Book Review: Karachi: Ordered Disorder and the Struggle for the City, by Laurent Gayer, London, C. Hurst & Co., 2014, 256 pp., £25.00 (paperback), ISBN 9781849043113

Sobia Ahmad Kaker, 2016

Gayer's Karachi: Ordered Disorder and the Struggle for the City fills a much-felt void in existing scholarship on the Pakistani megacity of over 20 million residents. Over the last decade, rapid urbanisation, explosive politics, and spectacular forms of violence in Karachi have captured the attention of urban scholars, policy-makers, and enthusiasts alike. Yet the scholarship on political conflict in Karachi remains rooted within onto-epistemological frameworks that foreground state-building efforts and planning regimes as central themes that frame Karachi's troubled socio-political condition. While such accounts are no doubt useful in capturing the complex negotiations between governance and politics in Karachi, Gayer's book takes this analysis a step further and interprets political violence in Karachi as an organising feature of the city's politics. In doing so, he creatively challenges the widespread interpretation of the megacity as one that is progressively descending into chaos and anarchy, and instead suggests that disorder in Karachi is inherently ordered.

Embedded in sociological and political theoretical frameworks, the comprehensively researched and masterfully written book takes a nuanced position in answering a central paradox that characterises urbanism in Karachi, i.e., how it is that endemic violence and turmoil do not result in complete anarchy and disorder. In the introductory chapter, Gayer argues that this is possible because the city is organised through an 'ordered disorder', whereby order itself is not a monopolisation of state power or violence, but rather is a historical figuration formed of interdependent actors who reproduce an equilibrium of social order. Although such an equilibrium is often tense and fragile, Gayer suggests that it is successful in containing conflict within certain bounds. As a result, the unparalleled violent performances that emerge during times of political tension in Karachi do not in fact 'preclude the existence of a democratic order and a thriving economy' (p. 11). Over the next 7 chapters, Gayer fleshes out this argument by mapping the socio-political configuration of Karachi's ordered disorder, and how this meshes with the everyday struggles of Karachi's residents.

In Chapter 1, he introduces the structural conditions that underpin conflict dynamics in the city. He outlines Karachi's place within the national project, its history of migrant settlement (national and international) and of urban planning, as well as the structures of power which organise everyday life and economy in the megacity. By doing this, he presents Karachi as a city that is not only a site for social, economic and political struggles, but is also an object of desire and conflict in itself. He singles out how variously positioned urban actors, struggling over Karachi's territories, its official and unofficial economies, and over the city's moral order, generate a 'palimpsest of sovereignties' (p. 49). Critiquing existing narratives of informality and fragile states, Gayer argues that the state is effectively complicit in such struggles, and as a result state power is dispersed through de-facto authorities—land grabbers, the drug mafia, militant student wings, ethno-political actors—who claim power over disciplining, taxing, representing, and protecting local populations. In the next four chapters, Gayer offers a thoroughly researched post-colonial history of urban violence and of violent transformation in Karachi. In Chapter 2, he traces the rise of student movements and campus politics between the 1950s and the 1970s. In Chapter 3, he details the genesis of the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) as a political party that irrevocably transformed politics in Karachi. He showcases how the MQM was able to combine political convention, disruption, militancy, and governance while still operating within the confines of the state. Over the years, other political groups have used similar strategies, operating in the 'twilight zone of dis/order' (p. 121).

In Chapters 4 and 5, Gayer outlines how groups commonly identified as 'criminals' (Lyari gangs) and terrorists (jihadists) also entered this arena of power to create a geography of overlapping sovereignties that challenged the predominance of the MQM. Building on this evidence, in Chapter 6 Gayer returns to the question posed in the introductory chapter, i.e., how was it that armed conflict became normalised in the city, and what prevented conflict from spiralling out of control? To answer this, he shows that the institutional structures that sustain these conflicts have also worked to contain them. Firstly, the MQM has been able to practise a mode of government by which it has the ability to both unleash and contain disorder. Secondly, no single political actor has been able to dominate local politics and monopolise violence. Thirdly, the broader context of unconsolidated democratic politics has played a role in fuelling, as well as moderating, armed conflict in Karachi. And lastly, the army and state agencies—whether operating in the shadows or overtly—have played a role in restoring order through performances of legitimate violence as well as a politics of patronage. In this way, violent conflicts have come to be both nurtured as well as moderated in an orderly manner because various institutions have played a strategic game for control over the city. In Chapter 7, Gayer maps how this form of politics is spatialised and how it has increasingly impacted upon insecure urban residents. In conclusion, Gayer reflects on the ways in which the present configuration of ordered disorder has become more complex and opaque due to the multiplicity of actors and the frequent movement of political positions between them.

Overall, I found Gayer's argument refreshingly novel, convincingly laid out, and extremely relevant for scholars interested in cities, urban politics, conflict and violence. While the book is comprehensive in outlining the structures of power and order in Karachi, if I were to suggest one area of improvement, I would point towards Gayer's references to sectarian and jihadist violence. I feel that his analysis of jihadist groups is not as well-grounded as that on MQM politics and criminal networks. This could have been improved by broadening or perhaps critically reviewing his data sources, and by pushing his critique of the present-day realities of sectarianism and jihadist terrorism. The recent political gains of jihadist groups could be potentially reviewed as an event that not only weakens the MQM's monopoly over urban politics, but also one that threatens to challenge the status quo of the present form of 'ordered disorder' in such a way that it will produce an uncertain future for the city. While this issue is tackled to some extent in the concluding chapter, it could do with more in-depth focus.