Event Report: Globalising Urban Histories Conference

Organisers:
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Title and date of Event:
Globalising Urban Histories: Interdisciplinary approaches to politics, material cultures and ideologies in world cities. Held at CRASSH, Cambridge, 4th and 5th December 2007

Summary Abstract:
This two day conference, held on Tuesday 4th and Wednesday 5th December 2007 at CRASSH, featured 20 speakers, spread over seven panels. Reflecting the global reach of the conference theme, the event was an international affair with presenters coming from universities in Britain, Europe, the US and Canada and India and from a range of academic disciplines including history, political science, anthropology and media studies. A plenary session on the final day provided an opportunity for presenters and members of the audience to discuss some of the wider themes of the conference and think about different theoretical and disciplinary approaches to our study of the city as well as patterns of exchanges, interchange and global connectivity. Dr. Gerry Kearns provided an opening keynote address, and Dr. William O’Reilly gave a concluding address and summing up of proceedings.

Overall the conference was a success. We received very positive feedback from all participants and we have been approached by an international publishing house regarding publication of conference proceedings.

Event Report:

Aims:
One of the main aims of the conference was to bring together academics from a range of different disciplines interested in using the city as a site through which global networks of exchange and cultural transmission can be explored. We asked for papers that sought to rethink conventional approaches to studies of the city as an iteration of wider frameworks of exchange, for example the nation. The conference brought younger scholars into dialogue with more established academics working in fields related to the conference theme, particularly world history within which Cambridge is seen to excel. In so doing, the conference provided an opportunity for participants at various stages in their research to rethink the analytical and theoretical tools used in their work and, we hoped, to begin to reconceptualise how we might proceed with and develop this area of study.

Intellectual content:
Exploring diaspora, the city and constructions of Irish identity in international politics, Dr Kearns keynote address served, from the outset, to foreground the conference’s key aim to move away from conventional views of the city as a micro-model for wider networks of power and to think about the city itself as a focus of study. This was also achieved in the way in which we organised the conference panels. Speakers presented 20 minute long papers on specific case studies that covered a broad geographical and chronological range. We
organised these papers into thematic panels, producing interesting exchanges that would not have been possible if they had been arranged in a less interdisciplinary conference. Thus, while papers highlighted the very individual development of cities and urban milieus, panel discussions served to bring to light some of the broader themes and cross references between the presentations.

Dr. Gerry Kearns, Director of the Cultural and Historical Geography group at Cambridge, gave a keynote challenging some traditional assumptions about globalisation and suggesting a new framework in which to consider urban space, globalisation, and political identities. Kearns argued that a principally economic understanding of globalisation in which transnational corporations trump the nation state both fails to differentiate between 'diasporic' and 'global' phenomenon and ignores local uses of global networks. It was simultaneous 'action across distance' rooted in specific urban spaces and politicised local histories, Kearns asserted, which allowed Irish identity to be 'performed' diasporically. Funerals for nationalist leaders, with processions through key sites in US and Irish cities, transformed both the identities of the participants and the larger political movement. It was the collapsing of distance and timescales which created a sense of a 'shared moment' among participants. These aspects of 'performance, locatedness, and reporting' revitalised the Irish nationalist project and ensured strong support from diaspora communities.

The panelists indeed all engaged with some of the central issues raised by Kearns, in particular focussing on the tension between the construction of local identities versus the forging of transnational links. Shane Ewan argued that the business of local municipal capitalism in twentieth-century Birmingham was inseparable from efforts to promote a transnational identity for the city and its investors. Roland Wenzlheumer and Justin Jones, however, suggested that globalisation of urban cultures and politics was far from even: Wenzlheumer emphasised the extent to which new technologies such as digital networks merely replicated existing patterns of infrastructure, while Jones challenged the notion of the 'Islamic city' as a template for Muslim culture in South Asia, highlighting instead local identity production through lineages and shrines. Other panelists tackled the notion of the town or city as a stage for the performance of new national identities, particularly in a colonial context: Charles West explored the application of Norman dominance through violence, legislature, and the maintenance of a separate identity in post-conquest Britain, while Eike Ohlendorf compared different methods of colonial governance in Dakar and Hanoi. Christopher Lee turned to a Eurafrican housing project in Lusaka, using the experience of a small community of families to consider how marginal groups used transnational debates and language to interface with the state.

Urban housing projects could be considered a significant theme of the conference: as Lee noted, Chris Tilly's concept of 'containers' which mediate human experience (skin, clothing, and housing) place urban dwellings at the heart of debates on local and transnational urban identities. Cecilia Chu structured her discussion of a public housing sell-off in Hong Kong around changing notions of municipal rights in the context of a global marketplace. Sunalini Kumar examined the realities of Delhi in the 2000s through debates which blamed auto-rickshaw drivers and small industry proprietors for Delhi's crippling pollution levels, exonerating middle class car-owners. Kumar suggested that the colonial vision of a leafy city of government jobs and housing had blinded officials to the need to protect and control
Delhi's many other 'faces', instead promoting the version of the city they felt would be most palatable to the international community at the coming Commonwealth Games. Pedro Ramos Pinto also focussed on housing and the construction of social and municipal rights and citizenship, examining how a change in the conception of citizenship in Portugal under the conservative Catholic regime and a sense of non-parity of housing with other European programmes created a relationship of dependency and responsibility between the poorest citizens and the state.

Another major theme of the conference was migration and the experience of 'stateless' groups seeking refuge in new countries. Romola Sanyal noted that the Indian government had to expand its definition of refugee status to include partition migrants after the creation of East and West Pakistan, and explored the complex 'informal' negotiations which they carried out to establish neighbourhoods and community organisations in Calcutta. International definitions of the 'refugee', Sanyal argued, rarely apply to particular cases: international law and developing technologies attempting to restrict human movement simply give rise to extra-legal workarounds among stateless exiles. Moses Chikowero and Ulrich Ufer both returned to the tension between global and local in the production of transnational cultures: Chikowero looked at the use of Western musical influences among African musicians, while Ufer looked at the uses of cosmopolitanism among Dutch merchants and elites in the early modern period: both concluded that, to some extent, 'everything is local', with the transnational element often being evoked to create a fundamentally local and individualised culture.

Mónica Brito Vieira and Filipe Carreira da Silva began their thoughtful plenary session by considering the historical legacy of a contemporary focus on globalisation as a battle between city and state. They also queried some of the larger contemporary implications of 'globalising' expertise and politics: does this contribute to the city as a site of the passive consumption of resources and municipal services? Is the 'local' inherently more activist and democratic, or is there a possibility of a global civil society? They also touched on ways that migrants' experiences bring out the contradictions and inequalities of globalised cities, and the role of identity politics in undermining representative democracy in an urban context.

William O'Reilly, in his concluding address, returned to issues of taxonomy and the city, suggesting that a focus of many papers on legal definitions and representations demonstrated the important of categories and classifications in a global context. He referenced Manuel DeLanda's "1000 years of nonlinear history", suggesting that trope of the city and its hinterland as parasite and host could be reimagined through some of the panelist's projects. He also highlighted the importance of Walter Mignolo's conception of 'border thinking', cultures of transience and the role of individuals in liminal social positions in 'globalised' urban settings.

Follow up:
We are looking to publish a selection of papers from the conference and have already been approached by LIT Berlin who is interested in publishing conference proceedings, though it seems that Cambridge University Press might also be interested. We are in the early days of the editing process, considering a number of longer versions of conference papers for inclusion in the book, and hope to have a manuscript ready by summer 2008.