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Governing Global Slums: The Biopolitics of Target 11



Tim Di Muzio

Recent literature has focused on the ways in which civil society organizations are contributing to practices of global governance in an era of neoliberalism. As UN Habitat has pointed out, what has also coincided with the shift to neoliberalism is the proliferation and growth of global slums. As slums have become an increasingly widespread form of human settlement, a global campaign to improve the life of slum dwellers has emerged under the Millennium Development Goals. In this article, I argue that this project can be conceived of as a biopolitical campaign where nongovernmental and community-based organizations are viewed as a kind of panacea for the problem of slums. This view is misguided given the scale of the problem and the apartheid of life chances that has accompanied neoliberalism. **KEYWORDS:** Governance, neoliberalism, slums, nongovernmental organizations, community-based organizations, biopolitics.

Recent literature has focused on the ways in which private authorities in the “third sector” are both reshaping and contributing to practices of global liberal governance and development.¹ In part, this growing research agenda can be attributed to the massive growth and proliferation of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs) during the last decades of the twentieth century, the diversity of their concerns, and the willingness of other actors to view them as legitimate forms of authority. Although there is debate over the exact reasons for the growth of these organizations, there seems to be a general consensus that their importance in the governance process has coincided with the worldwide neoliberal revolution in economic policy and the privileging of polyarchical forms of democracy.² As UN Habitat has pointed out, what has also coincided with the shift to neoliberalism and democracy promotion is the proliferation and growth of global slums.³

As slums have become an increasingly widespread form of human settlement, a complex nexus of multilevel governance initiatives has developed to combat the dismal life conditions manifest in slums.⁴ The agents involved in slum interventions range from supranational institutions such as UN Habitat and the World Bank to local governments, NGOs, and CBOs.⁵ Although any study concerning the governance of slums should take care to realize that interventions are often multifaceted, the current governance agenda appears to coalesce around Goal 7, Target 11 of the Millennium

Development Goals—“the world’s targets for dramatically reducing extreme poverty in its many dimensions by 2015.”⁶ Under Goal 7, which emphasizes environmental sustainability, Target 11 directs supranational institutions, national and local governments, and civil society organizations to “achieve significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers, by 2020.”⁷ Initially, this may sound like a sufficiently ambitious goal until one realizes that about 1 billion people on the planet currently live in informal settlements where the healthy, productive, and sustainable reproduction of social life is under constant threat. The modesty of this goal is further compounded by the fact that the planet’s slum inhabitants are projected to swell to well beyond 1 billion if current patterns of uneven development and income inequality persist.

While this goal may appear to some to be a miserly attempt to combat the problem of global slums, I argue in this article that it is more important to understand the governance of global slums as an increasingly important dimension of the Western biopolitical project to enhance and optimize the life chances of the “global poor.” Within this project, slum dwellers are considered a particular subset of the global poor, primarily distinguished by their forms of shelter, the deprivations they experience, and their exclusion from the formal economy. However, although slum residents represent an increasingly important target population for the agents of global liberal governance and their biopolitical imperatives to improve life, their strategic interventions are likely to fail in an age where neoliberal dogma continues to dominate the policy agenda of governments and supranational institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Trade Organization (WTO). This argument resonates with those of other critical scholars who have detailed and explored the rapid deterioration of living conditions and human security in an age of “disciplinary neoliberalism” and one where new constitutional and quasi-constitutional measures are used to lock-in policy commitments to neoliberalism.⁸

The chief contribution of this article is to continue this exploration in light of the growth and proliferation of global slums and to offer a critique of the biopolitical project that has developed as a response. One of the primary responses to improving the lives of slum dwellers has centered on the activity of NGOs and the self-help initiatives of CBOs. For many, these organizations hold the key to a more democratized and participatory form of development and are viewed as vital agents in the global campaign to upgrade slums and arrest their future formation.

However, while we can recognize some of the important contributions NGOs and CBOs are making to reach the Millennium target of improving life in the slums, I argue here that their interventions cannot be viewed as a panacea for what appears to be a mounting problem in need of broader and longer-term solutions that require a radical turn away from neoliberalism. In

considering this hypothesis, I first provide an overview of the growth and proliferation of slums, noting how these unplanned and insecure spaces are global in nature. As such, the politics of life and death in slums represents one of the key governance challenges of the twenty-first century. In the second section, I build on the work of Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose to consider how strategic interventions in global slums have become a biopolitical imperative for agents of global liberal governance.⁹ In this campaign to improve the lives of slum dwellers, NGOs and CBOs are given a central role. However, there is substantial evidence to suggest that this campaign will ultimately fail. In the final sections, I explore some of the practical and theoretical reasons for this failure.

Neoliberal Camps for a Surplus Humanity

The political theorist Giorgio Agamben has argued that the (concentration) camp is the true “biopolitical paradigm of the modern,” but slums, with their growth and proliferation, may soon take over this role.¹⁰ At the very minimum, slums may come to be seen as the twenty-first century version of the concentration camp—a warehouse, in the words of Mike Davis, for a surplus humanity.¹¹ For Agamben, camps are constructed spaces outside formal legal protections where anything becomes possible and life is ultimately exposed to death and the machinations of a sovereign power in excess. Camps are the spaces that open up when formal legal rights and protections are suspended and the state of exception as defined by the sovereign starts to become the rule. Although the ongoing generation of urban slums may not be due to the sovereign suspension of the liberal rule of law as in a state of emergency, these seemingly exceptional, or what some consider transitional, spaces of capitalist modernity are fast becoming what UN Habitat has called “the norm rather than the exception in the poorest cities of the world.”¹² Thus, the “true” biopolitical paradigm of modernity should be sought not only in the detention and refugee camps of the twenty-first century, but also in those proliferating spaces where life is increasingly concentrated and its vitality increasingly threatened on a daily basis: global slums.¹³

As a form of human settlement, slums have been historically linked with the rise of agrarian capitalism and a competitive market in land, a process that began, according to Karl Marx, in thirteenth-century England.¹⁴ During successive waves of enclosure and the gradual mechanization of farming, traditional forms of tenure were overturned as landlords and capitalist tenant farmers started to respond to price signals in the world market. As a consequence, rural subsistence producers began to be expropriated from the land they once worked for their own survival. This created both a nomadic population whose survival strategies were increasingly criminalized and one that would have little choice but to eventually flee into the

cities in search of paid work. Marx called this slow yet violent process “primitive accumulation,” by which he meant the series of strategies and tactics employed by landowners, agrarian capitalists, and parliament to expropriate and dispossess people of their traditional access to the means of survival. It is perhaps no surprise then that we find the first slums in the birthplace of capitalism, where cities and the nascent manufacturing industry were unable to absorb the massive influx of the dispossessed rural population.¹⁵ Indeed, by 1900, Britain was the most urbanized country in the world, with 80 percent of its population living in cities—the majority in deplorable conditions; this population became the subject of exhaustive surveys such as Charles Booth’s studies of life and labor in Victorian London.

While famine, civil wars, counterinsurgencies, population growth, and debt have contributed to the growth and formation of slums, the trend in rural-to-urban migration and the growth of the world’s urban population has intensified in our own era of neoliberal globalization where creditors and investors are privileged over other social forces and groups. Indeed, as UN Habitat has remarked in its 2003 flagship report on human settlements, the growth and proliferation of slums has coincided with the near-ubiquitous adoption of a set of neoliberal policy prescriptions—an indictment reiterated in its 2006/07 report on the world’s cities. Such policies have not only redefined political possibilities for the majority of humanity, but have also intensified the mass human flight into urban environments that cannot provide adequate shelter or infrastructural support for the healthy reproduction of social life. Since there is a direct correlation between neoliberal policies and the rapid (and projected) growth of slums, these neighborhoods could well be called neoliberal camps for a surplus humanity. The magnitude of the global slum problem is truly staggering and represents one of the key governance challenges facing the future of humanity.

As the UN’s World Urbanization Prospects noted in 2003, by 2007 over 50 percent of the human inhabitants on the planet will live in urban environments, a figure that is expected to increase to 61 percent by 2030. This is a historical tipping point, since for all of human history, the rural population has far outweighed the urban. What this means is that by 2030, about 5 billion people will be urban dwellers. According to UN projections, much of this growth will be absorbed by cities with fewer than 500,000 inhabitants in the Global South.¹⁶ Moreover, the UN estimates that in 2007, one third of the globe’s urban population (or 1 billion people) resided in unplanned, informal, and insecure settlements. If nothing is done to slow down this great transformation in the geography of social life, the UN expects that those living in the world’s slums will jump to 1.4 to 2 billion by 2020.¹⁷ Overall, the UN Global Urban Observatory has estimated that there are about 200,000 slums around the world, and although they are geographically concentrated in the Global South, about 6 percent of the globe’s slum population can be found in

advanced capitalist economies, in cities such as Los Angeles and Barcelona.¹⁸ Thus, advanced capitalist economies are not immune to this form of informal shelter.

What this statistical overview reveals is that slums may be the “emerging human settlements of the 21st century.”¹⁹ Such a disastrous prospect has not been lost on a range of national and international actors that are currently involved in a biopolitical project to govern the improvement of life chances in slums. This biopolitical project is embedded in an emerging regime of global liberal governance whose main strategic concern “is to establish functioning market economies and plural polities in the borderlands” of the global economy.²⁰ With this insight in mind, the following section aims to provide a sketch of how slums are an increasingly important dimension of this emerging regime of global liberal governance, with a view to questioning how the biopolitical imperative to improve the vital chances of slum dwellers may be in contradiction with the reliance on NGOs and CBOs and the political economy of disciplinary neoliberalism.

The Biopolitical Imperatives of Governing Global Slums

In his historical researches on power and knowledge, Foucault introduced the concept of biopolitics to underscore the ways in which the biological life of human beings became an object of political knowledge and intervention. He argued that this new form of power had its conditions of emergence in seventeenth-century Europe and distinguished it from a form of power centered on the right of the sovereign to “take life or let live.”²¹ Rather than a power centered on the right to command death, the aim of this new technology of power was to administer life in such a way as to enhance, optimize, improve, and invest in its chances. Unlike Foucault’s earlier concept of disciplinary power that functions at the level of the individual body to render it compliant, biopower targets the population as its field of intervention. According to Foucault, biopower’s emergence was coeval with the rise of the statistical sciences and social surveys that revealed the social conditions and general regularities among national populations. For example, governors and statisticians became conscious of such things as birth and death rates and how the natural and human-made environment affected the vital aspects of social life.

For Foucault, the rise of biopower was also intertwined with the governmental concern to increase “the wealth of nations,” since illnesses and the poor administration of life could threaten a nation’s success in the struggle to compete with other political communities in the race for land, power, and resources. What we find since the seventeenth century, then, is a new form of power whose correlate is not the punishment, discipline, and death of the individual body, but the population in all its multiplicity and regularity—a

power that will seek to enhance, defend, and invest in the life of a population and its chances of survival. Today, the literature on biopolitics ranges from debates on the meaning of life and death, the ethics of euthanasia, the capitalization of biotech firms, and new technologies for reproducing and manipulating life, to the meaning of the “molecular revolution” in biology, the application of the life sciences to the technologies of warfare, the detainment of internally displaced persons and refugees, and the use of biometric technologies in apparatuses of security and surveillance. In this article, however, I want to draw attention to how we can conceive of interventions in slums as part of a biopolitical project associated with global liberal governance and its aim to promote open market economies and attendant forms of polyarchical democracy.

Working with the concept of biopolitics, Rabinow and Rose have suggested that biopower designates a “plane of actuality” whose study must include at least three elements. First, “one or more truth discourses about the ‘vital’ character of human life” should be identified, along with the “authorities that are considered competent to speak that truth.” Second, a concern for biopower will identify the “strategies for intervention” that are meant to increase the life chances and health of a given population. Third, biopower implies certain “modes of subjectification through which individuals are brought to work on themselves . . . in the name of their own life or health.”²²

With these criteria in mind, I want to suggest here that improving and administering life in slums has now become a global biopolitical imperative. This is not to suggest that the slum is a wholly new target for political intervention. Indeed, schemes to deal with slum dwellers and their environment can be traced back to the nineteenth century and range from slum clearances to behavioral projects aimed at making the poor responsible for their own sanitation and hygiene.²³ However, what might be unique in our own conjuncture is the global scale of the problem, the sense of urgency it is given at the level of global governance, and the increasing reliance on NGOs and the self-help initiatives of community-based organizations as a kind of panacea for the problem of slums. Using Rabinow and Rose’s criteria, I offer in the following subsections an overview of how the slum populations of the globe have become a target of biopolitical governance and what strategies have been mobilized to increase the chances of life in these proliferating urban spaces.

Authoritative Truth Discourses

Historically, biopolitical interventions in slums were largely within the purview of national and municipal governments with rapidly urbanizing populations. However, at least three moments in the twentieth and twenty-first

centuries seem to have displaced the problematic of slums from a wholly local and national issue to one of global biopolitical importance. First, the creation of the United Nations offered the embryonic institutional architecture to support global biopolitical initiatives by gathering data, coordinating international initiatives, and suggesting best practices. Second, the rapid growth of the planet's human population since the 1950s and the shift toward greater urbanization placed increasing emphasis on the need to study the impacts of this process. Third, and overlapping with this realization, the more methodical gathering of global statistics on the vital life of people in cities revealed that slums were not an isolated form of human settlement confined to a handful of countries, but a growing global phenomenon.

With these moments leading to a more global concern for slum formation, it becomes possible to identify three interrelated truth discourses that inform the multilevel governance of global slums: (1) an official discourse that seeks to define, locate, and map the target population of slum dwellers, (2) a vital discourse about the conditions of life in slums, and (3) a wider developmental discourse concerned with the initiatives that must be taken to improve the vitality of slum dwellers within the context of a globalizing economy, the increasing importance of cities, and the presence of NGOs and CBOs. However, while these three sets of truth discourses inform the biopolitical governance of slums, there is a fourth discourse that is less concerned with improving slum life and more concerned with preparing for the dangers the urban poor may pose to the security of the global economy. This fourth discourse, which can also be said to inform the governance of global slums is military-strategic in nature and is primarily articulated by the Pentagon.²⁴ In some senses this is also a biopolitical discourse since, although it does not seek to ameliorate the life chances of slum dwellers, it is concerned with protecting a specific population—those who currently benefit from current patterns of production, trade, and finance.

Defining the Target

Slum dwellers are considered a particular, yet growing, subset of the global poor and are distinguished by the authorities competent to speak about them by the characteristics of their settlements. For instance, within the context of growing urbanization, UN Habitat has argued that “the battle to achieve the Millennium Development Goals will have to be waged in the world’s slums,” since this is where the majority of the global poor will be found in the not-too-distant future.²⁵ Although UN Habitat admits that slums are not homogenous entities and levels of deprivation vary from residency to residency, developing a knowledge base for intervention in global slums has required an operational definition to better identify the target population. Currently, UN Habitat defines slums along five measurable indicators: lack

of water, lack of sanitation, overcrowding, nondurable housing structures, and security of tenure. Individual households, UN Habitat's basic unit of analysis, need only demonstrate one of these conditions to qualify for inclusion in the slum population. The first four indicators are intended to measure shelter deprivations and deficiencies, and the fifth indicator is concerned with the legality of slum residents' tenure over their diverse forms of shelter and the land on which they are constructed.²⁶

With the target population defined, UN Habitat has begun to develop a "broad architecture for global monitoring and reporting," a crucial step in constructing the knowledge basis for reaching the biopolitical target of improving the lives of at least 100 million slums dwellers by 2020.²⁷ So far, Habitat has been able to locate, map, and measure trends in the annual growth rate of slums and the percentage of human inhabitants living in slums by region of the world. For example, Habitat calculated that in 2005, sub-Saharan Africa experienced the highest annual growth rate in slum formation, with Oceania and Western Asia following close behind.²⁸ Although these statistics start to paint a picture of global slums—where they are located, how quickly this form of human settlement is growing on a yearly basis, and where—Habitat admits that more accurate and comprehensive data collection needs to be carried out if the biopolitical project to help slum dwellers is to be fulfilled.²⁹

Vital Conditions

Davis has noted that the operational definition of slums does not include the social dimensions of living in slums and thus may be a "very conservative gauge of what qualifies as a slum."³⁰ However, while social dimensions are not captured in Habitat's measurable indicators and many have justified slums as an inevitable but transient phase en route to sustainable urban development, there is increasing recognition that slums are neighborhoods where the vital conditions necessary for the healthy and sustainable reproduction of life are lacking or completely absent. For example, Habitat's 2006/07 report noted that the "incidence of disease and mortality is much higher in slums than non-slum urban areas." The vital statistics of life are further threatened by overcrowding and "inequality in access to services."³¹ For instance, the spatial concentration of bodies facilitates disease transmission and may multiply the number of infections experienced by slum residents, and the inability to access basic services may lead to "rising violence, urban unrest, environmental degradation and underemployment."³² As the UN task force charged with suggesting best practices for slum interventions argues, the threat to life's vitality is self-reinforcing and begins with informal shelter:

Lack of access to adequate shelter deprives people of decent living conditions. This deprivation, in turn, cripples the ability of the poor, particularly women and children, to fight communicable disease; to properly conserve food supplies; to obtain proper medical treatment; to be protected against danger, assaults, and injury; to access formal education and employment—in sum, to access the opportunities (and safety nets) cities offer their more fortunate citizens. In most cases, this creates a vicious cycle of decreasing ability to earn a sustainable livelihood.³³

Thus, life's potentiality is exposed to a series of risks and dangers that may ultimately result in an early and otherwise preventable death. This discourse on the vital conditions of slum dwellers is intertwined with a wider developmental discourse concerned with the initiatives that must be taken to improve the vitality of slum dwellers within the context of a worldwide market, the growing importance of cities, and the recognition that NGOs and CBOs play a central role in development.

Slums, Development, and the Competitive City

The truth discourse about the vital conditions of life in slums is intertwined with a broader neoliberal development discourse that has the global poor as its target population. While this development agenda includes a range of policies, from greater trade liberalization to the removal of capital controls and fiscal discipline, they are largely aimed at creating favorable and sustainable investment climates that will induce the private sector to produce employment opportunities for the poor and spur growth.³⁴ Here, the focus is not simply on the need to provide transnational corporations with strong investment incentives in a predictable policy environment. The World Bank reasons that favorable investment climates benefit everyone and are particularly good for the poor since entrepreneurial slum dwellers will not unleash their productive energies in a policy environment hostile to their business interests. Although Habitat is somewhat skeptical about viewing growth as a panacea for the problem of urban slums, the UN program does share the World Bank's concern to promote favorable investment climates and private sector-led development.³⁵

The creation of favorable investment climates, however, must be understood within the context of the changing roles of cities in the global economy. One of the trends in the last decade has been the process of decentralization whereby centralized governments devolve more decisionmaking authority and responsibility to subnational governments.³⁶ As a result, the ability to attract foreign and domestic capital is viewed as an increasingly important role of city governments. Neoliberals welcome this devolution of power, since it leads to greater competition among governments and forces

them to respond to the demands of citizens under their administration. This is so because citizens as well as firms are reasoned to have a kind of structural power over city governments since they have the ability to move from those political jurisdictions that provide weak investment climates or standards of living to ones that offer more attractive incentives and living environments—for example, low crime rates, low property taxes, and decent schools. Thus, ensuring capital's confidence in the consistency and credibility of governmental policies is no longer simply a national imperative of centralized governments but also the concern of cities and their local administrations.

However, the expanded role of cities in the development process is not the only change that has taken place under neoliberalism. NGOs and CBOs are increasingly viewed as important agents in providing for the vital needs and social welfare of the global poor. For instance, these civil society organizations are recognized as contributing to achieving the Millennium Development Goals in five ways: (1) raising awareness and promoting development initiatives through their advocacy roles, (2) designing strategies that will assist in meeting internationally agreed targets of poverty alleviation, (3) partnering with government to implement strategies, (4) assessing and monitoring the success of projects, and (5) delivering services to poor communities and sharing technical knowledge.³⁷ Currently, Habitat estimates that there are 2,772 NGOs involved in human settlement issues, with 39 percent of these “belonging to wider regional and international NGO networks.”³⁸

However, if the biopolitical project to improve the life of slum dwellers fails, there is growing recognition that these spaces of insecurity may generate new forms of violent resistance that will threaten the stability of the global economy and those who are privileged by current patterns of unequal trade, finance, and production. In this light, a fourth biopolitical discourse can be detected—one that is informed by military-strategic thought.

Securing the Borderland, Protecting Privileged Life

If the current effort to improve the life of slum dwellers can be considered a form of “poor relief,” then the Pentagon's planning for future urban warfare may be viewed as a form of “riot control” with the biopolitical aim of protecting the winners of neoliberal globalization.³⁹ As Davis has noted, military planners in the Pentagon have been far less sanguine about the prospects of creating sustainable urban environments without the blight of slums.⁴⁰ Instead, the Pentagon anticipates that cities will be the new battle-spaces of the twenty-first century given the rapid rate of global urbanization and the growing gap between the haves and have-nots.⁴¹ Toward this end, the Pentagon developed the *Handbook for Joint Urban Operations* in 2000 and has coordinated mock urban warfare exercises in US cities; it has

also developed video simulations, such as *Urban Resolve 2015*, which are intended to train soldiers in operating in urban environments. Thus, the Pentagon is preparing for the day when the biopolitical project to improve the lives of slum occupants fails. When it does, this growing class of dispossessed humanity with little stake in the global economy will have to be contained through a variety of lethal and nonlethal technologies. While the US-led multinational force is currently involved in this endeavor in Iraq, the main strategic interventions have been directed toward increasing welfare rather than warfare.

Strategic Interventions

Since slums are considered spaces of deprivation where life's possibilities are in constant jeopardy, the overarching goal of biopolitical interventions is to transform slum settlements into vital neighborhoods. This project is somewhat of a radical departure from past policy approaches to slum settlements. Where settled or burgeoning slum populations were not ignored by government policy, the main policy approaches used by national and local governments tended to be summary eviction, slum clearance, and forced resettlement. Although such repressive practices continue today "in various forms and contexts," current strategic interventions tend to take place along biopolitical lines.⁴² What this means in practice is that clearances, evictions, and forced resettlements are increasingly viewed as policy approaches that only displace or exacerbate the problem of urban poverty and slum formation. Such policies also tend to destroy the social networks that have evolved in slum settlements—networks the poor consider vital for their survival. By contrast, biopolitical interventions seek to enhance and invest in slum life by identifying practices that will lead to the amelioration of living conditions.

Animated by the goal to improve the lives of 100 million slum dwellers by 2020 and arrest slum formation, UN Habitat has suggested that biopolitical strategic interventions follow a two-pronged strategy. The first is concerned with revitalizing or upgrading existing slums by promoting secure tenure. Initiatives here may include installing public toilets, improving streets, or providing microfinance for building materials and income generation. However, as the task force on slum improvement has noted, this response is only a "remedial measure made necessary by the inaction of past governments and the failure to adopt or implement adequate and efficient national and urban policies."⁴³

Rather than redressing previous policy failures, the second strategy is aimed at preventing future slum formation through proactive policies that take urban population growth seriously. Here, suggested interventions are more comprehensive and overlap with the goal of transforming cities into competitive and attractive investment climates for local and transnational

firms. These interventions range from building public infrastructure such as walkways, parks, roads, and sewer systems, to subsidizing the construction of low-income housing and providing property titles and record keeping. Both UN Habitat and the World Bank recognize the important role the state can play in facilitating these interventions—particularly when there is evidence of market failure. However, since the policy options and resources of governments are severely constrained within the context of disciplinary neoliberalism and a debt crisis without any foreseeable end, NGOs and CBOs tend to become a kind of biopolitical panacea by default. This is compounded by the fact that large sectors of the slum population work informally and may be outside the tax grid—further starving the state of resources. This may help explain why the predominant response to the problem of global slums—what UN Habitat calls “current best practice”—is participatory slum improvement rather than coordinated and long-term urban planning and investment by the state.⁴⁴ Here NGOs work with local governments and slum communities to upgrade their neighborhoods. For instance, one of the most quoted success stories is the Orangi Pilot Project in Karachi, which “empowered” slum dwellers to build sewer systems by contributing their own scarce resources. This best practice is grounded in an ethic of self-help and is connected to what Foucault called “technologies of the self.”

Technologies of the Self

A third dimension of the biopolitical governance of global slums is the development of various technologies of the self. Technologies of the self consist of a series of self-conscious self-practices that are intertwined with power relations and dominant understandings of what it means to be a good, normal, or worthy subject. The aim of these technologies is to produce the “self” and certain modes of being through successive modifications of individual conduct and thought. However, while these practices are productive of individual subjectivity, they also constrain certain patterns of thought and action.⁴⁵

The technologies of the self cultivated in global slums must be understood within the broader context of neoliberal governmentality, its scepticism of state-led development projects, and its ontological privileging of the entrepreneurial subject. Since neoliberals are against central planning, the modes of subjectification that tend to be encouraged are largely informed by an ethic of self-help that considers slum dwellers “active agents and not passive beneficiaries of development.”⁴⁶ Here, the inhabitants of the world’s global slums are considered active agents in providing solutions to their problems and are made responsible for their own livelihood and health.

The technologies of the self found in global slums aim to cultivate the capacities of the poor and range from educating the self about sanitation and hygiene to undertaking skills training and learning to be responsible debtors, savers, and entrepreneurs. For instance, one of the most widespread modes of subjectification in informal settlements is entrepreneurial. Associated with the microcredit revolution, this approach encourages poor women and men to give their lives an entrepreneurial form as a way of generating income and securing the livelihood of their household. Although microcredit, over its thirty-five-year history as an antipoverty strategy, has been heralded as a panacea for people living in deep poverty—and one of its key spokespersons, founder of the Grameen Bank Muhammad Yunus, won the Noble Peace Prize—there has been little evidence of microlending's success. What is certain is that microlending schemes help privatize and individualize peoples' responsibility for earning a livelihood, thus lessening their dependence on the state or subnational governments. In this way, encouraging the poor to participate in their own survival strategies by accumulating personal debt and creating small businesses displaces any sense that poverty and unemployment may be structural or that the state has any responsibility for collective welfare.⁴⁷ As one observer has commented,

The popularity of microcredit programmes among donor agencies can be understood within this context where the state is no longer responsible for creating employment, and the poor are expected to strengthen their own capacities toward livelihood security. Livelihood security becomes a matter of optimal utilization of the abilities and resources that one possesses. In the absence of critical education and awareness building, alternatives to the dominant economic regime are less likely to emerge, as are new understandings of collective good.⁴⁸

Thus, in one sense, the microcredit revolution has facilitated the discourse of self-help/empowerment and its attendant practices while displacing any notion of entitlement and collective well-being. It is perhaps small wonder then that major banks and credit agencies such as Citigroup, MasterCard, and JPMorgan are enthusiasts of creating an entrepreneurial civil society, not least because a few loyal microcredit customers may eventually transform their fruit stands into global grocery empires in need of finance and business consultation.

Thus, the governance of global slums is now a multilevel biopolitical imperative with a clearly defined—if flawed—population target. Coalesced around the Millennium Project's target to improve the lives of 100 million slum dwellers by 2020 and arrest the future production of informal settlements, actors involved in the governance of slums range from supranational institutions to individuals who give their own lives meaning by adopting an

entrepreneurial mode of being as a way out of poverty. However, while many actors are involved in the great biopolitical chain of governing global slums, their strategic interventions to improve life are likely to fail in an age where neoliberal dictates continue to dominate the policy agenda of governments and their supranational institutions. NGOs and CBOs seem to play a unique and privileged role insofar as neoliberal policies have helped create the space for their ongoing interventions and development. Indeed, for many, these organizations are to be celebrated—if only by default for some—as a kind of panacea for the problem of global slums in an age where the state has largely been discredited as an agent of development. The following sections offer a critique of this point of view by referring to the critical literature on non-governmental and community-based organizations and the political economy of disciplinary neoliberalism.

Band-Aids and Islands of Success

Much of the literature on NGOs and CBOs has noticed that their growth and proliferation coincides with the near-ubiquitous adoption of neoliberal policies. As such, any critique of biopolitical projects led by these organizations should take care to recognize not only the historical context of their emergence, but also the particularities of neoliberal capitalism. As a rationality of rule, neoliberalism is highly suspicious of state-led development projects, for two main reasons. First, neoliberals assume that it is impossible for central administrations to develop a knowledge of all the individual desires or needs of citizens. As a consequence, any effort at central planning is doomed to fail, since large-scale projects are likely to exclude some and include others while crowding out private initiatives. For neoliberals, the solution to this problem is to rely on the private sector and price signals in the market. Here, the price mechanism is taken as the best indicator of an individual's needs and wants since (at least in a freely competitive market economy) it is assumed to register the demand and supply of goods and services accurately. In this way, neoliberals argue that a decentralized and competitive pricing mechanism, rather than a centralized authority, acts as the most efficient and effective coordinating mechanism for organizing the needs and wants of interdependent societies.

However, while this epistemological position undergirds the rationality of neoliberalism, it was largely ignored in the era of “embedded liberalism” when state-directed development was deemed essential to stave off revolutionary activity and provide for general social welfare and the common good.⁴⁹ For most of the world, the debt crisis served to change this orientation and led state actors—however reluctantly in some cases—to adopt a series of structural adjustment programs to ensure the repayment of domestic and foreign-owned debt. The fiscal austerity required by international

creditors served to radically transform public administrations around the world by demanding the sale of public enterprises, calling for layoffs, and insisting on cuts in social and welfare spending. One consequence of this austerity was to starve the state of resources that could be used in public investment projects. With the rapid deterioration of life's conditions in this new policy environment, a space opened up for new actors to become involved in social and community welfare provision. Moreover, since the state was increasingly viewed as "corrupt, inefficient, dictatorial, parasitic and inflexible," neoliberals and many leftists celebrated these proliferating civil society actors as central to the biopolitical project of development and democratization.⁵⁰

Outside the congratulatory literature on these civil society organizations, however, there are significant reasons for remaining skeptical about the biopolitical campaign of NGOs and CBOs and what they can achieve in global slums. Here I follow Robert Cox in noting that civil society should be considered a social category inclusive of both hegemonic and counterhegemonic social forces, and not a homogenous zone of actors with an instinctive desire to promote democracy and development.⁵¹ Thus, while I offer reasons later for remaining skeptical about relying on these organizations to achieve the biopolitical project of improving the lives of slum dwellers, I do not deny that many of these social forces have progressive agendas that may seek to challenge the hegemonic power structures that currently lead to the generation and reproduction of slums. For example, Arjun Appadurai, in his study of an alliance of three civic organizations concerned with housing issues in Mumbai, offered a positive assessment of their agency and potential to improve their living conditions. The civic organizations, collectively known as the Alliance, largely shunned top-down expertise and tutelage and instead focused on building their movement based on their own hopes, dreams, and needs. For Appadurai, the participatory and democratic organizational structure of this movement, along with their strategies and knowledge for improving their lives and dealing with local authorities represented a "sort of governmentality from below."⁵² However, while Appadurai rightly celebrates some of the successes this type of participatory organization can achieve, his analysis does little to focus our attention on what might be called "the limits of the possible" of this type of agency. Highlighting these limitations does not deny that the urban poor can improve their own living conditions. Nor is it to deny that they develop their own forms of knowledge by which to struggle against political authority. A focus on the critical literature on NGOs and CBOs does, however, suggest a more nuanced view of what can be expected of these types of agency, particularly given the magnitude of the problem.

There are at least six reasons identified in the critical literature that suggest a more nuanced view of what NGOs and CBOs can accomplish in the world's slums.

1. *Privatization of the public interest.* Relying on NGOs and CBOs as agents of social welfare effectively privatizes the responsibility for social problems and tends to occlude any notion that the state has a responsibility to provide for the welfare of its citizens. It also deligitimizes any notion of the public good as specific constituencies come to identify with their own in-group and compete for scarce resources.⁵³

2. *Problems of accountability.* Though they intervene in particular constituencies and are often unproblematically assumed to represent the interests of their constituents, NGOs are typically beholden to their donors first and foremost. What this means in practice is that projects to improve the lives of slum dwellers may be far less accountable and representative of local residents than one might otherwise assume.⁵⁴ Relying on donor finance also increases the chances of co-optation, not simply because money can be withheld from those organizations that deviate from accepted best practices, but also because finance can be directed toward those institutions that fit with hegemonic understandings of development.

3. *Problems of representation.* NGOs and CBOs are typically viewed as agents of democracy working alongside their constituents to improve the welfare of their communities. However, although NGOs and CBOs may indeed contribute to greater forms of civic participation and political empowerment, many of these organizations may be organized hierarchically, have unelected staff, and dictate policy options rather than engage in good faith negotiations with their constituencies about their needs and the ways in which they can be fulfilled. In this sense, a participatory process may be one “in which participants cannot ask questions, and are told what to do.”⁵⁵

4. *Short-term, small-scale, constituency-specific projects.* Another reason to be skeptical about what NGOs and CBOs can achieve in global slums consists in the scope and temporal framework of their interventions. The fact that many of their projects are targeted at specific constituencies for short time periods on relatively small scales has led critical scholars to argue that these organizations can only provide “band aid social welfare,” thus ignoring holistic approaches to slum improvement and structural reasons for their global proliferation and reproduction.⁵⁶ Indeed, in a review of the past thirty years of slum interventions, UN Habitat remarked that “many programmes were unsuccessful; others, while successful at the pilot stages, could not be scaled up and remained small ‘islands of success’ that did not have a significant impact on urban poverty levels or slum growth rates.”⁵⁷

5. *Focus on technical solutions.* NGOs and CBOs tend to emphasize technical solutions to the many problems of insecurity and deprivation experienced by slum dwellers. However, a focus on technical solutions, such as the provision of public toilets, tends to distract attention away from the larger sociopolitical forces that contribute to the generation of informal settlements in the first place.⁵⁸

6. *Deradicalization.* Another critique of NGOs and CBOs is that they tend to deradicalize actual and potential social movements by directing and channeling their energies in certain ways and not others. Within the context of neoliberalism, the managerial and administrative roles these organizations play tend to be directed toward training “the poor to compete in the marketplace.”⁵⁹ As such, the potential for collective political action and radical social change is minimized.

There are therefore significant reasons for remaining skeptical about what NGOs and CBOs can achieve in global slums—particularly since their growth, proliferation, and involvement in the development process coincides with a set of policy prescriptions that prioritizes the private sector and the market over public forms of investment that may be longer-term and capable of reaching a larger segment of the population in need of sustainable and affordable housing. Indeed, in this policy environment, even the paltry biopolitical campaign to improve the lives of slum dwellers under the Millennium Declaration appears increasingly doomed to failure. Initial evidence for this claim can be found in the UN’s own attempts to assess progress in achieving the goals of the Millennium Declaration. If current approaches to slum improvement continue, even the attempt to improve the lives of 100 slum dwellers—about one-tenth of the global slum population—will not be met by 2020.⁶⁰

The Stark Utopia of Global Slums

Without using Marx’s colorful language to describe the historical process by which rural producers are dislocated from any nonmarket access to the means of survival and hurled onto urban labor markets that cannot absorb them, UN Habitat’s 2003 report is a scathing, if nuanced, indictment of neoliberalism and the growth of urban poverty. In examining some of the root causes of slum formation, the authors of the report begin by noting the growing inequality that has coincided with the near-ubiquitous adoption of neoliberal policies:

The neo-liberal agenda of state withdrawal, free markets and privatization achieved pre-eminence in English-speaking countries, and soon was exported to the world at large. This agenda was to have a very negative impact on income distribution and also, in a number of countries, an equally negative impact on economic growth and poverty. From 1973 to 1993, inequality, however measured, increased between countries, within most countries and in the world as a whole.⁶¹

The report also stresses that inequality has deepened both within and between cities of the world. The report links such uneven patterns of development

and the growth of inequality with a series of structural adjustment programs (SAPs—rebranded as Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers) that were implemented by nations experiencing balance-of-payments difficulties. While not all SAPs are identical, their overall—one might say only—purpose is to reengineer state-civil society complexes to ensure the consistent payment of interest on the “national” debt. As such, and regardless of whether SAPs are endorsed by the IMF or self-adopted by governments that want to appear credible in the eyes of their bondholders, they tend to constrain the fiscal flexibility of governments by calling for budget austerity. What this generally entails is a process by which the budgets of government departments are slashed, public servants are laid off, and subsidies or price controls for basic goods are removed. The privatization, or sale of public assets to private investors, has also been a key feature of disciplinary neoliberalism. While neoliberals believe that private firms are run more effectively and efficiently than publicly operated ones, a more convincing explanation for the massive global wave of privatizations throughout the 1980s and 1990s was not efficiency, but the need of governments to generate sufficient income to finance their mounting debt burdens. Such policies may contribute to and even exacerbate the problem of poverty and the formation of slums by (1) redirecting state resources away from public investment initiatives and toward creditors, (2) generating a crisis of unemployment and underemployment as the public sector is downsized and wages are slashed, and (3) making basic goods and services more expensive on local markets.

Structural adjustment programs have also promoted greater trade liberalization for developing countries even though all advanced capitalist countries industrialized and developed “under heavy regimes of protection (and still do in many cases).”⁶² Trade liberalization can affect slum formation in a number of ways. However, the most common is by forcing local producers to compete with more cheaply produced foreign goods of the same or better quality. For example, while Haiti has long been self-sufficient in the production of rice, with the imposition of a structural adjustment program by the US government and IMF in 1994, the Haitian government agreed to lower its strong tariff protections for Haitian rice producers. Within a year, US producers of rice flooded the Haitian market with cheaper products, thereby undercutting Haitian producers. Over time, more and more of Haiti’s rural rice farmers were run out of business and forced to flee the countryside into the slums of Port-au-Prince or risk their lives on ocean rafts.⁶³ This process of market eviction is not endemic to Haiti; it is experienced all over the world by rural producers who must compete with large subsidized agribusinesses based in the United States and Europe.

The trend in rural-to-urban migration is further exacerbated by foreign aid policies that have sought to increase agricultural productivity, largely through mechanized farming. Since mechanized farming requires less human labor, opportunities for income generation in rural spaces tends to decline

over time, leaving many small farmers to become rural refugees in cities that have neither the infrastructural supports for the healthy maintenance and reproduction of life nor employment opportunities that would help the poor earn an income needed to purchase adequate shelter.

The built environments of global slums are a testament to the ongoing dispossession of people around the world and to a more commodified, liberalized, and marketized world order facilitated by neoliberal policies. Thus, any discussion of biopolitical campaigns must take care to recognize how these interventions to improve life are informed and ultimately constrained by neoliberal policies and the forms of capital accumulation they are meant to encourage and secure. In some senses, this twenty-first-century indictment of neoliberalism is reminiscent of Karl Polanyi's condemnation of an earlier period of economic liberalism. Polanyi argued that a rationality of rule centered on the belief in free markets, and the price mechanism implied a "stark utopia" where the natural and human substance of society would inevitably be annihilated if society did not take measures to protect itself.⁶⁴ For Polanyi, this stark utopia was averted only after World War II, when governments abandoned economic liberalism in favor of social planning and collective welfare schemes. The growth and proliferation of global slums could be taken as both the spatial instantiation of this stark utopia and the apartheid of life chances that has accompanied neoliberalism. The scale of this problem is tremendous and represents one of the key governance challenges of the twenty-first century—one that seems increasingly unable to be met without a radical turn away from neoliberal policies and an overreliance on nongovernmental and community-based organizations. 🌐

Notes

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1. Space does not permit a complete listing of the relevant literature here. However, important contributions and representative samples would include Rodney Bruce Hall and Thomas Biersteker, *The Emergence of Private Authority in Global Governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Mark Duffield, *Global Governance and the New Wars: The Merging of Development and Security* (New York: Zed Books, 2001); and Thomas G. Weiss and Leon Gordenker, eds., *NGOs, The United Nations, and Global Governance* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1996).

2. Michael Edwards and David Hulme, "Too Close for Comfort? The Impact of Official Aid on Nongovernmental Organizations," *World Development* 24, no. 6 (1996): 961–973.

3. UN Human Settlement Program, *The Challenge of Slums: Global Report on Human Settlements 2003* (London: Earthscan and UN-Habitat, 2003).

4. Isabelle Milbert, "Slums, Slum Dwellers and Multilevel Governance," *European Journal of Development Research* 18, no. 2 (June 2006): 299–318.

5. UN Habitat has divided the range of actors working in slums into three categories: (1) international, multilateral, and bilateral agencies, (2) networks, and (3)

national and local bodies; see UN Settlement Program, *The Challenge of Slums*, p. 135, box 7.9.

6. United Nations Development Programme, Task Force on Improving the Lives of Slum Dwellers, *Achieving the Millennium Development Goals, A Home in the City* (London: Earthscan, 2005), p. 3.

7. There are eight UN Millennium Development Goals; see www.un.org/millenniumgoals.

8. Isabella Bakker and Stephen Gill, eds., *Power, Production and Social Reproduction* (New York: Palgrave, 2003); John McMurtry, *The Cancer Stage of Capitalism* (London: Pluto Press, 1999); Caroline Thomas, *Global Governance, Development and Human Insecurity: The Challenge of Poverty and Inequality* (London: Pluto Press, 2000).

9. Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose, "Biopower Today," *BioSocieties* 1 (2006): 195–217.

10. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

11. Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2006), p. 200.

12. UN Human Settlement Program, *State of the World's Cities 2006/7* (London: Earthscan and UN-Habitat, 2006/07), p. 50.

13. This, of course, is not to suggest that slums are extermination camps on par with Auschwitz or Treblinka. Nor is it to suggest that all slum ecologies are identical. However, there are three reasons for making the "camp" analogy. First, rural-to-urban migration is leading to a tremendous concentration of bodies in these environments, and overcrowding is common in many slum settlements. Second, although slum residents are not forced by walls and arms to remain in their settlements, their poverty generally limits their mobility. Third, it is well documented that living in informal settlements such as slums increases the chances of morbidity. For an earlier comparison of slums with Nazi extermination camps (something I do not do in this article), see Paul Chodoff, "The Nazi Concentration Camp and the American Poverty Ghetto: A Comparison," *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy* 1, no. 1 (1968): 27–36.

14. Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (Toronto: Penguin, 1990); see especially section 8.

15. UN Human Settlement Program, *State of the World's Cities*, p. 19.

16. United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2003 Revision* (New York: United Nations, 2003), p. 3.

17. UN Human Settlement Program, *State of the World's Cities*, p. x. See also UN Human Settlement Program, *Slums of the World: The Face of Urban Poverty in the New Millennium?* Working Paper (New York: United Nations, 2003), p. 54.

18. UN Human Settlement Program, *State of the World's Cities*, p. 20.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

20. Mark Duffield, "Governing the Borderlands: Decoding the Power of Aid," *Disasters* 25, no. 4 (December 2001): 311.

21. Michel Foucault, "Society Must Be Defended," *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), p. 241.

22. Rabinow and Rose, "Biopower Today," pp. 197–198.

23. Sheldon A. Wohl, *The Eternal Slum: Housing and Social Policy in Victorian London* (London: Edward Arnold, 1977).

24. Mike Davis, "The Urbanization of Empire: Megacities and the Laws of Chaos," *Social Text* 22, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 9–15.
25. UN Human Settlement Program, *State of the World's Cities*, p. xiii.
26. *Ibid.*, p. x.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
29. *Ibid.*, p. xi.
30. Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums*, p. 23.
31. *Ibid.*
32. UN Human Settlement Program, *State of the World's Cities*, pp. ix–x.
33. United Nations Development Programme, *A Home in the City*, p. xiv.
34. World Bank, *A Better Investment Climate for Everyone: World Development Report 2005* (Washington, DC: World Bank and Oxford University Press, 2005).
35. United Nations Development Programme, *A Home in the City*, p. 61.
36. UN Human Settlement Program, *State of the World's Cities*, p. 168.
37. UN Millennium Project, *Investing in Development: A Practical Plan to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals* (London: Earthscan, UN Development Programme, 2005), p. 126.
38. UN Settlement Program, *The Challenge of Slums*, pp. 160–161.
39. Robert Cox, quoted in Mark Duffield, *Global Governance and the New Wars: The Merging of Development and Security* (New York: Zed Books, 2001), p. 4.
40. Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums*, pp. 201–206.
41. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Handbook for Joint Urban Operations* (Washington, DC: US Department of Defense, 2000), p. 3. See also US Space Command, *Vision 2020*, available at www.middlepowers.org/gsi/docs/vision_2020.pdf (accessed 26 December 2006), p. 6, where the report notes the expected widening of the division between the haves and have-nots under conditions of globalization.
42. UN Settlement Program, *The Challenge of Slums*, p. 128ff.
43. United Nations Development Programme, *A Home in the City*, pp. 42–43.
44. UN Settlement Program, *The Challenge of Slums*, p. 132.
45. For a discussion on technologies of the self, see Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).
46. United Nations Development Programme, *A Home in the City*, p. 3.
47. James Petras, "Imperialism and NGOs in Latin America," *Monthly Review* 49, no. 7 (1997).
48. Sangeeta Kamat, "The Privatization of Public Interest: Theorizing NGO Discourse in a Neoliberal Era," *Review of International Political Economy* 11, no. 1 (2004): 169.
49. John Gerard Ruggie, "International Regimes, Transactions, and Change: Embedded Liberalism in the Postwar Economic Order," *International Organization* 36 (1982): 379–415.
50. Akbar S. Zaidi, "NGO Failure and the Need to Bring Back the State," *Journal of International Development* 11, no. 2 (March–April 1999): 269. See also UN Settlement Program, *The Challenge of Slums*, p. 148.
51. Robert Cox, "Civil Society at the Turn of the Millennium: Prospects for an Alternative World Order," *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 1 (1999): 3–8.
52. Arjun Appadurai, "Deep Democracy: Urban Governmentality and the Horizon of Politics," *Environment and Urbanization* 13, no. 2 (2001): 23–43.

53. Kamat, "The Privatization of Public Interest"; James Petras, "NGOs in the Service of Neoliberalism," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 29, no. 4 (1999): 438.

54. Zaidi, "NGO Failure," p. 263; UN Settlement Program, *The Challenge of Slums*, p. 158.

55. Andrea Cornwall and Karen Brock, "What Do Buzzwords Do for Development Policy? A Critical Look at 'Participation,' 'Empowerment' and 'Poverty Reduction,'" *Third World Quarterly* 26, no. 7 (2005): 1054.

56. Zaidi, "NGO Failure," p. 269.

57. UN Human Settlement Program, *State of the World's Cities*, pp. xi–xii.

58. Kamat, "The Privatization of Public Interest," pp. 167–168.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 171.

60. United Nations, *Millennium Development Goals Report 2005* (New York: United Nations), p. 35, available at: www.un.org/Docs/summit2005/MDGBook.pdf (accessed 26 December 2006).

61. UN Settlement Program, *The Challenge of Slums*, p. 36.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

63. Michael Dobbs, "Free Market Left Haiti's Rice Growers Behind," *Washington Post*, 13 April 2000; Jane Regan "Some Areas Really Miss Tariff," *Miami Herald*, 26 October 2003.

64. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Times* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), p. 3.