


RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Between Global History and Microhistory: Rethinking Histories of “Small Spaces” and Cities

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## Abstract

How can historians of “small spaces” and cities focus on local events and issues and at the same time carry on conversations with peers in a disciplinary mode marked by the spatial expansiveness of global history, on one hand, and a focus on objects and individuals of microhistory on the other? At stake here are key questions connected with the intellectual value of place-based knowledge and detailed single-site historical case studies. I argue that as long as we are caught between the positivist idea that causal regularity and time-place independence of explanatory mechanisms are the hallmark of theory, and the postmodernist resistance to generalizations, histories of cities and other small spaces will suffer from “defanged empiricism.” This problem is particularly debilitating for non-global histories of small spaces and cities of the global South, which often “do not travel well.” Is there a way out? I argue that a critical engagement with the stratified ontologies of critical realism—in particular, a version that I call “soft critical realism”—and Charles Tilly’s “deep order” can enable historians of small spaces and cities to re-situate their research at the heart and center of social theory, and simultaneously strike a better balance between attention to local details, the narrative form, and engagement with larger processes, concepts, and theories. Finally, I concretize the discussion by offering the example of how my own research on late colonial and early postcolonial Calcutta has benefitted from this approach.

**Keywords:** global history; microhistory; urban history; critical realism; Charles Tilly; deep order; history and ontology; Calcutta/Kolkata; global South and history; defanged empiricism

In a critique made at the height of the global turn in history, in 2013, David Bell argued that global history has “hit a point of diminishing returns.” Setting past events in global contexts is not always helpful or desirable. Since “many of the most interesting historical phenomenon ... have started with rapid, incredibly intense changes that took place in very small spaces,” the time had come to “turn back to them.”<sup>1</sup> In the

<sup>1</sup>David A. Bell “This Is what Happens when Historians Overuse the Idea of the Network,” *New Republic*, 26 Oct. 2013, <https://newrepublic.com/article/114709/world-connecting-reviewed-historians-overuse-network-metaphor> (accessed Mar. 2020).

following year, Bell doubled down on his call for a return to “small spaces.” “A lot can happen in small spaces” he reiterated, “and as historians, we need to remain attuned to their explosive dynamic, not just to their location on the spinning globe. For unless we struggle to understand these dynamics, we will not understand the massive forces that ... times and places have been capable of unleashing—forces that, in their turn, have wreaked so much change and havoc on the larger world.”<sup>2</sup> As a “non-global” historian of a “small space” in the global South, Calcutta, I read Bell’s critique as a timely affirmation of the intellectual value of embarking on a research project to study the history of spatial politics of business elites in a (post)colonial city.<sup>3</sup> But then, on closer inspection, Bell’s critique seemed inadequate, for it did not specify how one might return to small spaces in the era of global history. The critique appreciated how some global historians have used microhistory to “bring individuals into stories told on ... vast scales.”<sup>4</sup> But it neglected to consider whether microhistory can accommodate the history of small spaces within the umbrella of global history. Bell’s critique also did not consider how the back and forth between the micro and macro scales of enquiry was engendering and reinforcing a spatial binary in the discipline, leading to the neglect of intermediate spaces.

For these reasons, Bell’s call for a return to small spaces in global history, in my view, did not go far enough. This hunch was confirmed when, in an illuminating discussion in the *Journal of Global History* Bell clarified that the issue with global history was not that it “altogether neglects small spaces, and the events in them.” Rather, his point was to stress that small spaces do not “just feel the impact of global forces”; they can generate large-scale changes on their own. But how *small* should such small spaces be? Bell gave the following examples: “Arabia in the age of Mohammed, Germany in the age of Luther, or Paris in the French Revolution.”<sup>5</sup> And here lies the rub: notice how Bell’s idea of spaces that can generate global changes and hence constitute a meaningful unit of analysis in global history becomes more expansive as one moves further from Paris. How then can we sustain and justify writing histories of small spaces, especially of the global South, whose influence on global processes may at best be very diffuse, or at worst absent? In other words, what does it mean to conduct research on the history of small spaces, especially of the global South, within a disciplinary mode that ever since the eclipse of national histories has swung between micro and macro analysis, or between microhistory and postmodernist fragmentation on one hand and the spatial and scalar

<sup>2</sup>David A. Bell “Questioning the Global Turn: The Case of the French Revolution,” *French Historical Studies* 37, 1 (2014): 1–24, 24.

<sup>3</sup>Manuel De Landa writes, “As biological organisms and as social agents we live our lives within spaces bounded by natural and artificial *extensive* boundaries, that is, within zones that extend in space up to a limit marked by a frontier. Whether we are talking about the frontiers of a country, a city, a neighborhood or an ecosystem, inhabiting extensive spaces is part of what defines our social and biological identities.” Given so, by “small spaces” I mean *extensive* intermediate spaces like cities or counties/districts that are between the macro-global and micro-local (communities, villages, and individuals) levels of analysis but also *extensively smaller* than the national or provincial frontier. De Landa also writes about *intensive spaces*, but I do not consider such spaces in this essay. See his “Space: Extensive and Intensive, Actual and Virtual,” in Ian Buchanan and Gregg Lambert, eds., *Deleuze and Space* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 80–88.

<sup>4</sup>David A. Bell, “This is what Happens”.

<sup>5</sup>David A. Bell, “Replies to Richard Drayton and David Motadel,” *Journal of Global History* 13, 1 (2018): 16–21, 17.

expansiveness of global history on the other? Should historians of Calcutta, for example, restrict their focus to only those aspects of the city's history that are congruent with the agendas of global history, or risk being dismissed as "local historians"?<sup>6</sup>

In this article I argue that neither global history, with its contentious relationship with place-based knowledge, nor microhistory, with its emphasis on individuals, objects, and ideas in exhaustive details, can help us return to the history of small spaces and rescue it from neglect and intellectual obscurity. This is because the spatial binary in the field of history, combined with unintended consequences of the undoubtedly important move to "provincialize Europe," has meant that it has become ever more difficult for historians, especially of the global South, to link space- and time-specific research to larger concepts, theories, and processes. The result: histories of small spaces, as I will show, are susceptible to a widely acknowledged but rarely articulated problem of "defanged empiricism"—scholarship which is "unable to transform understandings of wider processes ... [thus] ... leaving [dominant] conceptualizations relatively intact" as it heaps descriptions upon descriptions without really resulting in the formation of new knowledge.<sup>7</sup>

To make historical scholarship "travel better," research agendas are now being overdetermined by a quest to establish connections and mobility between far-flung spaces and societies.<sup>8</sup> The flipside is that, while "nobody wants their history, their city and their community to be reduced to a mere station along the path of a global flow—a measly dot on a map, lacking any depth, agency or significance,"<sup>9</sup> this is precisely what is happening. Place-based historical knowledge, especially from the global South, is getting consigned to localism.<sup>10</sup> This tendency is also impacting publishing and is hence being reinforced. As Sanjay Subrahmanyam—the progenitor of connected histories—has complained, "Publishers, even university presses, have become more and more hostile to the idea of publishing" anything but "vast and vague themes, covering enormous spaces and time periods..."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup>As I will show, no one in the field really wants to be a local historian.

<sup>7</sup>I have borrowed "defanged empiricism" from Jennifer Robinson, "New Geographies of Theorizing the Urban," in Susan Parnell and Sophie Oldfield, eds., *Routledge Handbook on Cities of the Global South* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 57–71, 66. See also Raewyn Connell, *Southern Theory: The Global Dynamics of Knowledge in Social Sciences* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), 214. Robinson adopted the term from Z. R. Chaudhury, "Subjects in Difference: Walter Benjamin, Frantz Fanon, and Postcolonial Theory," *Differences* 23, 1 (2012): 27–43.

<sup>8</sup>Lara Putnam, "The Transnational and the Text-Searchable: Digitized Sources and the Shadows They Cast," *American Historical Review* 121, 1 (2016): 377–402.

<sup>9</sup>John Paul A. Ghobrial, "Introduction: Seeing the World Like a Microhistorian," *Past and Present* 242, 14 (2019): 1–22, 14. The first section of this article has benefitted immensely from this excellent survey of the relationship between global history and microhistory.

<sup>10</sup>Lara Putnam, "Daily Life and Digital Reach: Place-Based Research and History's Transnational Turn," in Debra Castillo and Shalini Puri, eds., *Theorizing Fieldwork in the Humanities* (London: Palgrave 2016), 167–82; "To Study the Fragments/Whole: Microhistory and the Atlantic World," *Journal of Social History* 39, 3, (2006): 615–30; and Jeremy Adelman, "What Is Global History Now?," *Aeon* 2 Mar. 2017, <https://aeon.co/essays/is-global-history-still-possible-or-has-it-had-its-moment> (last accessed 26 July 2023).

<sup>11</sup>Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Maritime Fare that's Neither Fish nor Eel," *The Wire*, 23 Nov. 2022, <https://thewire.in/books/eric-tagliacozzo-in-asian-waters> (accessed 10 Dec. 2022). I thank Kelvin Ng for directing me to this essay.

Potentially, urban history, with its focus on single-site case studies, attention to local details, and engagement with questions of space and scale, could help overcome some of the problems of spatial binary and “defanged empiricism.” Charles Tilly had argued, “In principle urban historians have the opportunity to be our most important interpreters of the ways that global social processes articulate with small-scale social life.” However, “in practice” they have “turned unseeing eyes to the challenge.”<sup>12</sup> This was because urban historians “ordinarily oscillate between time-place particularism of local history and grand timeless, spaceless, processes, causes and effects.”<sup>13</sup>

How, then, can we return to small spaces in historical research in the era of global history? I contend, that (urban) historians oscillate between the two extremes of time-place particularism and grand, timeless, spaceless causation because all too often, they—like most other historians and scholars of the social world—implicitly accept the shared ontological commitments of both positivism and postmodernism to an empiricist social ontology,<sup>14</sup> which entails, among other things, the idea that generalization involves finding time-place-independent regularities or “laws.”<sup>15</sup> To be sure, even though many scholars have tried to rigorously pursue positivist tenets, actually existing academic research has never conformed fully to its ideal-typical philosophical canons.<sup>16</sup> And similarly, postcolonial/poststructuralist scholars have insisted that their quest for “historical difference” does not intend to “sidestep general processes for particularities.”<sup>17</sup> But such arguments only bolster the idea that there is indeed an inclination among scholars with a positivist approach to search for “covering laws” and correspondingly focus on the macro or micro scales of analysis. And among those with a postmodernist orientation, there is a tendency to recoil at generalizations and comparisons, which means that they often turn their attention to the micro, but with the primary aim of disrupting dominant schemas and notions.<sup>18</sup> A return to small spaces, therefore, I argue, demands that we find an alternative to the two extremes offered by positivism and postmodernism. To achieve this, as De Landa has suggested, scholars need to grapple with “the complexity of that forgotten territory between the micro and the macro” and more generally, undertake the task of “ontological clarification.”<sup>19</sup>

With these aims in mind, I will unpack Tilly’s own (implicit) ontological commitments in his missive to urban historians. I will show that his suggestions

<sup>12</sup>Charles Tilly, “What Good Is Urban History?,” *Journal of Urban History* 22, 6 (1996): 702–19, 702.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 710.

<sup>14</sup>Roy Bhaskar, in *The Possibility of Naturalism: A Philosophical Critique of the Contemporary Human Sciences* (New York: Routledge, 1998), writes: “...with the partial exception of ‘dialectic materialists’ ... the great error that unites ... [scholars] is their acceptance of an essentially positivist account of natural sciences, or at least (and more generally), of an empiricist ontology” (p. 2).

<sup>15</sup>George Steinmetz, “Odious Comparisons: Incommensurability, the Case Study, and the ‘Small N’s’ in Sociology,” *Sociological Theory* 22, 3 (2004): 371–400.

<sup>16</sup>Eric Sheppard, “We Have Never Been Positivist,” *Urban Geography* 35, 5 (2015): 636–44, 639. For a fascinating account of how the Chicago School positioned Chicago as both the ideal field and laboratory in the positivist vein, see Thomas F. Gieryn, “City as Truth Spot: Laboratories and Field-Sites in Urban Studies,” *Social Studies of Science* 36, 1 (2006): 5–38.

<sup>17</sup>Ananya Roy “What Is Urban about Critical Urban Theory?,” *Urban Geography* 37, 6 (2015): 810–23.

<sup>18</sup>For a succinct analysis of the macro-micro oscillation in the social sciences and how it leads to the neglect of intermediate layers, see Manuel De Landa, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity* (London: Continuum, 2006).

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 6–7.

on how urban historians can become one of the most important interpreters of how large-scale processes articulate with small-scale social life presupposes a layered and realist social ontology, as opposed to the flat empiricist ontology of positivism and postmodernism. I then suggest how historical research on small spaces may gain a further analytical edge if Tilly's insights are extended to incorporate several vital aspects of critical realism, but without necessarily accepting its entire agenda—I refer to this approach as *soft* critical realism.<sup>20</sup>

Before proceeding, it is important to clarify the work that “ontological clarification” can do. Here I will defer to Roy Bhaskar. Ontological clarification is not a manual or a method. All results, even in philosophy, are contingent and conditional in the sense that they do not stand apart from the world of (social) science. Rather, philosophy, as Bhaskar puts it, “considers just that world but from the standpoint of what can be established about it by a priori argument where it takes as its premises generally recognized activities as conceptualized in experience.” Neither can ontological clarification “anticipate the form of or stipulate criteria *ex ante* for successful [social] scientific practices,” nor is social science the “simple realization of philosophy.” The task of ontological clarification, then, is to provide “knowledge of the *necessary* conditions for the production of knowledge.”<sup>21</sup> The goal of this article, therefore, is to suggest the necessary conditions for the writing of histories of small spaces and cities in a way that is not overdetermined by global history or trapped in “defanged empiricism.”

More generally, this article is an invitation to scholars to think about the problems of writing histories of small spaces, especially of the global South, within a disciplinary mode that suffers from fragmentationism, and in which the only out, as of now, is an engagement with global history—a field that privileges a focus on circulation, mobility, and connections over other concerns. My [section I](#) lays out micro-macro oscillations in the discipline of history and how they lead to the neglect of intermediate small spaces, especially in the global South. [Section II](#) shows how the potentially promising sub-field of urban history is not well-aligned with the agendas of either global history or microhistory, and how, as a result, the sub-field suffers from “defanged empiricism.” [Section III](#) offers an outline of one of the ways the problems of researching and writing histories of small spaces may be resolved by scholars, through an engagement with what Charles Tilly called “deep order” and critical realism—in particular, a version that I call “*soft* critical realism.” [Section IV](#) concretizes the discussion by showing how my research on late colonial and early

<sup>20</sup>The distinction between what I am calling *soft* critical realism and traditional critical realism is elaborated later in this essay, but it is important to note here that Roy Bhaskar, the founding figure of critical realism, accepted such distinctions. He believed that “critical realism is a very broad church” but it does not imply “religious commitment.” See Roy Bhaskar and Alex Callinicos, “Marxism and Critical Realism,” *Journal of Critical Realism* 1, 2 (2003): 89–114, 97. Recently, critical realism has also accommodated within its umbrella Neo-Critical Realists like Philip Gorski. Note, too, that critical realism is just one interpretation of a realist ontology. Deleuze offers another influential interpretation. Some scholars consider Deleuzian ontology/assemblage as fundamental for promoting a critical and comparative social science. See Jennifer Robinson, “Cities in a World of Cities: The Comparative Gesture,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 35, 1 (2010): 1–23. That said, Bhaskar and Deleuze share more in common than is usually acknowledged. See Timothy Rutzou, “Finding Bhaskar in all the Wrong Places? Causation, Process, and the Structure in Bhaskar and Deleuze,” *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior* 47, 4 (2018): 402–17.

<sup>21</sup>Bhaskar *Possibility of Naturalism*, 7–9, my italics.

postcolonial Calcutta has benefitted from an engagement with “deep order” and *soft* critical realism.

### I. Micro-Macro Oscillations and the Neglect of Small Spaces

Historian Lynn Hunt argued in 2014 that it was the “Dissatisfactions with ... cultural historians’ focus on the micro-historical [that have] fueled a reactive propensity for the macro-historical.”<sup>22</sup> But note that the microhistorical, or microhistory,<sup>23</sup> itself grew in the 1970s and the 1980s “in opposition to ... [the] macroscopic and quantitative models that dominated the international historiographical scene between the mid-1950s and mid-1970s, primarily through the activity of Fernand Braudel and the historians of the *Annales* school.”<sup>24</sup> Microhistory was also a response to, and set itself off against, “ethnocentric abstraction of theories of modernization.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, the sub-field has always been in a tension with received understandings of macrohistorical processes. In practice, however, microhistory has leaned heavily on the side of disrupting our notions of macrohistory, and especially modernization theories, than building them anew.<sup>26</sup>

In South Asian historiography, the tradition I am most familiar with, the task of presenting micro-challenges to the macrohistorical was carried out admirably by the Subaltern Studies Collective. In its early phase (early to mid-1980s), this collective bore an unacknowledged family resemblance to Italian microhistory and focused on dismantling elitist biases within modern Indian historiography.<sup>27</sup> The collective was heavily invested in anthropology, and rural in orientation.<sup>28</sup> Given this, while Italian microhistorians still researched small towns and issues pertaining to real estate,<sup>29</sup> the subaltern school, for the most part, did not engage explicitly with spatial and scalar issues.<sup>30</sup> In its later, more internationally acclaimed phase, that began from the late 1980s, the collective, unlike Italian microhistory, also internalized postcolonialism and postmodernism. Subsequently, as the move to “provincialize Europe” became the norm among

<sup>22</sup>Lynn Hunt, *Writing History in the Global Era* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014), 60. Other historians have noted macro-micro oscillations in the discipline of history as well, some approvingly. See, for instance, Bernhard Struck, Kate Ferris, and Jacques Revel, “Introduction: Space and Scale in Transnational History,” *International History Review* 33: 4 (2011): 573–84, 577. The authors write, “... zooming in and out from grand and large-scale questions to micro analysis, case studies of individuals or small groups and vice versa enables the historian to fulfil his craft and the ethic of the discipline by working close to primary sources.”

<sup>23</sup>Scholars use the two terms interchangeably.

<sup>24</sup>Carlo Ginzburg, John Tedeschi, and Anne C. Tedeschi, “Microhistory: Two or Three Things that I Know about It,” *Critical Inquiry* 20, 1 (1993): 10–25, 17.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>26</sup>This sentiment is shared across the board by microhistorians. For a survey, see Ghobrial, “Introduction.”

<sup>27</sup>Like Italian microhistory, early subaltern studies were inspired by Thompsonian social history. Sumit Sarkar, “Decline of the Subaltern in Subaltern Studies,” in *Writing Social History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 82–108, 94.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup>Karl Apuhn, “Microhistory,” *Encyclopedia of European Social History*, Encyclopedia.com (15 Nov. 2022), <https://www.encyclopedia.com/international/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/microhistory> (last accessed 27 July 2023).

<sup>30</sup>Only in one of his last English essays did Ranajit Guha turn explicitly to what may be called urban history: “A Colonial City and Its Time(s),” *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 45, 3 (2008): 329–51.



many historians of the global South, especially in the West, problems of fragmentationism in the discipline of history began to surface. In a 1993 article, Dipesh Chakrabarty suggested that historians were reluctant to embrace “difference,” or fragmentationism, primarily because it threatened the very idea of history.<sup>31</sup>

Fragmentationism in history engendered two kinds of responses. One called for a more robust and renewed engagement with “methodological niceties” so that historians could develop some “guideposts” and “common standards of evidence, evaluation, and explanation” in a discipline that had been left all but exhausted by the epistemological challenges launched against it during the so-called “cultural turn.”<sup>32</sup> The other, far more popular response was a turn to global history. This global turn was epitomized by Sanjay Subrahmanyam’s connected histories (more on that later) and the inaugural editorial of the *Journal of Global History*. The editorial noted, “Historians have expressed increasing concern about the segmentation of their discipline’s scholarly expertise into discrete compartments, whether defined by place, period, theme, or sub-discipline” and that a “deluge of monographs” was obscuring the “landscapes of historical knowledge, even in relatively neglected parts of the globe.” Global history could help “overcome this fragmentation in historiography, while avoiding pitfalls that have emerged in earlier attempts to achieve this goal.”<sup>33</sup>

On paper, the attempt at overcoming fragmentationism in the discipline of history through global history offered an opportunity for historians of South Asia and elsewhere in the global South to participate in a new project as equal members of the discipline. However, as the field of global history developed, it came to share a tenuous relationship with single-site case studies, place-based knowledge, and the academy in the global South. This is why, “[t]here is [now] an acute worry on the part of some scholars” notes John-Paul A. Ghobrial, “about the methodological downgrading of place-based knowledge and expertise in the writing of global history.”<sup>34</sup> As Lara Putnam has argued, this downgrading is co-constituted by the progressive prominence of digitization in historical research that has allowed several global historians to “‘side-glance’ and ‘term-search’ their way through research fields that are very far from their own expertise.” It has not only meant that historians make “rookie mistakes,” but has also jeopardized research requiring multi-dimensional knowledge of small sites or locales, and deep immersion.<sup>35</sup> Further, as Jeremy Adelman has reminded us, “High hopes for cosmopolitan narratives about ‘encounters’ between the Westerners and Resterners [has] led to some pretty one-way exchanges about the shape of the global.”<sup>36</sup>

It should therefore come as little surprise that the Subaltern Studies Collective wound down in 2012, when the global turn in history peaked. In a remarkably self-

<sup>31</sup>Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Marx after Marxism: A Subaltern Historians’ Perspective,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, 22 (1993): 1094–96.

<sup>32</sup>Peter Mandler, “The Problem with Cultural History,” *Cultural and Social History* 1, 1 (2004): 94.

<sup>33</sup>William Gervase, Clarence-Smith, Kenneth Pomeranz, and Peer Vries, “Editorial,” *Journal of Global History* 1, 1 (2006): 1–2.

<sup>34</sup>Ghobrial, “Introduction,” 6.

<sup>35</sup>Lara Putnam, “Transnational and the Text-Searchable,” 377. See also Putnam’s “Daily Life and Digital Reach,” and “To Study the Fragments/Whole.”

<sup>36</sup>Adelman, “Where Is Global History Now?”

reflexive move, Partha Chatterjee called for an end to the collective, which he had co-founded with Ranajit Guha and others in the early 1980s. Chatterjee admitted that “as an intellectual project, Subaltern Studies was perhaps overdetermined by its times. Given today’s changed contexts the tasks set out by it cannot be taken forward within the framework and methods mobilized for it.”<sup>37</sup> Building from Shahid Amin’s observation that subaltern studies “do not travel well,” Chatterjee observed that “It is undoubtedly true that the weaving of a local historical narrative with detailed ethnographic description of local practices requires immersion in a seemingly bottomless pool of names, places, and events that are unlikely to be familiar to readers outside the immediate geographical region.” This difficulty “was circumvented by establishing strong connections between the ethnographic account and the relevant conceptual formations or theoretical debates in the discipline,” and therefore, “in the end theory dominated.” However, it was “more difficult to achieve the same result when the main modality of the work is the narrative flow of history.”<sup>38</sup> That is to say, to the extent subaltern studies was an intervention in historical scholarship, it had started to suffer from “defanged empiricism.” Critics say this tendency had become apparent much earlier. Sumit Sarkar, for instance, argued in 1997, “Once the initial excitement had worn away ... work of this kind could seem repetitive, conveying an impression of a purely empiricist adding of details to confirm the fairly simple initial hypothesis of subaltern autonomy in one area or form after another.”<sup>39</sup>

Partha Chatterjee, however, concluded his call for an end to the subaltern studies project on a hopeful note: if “history students all over the world could read about daily life in a single village in the French province of Languedoc in the fourteenth century or about the mental world of a solitary Italian miller in the sixteenth century, then in principle, there is no reason why they should not do the same with a book about subaltern life in a village or small town in South Asia.”<sup>40</sup> Chatterjee made a fair point. What he neglected to mention is that—leaving aside the fact that scholars of the global South are compelled to engage with histories of the global North but not vice versa—both the French and the Italian microhistory traditions relate the particular to the general in customary ways that make them accessible to readers from other parts of the world.<sup>41</sup> The French microhistorical tradition assumes that a single microcosm offers a window into a “total history,” and therefore “an opportunity to see the world in a grain of sand.” The Italian *microstoria*, on the other hand, relies on the notion of *exceptional-normal* and unravelling “the teleology and triumphalism of the grand narratives.”<sup>42</sup> The French option, which remained at home in the social sciences in the French academy,<sup>43</sup> is at odds with the postmodernist impulse of the subaltern

<sup>37</sup>Partha Chatterjee, “After Subaltern Studies,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 47, 35 (2012): 44–49, 44.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>39</sup>Sarkar, “Decline,” 87.

<sup>40</sup>Chatterjee, “After Subaltern Studies,” 49.

<sup>41</sup>Statisticians also use “rules of thumb” to determine ideal sample sizes. See Carmen R. Wilson VanVoorhis and Betsy L. Morgan, “Understanding Power and Rules of Thumb,” *Tutorials in Quantitative Methods for Psychology* 3, 2 (2007): 43–50. I thank Sneha Lamba for this point.

<sup>42</sup>Ghobrial, “Introduction,” 13.

<sup>43</sup>Carlo Ginzburg, “Microhistory and World History,” in Jerry Bentley, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, and Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, eds., *The Cambridge World History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 446–73, 462.



school.<sup>44</sup> The Italian option, on the other hand, as the end of the Subaltern Studies collective suggests, has clearly run its course insofar as South Asian history is concerned. Further, Italian microhistorical tradition “repeatedly argued against relativist positions, including the one that ... reduced historiography to a textual dimension, depriving it of any cognitive value.”<sup>45</sup> But the later phase of subaltern studies embraced postmodernism, a celebration of the fragment, and a “repudiation of post-Enlightenment ideology of Reason and Progress.”<sup>46</sup> This unwittingly made it even more difficult to address what Chatterjee has correctly identified as the challenge of devising forms of writing that will “preserve the integrity of the study as well as make it accessible outside the region.”<sup>47</sup>

To be sure, the charge against Eurocentrism was necessary. Further, it is obvious that *hyper-real* Europe does not pose the same problems to the historian of Italy as it does to the historian of South Asia. But *History I* of Eurocentric assumptions and metanarratives was meant to be locked in an inadequate but necessary relationship with *History II* of fragments.<sup>48</sup> Now that the goal of provincializing Europe has entered academic common sense, in the humanities at least, the most dominant strand of non-global South Asian historiography in the United States and elsewhere has little left to argue for or against. It has therefore lost much of its radical charge. Paradoxically, then, the problem of writing “non-anthropologized” and “post-Orientalist” histories that can travel well and change the way we understand broader concepts has become more acute in the age of global history, which emphasizes travel, connection, and mobility.

With the retreat of “Europe” to the “West,” the task of relating the “particular” to the “general” has become even more difficult for histories of the non-West. Take for instance “new histories of capitalism,” birthed in the United States in the aftermath of the 2008 global economic crisis. In this context, the critique by Edwards, Hill, and Neves-Sarrigui is pertinent. They have observed that historians associated with this approach agree that “the process of discovering the history of capitalism ... would be inductive rather than deductive.”<sup>49</sup> And that since there is no agreement on what capitalism is, the rule of thumb to be applied, if only for the time being, is that

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Francesca Trivellato, “Microstoria/Microhistoire/Microhistory,” *French Politics, Culture & Society* 33, 1 (2015): 122–34, 126.

<sup>44</sup>Sarkar “Decline,” 84.

<sup>45</sup>Ginzburg, “Two or Three Things.”

<sup>46</sup>Gyan Prakash, “Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Perspectives from Indian Historiography,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 32, 2 (1990): 383–408, 404.

<sup>47</sup>Chatterjee, “After Subaltern Studies,” 49.

<sup>48</sup>Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998). Here there is an ambivalence: Recognizing the time-place specificity of social theory and provincializing existing social theory to “Europe” can entail a rejection of the possibility of a truly global and inclusive social theory. However, it can also imply that embracing time-place specificity of all concepts is the best way to begin generalizations anew. In practice, provincializing Europe has resulted in the former. My aim here is to enable the latter. Put another way, to borrow opportunistically from Ethen Kleinberg and William R. Pinch, my aim is to arrive at the necessary conditions for provincializing history in order to “unprovincialize” it. See their “History and Theory in a Global Frame,” *History and Theory* 54, 4 (2015): 1–4.

<sup>49</sup>Andrew David Edwards, Peter Hill, and Juan Neves-Sarrigui, “Capitalism in Global History,” *Past and Present* 249, 1 (2020): e1–e32, e7.

whatever happened in the United States, Germany, France, and England was capitalist.<sup>50</sup> But where does this move leave the rest of the world? How is this approach, the authors ask, more inclusive, promising, or exhilarating than earlier deductive approaches in vogue between 1950s and 1980s in which “the Global South not only formed a major focus of ... discussions [about capitalism] ... [but also] ... the source of central theoretical contributions”?<sup>51</sup>

It is broadly in these contexts that one can appreciate the significance and appeal of the “connected histories” approach that Sanjay Subrahmanyam laid out in his seminal 1997 article. Through connected histories, Subrahmanyam sought to offer a way for historians to break free from their national, regional, and civilization silos and engage with the discipline of history in a more inclusive and global manner. As importantly for the present analysis, he emphasized how in this approach, “we cannot attempt a ‘macro-history’ ... without muddying our boots in the bogs of ‘micro-history.’” Overall, connected histories, Subrahmanyam argued, could be a solution to the “methodological fragmentationism ... proclaimed from the rooftops by some ... postmodernist colleagues to be the only alternative to the Grand Narrative of Modernization.”<sup>52</sup>

Subrahmanyam’s approach “came to full fruition” in his *Three Ways to Be Alien*.<sup>53</sup> This was “the case study, bridging as it were the gap between microhistory and world history.” How did he bridge this gap? Subrahmanyam conducted microhistory of “large spaces” through individual actors. These “large spaces” encompassed oceans and continents and approximated the planetary scale, or in other words, the world “made by the Iberian empires of the early modern period.”<sup>54</sup> Missing here in the oscillation between the macro and the micro, however, is a consideration of small spaces.

Subrahmanyam’s essay has been hugely influential in the field of global history. However, perhaps due to the very nature of global history and the fecundity of his approach, there is now an “obsession with mobility and movement” in the field.<sup>55</sup> This obsession has now bled into unexpected terrains. For example, as Alexia Yates has noted, even “historians of capitalism tend to privilege ... capital flows over the more fixed terrain of land, patrimony and real property.”<sup>56</sup> The over-emphasis on mobility and circulation is not surprising, but it is unfortunate since Subrahmanyam also attached much importance to “friction and discomfort, at both the existential and conceptual levels,” and the need for striking a balance between incommensurability and perfect malleability of cultures.<sup>57</sup>

Recently, microhistory has embraced the “global,” too. Either independently or as part of scholarly conversation, some scholars have started to write “global

<sup>50</sup>Ibid.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., e2.

<sup>52</sup>Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia,” *Modern Asian Studies* 31, 3 (1997): 735–62, 750, 745.

<sup>53</sup>Ghobrial, “Introduction.”

<sup>54</sup>Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Three Ways to Be Alien: Travails and Encounters in the Early Modern World* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2011), 173.

<sup>55</sup>Sebastian Conrad, *What Is Global History?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 16.

<sup>56</sup>Alexia Yates, *Real Estate and Global Urban History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 9.

<sup>57</sup>Subrahmanyam, *Three Ways*, 173–75.

microhistory.”<sup>58</sup> In a 2010 article, Tonio Andrade argued that “World History has tended toward the social science side of history” and as a result has “neglect[ed] the human dramas that make history come alive.” Given this, “we should adopt microhistorical and biographical approaches to help populate our models and theories with real people, to write what one might call global microhistory.”<sup>59</sup> A few years later, Sebouh David Aslanian made a similar point. He argued that instead of over-relying on published primary sources as global historians tend to, historians will be better served if they “choose to adopt a multiscopic lens and combine a micro focus and attention to detail (either by limiting their study to a specific community, an individual biography in the tradition of Italian *microstoria*, or even a ‘commodity chain’ or material object) with a macro view of global connections and comparisons.”<sup>60</sup>

A few observations are apposite here about this sub-field. First, given that microhistory was always concerned with connecting the micro and with the macro, the novelty of global microhistory is not self-evident. Second, the drive to add humans, communities, and agency to global history models gives the flawed impression that (micro)history is an exercise in accretion and that the discipline of history serves an “idiographic” function.<sup>61</sup> Third, in the elements that constitute Sebouh’s “micro focus and attention to details,” “space” is conspicuous by its absence.

A more spatially sensitive approach to global microhistory has been deployed by Adam Mestyan. In a 2018 article, he conceptualized global microhistory as a methodology that “focuses on the effects of worldwide transformations in a single locality and through an axial moment.” He admitted, however, that this was “not the standard form of global microhistory, which studies how objects, individuals, and ideas traveled in order to decentralize Europe. Nor is it about the ‘cosmos’ of one individual in one locality, village life, or a fascinating event.”<sup>62</sup> What is worth noting here are the kinds of qualifications that Mestyan has to make to call his history of a small space a “*kind of*” microhistory,<sup>63</sup> which reveal the tension between traditional microhistory, global history, and histories of small spaces. Further, his approach is likely to sit at odds with Bell’s, for it is less focused on how small spaces can generate large-scale changes.

Mark Gamsa has recently made a valiant attempt to overcome the limitations of global microhistory and address some of the concerns I am raising in this article. He suggests that global microhistory is an approach through which “lives” may be used as means of “bridging the particular and the general, or combining the micro and macro levels in historical analysis.” But interestingly, to do this Gamsa sets his

<sup>58</sup>Ghobrial, “Introduction.”

<sup>59</sup>Tonio Andrade, “A Chinese Farmer, Two African Boys, and the Warlord: Toward a Global Microhistory,” *Journal of World History* 21, 4 (2010): 573–91, 574.

<sup>60</sup>Sebouh David Aslanian, Joyce E. Chaplin, Ann McGrath, and Kristin Mann, “AHR Conversation, How Size Matters: The Question of Scale in History,” *American Historical Review* 118, 5 (2013): 1431–72, 1467.

<sup>61</sup>Brad S. Gregory, “Is Small Beautiful: Microhistory and the History of Everyday Life,” *History and Theory* 38, 1 (1999): 100–10, 104. The author points out here, “Neither the history of everyday life nor microhistory aspires ... to be simply accretionist, to offer so many ‘building blocks’ in the edifice of a larger, only more detailed, historical picture.”

<sup>62</sup>Adam Mestyan, “Domestic Sovereignty, A’yan Developmentalism, and Global Microhistory in Modern Egypt,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 60, 2 (2018): 415–45, 420–21.

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*, 420, my italics.

microhistory of a person, Baron Roger Budberg—a physician of Baltic German origin—within a biography of the city of Harbin in northeast China, where Budberg arrived during the Russo-Japanese war and stayed for the rest of his life. The biography of Harbin here helps in “navigating the layers between ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ layers of enquiry.”<sup>64</sup> But the question is, can a history of Harbin, or any other city for that matter, perform the role of navigating between the micro and macro layers within the confines of the discipline of history as it stands now? I now turn to this question.

## II. Urban History as a History of Small Spaces and “Defanged Empiricism”

In section I, I showed how the discipline of history has experienced micro-macro oscillations and how this has led to the scholarly neglect of small spaces. In this one I will show that urban history, too, an otherwise promising sub-field that generally focuses on small spaces and single city case studies, has suffered from “defanged empiricism,” a problem reflected in the anxiety that urban historians themselves have expressed about the intellectual value of their endeavors.

Since its inception as a distinct sub-field in the UK, urban history has sought to relate itself to the general and, in so doing, distinguish itself from “local history.” In a 1966 lecture, H. J. Dyos, the founding figure of the sub-field of urban history in the UK, stated, “The study of urban history must mean not merely the study of individual communities, fixed more or less in time and space—what might be called urban aspect of local history; but the investigation of altogether broader historical processes and trends that completely transcend the life cycle and range of experience of particular communities.”<sup>65</sup> Dyos thus argued that urban history was different from local history because it engaged with “pervasive historical process” and that it was different from municipal history “in being [interested in] vastly more [topics] than certain types of local government.”<sup>66</sup> The very thin lines that often separate urban history from local history, however, can be appreciated when we consider that Dyos’ landmark 1961 monograph *Victorian Suburbs: A Study of the Growth of Camberwell*, seen as the first conscious work of urban history in the UK, was originally intended for the series “Occasional Papers in Local History.”<sup>67</sup>

Urban history, therefore, has consciously tried to distinguish itself from local and municipal history, but it has not found an easy home in global history. “Until recently,” even accomplished urban historians like Guy Ortolano “went urban to escape [rather than embrace] the global.”<sup>68</sup> Urban history has been a late entrant into the global fold—the “Global Urban History Project,” which is “based on a broad

<sup>64</sup>Mark Gamsa, “Biography and (Global) Microhistory,” *New Global Studies* 11, 3 (2017): 231–41, 234, 231. This approach was fully developed in Gamsa’s *Harbin: A Cross-Cultural Biography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020).

<sup>65</sup>H. J. Dyos, “Agenda for Urban Historians,” in H. J. Dyos, ed., *The Study of Urban History* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1968), 7.

<sup>66</sup>Quoted from David Cannadine, “Urban History in the United Kingdom: The Dyos Phenomenon and After,” in David Cannadine and David Reeder, eds., *Exploring the Urban Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 203–21, 208.

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>68</sup>Guy Ortolano, “No Escape,” *Global Urban History Blog*, 7 Aug. 2019, <https://globalurbanhistory.com/2019/08/07/no-escape/> (last accessed 27 July 2023).

understanding of global urban history as encompassing any effort to think of cities as creations or creators of larger-scale or global historical phenomena,” came into existence only in 2017.<sup>69</sup>

I suspect there are two major reasons for the late turn to the global by urban historians. First, most urban histories are dense and detailed studies of a single city. This mode of history writing is not well-aligned with the ethnographic approach of “following” the same thematic question or individuals across sites—popularized by anthropologist George Marcus—that has become the staple of global history.<sup>70</sup> There are, of course, some outstanding examples of thematic global urban history, but they are and will necessarily be limited to certain themes and heavily dependent on single-site studies.<sup>71</sup> Would thematically focused global urban history be even possible if scholars stop producing grounded and deep historical research on specific cities?

The second reason urban history may have been a late entrant to the global fold is that once the city is placed in a global context, issues of connectivity and mobility begin to dominate. We lose a sense of concrete place and time as well as that of capital and human immobility, except insofar as that immobility enables further connections and circulations. All this begins to give the impression that the urban and especially the cityscape are epiphenomenal, or as Dyos himself put it, a “dependent variable, the outcome of larger forces.”<sup>72</sup> The point to be considered here is that if the city/the local as a product of history is invariably only acted upon; if the urban “is a field of knowledge” and “not a form of knowledge itself”;<sup>73</sup> and if processes intrinsic to the urban, even if they exist, are impossible to disentangle from processes that are merely incidental, then intellectually, as historians like David Cannadine and Rajnarayan Chandavarkar have pointed out, urban history stands for very little.<sup>74</sup>

The anxiety around the intellectual value of urban history reveals that the sub-field suffers from “defanged empiricism.” For many scholars this became apparent even before the cultural turn, in the 1970s, the halcyon decade of urban history. As Cannadine has informed us, while the editors (including Dyos) of the ambitious two-volume *The Victorian City: Images and Realities* “hoped that the logic of the book’s structure and of the links between the contributions, would become apparent as the reader made his way through its pages,” according to several reviewers,

<sup>69</sup>Global Urban History Project, [https://globalurbanhistory.org/content.aspx?page\\_id=22&club\\_id=803980&module\\_id=256970](https://globalurbanhistory.org/content.aspx?page_id=22&club_id=803980&module_id=256970) (last accessed 27 July 2023).

<sup>70</sup>Sebastian Conrad, in *What Is Global History?*, 121 credits anthropologist George Marcus for popularizing “following” both among anthropologists and historians. George Marcus, “Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24, 1 (1995): 95–117. “Following” was situated within “world systems analysis,” an approach most historians today are weary of.

<sup>71</sup>A notable example of a global urban history that follows a theme is Carl H. Nightingale’s *Segregation: A Global History of Divided Cities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

<sup>72</sup>To clarify, I do not agree with the idea that cities are epiphenomenal. As Harvey and De Landa have argued, cities are not inert and are certainly more than sums of their parts. But it is difficult to establish this position without entering into a discussion of ontology, as both Harvey and De Landa do. De Landa, *New Philosophy*; David Harvey, “The City as a Body Politic,” in Jane Schneider and Ida Susser, eds., *Wounded Cities: Destruction and Reconstruction in a Globalized World* (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 25–46.

<sup>73</sup>Quoted from Cannadine, “Dyos Phenomenon,” 207.

<sup>74</sup>*Ibid.*, 207; Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, “Urban History and Urban Anthropology in South Asia,” in *History, Culture and the Indian City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 206–35, 208.

including E. P. Thompson, “no structures or links emerged,” and the “contributions did not add up to anything coherent.”<sup>75</sup> A variant of the same problem also emerged in the United States. As “the various populisms of the 1960s, which had borne with them great hopes for systematic history from below,” faded away, urban history started to suffer, according to Tilly, “from diminishing returns ... because no one figured out how to get a firm grip on city-to-city and year-to-year variation.” Consequently, publishers lost interest in printing “yet another study of Irish or Italian workers’ social mobility—or the lack of it—in yet another middle-sized city.”<sup>76</sup>

It is no surprise, then, that questions like “what good is urban history” have been raised by the sub-discipline’s practitioners. As a way out, urban historians have often wished for a comprehensive frame of reference to help link various aspects of what might otherwise be consigned to the remits of local history to larger and more relatable processes. In his 1966 lecture, Dyos recognized the need for having “some means of relating the work being done on the small-scale with that on the large; some comprehensive frame of reference capable of embracing studies, however microscopic, of individual towns or even of single streets or particular houses within them, as well as those macroscopic sweeps which cross centuries of change or cultural divisions within or across political frontiers.”<sup>77</sup> However, Dyos also wondered, “How far can [such attempts] go?” For while he was in favor of finding unifying themes, he rejected grand accounts of urbanization, and that is why he was extremely critical of Lewis Mumford.<sup>78</sup>

In the absence of unifying themes, Dyos proposed another move: he wished that “urban historians would find themselves getting enmeshed to a greater extent with the new kinds of thinking about ... [urban] phenomena that are being developed by other disciplines, especially ... those concerned with contemporary problems.”<sup>79</sup> This was partly because justifying researching on and about the past is vastly different from research focused on the present: “It is all very well to suggest that what we want to be able to make, say, are comparisons in terms of the structure of the labor force and the level of real wages, between London and Singapore or Paris and Timbuctoo at the present day,” but “it is quite another ... to compare, for example, the occupation structure of Soho and Spitalfields in 1851 or between 1851 and 1951.”<sup>80</sup> Dyos’ desire for urban history to get more involved in making sense of contemporary urban issues, however, remains unfulfilled. This is apparent in the fact that almost half a century after his speech, urban historians of India, for instance, were being urged by some of their colleagues to move beyond a focus on the long nineteenth century and turn their attentions to the middle decades of the twentieth, because, among other things, it would enable them to participate in contemporary urban policy debates.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>75</sup>Cannadine, “Dyos Phenomenon,” 209.

<sup>76</sup>Tilly, “What Good?,” 706.

<sup>77</sup>Dyos, “Agenda,” 9.

<sup>78</sup>Cannadine, “Dyos Phenomenon,” 211.

<sup>79</sup>Dyos, “Agenda,” 7.

<sup>80</sup>*Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>81</sup>Douglas Haynes and Nikhil Rao Haynes, “Beyond the Colonial City: Re-Evaluating the Urban History of India, ca. 1920–1970,” *South Asia* 36, 3 (2013): 317–35.



### III. Deep Order and Critical Realism

The anxiety around generalization and intellectual value that Dyos expressed in the initial stages of the sub-discipline in the 1960s continues to haunt the sub-field even today. This should give pause, since it suggests that urban history remains stuck between the two extremes that Tilly warned against: time-place particularism (localism and defanged empiricism), and the positivist quest for concept independence and causal regularity as the only legitimate generalization (timeless, spaceless causation). Urban history is susceptible to “defanged empiricism.”

To get around these problems urban historians have aligned their agendas to the demands of global history;<sup>82</sup> focused on certain paradigmatic cities that have produced large-scale impacts;<sup>83</sup> tried to make their research more relevant to contemporary urban issues; or, occasionally, sought to spatialize concepts.<sup>84</sup> Thus, all their attention has been spent on trying to make urban history “travel better” in order to escape “localism.” But they have done precious little to question and rethink the other end of the problem: the validity of causal regularity and concept independence as the only legitimate theory or benchmark for generalization. Could it be that to rescue histories of small spaces of the global South from “defanged empiricism” and “descriptive particularism,” on one hand, and “unhistorical thinking” on the other, we need to rethink our ontological commitments? One scholar who raised this point implicitly was Tilly, who, after all, urged urban historians to participate more centrally in epistemological and ontological debates.<sup>85</sup>

Tilly thought, “The search for grand laws in human affairs comparable to the laws of Newtonian mechanics ... a waste of time.”<sup>86</sup> However, this did not mean that all that could be said was that human and social life is endlessly “complicated, varied, and unpredictable.” For Tilly, human and social life, despite its apparent chaos, still conformed to a “deep order.”<sup>87</sup> To be sure, he was not the only one to notice this “double condition” between chaos and order. Raymond Williams had noted how a city like London “could not easily be described in a rhetorical gesture of repressive uniformity. On the contrary, its miscellaneity, its crowded variety, its randomness of movement, were the most apparent things about it, especially when seen from inside.”<sup>88</sup> And yet, as Ranajit Guha has observed, Williams recognized that “underlying” this randomness, “was a deep structure embodying a system.”<sup>89</sup> For Williams, this paradoxical coexistence between “apparent randomness” and a “hidden” “determining system” could only be resolved outside the remit of the

<sup>82</sup>Nightingale, *Segregation*.

<sup>83</sup>A great example is Michael Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>84</sup>See Stephen Legg, *Spaces of Colonialism: Delhi's Urban Governmentality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007) for a nuanced historical work that engages with and seeks to spatialize Foucauldian concepts in the global South. Also see, Ritojyoti Bandopadhyay, *Streets in Motion: The Making of Infrastructure, Property and Politics in Twentieth-Century Calcutta* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

<sup>85</sup>Tilly, “What Good?,” 715.

<sup>86</sup>Quoted from, George Steinmetz, “Charles Tilly, German Historicism, and the Critical Realist Philosophy of Science,” *American Sociologist* 41, 4 (2010): 312–36, 312.

<sup>87</sup>Tilly, “What Good?,” 713.

<sup>88</sup>Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 153–54; Guha “Colonial City,” 338.

<sup>89</sup>Guha, “Colonial City,” 338.

discipline of history—as Charles Dickens had done in the mid-nineteenth century, “by the creation of a new kind of novel.”<sup>90</sup> For Guha, too, this “double condition” was irresolvable through history because it subsumed the “order of things” by the “order of times.”<sup>91</sup> Where Tilly differed from Williams and Guha was in his insistence that the “double condition” between order and chaos can be best captured by urban historians and within the disciplinary modes of history via a “thoughtful” or “reflective historicism.”<sup>92</sup> In fact, for Tilly, it was this very “double condition” that made urban history intellectually meaningful. Now, we must ask, if Tilly indeed makes a point that is worthy of our attention, what ontological commitments might this position entail?<sup>93</sup> And how, if at all, can his insights be extended to fulfil his grand ambition that urban historians emerge at the forefront of the discipline of history by showing how large-scale phenomena articulate with small-scale social life and by contributing to the development of what he called “local theory”? The rest of this section will focus on these questions.

Tilly’s rejection of grand laws in human affairs comparable to the laws of Newtonian physics may be immediately taken as a rejection of positivist epistemology, which, according to Steinmetz entails “a search for ‘invariant laws’ or ‘constant conjunction of events’ that link two or more phenomena (or, in a widespread positivist realist variant, linking a conceptual/theoretical mechanism to phenomenal events in a universal conjunction of the ‘if A, then B, sort’).”<sup>94</sup> At the same time, Tilly argued against the impulse to highlight the endless complexity, variety, and unpredictability of social life. In his view, social life generated an order; human action and activities invariably resulted in the reproduction of durable social structures. This shows that Tilly also rejected poststructuralist epistemology that often recoils at generalizations, comparisons, and rejects the possibility of systemization of knowledge in the social world. Indeed, Tilly had argued elsewhere that postmodernism is fundamentally dependent on the health of the “host” or the master narrative. When the host dies, postmodernist scholarship loses its edge and “shrivels”; its “methodological, rather phenomenological, individualism ... [was] a reduction that makes systemic history impossible.”<sup>95</sup> Given so, even if he did not articulate his stance fully, Tilly was, we may infer, trying to find an alternative to positivist and poststructuralist epistemologies.

The idea that Tilly was looking for an alternative to both positivism and poststructuralism is bolstered when we consider that for him order was “deep.” Through this concept of “deep order” Tilly seems to be making an important ontological point. Both causal regularity and concept independence—positivism,

<sup>90</sup>Williams, *Country and the City*, 154.

<sup>91</sup>Guha, “Colonial City,” 337–38.

<sup>92</sup>For a discussion on Tilly’s historicism, see Steinmetz, “Charles Tilly.”

<sup>93</sup>Steinmetz has done much to lay out Tilly’s ontological and epistemological position. Readers familiar with his essays are likely to find that my interpretation here reaches a broadly similar conclusion. If there is a difference it is that my interpretation works out Tilly’s position primarily from his essay addressed to urban historians that had the specific aim of suggesting how they could combine large-scale processes with small-scale ones, and in doing so, rescue their sub-discipline from what I have interpreted as “defanged empiricism.”

<sup>94</sup>Steinmetz, “Odious Comparisons,” 380.

<sup>95</sup>Interview by Bruce M. Stave, “A Conversation with Charles Tilly: Urban History and Urban Sociology,” *Journal of Urban History* 24, 2 (1998): 184–225, 204.

and the impulse toward time-place particularism; broadly poststructuralism—share the same ontological commitment to an empiricist ontology. An empiricist ontology is flat. It does not consider the world as is beyond our perceptions. It supports the view that there is no difference between phenomenon and essence, and that scholars of the social sciences should “only concern themselves with observables.”<sup>96</sup> Given so, neither positivism nor poststructuralism can admit of a “deep order”; the ontological position that can is the one that is committed to a layered or stratified ontology.

Further, by invoking “thoughtful” and “reflective” historicism, in which he made a compelling case for path dependence of social life, how actions generate durable structures, and how the past frames the possibilities of the future even if we do not necessarily recognize them, Tilly also seemed to accept a realist position which argues that even if the social world is a product of human imagination and action, there are aspects of the social that are mind-independent and function regardless of how we conceptualize them. It is these durable structures that make the world knowable, and wrench open the possibility of limited time- and place-specific generalizations and comparisons between cases.<sup>97</sup>

To sum up: Tilly was, at the very least, committed to a layered and realist ontology as well as an epistemology that was historicist. His position, then, was congruent with what I call a *soft* critical realist position. It has three main components, which Alex Callinicos has identified as critical realism “with a small ‘c’ and ‘r’.” The first is that reality is “conceived as complex, structured, and multi-leveled,” with its apparent workings—the workings that are visible to observations, for example—“the outcome of interaction between the powerful particulars that underlie them.” The second component is that in the social world “operation of the underlying powers is dependent on the activity of human subjects,” or as Tilly puts it, purposive social action, which, even if generative of unintentional consequences, engenders durable structures. The third is that in social life we do not and cannot find “grand laws” because the social is an “open system” whereas, “critical to scientific practice is the creation of a closed system in which as far as possible the operation of one particular power is isolated from the operation of all the others.”<sup>98</sup>

The advantage of *soft* critical realism, as I hope to convince readers, is that it might serve as a philosophically robust framework that enables scholars to focus on multiple layers of enquiry simultaneously; that is, to interrogate the surface or the observable

<sup>96</sup>Steinmetz, “Odious Comparisons,” 375, 380.

<sup>97</sup>Bhaskar and Callinicos, “Marxism and Critical Realism,” 90. Note, Steinmetz argues in his “Critical Realism and Historical Sociology: A Review Article,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 40,1 (1998): 170–186, that most scholars of the interpretative social sciences may already be critical realists. If so, my view is that they are more likely to be the following some version of soft critical realism than the more traditional and programmatic version. And in any case, scholars have not yet fully explored the potentialities of this approach.

<sup>98</sup>The point about comparison is of importance given how case studies and comparisons across cases have come under attack from both positivists and poststructuralist. For an analysis, see *ibid.* For a nuanced postmodernist critique of comparisons, see Ranajit Guha, “Subaltern Studies: Projects of Our Time and Their Convergence,” in Partha Chatterjee, ed., *Small Voices of History: Ranajit Guha* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black 2006), 348–49. Subrahmanyam’s “Connected Histories” also critiques comparisons. Some scholars believe that quantification may be the only way of engaging in rigorous comparisons. See Cannadine, “After Dyos.” “Deep order” is not antithetical to quantification. But, in my view, it potentially allows for a broader, and non-reductive basis for comparisons between structures, experiences, and mechanisms.

in all its complexities and, at the same time, turn to the layer underneath for order. In other words, *soft* critical realism may allow scholars to focus both on the “order of things” and the “order of time” without sacrificing one for the other. Moreover, it may enable them to mount comparison with other cases. Potentially, all this could help generate a fresh wave of mid-level, time-specific generalizations that can also critically engage with past social scientific practices. Such a position on social theory, it must be remembered, is congruent with Tilly’s, for he “heartily” agreed with the idea that scholars must stress “the obdurate particularity of historical experiences” but at the same time “use history” to build more generalized explanations of the past and present.<sup>99</sup>

The following further clarifies Tilly’s position:

Mechanism-process accounts ... positively welcome history, because their explanatory program couples a search for mechanisms of very general scope with arguments that initial conditions, sequences, and combinations of mechanisms concatenate into processes having explicable but variable overall outcomes. Mechanism-process accounts reject covering-law regularities for large structures.... Instead, they lend themselves to “local theory” in which the explanatory mechanisms and processes operate quite broadly but combine locally as a function of initial conditions and adjunct processes to produce distinctive trajectories and outcomes.<sup>100</sup>

Steinmetz has pointed out that many of Tilly’s methodological formulations seem to “have been lifted almost directly” from the writings of critical realist philosophers.<sup>101</sup> Indeed, Tilly’s insistence that the key to building local theory lies in history (initial conditions, sequence, and combination) is closely aligned with Roy Bhaskar’s position in that social life is ascribed a special “geohistorical” character, which means social theory “is also history and geography.”<sup>102</sup> However, Tilly was not a traditional critical realist. This is because, among other things, as Steinmetz has highlighted, Tilly drew a line between meaningful and objective social mechanisms, whereas for critical realists “all social mechanisms are inherently conceptual, that is always co-constituted by the meanings with which actors imbue them.”<sup>103</sup> Further, it is unclear whether Tilly would have agreed to the tripartite ontological schema—the empirical, the actual, and the real—that traditional critical realists adhere to. Steinmetz, therefore, refers to Tilly’s philosophical position as “relational realism.”<sup>104</sup> But labels apart, both Steinmetz’s analysis and the one I offer here make it amply clear that Tilly, like critical realists of all hues, based his epistemological arguments for a thoughtful historicism on a prior ontological commitment to a realist and layered/stratified ontology, the openness of the social system, the difference between causal mechanisms and the empirical events, and the

<sup>99</sup>Charles Tilly, “How and Why History Matters,” in Robert Goodin and Charles Tilly, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 417–37, 420.

<sup>100</sup>*Ibid.*, 423.

<sup>101</sup>Steinmetz, “Charles Tilly,” 326.

<sup>102</sup>Roy Bhaskar, *Reclaiming Reality: A Critical Introduction to Contemporary Philosophy* (New York: Routledge 2011), 185.

<sup>103</sup>Steinmetz, “Charles Tilly,” 326–27.

<sup>104</sup>*Ibid.*

possibility of generating a “local theory” in which explanatory mechanisms themselves operate “quite” broadly but never universally.

It is at this point, I contend, some insights from traditional critical realism can be taken on board to extend and further clarify Tilly’s ideas. Following Bhaskar, critical realists argue that our only access to causal mechanisms that lie underneath the empirical or observable layer of reality is through a close study of events, individuals, or groups. But what we observe at the empirical level is itself a product of underlying (explanatory/causal) social mechanisms, and random contingencies. However, mechanisms never appear to us in a pure form, but always as intertwined with other mechanisms. Nevertheless, to use Tilly’s language, mechanisms “operate broadly,” which makes time-place specific generalizations about the social world possible. That said, since social systems are open, the same causal mechanisms can lead to different results in different contexts, and different causal mechanisms can also result in the same outcome. Translated to the concerns of urban historians (and scholars of urban studies), the case study then emerges as the best way to identify and examine “mechanisms” that operate broadly. These mechanisms, then, can be compared across contexts or be used to understand other cases, all with the aim of generating a fresh set of “local theories” (note: all theories are time- and place-constrained) that emerge just as legitimately from the experiences of the global South as from the global North, from the past as from the present, and from cities that are paradigmatic, or big (but non-paradigmatic), or small, or obscure.<sup>105</sup>

#### IV. A Non-Global Small-Scale History of Calcutta

I began my on-going research on Calcutta with a “discovery.” I found that in the early 1960s, the Ford Foundation, in alliance with the Government of West Bengal and the Government of India, and with informal backing from the World Bank, initiated the first and perhaps only urban renewal program in the global South. It aimed to help local and regional authorities draw up and implement a new urban blueprint that would relieve the city’s many infrastructural bottlenecks that were impeding both business operations and the quality of urban life. Furthermore, the plan envisaged transforming Calcutta in a way that would boost the local and regional economy. There were other fascinating aspects to this program that need not detain us here, but for our purpose, it suffices to know that this program failed to materialize, let alone achieve its objectives. Given India’s record with urban planning, this failure is not at all surprising. But what is surprising is that, although Calcutta’s businesses recognized that the city’s urban condition was beginning to impair their operations and deter new investors, they refused to offer meaningful support to this program. Why did businesses not support a program that was *prima facie* in their own interests?

My first move was to extrapolate insights from the existing business and economic history of Calcutta to help explain business resistance. I found, though,

<sup>105</sup>In addition to the works of Bhaskar and Steinmetz, I have based my understanding of critical realism on the following works: Andrew Sayer, *Realism and Social Science* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2000); Andrew Collier, *Critical Realism: An Introduction to Roy Bhaskar’s Philosophy* (London: Verso Books, 1994); Philip S. Gorski, “Critical Realism and Why You Should Care?,” *Contemporary Sociology* 42, 5 (2013): 658–760; and his, “After Positivism: Critical Realism and Historical Sociology,” in George Steinmetz and Timothy Rutzou, eds., *Critical Realism, History, and Philosophy in the Social Sciences* (Bingley: Emerald Publications, 2018), 23–45.

that existing historical analyses of counter intuitive business behavior in Calcutta (in other contexts) were inadequate since they invariably took one or more of these three steps: they placed Calcutta outside the historical geography of capitalism; focused on firm-level cultural peculiarities; and emphasized fractious race relations in the city. But it was not all clear to me why Calcutta of the 1960s—with a substantial section of its population being employed as factory workers, and a massive concentration of capital, could not be treated as a capitalist city, or how organizational peculiarities of India's businesses as a whole could help explain differences between Calcutta's business community and Bombay's far more activist business community. Further, I could find little evidence of racial acrimony among Calcutta's businesses in the 1960s.

My next move was to focus on the contexts in which businesses were operating in Calcutta. I found, however, that the business world of the first half of 1960s, when the Ford Foundation and the Government of West Bengal made their first effort to draw Calcutta's businesses into civic-business partnership, was vastly different from that of the late 1960s, when the second formal attempt to draw them in was made. In the first half of the decade, business confidence was high and the economy was booming by India's standards. In the second half, Calcutta's business and economy were both shattered by an India-wide depression, reductions in government spending, a collapse of the planned economy, and massive labor troubles. Yet, across this 1960s divide, businesses' responses to urban transformation plans remained the same; in the words of a Ford Foundation planner, Calcutta's business community was "civically inert."

After realizing that neither "culture" nor "context" was going to help explain business attitudes toward large-scale urban transformation of the city, my third move was to look at how businesses had responded to similar large-scale programs in Calcutta in the past. Here I found that business' reluctance to support the Ford Foundation program was not an isolated event. Calcutta's business communities had also opposed two of the most significant large-scale urban infrastructural programs in the late colonial era. They had scuttled the Grand Trunk Canal Scheme, a project aimed at connecting Calcutta with its jute and rice growing hinterland to the east via a shorter, safer, and faster water route; and the cantilever Howrah Bridge, that connects the city to its principal railway station and industrial zone across the river Hooghly. In all the three examples—the canal, the bridge, and urban renewal—I found that Calcutta's business community privileged their existing landed and other spatially sensitive investments within Calcutta over new opportunities.

Having reached this stage, I had to deal with a major question. There was some ground for considering that the three events I excavated from the archives were part of a "trend." After all, all three happened in the same city, business groups and chambers involved were broadly the same, and urban historians of South Asia now consider the twentieth century's middle decades (ca. 1920–1970s) as a period when many urban processes remained intact and transcended the colonial-postcolonial divide.<sup>106</sup> At the same time, there were equally good grounds for arguing that each of the three events were discrete in the sense that they were different projects, mooted by different government departments, and pushed by different types of

<sup>106</sup>Rao and Haynes, "Beyond the Colonial City."



states (colonial and postcolonial) and “experts” (British and then American). Given so, to consider these three events together as part of a trend would be to construct, as historian Gyan Prakash has argued in another context, a “fable”; it would be akin to falling to the spell that “history” casts on us,<sup>107</sup> or as social scientists might say, it would be to give in to “selection bias.” It is at this stage that the conceptual repertoire of critical realism helped me resolve this dilemma—following Lawson, I could identify the three events in question as a “demi regularity.”

A demi-regularity ... is precisely a partial event regularity which *prima facie*, indicates the occasional, but less than universal, actualization of a mechanism or tendency, over a definite region of time-space. The patterning observed will not be strict if countervailing factors sometimes dominate or frequently co-determine the outcomes in a variable manner. But where demi-regs are observed there is evidence of relatively enduring and identifiable tendencies at play.<sup>108</sup>

The relatively enduring tendency here was business resistance to large-scale urban infrastructural programs in Calcutta. The patterning was less than strict; the observable/empirical level events were that the Grand Trunk Canal and the Ford Foundation urban program were shelved but the Howrah Bridge project went through because of certain contingent/countervailing factors. The question was, how could one account for the mechanisms that constituted the tendency or the demi-regularity?

The archival materials that gave me access to the specific events under consideration as well as the demi-regularity provided no clues as to why businesses privileged their landed interests over new opportunities that fresh urban infrastructural investments could provide. Surely, then, businesses must have been responding to something that they did not articulate, at least in the debates and correspondences pertaining to those programs. Here again, insights from critical realism were useful. As Steinmetz points out, critical realism is willing to deploy theoretical concepts that may or may not map onto the conscious views of the subjects but uses the conscious or expressed meanings as points of entry in order to discover the latent sense.<sup>109</sup> Further, it enables comparison across mechanisms and across events.<sup>110</sup> Since Calcutta’s businesses were privileging their landed and other spatially sensitive interests over new opportunities infrastructural investments could open, I realized that I had to gain a good sense of Calcutta’s land and housing market during the period. For this, I turned to the files pertaining to the Rent Act that, following World War I, was imposed almost simultaneously in Calcutta and Bombay (and elsewhere) but worked out locally.

Here I found that ever since the enactment of the Transfer of Property Act in 1882, local financial and legal systems in colonial Calcutta discouraged the use of mortgages and debentures—land-based financial instruments—for industrial and

<sup>107</sup>Gyan Prakash, *Mumbai Fables* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 23.

<sup>108</sup>Tony Lawson, “Economic Science without Experimentation/Abstraction,” in Margaret Archer et al., eds, *Critical Realism: Essential Readings* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 144–69, 149.

<sup>109</sup>Steinmetz, “Odious Comparisons,” 378. See also Phillip S. Gorski, “Causal Mechanisms: Lessons from Life Science,” in Margaret S. Archer, ed., *Generative Mechanisms Transforming the Social Order: Social Morphogenesis* (New York: Springer Publishing, 2015), 42–43.

<sup>110</sup>*Ibid.*, 393.

housing finance. This land-finance articulation, I found on subsequent research, persisted well into the 1970s, through the period of three instances of business resistance. In fact, I found that Calcutta's relatively disarticulated land market came to suit and even benefit existing British businesses operating from the city, because in Calcutta, capital sunk into urban land, building, and built environment was by and large owned by a distinct social group—Bengali landowners—whose principal source of wealth came from rural landholding. This meant that British businesses, instead of investing their own resources, could “purchase the use values which attach themselves to the capital embedded in the land” by paying a service fee or an annual rent.<sup>111</sup> In return for a fee or rent they could keep the bulk of their investments mobile. Bengali landowners, on the other hand, could get a steady return on their landed investments. This is why, while these two groups ordinarily shared a racially charged relationship, this racial bitterness did not stop them from acting against groups (such as Marwaris, a merchant community from Rajasthan) that had the potential to combine business and landed interests, and hence upset the balance of political and economic power in the city.

In this way, the Transfer of Property Act 1882 both reinforced and was in turn reinforced by a structure of urban landownership in Calcutta—that had started to emerge from the 1850s—in which the most dominant urban landowning group, the Bengali gentry, had little stakes in commerce, and the most dominant business group, the British, rarely invested in urban property. This structure of Calcutta's land and mortgage market further combined with Calcutta's hyper-primacy in eastern India, certain peculiarities of the jute processing in mills, and the impact of the Permanent Settlement of 1792 on Calcutta's suburban lands. The result: through the period under study, spatial interests compelled businesses to promote a low tax, low expenditure, status quoist urban regime. As part of this strategy, businesses allied with the city's landlords to push local taxation to the lowest possible levels and oppose any major restructuring of the urban built environment. This is why, right through the middle decades of the twentieth century, Calcutta had the lowest rate of property taxes of all major Indian cities; it was the only important Indian city to not impose octroi; and it experienced a continuously declining per capita expenditure in urban improvements from 1921 to the late 1950s. Hence, I could show that businesses were themselves responsible for creating many of the conditions that resulted in Calcutta's postcolonial urban-economic woes and also explain why they could not support the Ford Foundation-led urban renewal program in the 1960s.

Surely, this is not a global history. And it is not a microhistory either since it is not about individuals or objects. Further, no insight from this study is generalizable in the positivist sense; no “finding” about businesses, or the city, or business-city relations in Calcutta between 1910 and 1970 can decenter or displace existing ideas about business-urban relationship under capitalism, such as Logan and Molotch's “Growth Machine Thesis” and the Harveyian-Schumpeterian idea of the private enterprises led “creative destruction of the urban built environment”—both borne out of the experiences of the global North.<sup>112</sup> Was this research, then, going to be a local history and suffer from “defanged empiricism”?

<sup>111</sup>David Harvey, *Limits to Capital* (London: Verso, 2006), 395.

<sup>112</sup>John Logan and Harvey Molotch, *Urban Fortunes: The Political Economy of Place in the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007). Ad hoc coalitions in urban politics are common across the world. For a recent example in the Indian context, see Neha Sami, “From Farming to Development:

It is here that *soft* critical realism helped me focus on the ontological layer below the empirical/observable. As I have pointed out, Calcutta's actors never mentioned land-finance disarticulation when registering their opposition to large-scale infrastructural improvements in the city. However, it was clear from my research that land-finance disarticulation in Calcutta in the twentieth century's middle decades was a significant mechanism shaping businesses' status quoist relationship with the city. That said—and this is important—there is no one-to-one (if A then only B) relationship between business attitudes toward urban infrastructural investments and transformations, on one hand, and land-finance articulation, on the other. If land-finance disarticulation contributed to business resistance to urban transformations in Calcutta, then in New York and London, Mumford has long informed us, the reverse took place: as mortgages on metropolitan real estate became a mainstay of saving banks and insurance companies—that is, as the land and financial markets became more enmeshed—they began to actively combat any attempt to lessen congestion via infrastructural improvement, for that would deflate the values that were based on congestion.<sup>113</sup> This suggests that while the nature of land-finance articulation is a causal mechanism operating beneath the surface-level, its effect is only perceptible to us at the empirical level in combination with other mechanisms, processes, and contingent events. This is to say, in the social world, as critical realism argues, meaningful causal mechanisms usually do not appear in a pure or disentangled state; they always appear to us at the empirical level as inextricably combined with other mechanisms because social systems are always open, and irreducible to their constituent properties.<sup>114</sup> Put another way, the nature of land-finance articulation is like a “factor” which is neither neutral to businesses responses to urban form nor locked in a definite and identifiable law-like relationship.

As a causal mechanism, the nature of land-finance relations/articulation operates quite broadly, but not universally, and in many cases underneath the level of the empirical as mind-independent reality (i.e., businesses in Calcutta did not evoke this feature of the city when opposing the three projects). It is, therefore, the building block of comparisons and a local theory of business-city relations.<sup>115</sup>

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Urban Coalitions in Pune, India,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 37, 1 (2013): 151–64. For the clearest articulation of the imbrication between imperatives of capital accumulation and the creative destruction of cities, see Harvey, “City as a Body Politic.” The idea of creative destruction of cities has been implicitly or explicitly deployed in many works of urban history. For examples, see Max Page, *The Creative Destruction of Manhattan, 1900–1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Robert Beauregard, *Voices of Decline: The Postwar Fate of U.S. Cities* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Alexia Yates, *Selling Paris: Property and Commercial Culture in the Fin-de-siècle Capital* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015); and Debjani Bhattacharyya, *Empire and Ecology in the Bengal Delta: The Making of Calcutta* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>113</sup>Lewis Mumford, *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1961), 536.

<sup>114</sup>For a discussion on stratification, emergence, and causation in social science, see Andrew Sayer, *Realism and Social Science*, 13–18.

<sup>115</sup>The popularity of the growth-machine thesis notwithstanding, there is no consensus as to why businesses get involved in urban affairs, and if they do get involved, what they do. See, Ian R. Cook, “Private Sector Involvement in Urban Governance: The Case of Business Improvement Districts and Town Centre Management Partnerships in England,” *Goforum* 40 (2009): 930–40. This shows that the business-city relationship itself is not amenable to theorization in the positivist mold, even under capitalism.

In Calcutta's rival Bombay, I found in my research, land markets and the industrial economy became closely intertwined due to the location of cotton mills within city limits; the fact that the Original Jurisdiction of the Bombay High Court, where exceptions to restrictions in mortgages applied, kept expanding with the city; and the possibilities of reclaiming freehold from the city. This may have contributed to, as Sheetal Chhabria has shown, the aggression with which, even in times of acute distress at the start of the twentieth century, local business elites joined forces to secure the interests of urban capital,<sup>116</sup> and promoted speculative infrastructural investments. In this way, critical realism enabled my study of Calcutta to enter into an explicit comparison with Bombay at the level of causal mechanism and implicit comparisons with other cities without compromising on the specificity and intricate details of Calcutta's history. In the process, I could offer a different perspective to business-city relationships than that forwarded by Logan and Molotch's growth machine thesis, and question the Harveyian idea that the desire of urban capital lies in the creative destruction of the urban built environment. Further, in their place—though this is beyond this essay's scope—I could offer a more open-ended conception of the relationship between the imperatives of capital accumulation, private enterprises, and cities, which can potentially account for a wider variety of urban experiences across capitalist time and space.<sup>117</sup> In this way, my research, which would otherwise have struggled to escape the descriptive particularism of local history, managed to, at the very least, enter into conversations with a wide range of urban experiences and contexts, while remaining faithful to narrative, and to Calcutta's business and urban history.

## Conclusion

To summarize, *soft* critical realism first helped me adjudicate whether the three events that constituted my analysis were part of a trend (demi-regularity). Second, the stratified realist ontology of critical realism enabled me to distinguish surface-level chaos and search for order beneath the empirical surface. In so doing, I could hold in tension the "double condition" of order and chaos in cities *within* history. Third, critical realism helped me better appreciate that generalizations are always limited, contingent, and time- and space-specific, and yet, it is possible to construct "local theories." Fourth, critical realism also helped clarify that the "case" is our only point of entry into a study of deep order and that social mechanisms never appear to us in a pure state. Fifth, critical realism enabled me to make comparisons while maintaining the integrity of the case. Lastly, critical realism helped save my research from hopelessly oscillating between timeless spaceless generalization and time-place particularism.

To be sure, I am not claiming that my execution was perfect, smooth, or entirely satisfactory. Research on the social can never conform perfectly to our implicit or

<sup>116</sup>Sheetal Chhabria, *Making of the Modern Slum: The Power of Capital in Colonial Bombay* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2020).

<sup>117</sup>Hypothetically, a detailed urban history of Bombay may reveal relevant mechanisms, which can be compared with, say, Sao Paulo, where, like Bombay, land-based financing played a major role in spurring cotton mill-centered industrialization at the turn of the twentieth century. See Gustavo Cortez, Renato Marcondes, and Maria Dolores Diaz, "Mortgages for Machinery: Credit and Industrial Investment in Pre-World War I Brazil," *Financial History Review* 21, 2 (2014): 191–212.

explicit philosophical commitments. Furthermore, it may be argued that one did not need the conceptual repertoire of critical realism to reach my conclusions, and indeed, scholars often make connections with concepts and other cases anyway. However, I submit that engaging with the repertoire of critical realism facilitated methodical and intuitive moves in a manner *broadly* consistent with a particular understanding of ontology, which—I hope to have convinced the reader—enabled me to, at the very least, try to overcome the problem of “defanged empiricism” in urban history but without surrendering completely to the demands of global or micro history.

Critical realism, therefore, I believe, can open up possibilities for more research on the history of small spaces especially from the global South, and start conversations on methods far more effectively than any “rule of thumb” for generalization. It can also help position the mechanisms, experiences, and histories of cities and other small spaces of the global South as sites from which one can generalize and theorize about the social world just as legitimately as scholars have traditionally done from select spaces from the global North.

Ethan Kleinberg and William Pinch have noted that, according to many eminent historians, “the philosophy of history and the theory of historiography aren’t mainly about finding new and better answers to old and/or recurring questions and problems, but ... [are about] asking new questions and ... creating new concepts and new arguments to deal with them.” Where better to look for new questions, concepts, and arguments than ... everywhere?<sup>118</sup> Critical realism, broadly conceived, may make it possible for historians to attain what they have so long desired. In such a “world,” any case, city, or space has the potential to reveal something of wider importance and contribute toward limited generalizations of the social.

**Acknowledgments.** I am indebted to Andrew Sartori and John Shovlin for encouraging me to write this paper and for reading early drafts. Thanks are due also to the anonymous *CSSH* reviewers for their insightful comments, to Sakina Sehorewala for assisting me in readying the manuscript, and finally, to David Akin, whose editorial expertise has helped improve this essay. All errors are mine.

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<sup>118</sup>Kleinberg and Pinch, “History and Theory,” 1.