

The Southern city and the capitalist fantasy and realities of a people-centred economy

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Abstract

Across the globe, the Southern city increasingly attracts the attention of scholars, policy makers, as well as of real estate investors and the travel industry. The Southern city has acquired unprecedented centrality as an emerging paradigm for urban living and the pursuit of a people-centred economy within the global imaginary of economic development practice and theory.

This paper explores how the increasingly hegemonic imaginary of the Southern city as the embodiment of a people-centred economy relies on the exploitation of a disposable workforce, hidden behind the common rhetoric of human capital development. Speaking about hegemony Antonio Gramsci is the obvious reference within critical theory. In his work, Gramsci reconnected the exercise of hegemony to particular configurations of state-civil society power relations. Gramsci never defined hegemony in general, abstract terms, but clarified its meaning through a variety of historical and intellectual contexts (Lears 1985). In recent times, writing from a Gramscian perspective Stuart Hall and Doreen Massey have pointed to the place- and time-specific configurations of hegemonic power as determinants of capitalism's evolving conjunctures (Hall and Massey 2010).

In our perspective, a distinctive feature of contemporary global capitalism in its current configuration is the emphasis that is placed in economic theory and policy practice and discourse on human capital as a key factor of production in knowledge-based capitalism, not only at the firm level but also at the level of the individual worker. In this context, the idea of a people-centred economy – allegedly replacing the previous corporate-centred order of the Fordist era – has entered the dominant rhetoric of capitalist discourse, particularly in the context of skill-based urban economies (see Florida 2012; Glaeser and Maré 2002; Lucas 1986). At the institutional level, this move is testified by the growing emphasis being laid on the economic valorization of human capital by international organizations such as the OECD and the World Bank (see for instance <https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/human-capital>).

Human capital development has therefore become hegemonic in contemporary economic development discourse and policy practice, as Marxist authors Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis as well as Michel Foucault envisaged in their pioneering analyses of the 1970s (Bowles and Gintis 1975; Foucault 2008; see also Feher 2009). In this chapter, we

look at the constitution of the hegemonic imaginary of the Southern City through the economization of urban southern populations as ‘human capital’. As illustrative evidence of its thesis, the chapter comparatively looks at cities in southern Italy and eastern India, Naples and Kolkata respectively. The paper shows how in different ways in Naples and Kolkata the state mobilizes civil society organizations that act as facilitators of informal (and cheap) labour recruitment in deprived urban environments with high concentrations of poverty and different forms of social disadvantage. In Naples, the chapter looks at current local art and culture projects for urban regeneration purposes that employ jobless young people as a cheap labour force within a rhetoric of economic rejuvenation and human capital development in a long-deprived and crime-ridden district of the historic city. In Kolkata, the chapter looks at how the human capital rhetoric turns forgotten and untouchable populations into a disposable workforce in platform services and maintenance services such as logistics and cleaning. Our empirical analysis is intended to show how the hegemonic human capital discourse in the Southern city leads to the incorporation of subaltern urban populations into the subtle neoliberal machineries of surplus value extraction in today’s global capitalism.

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