Laurent Gayer, Karachi: Ordered Disorder and the Struggle for the City

Nausheen H. Anwar
Laurent Gayer, Karachi: Ordered Disorder and the Struggle for the City

Nausheen H. Anwar

REFERENCES

Is Karachi an anarchic metropolis? Laurent Gayer, a research fellow at the French Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS), posits an answer to this and other questions in his book *Karachi: Ordered Disorder and the Struggle for the City*, which explores the multifaceted political and criminal violence that undergirds state-society dynamics in one of Asia's fastest growing cities. With an estimated population of 21 million, Karachi is Pakistan's largest metropolis and the center of finance and commerce. As Pakistan's 'crown jewel,' Karachi contributes approximately 25 percent of the country's GDP, holds 50 percent of its bank deposits, and 30 percent of its manufacturing sector. Karachi also handles 95 percent of Pakistan's international trade. Karachi's centrality in the nation's economy and its complex ethnic mix, and religious and linguistic diversity, make the city a key barometer of Pakistan's political-economic development. Even though Pakistan's other urban centers suffer similar challenges of political and criminal violence, Karachi's violence rate is considerably higher with criminal, political, social and sectarian violence overlapping in complex ways. This violence often brings life to a standstill in a city whose economy depends upon the work and mobility of large swaths of its urban population. As Gayer notes, for Karachi's residents violence has 'become part of the order of things' (p. 4). A familiar trademark of Karachi's decades-old armed conflict is bullet-riddled bodies stashed in gunny bags, a source of inspiration for artists and writers who reflect upon the city's chaotic predicament.

Karachi’s multifaceted political economy in which violence inheres is by no means a unique urban condition. Violence, crime, fear, and terror are entangled in processes of political-economic change in many contemporary cities generating new forms of spatial segregation, exclusion and social configurations. Cities as distinct as Los Angeles, Mumbai, Bogota, Sao Paulo, Buenos Aires, Johannesburg, Cape Town and Mexico City, to name a few, have exhibited levels of violence that are not only proximate to (and at times exceed) Karachi, but are also ravaged by organized crime and drugs, where firearms are involved in the majority of incidences of homicide, and where violence is often correlated with vulnerability, inequality and spatial-social segregation. As Teresa Caldeira (2001) has shown in her pioneering ethnographic work, in cities like Sao Paulo, crime and violence are intertwined with other processes of social transformation such as transitions to democracy. Violence and marginality especially are intimately linked together by processes through which society's upper echelons maintain order, exercise influence and reproduce their political-economic power, both in structural and spatial terms.

In exploring the complexity of Karachi's violent political-economy and its postcolonial structural transformations spanning several decades, Gayer puts forward a distinctive
conceptual framework: ordered disorder understood as a process fraught with ambiguity and multiple overlapping possibilities. The crux of Gayer’s position with regard to the meaning of ordered disorder is best captured by conceptually de-linking the notion of social order from the control of violence. This conceptual maneuver allows Gayer to push beyond conventional approaches in sociology and political science where social order has been equated with the containment of violence and its eventual monopolization by the state. Notably, this move enables the author to answer, to the extent possible, the important question: as a city subjected to successive cycles of violent escalation, how has Karachi avoided a general conflagration? Drawing on Norbert Elias’s (1994 [1939]) work, Gayer argues that social order can be understood in neutral terms or as a ‘game structure’ organized around interdependent actors, and as a process accommodating levels of competition over the means of coercion. Hence, even in seemingly chaotic situations, there is a specific form to social life and this cannot be simplified in terms of individuals’ intentions and interactions. For Gayer, Karachi’s ordered disorder is a ‘particular social form,’ unplanned and emerging from human interdependence. In this regime of uncertainty, several social and political forces (state/non-state) are at play, competing for sovereign power in the dispensation of authority and the allocation of resources. Gayer appropriately avoids causal explanations and favors an approach that emphasizes process and contingency in the reproduction and escalation of violence, and in the fragmentation of state sovereignty.

Moreover, in thinking the Pakistani state, Gayer pushes beyond conventional categorizations of a ‘weak’ or ‘failed’ state, taking instead the dynamic of state formation on its own terms. He fittingly avoids elucidations of state-building that have relied on a Weberian typology or on normative models of the modern state. For this reason, he is attentive to the everyday negotiations of public authority in the dispersion of power to understand not only where the state begins and ends, but more importantly ‘how to capture its continuous (trans)formation through the procedures and performances of those giving it flesh and blood, within and without state institutions’ (Gayer 2014: 49). The author is particularly attentive to the notion of ‘de facto sovereigns’ (Blom Hansen & Stepputat 2005), or those political actors whose proliferation and increasing power has turned Karachi into ‘a palimpsest of sovereignties’ (Gayer 2014: 49). He underscores how these ‘organic sovereigns’ have used legal and extra-legal power to carve their own dominions across Karachi. But ordered disorder is not a zero-sum game where certain players (state agencies) are weakened and others (criminal and religious groups) are strengthened. As Gayer shows, for instance in Chapter 4 titled ‘The Bandits Who Would Be Kings’, members of criminal groups, politicians and state officials simultaneously occupy several positions but that these contending forces exist concurrently in society does not mean that the state loses control. Political patronage and police/military protection becomes an essential component to the survival of local kingpins in neighborhoods like Lyari (one of Karachi’s oldest settlements located near the port). Similarly, the kingpins’ control of the local state by ‘projecting themselves as ‘peace janissaries’ is integral to their project of domination’ (p. 159).

Before delving into a discussion of Karachi’s disorderly configuration and complex order that thrive in a democratic environment, the author frames the city’s structural transformations and unending conflicts in the context of its postcolonial history (Chapter 1, ‘A Contested City’). He highlights key moments such as post-Partition demographic shifts, a rapidly changing political economy, and the ‘absence of planification schemes’
that amplified the disruptive effects of post-1947 mass migration and led to the rise of unplanned settlements in the city’s periphery. Gayer also underscores the city’s dramatic transformation in the wake of the Afghan jihad and the emergence of new sovereign powers that have contested the state’s monopoly over the use of force. These de facto sovereigns range from the spectacular success of the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) that has redefined the political game in Karachi, to Baloch political bandits who operate in the neighborhood of Lyari, and radical Islamist groups such as the Taliban that have allegedly taken root in the city’s Pakhtun-dominated settlements.

Notwithstanding the vital historical analysis of Karachi’s urban development, Chapter 1 is a somewhat simplified account of familiar narratives on the colonial ‘dual city’ as well as on the ‘unplanned’ postcolonial city in the grip of the ‘unofficial/informal sector.’ The ‘dual city’ narrative of Karachi’s colonial development, already presented by architect-historians (see for instance, Lari & Lari 2001), relies on a binary understanding of colonial urban planning that fails to problematize how colonial power had integrated itself with the native order to create legitimacy for colonial rule. Similarly, the dominant narrative of urban planning in the post-Partition context relies on a neat informal/formal binary to underscore the ‘failure’ of modern urban planning in the production of a stereotypically chaotic and out of control Karachi (Hasan 1999). Conceptually speaking, such binaries are not useful for facilitating a nuanced understanding of the shifting conjunctures of colonial/postcolonial state power in Karachi’s planning. In a broader context, such binaries also fail to grasp how planning drives the production of the informal, spatial segregation, and states of exception, and that it enables both the state and elites a degree of territorial flexibility to pursue their own interests (Roy 2009). Even though Karachi’s post-Partition planning endeavors are understood as emblematic of state failure due to the ineffective resettlement schemes that were meant for migrant populations, and the subsequent ‘informalization of the state’ (Gayer 2014: 38) in the supply of land and housing, conventional interpretations continue to miss a significant point: the unplanned city that has emerged as a consequence of the early planning is constitutive of the rationally planned city. The expansion of Karachi’s periphery through the proliferation of unplanned settlements based upon forms of political brokerage has been guaranteed by a state that has granted the ‘unplanned’ exceptional status as ‘illegal.’ Since in Karachi the boundaries of the illegal and legal are ill-defined, especially when it comes to land ownership for the poor, the state has had the de facto authority to provide the final word on settling land disputes and regularizing land ownership, often on a case-by-case basis. Essentially, legal ambivalence has fixed Karachi’s unplanned/informal settlements such that land tenure for the poor is always defined and facilitated on the basis of executive fiat. Gayer’s notion of the ‘absence of planification’ and the binary of ‘informal/formal’ could have been examined more critically as the penultimate space of state power and violence undergirded by legal uncertainty. Several scholars (Roy 2009, Ghertner 2008, Holston 2007, Berry 1993) have noted that, in the planning of urban space, the relationship between the legal and illegal remains a site of state power. What is more, they have shown that in a democratizing urban space, even the urban poor learn to use the law and legitimate their own land claims by perpetuating the misrule of law for their own purposes. In Karachi, the job of policing the capricious boundaries between the illegal and legal is not limited to de facto sovereigns such as middlemen or land suppliers, land mafias and politicians; it is increasingly also the work of ordinary citizens and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Besides, and in the absence of long term planning visions, the deployment of vocabulary such as ‘informal/formal’ or ‘official/unofficial’
elides the practices associated with market capitalism, practices that present themselves through languages of risk and survival for the urban poor.

7 Gayer devotes a considerable portion of his book to a discussion of four mutually reinforcing phenomena that have sustained and moderated political strife in Karachi, and set the conditions for a flimsy equilibrium. He explains the ‘battle for Karachi’ in terms of the struggles over its economies (informal/formal) and territories, struggles that are not only related to changes in social identities and state/non-state maneuvers but also imbricated within the mutually reinforcing phenomena. These phenomena are (1) the ability of a leading regional political party—the MQM—to introduce a disequilibrium in interdependencies through which the party is made less dependent on others than they are toward it, and the concomitant inability of any actor to establish a monopoly of violence; (2) the MQM’s capacity to actualize its power through disruptive performances as well as through the restoration of order; (3) the rise of a coalition politics in which political parties representing ethnic groups compete for the control of the state and its resources; and (4) state interventions through a politics of patronage and outright repression for establishing compromises between different aspirants to sovereignty.

Gayer persuasively argues that in the 1980s and 1990s the predominance of the MQM had brought relative order to Karachi, an order that entailed a stable pattern of domination with some predictability. But the escalation of homicidal violence in Karachi since 2007 marks a new moment in which the checks and balances that have long moderated violence appear to have been uprooted. This has happened in light of new challenges to the MQM’s predominance, for instance the rise of the Taliban, new political players such as the Awami National Party, increasing armed conflict, and the deregulation of protection rackets, as well as the ambivalent and contradictory nature of recent state interventions. However, the author is careful to assert that despite Karachi’s escalating violence, Pakistan should not be considered a lawless society. Even as social order becomes disorderly and atomized in patterns of domination with increased scope for idiosyncratic legalities, politics seems to be migrating to the courts, albeit with uncertain futures. Gayer (2014: 236) underscores here the reassertion of the judiciary in Pakistani politics and the fact that the realm of the law has become a ‘major battlefield over the past few years and the culture of legality has come to saturate even its most unlawful enterprises.’

8 In Chapters 2 and 3, the author creates a particularly rich and absorbing account of the rise of the MQM in the 1980s and 1990s and its intricate connections with state patronage. Focusing on the life-stories of MQM’s units-in-charge and foot soldiers, or karkuns, he constructs a relatively complex picture of the party’s success and crises. In presenting the life-stories of the foot soldiers, he endeavors to question commonly held assumptions about their aspirations and violent behavior, showing for instance alternative paths toward violent mobilization. Gayer traces the MQM’s origins as a student movement, focusing on its street-fighting years that left a deep imprint on the leadership’s approach to politics, ‘conceived by the party’s ideologues as a state of permanent warfare’ (p. 119). A key moment in the MQM’s transformation was the ethnic riots of the mid-1980s, which brought forth the party’s military build-up and escalated local battles for supremacy with other parties, such as the Jamaat-i-Islami. But the strong-arm tactics that the MQM deployed also ended up being emulated by its rivals, thus leading to further violent escalations. The crucial point in these chapters is that the MQM’s success has not been a straightforward outcome of strong-arm tactics or political patronage, but more so of the
party’s ability to ‘reconcile official and unofficial resources, in a permanent dialectic of the legal and the lethal [...] essential to the transmutation of power, through its transcendence, into sovereignty’ (p. 120). Such transgressions facilitated by state agents have contributed to the fragmentation of state sovereignty. The issue of MQM’s power over disorder is revisited in Chapter 6—‘A City on The Edge’—which examines the party’s return to power following the 2002 general elections.

Similarly, in Chapter 4 on the political actors and Baluch bandits of Lyari, the ethnography is deftly managed to highlight the complex powers at play, multiple sovereigns and their fascinating histories. By focusing on Lyari—one of the poorest and most criminalized neighborhoods of Karachi—Gayer shows the intricate connections and collusions between political parties, such as the MQM and the PPP, and criminal groups to extend their influence and control over resources, public services and to gain political prestige and profit. He highlights the ‘semi-overt political patronage’ (p. 159) that has given a sense of impunity to local kingpins such as Arshad Pappu, Uzair Baluch and the infamous Rehman Dakait, who was killed in 2009 in a police encounter. Notably, political patronage has intersected with police and military protection in the survival of local kingpins. In a particularly fascinating section of this chapter, Gayer highlights how Lyari’s kingpins have played a prominent role in Karachi’s history by providing security not only for Marshal Ayub Khan’s political rallies in the early 1960s, but also for elite political families such as the Haroons, who own the prestigious national newspaper, Dawn. The point here is to underscore how these clandestine deals between criminals, economic entrepreneurs and political activists conjure a volatile nexus, ‘a chronic instability of these collusive arrangements goes against their ‘systematization’ (p. 137). These are not straightforward broker/patron relationships but more ambivalent forms that work both outside the ambit of government and also engage within it. The relations are unstable and never fully institutionalized.

This is rich material based on participant observation and extensive interviews that give a sense of the neighborhood, the micro-processes of power and residents’ voices. However, Chapter 5, titled ‘Jihad Comes to Town’, fails to convey the same sense of richness. In this chapter, Gayer attempts to show how the ‘implanting’ of the Taliban in Karachi and its ‘logics of territorialization’ and ‘militarization of the law’ have challenged the authority of the MQM and the writ of the state. However, there is very little sense of how this ‘talibanization’ has worked out on the ground, in the everyday context and of how residents have responded to this. Much more substantial ethnographic and quantitative evidence would be needed to back the talibanization claim convincingly, which is instead supported mostly by journalists’ accounts and print media sources and two life-stories about Karachi’s radicalized youth. Hence, the chapter reads like a summary of media accounts. The media sources share the same general discourse that emphasizes the Taliban’s circulatory migration from northern regions and never fails to highlight the emergence of ‘tribal traditions,’ ‘jirgas’ and ‘qazi courts’ that preside over the delivery of swift justice in neighborhoods under the Taliban’s influence. Media generated studies attempt to show correlation between political and criminal violence and different ‘Taliban dominated’ neighborhoods, but these hardly epitomize rigorous quantitative analyses or long-standing ethnographic engagements in working and middle class Pakhtun neighborhoods.

Since 9/11, the role of the media in terms of efficiently building/making stories on the Taliban has been compromised. It is very likely that journalists rely on official
documentation of the state and even on intelligence agencies and the police for information concerning the Taliban. Moreover, the media both inside and outside Pakistan has taken a proactive approach in amplifying their views of what the Taliban in Karachi is all about. Thus media narrative sets a particular type of frame in which ordinary citizens, politicians and even academics discuss the Taliban’s terror. A nagging problem also concerns how politicians ‘court’ the media in Pakistan to frame the debate on the Taliban and its entanglements with crime and violence. These discourses also incorporate ethnic anxieties, class prejudices and references to marginalized groups. I refer here for instance to media accounts such as the map provided by the national newspaper Dawn and showcased in the book (p. 191), and related stories (pp. 192-3) that focus on the killing of Perween Rehman, the director of the NGO OPP-RTI, at the hands of Taliban representatives. Such stories are also quick to suggest that large swathes of Pakhtun neighborhoods in Karachi’s peripheries have fallen under the influence of the Taliban. Some years ago, in an interview with a foreign journalist, the then MQM-backed mayor of Karachi, Mustafa Kamal, had also deployed the classic trope of the ‘Pashtun Fundamentalist’ plotting to take over the city’s peripheries, which are increasingly seen in the media as deviant territories that provide shelter to militants.³

I am not suggesting here that the subject of the Taliban’s rise as a political force in Karachi should be dismissed. On the contrary, I believe the subject deserves far more critical engagement than Gayer allowed. Of course, methodological constraints do affect ethnographic research. It is not an easy task to pin down empirically the micro-processes of power operating at the neighborhood level, the associated messy realities of political and criminal violence, and residents’ perceptions and feelings of insecurity about the Taliban or how they see themselves as being outside the law and society. Moreover, there are no comprehensive studies (aside from the plethora of maps generated by the media) of the spatial distribution of political and criminal violence in Karachi. But Gayer could have, at minima, problematized the media discourse that finds resonance with the story showcased in Chapter 5. The fear and talk of the Taliban in the media not only produces certain types of interpretations that are often stereotypical, but more importantly this talk organizes the urban landscape and, through cartographic representation, casts certain neighborhoods as dangerous enclaves. How does the media’s cartographic representation of violence as an ‘authentic’ form of knowledge speak to the logics of territorialization? How is Karachi’s ordered disorder encased within the mediascape’s powerful narrative discourse? This has implications in so far as media discourse may delocalize/deterritorialize Karachi as a lived place and also participate in the manufacturing of risk and volatility. The story of the Taliban’s arrival in Karachi spurred on by displacements in Waziristan; its takeover of certain sections of the city through ‘land grabs’; and its involvement in extortion and enforcement of a parallel legal order have been told repeatedly. Such stories tend to reduce the city’s experience of violence into a world of ‘before’ and ‘after.’ Since terror is mediated and recreated through narration (Taussig 1987, Feldman 1991), in the context of the general increase in violence in Karachi, the talk and mapping of violence in the media signals the intricate relationship between violence and the role of symbolism in which narrative discourse reproduces violence. By adopting a more critical stance when examining the imbrications of violence, order/disorder, signification and the media’s narrative discourse, Gayer’s story about the Taliban could have been unpacked further to problematize the logics of territorialization and deterritorialization.
This aside, *Karachi: Ordered Disorder* is an intriguing read, not least for what it reveals about the politics of order/disorder and the political changes witnessed in Karachi over the past three decades, transformations that entail the overall fragmentation of state sovereignty in a new phase of democratization in Pakistan. The book sets the tone and the standard for future work on the relationship between criminal and political violence in Karachi’s contemporary urban condition. It offers a compelling conceptual pathway for understanding the complexities of certain types of violence and mutating sovereign power, and is relevant for those who study South Asia and also scholars of urban studies, geography, sociology and political science/anthropology.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


**NOTES**


2. Interestingly, these are all male figures as the author seems to have bypassed the role that female working class karkuns have played as political aspirants—especially their renewed role as neighborhood councilors and powerbrokers in key wards in the post-liberalization phase.

AUTHORS

NAUSHEEN H. ANWAR
Assistant Professor of Urban Studies, Institute of Business Administration (IBA), Karachi