There was the conviction that messy interchanges among different sentiments and actors would eventually produce something better than existed now, even when people might be hard-pressed to demonstrate real results. In the rough-and-tumble everyday worlds of trying to make the most from what was available, of putting together people and things that didn’t seem to really go together, residents tended to be convinced to let many different scenarios play out, and demonstrated a basic

tolerance for ways of doing things that didn't necessarily correspond to their values or beliefs. What was important was an experience of forward momentum, even in small increments; the feeling that one wasn't stuck in place, that there were ways of "working" the situation, playing the field, that allowed one a sense of agency.

This terrain of action, where eventualities were valued more than plans and where rambunctious styles of relating took precedence over civilities, constantly created mixed results, from all the volatile mixtures of usually self-built environments, variously assembled households, and all the social roles—clergy, enforcer, teacher, entrepreneur, domestic, artisan, and so forth, who were always much more than those classifications would seem to imply. Many things worked; many others did not. But failure was usually not a deterrent. After all, the messy mixtures, all the buildings in various states of construction, repair, or dilapidation, or displaying their sturdiness, seemed to absorb failure, mitigate its costs. It was often hard to tell the difference between transparency and dissimulation, generosity and parasitism. Keeping one's head above water and navigating the neighborhood densities of different obligations, needs, and games took a lot of work and patience, and sometimes seemed to drain energies and pockets. Nevertheless, such action was necessary in order to instill a sense of purpose and aspiration; a person's presence *meant* something, allowed them to think that they were not *expendable*, not surplus labor waiting to be used or to die.

Of course, urban majorities depend upon states and municipal governments to provide essential infrastructures and services. Residents, entrepreneurs, skilled workers, and craftspeople could not attend to all the large-scale material reticulations necessary as a platform for their existence on their own. Education, health, and social services provided by both state and formal civil society were critical to any social reproduction. The urban majority is never self-sufficient, but rather concretely extends the terms of sufficiency, making itself more than what might be expected from states who usually entertained very narrow notions of citizenship.

What has happened to this majority in the past decade, and most particularly in this critical moment of urban history where many assumptions and arrangements seem up for grabs? Pandemic conditions would seem to amplify a vast range of vulnerabilities inherent within this urban majority, especially in the midst of what has been a steady divestment in the physical and social infrastructures afforded. As cities have become more expensive in many respects—in terms of money, time, and energy—the human and financial resources necessary to maintain a collaborative atmosphere have been waning. As a result, many residents of districts long known for embodying the ethos of that urban majority have moved on, usually to

the peripheries of urban regions, in the interest of affordability and the pursuit of more individuated styles of livelihood.

“Majority” districts have also been subject to more intense levels of extraction. The very cooperativeness of social relations, the skills of improvising the making and repairing of things, and the freewheeling give-and-take among different kinds of actors all become resources for states and other institutions attempting to cut costs, demonstrate efficiency and smartness, shed their responsibilities for guaranteeing social welfare, and in general find ways to profit from creativities from below. As the development priorities of urban cores emphasize logistical hubs, transport relays, financial and service centers, and upscale leisure and consumption, skewed heavily toward foreign investment and domestic surpluses, majority populations find themselves increasingly displaceable, if not expendable, and made the objects through which states and other regulatory apparatuses demonstrate their capacity to control, to measure, to contain.

Clearly the pandemic has revealed sizable holes in such regulatory capacity. The wholesale “importation” of lockdown logics, the authoritarian styles of rule (often incompatible with aspirations to engender cooperation from the larger public), the absence of adequate health and provisioning systems, and simply the lack of preparedness and institutional capacity have combined to limit the efficacy of national responses to the pandemic. But perhaps more importantly in many contexts, the inconsistencies, the fragmentations of governance, and the absence of coordinated intersectoral responses demonstrate the patchwork of accommodations, tacit compacts, and informally negotiated arrangements that have characterized relationships between majority districts and the state.

In many respects, these districts were allowed to pursue self-constituted practices of development and governance, relying on mixtures of the licit and the illicit, as long as they did not pose existential threats to ruling regimes. While the past decade has witnessed gradual and more extensive formalizations of these arrangements, subsuming majority-district lives under more institutionalized mechanisms of administration, it would be foolish to assume that the ways that these districts have depended upon to endure—whether long-honed or improvised—would simply fall by the wayside.

Even though districts of the majority will likely be further marginalized and subject to new control technologies in the name of protecting health and cleaning up insalubrious densities, the economic crises generated by the pandemic mean that states will need to rely upon these older social infrastructures as critical safety nets, even if they manage to improve upon public infrastructures of social care. Addition-

ally, there have been slippages of all kinds in terms of how states envision the populations and arrangements they govern and how things actually take place on the ground. For example, during this pandemic, the compositions of households have been revealed to not be what they commonly are assumed to be. In many districts the “home” has become visible as consisting of provisional arrangements of different fragments of extended families, invented kin, groups of workers in a common industry, or collections of short-term boarders. There is certainly nothing new about this unruliness and the often haphazard and transgressive ways through which household “units” are forged. It is, rather, the persistence of the modernist dream that imaginarily segments populations into cohesive familial, usually heteronormative, units that mistakes the composition on the ground.

This is not to deny the persistence and salience of such familial units. Only that they do not embody a “majority.” That said, it is important to always recognize the ongoing and difficult roles that women play in the maintenance of households and the process of social reproduction. The deployment of lockdown procedures has taken a particularly high toll on women, from the massive increases in domestic abuse to the toxic physical and psychological conditions they experience as they bear the brunt of keeping children and older persons at home. Across the spectrum of class, these gendered domestic arrangements have become newly visible, as if for the first time.

In many urban settings, limited savings mean that many households are dissolved as members retreat to their places of origin—as seen in the mass flight of low-paid industrial and service workers in India. Both the common and differentiated ways in which elements of the urban majority have experienced the pandemic and ramifying economic and social challenges disentangle many mutual arrangements and reveal a broad range of fragilities that cannot be compensated by the collaborative actions of the majority itself. While districts have often demonstrated remarkable creativity in converting economic activities into those needed to provide new forms of essential goods and services, severe structural problems with liquidity, disrupted supply chains, food and medical shortages, police repressions, and illness send shock waves through these districts.

Yet before prematurely offering eulogies for forms of collective life seemingly past, it is also important to understand with even more detail the range of mediating factors and practices that circumvent potential dispositions that could have been much more severe or that manage to mobilize conversions of existent infrastructure and economic practices more effectively in this crisis situation. For certain conundrums persist as to why particular districts have experienced pandemic conditions more severely than others.

For example, in Jakarta, it is possible with simple geomatics to map out density levels in relationship to household income, compositions of all economic activities, access to health and social welfare organizations, and so forth. Even given the highly sporadic, disorganized administration of testing and spatial restrictions in the city, comparable districts tend to vary widely in terms of number of cases and rates of mortality. Such mediating factors may not surface easily, or may be a matter of chance rather than anything systematic, but they do signal a need for caution in any attempt to disentangle districts in the name of more sustainable densities. Similar notes have been struck with regard to the many informal or slum settlements of Mumbai, with Dharavi surfacing as an important counterexample, demonstrating the possibilities of control in the face of unsustainable densities. Often filed under stories of Mumbai's "resilience" in the face of disasters ranging from floods to terrorism, communal violence and now pandemic conditions, Dharavi is a veritable poster child for a majority district that continues to "surprise," even though a closer examination of civic collaboration might reveal new ways of understanding urban possibility.

As larger numbers of residents have dispersed to more peripheral areas of urban regions it is also important to reconsider just what densities have entailed. Density for majority districts was never a simple matter of a lot of people crowded into limited space, but rather the circulation of different games, vernaculars, viewpoints, and experiences in close proximity to one another. Density was always, then, a matter of circulation, and circulation in which the relations among those things and persons that did circulate didn't necessarily have to be clearly known or described. Beyond the quotidian circulations that were the products of lives trying to orient themselves to one another, make use of one another, and find ways to share space and resources, circulation was also something heuristic, experimental, a matter of things passing through each other without having to produce settled results. This was critical to producing the sense that residents had of being able to "go somewhere," to "move on" even if they remained in their neighborhoods all their lives.

In the dispersal to the periphery, densities have increasingly become a literal matter of circulation, involving people moving more frequently and across a broader range of terrain, as opposed to a matter of social compactness. The recently constructed housing projects, into which Mumbai's government has relocated thousands of households facing eviction due to expanding transportation networks, constitute one such example of involuntary densification. With people relocated from far-flung corners of the city to new enclaves, the implicit social compact is less a matter of how people negotiate shared space, and more about how they move, mostly individually, across many different territories simultaneously.

Here, urban majorities are associated less with particular districts than with a

range of itineraries of movement, which raise important questions not only about how people stay in place during pandemic conditions but about what the post-pandemic terrain will look like in terms of asking urban residents to “settle down,” to be settled in their ways, to distance themselves from attachment to socialities of the past, seen as intensifying health vulnerabilities. The role of new and pirate media ecologies that bridge the gap between sheltering in place and maintaining a range of motion in the face of enormous restrictions on movement and censorship of expression is especially important to highlight as the majority is being reconstituted in peripheral districts.

Whatever new implicit social compacts emerge, whatever arrangements—social, political, territorial—emerge from the recalibration of urban majorities to forms of rule, calculation, and administration, they will take their place in the interstices between the majority’s long-honed convictions that compliance with standardized norms will not bring a better life, on the one hand, and that the vast legacies of endurance count for something in all decisions to “move forward,” on the other. Such moving forward may largely entail adaptations of neoliberal logics with a semblance of a new public infrastructure of provisioning that will be occasioned by these severe conditions. States will certainly try to compel majorities both to be more visible in terms of their practices of social organization and accumulation and to be more invisible in terms of what they actually must do in order to survive, or perhaps thrive, so that cities can maintain the pretense of smart machines.

There has been much talk about how the current crisis will open new doors, create new deals, and reverse many of the deleterious processes of privatization, technologically driven accumulation, and indifference to the needs of most urban inhabitants. While we certainly commit much of our time to advancing these possibilities, we remain largely skeptical of grand claims and attend to the unfolding profusion of small details that are not yet substantive evidence of specific conclusions. The urban majority remains a work in progress, able to take different shapes and forms. While in the past we have looked primarily to the rough-and-tumble cosmopolitanisms of urban-core neighborhoods, with their often vibrant and heterogeneous compositions, we must also extend our engagements to other, less obvious terrains. These include apparently faceless suburbs, large tracts of affordable vertical housing developments, and the emergent, largely temporary accommodations across peripheries where new instantiations of the majority are taking place in forms that are still being worked out.

In studying emergent forms of building in Mumbai, we discovered how residents of majority districts caught in the middle of the city’s macromoves found them-

selves being actively disentangled from the networks and forms that had aided their capacity to endure urban life. The multistoried building is fast becoming the standard form of construction in Mumbai, as the city's diverse housing typologies level down toward a code-driven standard. Throughout Mumbai's history, however, even this multistoried-building envelope has accommodated diverse household configurations tied to multiple affiliations beyond private property and the nuclear family. Projects of involuntary densification such as the new housing colonies on the peripheries do not significantly depart from this history. But they remain threshold spaces of gathering, works in progress that continue to mold capital, class, community, potential labor, and desire into a kaleidoscope of patterns of collaborations and amorphous forms of sociality that cannot be calibrated to specific, transcendent forms of community.

Thus we contend that even the move from more informal and self-built patterns of majority districts to more formal ones continues to foster forms of sociality that may remain opaque to data-aggregation techniques, which presume their data points to be singular, dividual, and surveillable units forming the basis of collectives that can be endlessly assembled and reassembled, simply by combining different databases within which these points are archived. A collective thus assembled and imagined through big data may not be capable of the kind of political and ethical action that majorities have embodied in their capacity to endure oppressive and unequal circumstances. This is not to romanticize the uncountable in the era of surveillance capitalism but to turn our speculative energies in a different direction: one that does not celebrate the resilience of the majority at the cost of their marginalization; one that recognizes actions from below that may fundamentally alter the shape of state power itself. Fueled by the rise of social media, big-data sociality by contrast seems to be captured by spectacles of angry mobs, howling with various forms of rage and outrage, and herds flocking toward collective immunity from the very conditions that may extinguish them. Emphasizing context over counting, action and activism over aggregation, may strengthen counter-speculations for more equitable urban futures.

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