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Archipelagos – From Urbanisation to Translocalisation

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for those whom this book tells about
and for Khorshed Alam, who could not read it

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Zeigen möchte ich Ihnen, daß die Tendenz einer Dichtung politisch nur stimmen kann, wenn sie auch literarisch stimmt. Das heißt, daß die politisch richtige Tendenz eine literarische Tendenz einschließt. Und, um das gleich hinzuzufügen: diese literarische Tendenz, die implicit oder explicit in jeder richtigen politischen Tendenz enthalten ist – die und nichts anderes macht die Qualität des Werks. Darum also schließt die richtige politische Tendenz eines Werkes seine literarische Qualität ein, weil sie seine literarische Tendenz einschließt.

Walter Benjamin, 1934

For in the immediate world, everything is to be discerned, for him who can discern it, and centrally and simply, without either dissection into science, or digestion into art, but with the whole of consciousness, seeking to perceive it as it stands: so that the aspect of a street in sunlight can roar in the heart of itself as a symphony, perhaps as no symphony can: and all of consciousness is shifted from the imagined, the revisive, to the effort to perceive simply the cruel radiance of what is.

James Agee, 1939

A user's guide

Taking off from Bangladesh for the first time, I remember, I was impressed by the similarity of its topography made of rivers and sinuous streams drawn by the pre-monsoon tempests with another, more familiar topography. Seen from the airplane, the *char* or sand islands covered with grass and dotted with sparse houses—or were we crossing ordinary agricultural lands submerged due to the season's floodings?—strikingly resembled the view that filled me with the love of the homecomer and the nostalgia of the migrant every time I landed in Venice. Only that the lagoon was a 'microcosm'[1] with an ageing and declining population, while Bangladesh covered two-thirds of the huge Ganges Delta and was famous for being the world's most densely populated country.[2] The illusion couldn't sustain, but sufficed to convince me that I'd come back. Voluptuous is the pleasure of seeing the whole from on high, says Michel de Certeau;[3] yet it might never have matched the experience on the ground level.

That is voluptuous. If you asked me what this book should at all costs manage to convey, I'd say it is the voluptuousness, tactile experience beside optic allusions, of the fieldwork to which it goes back: the landscapes, wrenched soils, turgid skies, people, proverbs, cuisine, whose beauty and pain accompany me till today, of Bangladesh and West Bengal. It were observations, suggestions on that ground level that prompted my initial questions; after I had bundled them in scientific language convincingly enough to be granted a research fund, new experiences on the ground impregnated hypotheses. To this stage, they carry a bit of the fieldwork's dirt, like the minuscule grains of clay one cannot shower off her toes after a long march on Bengal's *kancha* roads drenched by the monsoon.[4]

I'll linger on that scale illusion for a moment. The two topographies' similitude was to do with the location on respective deltas, incommensurable as their dimensions might be. Down below, the aerial views dear to geographers, planners, designers and directors of photography (I don't ignore that compared to the app-generated layerings and batchings of Google Earth-views that overflow our screens, they have a charmingly authentic touch) unfold in landscapes where sand and water play with each other beautiful games: humidity- and mosquito-prone habitats, coloured in clay-red-greys and paddy-or-wheat-yellow-greens. And all around and multiplied in uncountable water bodies, the sky, gloomy for part of the year, constantly threatening to fall on earth and flood it, like in one of William Turner's paintings, or in Jibanananda Das' poems. Adding the factor *time*, now I could pass from the three-dimensionality of the travelled landscape to the four dimensions of social space. I would then speak of the biographical

and economic ties linking the two seemingly far-removed deltaic regions, which in the last decades have been invigorated through migration and industrial exploitation—attested, for example, by the privileged lane for textile investors at Dhaka's airport, or by Milton wandering these days on some Italian beach with sunglasses and toys for holidaymakers on his shoulders.[5] Yet this will have to fill a future book, because until recently I was obsessed with another level of the production of social space and precisely, the 'urban'. It all started in Dhaka: I was mesmerised by the way this city was squeezing a whole country's people and its soft landscapes into a hard corset of residential blocks, highways, embankments and flyovers. I dived into its streets as good as I could, learning to accept the obsolescence of my European concepts of urbanity and urbanisation. Orienting myself in that mess took me a few years: I started by studying everyday life negotiations of space at the city level and later, I engaged in research in one of its self-organised settlements, Karail Basti. Exactly there, in the heart of the city, the 'rural' got me.

What is the 'rural'? An extinguishing mode of production, or the constantly re-emerging effector of a morphed everyday? Some regard cities like Dhaka or Kolkata with all which is around them as effects and witnesses of 'planetary urbanisation'. The ambiguous attire of the modes of production and life forms that shape them, however, prompt one to doubt: is the production of space (still) determined only by what Henri Lefebvre called the 'urban'? Others have insisted that the path taken by the urban phenomenon especially in non-EuroAmerican contexts is different from that delineated by Lefebvre on the basis of the opposition of rural and urban production.[6] I on my part am interested in what appears to mark a rupture, a diversion or a subversion in the historical process of urbanisation: the classic city–village relationship being supplanted not by the 'urban', but by the *motional*. This distinction becomes necessary in face of settings in which rural and urban modes of production appear, more than interdependent, overlapping in 'urban' *and* 'rural' areas;[7] and of a deeper transformation of the norms of production of space which extant descriptions—from 'rurbanisation' through 'peri-urbanisation' to 'desakota'—don't in my view reflect. Yet I'll stick by the observations of those days, for now. For example, by the fact that entire families vacated Karail Basti in the harvest periods and seasonal workers moved in and out all through the year, which helped me realise that village and city were the complementary sites of well-tuned livelihood cycles, rather than opposites. Or by the importance of the 'rural' as producer of habitats and stories: it was sensible in the architecture of the settlement's older clusters, built around a courtyard like in the countryside,[8] as much as in the gifts and seasonal dainties brought by relatives from *desh*, the village—desh, indeed, was a constant reference in the debates of my neighbours and in the stories of Furkhan-*bhai*, my 'landlord', where it attained an intriguing allure of natural splendour and social anomy.[9]

That the reverse, that is, the 'urban' manifesting itself in the countryside, was the case too, occurred to me looking at the men unloading iron rods on shores never touched by electricity (villages were not even in sight) during the one night and dawn it took us to travel on a battered ferry boat from Dhaka to Bhola, Furkhan's native island 250km down the Meghna. He stayed back for some urgent family matters and

I returned via train, crossing pristine landscapes but also strangely expanding settlements I couldn't make sense of: they weren't for sure the product of urban sprawl—the train didn't pass big, not even medium cities; perhaps new industrial hubs, Export Processing Zones like that of Savar on the fringes of Dhaka, which as I continuously heard had propelled a chaotic urban growth? The passengers getting in and off didn't give the impression of being industrial workers though, and I would have expected at least some groups of women like those I usually saw coming home from the garment factories to be among them. Sensing that whatever was going on, someone ought to examine it closely, I noted down: *people moving along the patterns of rural–urban exploitation, and not intangible forces such as development or capital, are changing the known shapes and concepts of settlement.* This book is the outcome of my subsequent efforts to understand *how* they are doing it.

'It is well known that numbers of people all over the world don't immigrate permanently but move between the city and other places in regular intervals! Studies around circular migration in South Asia abound, you should know that', you might remark. Well, my goal was from the very beginning to uncover what, to me, lay behind and simultaneously beyond the sociological phenomenon of circular migration: a shift that many already sensed as virtuality in the Asian subcontinent and elsewhere, and its effects on human settlements. In fact, it were the implications for urbanisation theory that I wanted to inspect. Cause if and insofar as 'strange' settlement formations of the kind I got to see on the return journey from Bhola, deep in the 'rural', correlate with the augmented movement of people, the narrative (as Lefebvrian terminology permeates the book, I'll speak of *representation* and stick by that from now on) of urbanisation as process of concentration–extension is called into question.[10] If other, decentring or even ex-centric, forces are impacting urban growth and reshuffling all levels of social space—the near (habitation), the middle (the city) and the far (state and its macrolevel connections)—the city-hegemonic views that dominate urban studies must be abandoned once for all, and the new norm of production of space called by name. All this is extensively dealt with in *From Urbanisation to Translocalisation,* the essay that ought to sum up the lessons interspersed in the first, much larger part of the book. Here, I need to dedicate a few words to something else, and it regards that primary challenge: re-presenting the voluptuousness of the fieldwork in a book.

Long before embarking in the *Archipelagos*-research, I started to enquire about the shifts, moves and returns that had characterised or still characterised the lives of my neighbours in Karail Basti itself. A remarkable experience those days was that the events they narrated were somewhat irreproducible in a time–space sequence: I could try and try to 'order' them, but I invariantly ended up with renditions that were either oneiric or didn't make sense. Was I failing to retain a full, deep understanding of the stories due to my rudimentary language skills? Was my impression to understand them at the time of oral production only an illusion, nourished by empathy and the helpful hints of hand movements, gestures and face expressions? I can't exclude that, however the diagrams and drawings I soon turned to in order to document those conversations[11] suggested a different explanation. Namely, that stories told for the simple purpose of

sharing them with a casual listener don't follow a linear logic, since the ways human beings report their experiences underlie, like life itself, dynamic influences—respective audiences and environments, changing moods, emotions evoked by the work of memory, etc. It is those scantily sketched space–time congregations that generated the image, the *Denkbild* as Walter Benjamin would have said, of archipelagos.[12] I saw how crucial events emerged from the sea of one's life and got temporarily connected to others via a fleet of vessels, unpredictable and complex like a half-public-half-private-sector ferry network.

Archipelagos, as I conceive of it, stands for different aspects and foci of the research on translocalisation that this book ought to condense. For one, it should render the idea that people's experiences of space and time, conveyed among others in life stories, are at once semantically linked and semiotically connected: as the islands of an archipelago communicate via the sea but are also part of the same geological unity, visible only underwater, they don't constitute a continuum, but a holey and multilayered mesh of connections, references, affiliations. A slight variation of the same *Denkbild* will help me discuss the hypothesis that in the historical transition towards livelihoods and lifestyles-on-the-move, human beings also recur to other, new representations in order to arrange their experiences. For example, collecting-sketching stories back then, it intrigued me that similarly to how they lacked a before–after order (speaking of a sense of causality would be misleading), also the localities of specific occurrences were mostly discounted: did it mean that representations of space–time shift along with increasing mobility? The fieldwork supplied a yes-and-no answer, infinitely more complex and multilayered, which I discuss in the *Afterword*. Nonetheless, this simple possibility has explosive potential: if representations of space co-produce social space along with spatial practice and representational or lived space,[13] the fact that they're shifting might signal an interruption of the usual relations of production. This frees potentialities—for a realignment of representations, spatial practice and lived space, to start with; and thinking only a bit further, for a subversion of settled gender, class, or economic hierarchies, pushed forward by people brave or desperate enough to choose *other* ways to live, produce, dwell. In short, for new social relations. Yes, I imagine that a motional experience of space–time should yield a fully different type of relationship to habitation, production–consumption, personal interactions, etc. It might not suffice to overthrow the closely intertwined systems responsible for the misery from which millions are fleeing today, and certainly, augmented movement could also presage a transformation for the worse. Whence the importance of monitoring representations, tracing their possible reconfigurations, so to identify measures that might allow us to handle the implications, rather than only enduring them. The last interpretation of *Archipelagos,* finally, will help me to describe (and that's again stuff for the concluding essay) at least some of the economic and social interdependences backing the ex-centric urbanisation that looms on the horizon.

I now go back to what I could call the programme of this book: to tell about translocalisation via the stories of people who are hit by its multi-level effects most directly. No, not via migration biographies, though life story-tellings of highly mobile persons were the starting point; nor via a 'travelogue', though I moved between home and

South Asia repeatedly and there, travelled to innumerable sites. Rather, by mediating from there and then to here and now, the stories of *people-on-the-move*. Behind the concept, there is the plain fact that none of the persons I talked to during the field-work perceived themselves as 'migrants' (or for what matters, as commuters)—not even Sahabuddin, who could pass for a full-fledged migrant labourer indeed. Many alternated to indefinitely long phases on the move, that is, travelling and/or pursuing a temporary job and/or monitoring a certain activity elsewhere, periods of work at the places of origin and there they felt, in fact, rooted. Put another way, moving between one's village and the city, or other places, was understood as an exceptional, ad hoc (or 'coping') tactic even when it had long become a consistent livelihood strategy. 'People-on-the-move' should convey all this: their being 'suspended' between different places and identities, the instability of their livelihoods, as well as a silent, forced and poor reflected adaptation to being-on-the-move that points at the deeper, historical process I strive to define. By exposing the experiences, struggles, the dignity, of Durga, Dulal, Soyjuddin, Sahabuddin, Aijer, Badal, Kartik, Milton and Enamul, I cannot hope they (who have no access to the English language) or individuals in similar circumstances will automatically start to question the structural factors which compel them to move. But I can hope *their* ways to read the concerned developments, and *their* answers to the same, will at least refresh the somewhat exhausted, at times self-referential debates around globalisation and urbanisation of these days.

You find these stories, or more precisely the not-at-all-systematised representations and vivid experiences they mediate, in *Part 1* of the book: they lack an encompassing historic-geographic introduction (made for by more or less exhaustive addenda), and come along with sketches, drawings, references to newspaper as well as scholarly articles, government acts, expert reports. Bear with the uncanny sides of this combination, do not disdain the puzzling effects for want of specialised knowledge of which I can anyway provide little, and please don't jump prematurely to the effort at a synthesis offered in *Part 2:* in order to grip, theory and its understanding demand the guidance of lived experience. You might recognise instances that are peculiar to Bangladesh and West Bengal and, one page later, wonder about their pitiless resemblance with the stories that people could tell you, if you listened, in other parts of the world. You should notice they're neither work of anthropological self-reflection, nor of sociological analysis and its magistral censorship, nor of artistic aestheticisation.[14] As I elucidate in *Nandi: Everyday–Life–Stories of Movement*, they are intended to be stories with many lives of their own.

   Aside straddling villages and cities, industrial and agricultural hubs, regions with differing climates, languages, cultures, those who entrusted me with these stories conciliate a number of temporalities. They didn't pay attention to chronologies, but told their stories according to god-knows-what expectations, or to the mood, with their own words, hands, eyes, face expressions, not rarely contradicting themselves. I decided to retain the dialogue form that had characterised our interactions in order to pluralise voices and interpretations and to effect a *Verfremdung*, a 'distancing' (yes, I mean the 'distancing effect' that Bertolt Brecht devised to prevent the spectator from sousing in

the circumstances displayed on stage, appraise them critically, and draw consequences). 'Staging' dialogues, as opposed to composing one story, made it easier to reproduce the constant clashes between my questions and the story–tellers' concerns, my visions of revolution and their humbling struggles, and at the same time, it was a way to deal with the transformative power of certain life–story–tellings. Respective individuals, in fact, deployed stories to embody, enact or dramatise their lives: story–telling, in such cases, offered an occasion to rethread stories and, why not, *trade* events, *knowing I may or may not understand, may or may not believe them*. Under these premises, 'distancing' inaugurated a sensitisation to the chasms of experience—chasms determined by class, gender, language and ethnic disparities that it was impossible to bridge back then, and it would be pointless to ignore now. This implies that you should look for the 'truth' in between interactions-interferences and perhaps even between the lines, because as hardly the experience of these people-on-the-move with their weird everyday life and ideas can be given *one* explanation, as individual and subjective were my reactions.

One last remark, regarding the 'partition' of this book. Setting off to write, I realised I had to find ways to deal with the impossibility to *grasp* movement—I was clear about the fact that movement is comprehended relationally (very similarly to the way one appreciates a photograph, a painting, a map, or even the bird's-eye view of a little ago: not by reading single colour patches, or pixels, but apprehending the whole) and simultaneously, as it happens; and that its experience lies exclusively *with* and *in* the person that is moving. Thus, what I could strive to render was exclusively the shift in space and time of myself and of my object of research; yet how to do that? May such a shift be made sensible, repeatable, *rehearseable*, via a separation, a rupture? Well, that's the idea. Note that this is not a separation between 'experience' (although *Part 1* clearly focuses and transfers the experiences of the field) and 'theory' (although *Part 2* presents itself as an attempt at theorising), but between viewpoints impacted by contingent experiences, on the one hand, and by the desire to convey something urgent and to do that with solid arguments and an adequate terminology, on the other. *Part 1* principally gathers *Nandi* and nine independent volumes, following one another according to a purely constructed gradient of distances and of principal, but definitely not exhaustive, themes: *trade*, *landscape,* and *travel*. *Part 2* by contrast propounds a full-fledged essay on translocalisation, whereby you shouldn't let the linear structure mislead you. The reflection I present there emerged less from a logic concatenation of arguments than from the impressions and intuitions, the readings and interactions, the rage and the delights of innumerable time–space shifts.

You might of course move between these two, following the margin notes or your mood, setting your own focus, pursuing your questions, drawing your conclusions. Then, the *Verfremdungseffekt* would be perfect.

Notes

1   The down-to-earth, rough-soft poetry of this region is portrayed masterfully in Claudio Magris' award-winning book *Microcosmi* (1997).
2   Excluding city states and island countries like Monaco, Macao, Bahrain, Malta, or Singapore.

3   As is well known, de Certeau was critical of such fascination, an 'exaltation of a scopic and gnostic drive: the fiction of knowledge … related to [the] lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more' (1988: 92).

4   'Bengal' is a cultural and historical region corresponding approximately to today's Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal.

5   A study carried out by students of IUAV University under the direction of Wolfgang Scheppe (2009) provided a visually impressive assessment of the impact of immigration on Venice and its hinterlands. Nonetheless, the complex interrelations between Italy and Bangladesh in times of globalisation haven't yet been specifically looked into.

6   The thesis of planetary urbanisation is mainly proposed by Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid, who analyse urbanisation through the lens of Lefebvre's theory, in particular of his hypothesis of the complete urbanisation of society (2003a). Cf. Brenner/Schmid 2012, 2015. Among the critics of this stance, Ananya Roy (2009a, 2015) has suggested that the 'urban' is continuously made and unmade, and that the current logic of urbanisation is rather the 'informal'. I shall deal more closely with all these positions and arguments in the book.

7   I'm referring to settings that are characteristic at least of parts of South Asia and Southeast Asia. Stephen Cairns (2018) has advanced the hypothesis that a specific quality of the landscape in these regions, namely its being forged by the cultivation of rice—that is, by the abundance of water—explains their 'other' urbanism.

8   I write about this in Bertuzzo 2016b.

9   I should mention that most of them were fully integrated in the local labour market or in Dhaka's commercial networks and had settled down permanently.

10 As far as concerns visions of *villes mobiles* or 'mobile cities' (Friedman 1968), or 'walking cities' (Herron/Harvey 1964/online), they didn't seem to go far enough: the role of the city as centre and basis of social progress remained unchallenged, whereas I presumed exactly this role to be at stake.

11 I refrained from taking written notes for language and technical restrictions: first of all, I wasn't trained in written Bengali; simultaneous translations into any of the languages I was fluent in resulted in a noisy confusion. I also avoided recordings because the audio device often had an embarrassing or intimidating effect.

12 *Denkbild* is a concept that goes back to Walter Benjamin's 1928 essay *Einbahnstraße* (*One-Way-Street*) and was later specified in *Lehre vom Ähnlichen* (*Doctrine of the Similar*) as well as *Über das mimetische Vermögen* (*The mimetic faculty*) of 1933. He described *Denkbilder* as *thought figures* that took shape in his mind by combining images with observations of the nature, heard stories and autobiographical reminiscences. So, as stressed also by Michael Taussig (2004), *Denkbilder* originate from a surrealist intercourse that is obviously gravid of unexpected fruits, between signs and objects, language and perception, propositional and non-propositional reasoning, knowledge and intuition.

13 Also here, I'm drawing on Lefebvre's theory, in particular on his conceptualisation of the dimensions of the production of space (1991).

14 Here I am addressing those who, reminiscent of misuses in the wave of the 'narrative turn', deem storytelling a depoliticised, escapist, self-complacent bourgeois exercise. More on the issue in *Nandi* as well as in the *Afterword*.