

Urban World / Global City

David Clark

A Book Review

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Gospel and Cultures: ST 8530

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December 2006

An Urban World (or World Cities)

David Clarke wrote this book at a time (in 1996) when it could be said for the first time that more than half of the total 5.2 billion world population (more than 6.5 billion now in 2006)¹ are urbanized. Clark's study of urban growth in a global context provides an informative overview of the geographical and demographic phenomenon of urbanization, and a comprehensive analysis of the social and behavioural characteristics of urban living. In doing so, Clark builds an argument on the premise that urban growth and change are geographical consequences of global capitalism.

Urban Growth and Development

Clark starts his book by describing and analyzing global patterns of urbanization within a spatial and historical context (first three chapters). An overview of the characteristics of the global urban society (chapter 1) and an analysis of the basic distributions of these urban populations (chapter 2) leads him into exploring the dynamics of global urban change from the perspective of historical processes (chapter 3). He shows how urbanization accelerated under mercantilism, and then gained further momentum during the industrialization in the early 19th century. The emergence of industrial capitalism, in relationship with colonialism and imperialism, led to rapid urban development in the core

¹ <http://www.census.gov/main/www/popclock.html>

economies of the western world. By 1950, the world was already highly differentiated in urban terms.

The pivotal point at this beginning part of his argument is that societal relationships with *space and place* have been restructured profoundly as urban environments continue to play an increasingly important role in the global economy. His premise on global capitalism is reiterated: the development of a new world-economic order leads to rapid urbanization in many of the world's peripheral areas (chapter 4). Clark also acknowledges though, that because urbanization was driven by western values, not enough detail is available on urban growth mechanisms in regions such as east Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. This acknowledgement opens up room for much more extensive study at this point of his argument.

At this point of Clark's argument, it might be appropriate to put his analysis on the connection between global economic forces and urbanization in discussion with globalization studies in the field of anthropology, and what that means for *space, place and time* in an African context. One such a conversation partner could be Wim van Binsbergen², who argues from an African village perspective how “globalization is not about the absence or dissolution of boundaries, but about the dramatically reduced fee imposed by time and space, and thus the opening up of new spaces and new times within

² W. van Binsbergen, “Globalization and Virtuality: Analytical Problems Posed by the Contemporary Transformation of African Societies”, in B. Meyer & P. Geschiere (editors), *Globalization and Identity: Dialectics of flow and closure* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 273-303.

new boundaries that were hitherto inconceivable.”³ In this regard he shows how urbanites get involved in relations of dependence and exploitation (alienation in the form of the destruction of historic meaning), and in modern organizational forms (such as trade unions) meant to counter the powerlessness generated in the process.⁴ These social dynamics have a huge impact on shaping socio-economic patterns of urbanization in these African cities.

What is also interesting is that Van Binsbergen also indicates how particularly the Independent Churches are offering formal socio-ritual contexts in which imported cosmopolitan symbols can be articulated and shared between urbanites, and in which rural-based historic symbols can be mediated.⁵ It would be an interesting study to look at the way in which the restructuring of place and space in global urbanization have impacted on churches’ creation of socio-ritual contexts in this process.

Urban Lifestyles

In the second half of his book (chapters 5-8), Clark develops his analysis in the direction of the socio-economic characteristics of a global urban society, with a particular focus on urban lifestyle patterns evolving from this urbanized world. He finds (in chapter 5) that cities offer a mosaic of social worlds characterised by many social and economic

³ Ibid., 275.

⁴ Ibid, 288-289.

⁵ Ibid, 289.

differences. But he also finds that urbanisation are not only restricted to cities. Urban values are now spreading across the globe in the form of images and values carried by the mass media (chapter 6). An important part of the development of his argument at this point is that these patterns did not necessarily lead to *cultural homogenization* or social uniformity, and that the emerging situation is much more complex than to simply call it a cultural imperialist one (end of chapter 6). Rather than a single global village with a homogeneous culture, the trend is towards a plural world-wide urban society.

This is an important insight in Clark's study that concurs with studies in anthropology on cultural imperialism arguments. One appropriate example is the work of Jonathan Xavier Inda and Renato Rosaldo⁶, who shows that such arguments fail to adequately capture the full complexities of globalization and the influence of economic powers. The main problem with these assumptions is "that it constructs Third World subjects as passive consumers of imported cultural goods", relying too much on what is called the hypodermic model of media effects.⁷ This is too simple a model of cultural reception. What takes place, rather, is "that foreign cultural forms have a tendency to become customized" (interpreted, translated, and appropriated according to local conditions of reception).⁸ Another problem is the tendency to analyze globalization

⁶ Jonathan Xavier Inda & Renato Rosaldo, *The Anthropology of Globalization: A Reader* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 1-36.

⁷ Ibid., 15.

⁸ Ibid., 16.

“simply as a flow from the West to the rest.”⁹ Instead, they illustrate how the periphery also “talk back”, and culture also flow in the opposite direction. And we now see more and more signs of the periphery setting itself up in the heart of the West (diasporic attachments).

The meaningful question from a theological point of view would be on how these new social imaginations of agency amidst the economic forces of globalization can be utilized and integrated with a Biblically informed spirituality for the sake of these churches’ missional futures in dealing with all life’s challenges in world cities.

The Future Urban World (or World Cities)

On the basis of his premise throughout that there is a close link between global capitalism and urbanization, Clark (in chapter 7) ends by illustrating this with reference to “world cities” (defined by the range and extent of their economic power). He uses Tokyo as an example of such a “world city” and shows that these cities are the control points for a capitalist system which has helped to concentrate large and growing numbers of people in urban places. He uses these illustrations of “world cities” as a foundation to ask the question on how these phenomena might evolve and whether it is sustainable in the future (chapter 8). He predicts that it will take less than 80 more years (now 70) for this rapid process to encompass the rest of the world’s population.

⁹ Ibid., 18.