

**The Structures of Desire and Dispossession: Class-nature of  
Neo-urban Structuralism in Post War Sri Lanka**  
*(A revisit to David Harvey's conceptualization on capitalist city)*

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*Keywords: Desire; Dispossession; Class-nature; Neo-urbanization;  
Post war Sri Lanka*

**Introduction**

Human-cities are not simply a set of material constructions, a set of buildings, transportation networks and mode of transportation, and identities of metropolitans. Historically, cities have been signified the highest achievement of conquering political economic ideology, or the justified framework of capital accumulation and transformation, contemporarily the ideology of capitalism realism. They appear, at a specific geography and in a certain epoch of a society, with a set of ideological positions and with a set of propositions of logics of surplus generation and capital accumulation. As a result of that very ideological positioning and the logics of surplus generation and capital accumulation, a city of capitalism is the ideal site to be seen the glorified-desire and muted-dispossession of capitalism itself. At a wider sense of this argument it is more than that. David Harvey elaborates the broader picture of capitalists' city and its camouflaged-true-nature of contradictions in production, reproduction, surplus generation and class-nature of urbanization comprehensively (see Harvey 1985, 2001, 2010).

This study fundamentally depends on the theoretical foundation which David Harvey unearthed and developed regarding urban structuralism in capitalist development and the class-nature of urbanization. The study can be called as a theoretical revisit of Harvey's key arguments,

on the city, urbanization and class-nature of neo-urbanization in the post-war Sri Lankan context and a revisit to the grounded dynamics of neo-urbanization which take place in the same context.

### **Objective**

The main objective of the study is to analyse the breeding forms of urban class-nature and its contemporary reflections in the class-contradictions and class conflict as the neo-urban structuralism extensively wide-spreading and sharpening not only its practice but also the conceptual utensils.

### **Methodology**

The devising methodology in this research is *Grounded theory*, which can be identified as a core methodology that emerged, developed and widely used in Heterodox Economics (Lee 2012). And the study is broadly influenced by the intellectual work of Harvey (1985)

The study deliberately attempted to provide a better opportunity for the voices of people who are actively make their presence and intermingle at the considering structures in order to understand the ontological nature of the class nature and its contradictory tendencies. Therefore, number of unstructured narrative interviews was conducted. The study uses qualitative data for the most part while both primary and secondary data sources will also be used.

### **Results and Discussion**

After the end of the war, the Colombo city attracted the state capital and its elitist- war-triumphed ideological spirit, primarily, as a challenge that must be achieved in developing and uplifting as a city of

‘dazzling’<sup>1</sup> to sum up with the requirements of being attractive to investments, persons and primarily to the needs of international capitalist regimes. Colombo city can be identified as the capital of Sri Lanka, as the capital of highest GDP contributing province since the independence, as the political capital, as the most dynamically linked economic region to the international trade, finance and production and in so many other ways. More than that the Colombo city can be identified as the city which indicates the actual examples of uneven development of capitalism, the contradictions within capitalism and, historically, the class conflict/ struggle of the Sri Lankan society. Colombo city is the power house of class politics and its political economic depiction on the social reality. The study conceptualizes this certain phase of the history, which remarks ideological intermediation of the state to extend the boundaries of capitalist economic relations, cultural urgencies and capitalist realism, as neo-urbanization of contradictory structuralism.

The capitalist system at the heart of the economy was reluctant to expand its boundaries as such in the period of neo-urbanization at such dynamic intensity due to key dual-threats inhabited in the political economy of Sri Lanka. Firstly, the security threat and secondly, which can be identified as a close determinant of the first threat, the government’s ideological positioning and threats derived by its possibilities of stronghold. At the context of post-war these dual-threats are absent. Capitalists’ willingness has been pushed to the limits of capitalist realism, affluence and vicious surplus generation. The neo-urbanization process which leads by the state elitist ideology and international financial capital is a process of ‘realization’, primarily in

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<sup>1</sup> *‘As Colombo transforms into a ‘dazzling capital city’ and an icon of the Asian region, we take a moment to reflect upon the journey of post war Sri Lanka’ – Message from Gotabaya Rajapaksha, Secretary to the Ministry of Defense and the Urban Development for the opening of Colombo Independent Square Arcade.*

terms of presumption of needs of predominant economic classes, than anything else.

The neo-urbanization exemplifies the core-intentions of ruling elites and their funding capitalists in the process of occupying and modifying the available space (primarily land) to facilitate capitalist class with necessities of surplus generation. But the fundamental fault in the process we analyse is that, it never, as an ideology and as well as praxis, sensitive to the conflicts that raised and would rise by contradictory structuralism of the Colombo city. The study would argue that the neo-urbanization process so far was not able to solve any principle conflict of the population but it has taken conflicts to much more controversial platform and intensified the conflict magnitudes, which the reality of development of capitalism would never escape. It is possible to see the Colombo city is in need for a far better attention right now on issues which are realistic and inhumanly ignored, which created with respect to the historical economic relations under the rule of past governments. Nevertheless, the majority of such issues were ignored or not considered as priorities in the neo-urban structuralism.

Fundamentally, the study identifies a clear cut duality in constructing structures in the process of neo-urbanization. They are namely, *structures of desire* and *structures of dispossession*.<sup>2</sup> In the category of structures of desire, the study has been taken following key structures to the account of analysis; Colombo Arcade Independence Square, Lotus tower, Lotus Pond (*Nelum Pokuna*), Fort City, Krrish Square, Shangri-la hotel and walking paths. In the category of dispossession, the study has been taken following key structures to the account of analysis; *Mihindu senpura* and *Methsara Uyana*.

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<sup>2</sup> The definition of these two structures depends on the nature and culture of class accessibility and intractability within neo-urban structures.

If we pay our attention to the voices of few active participants from structures of dispossession and structures of desire, it would produce a set of relevant straightforward ideas on the contradictory and ambiguously ignorant role of the capital-backed elitist government ideology and praxis.

*'This is a prison, we imprisoned like animals. Now, we don't know what to do or where to go. We all are hopeless. Nobody listen to us. Nobody care! They come right one time to get the housing rent. We can't pay and we won't pay! There is no point of paying for living in this hell. We are ready to leave this place at any time...even; we are ready to leave now. The government has shown big rooms, tiled-floors and attached bathrooms in the housing TV commercials but come and see what we have got inside! The rooms are exactly like hospital rooms. This is nothing but a hospital. Even though we were very poor we lived happily in our 'Wattha'.<sup>3</sup> Today everything is gone. They bulldozer-ed everything – our lands, shelters and jobs and have thrown us to this hell. They know we are not strong enough to do anything – anything against them and their government. We curse them because they killed us alive!'*

*Interview, Nethsara Uyana flats*

*'The beauty and tranquillity my wife and I expected during a morning stroll around the newly completed Independence Square Complex reminds me of the beautiful descriptions of great asylums including that in the Colombo which this very building was in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.....- the deference being that the aim of the asylum was to restore the sanity of a group of people, whereas the modern complex is aimed at providing a beautiful environment for the public to relax and enjoy their lives and promote mental health'*

*Arcade then and now: Far from the madding crowd by Nalaka Mendis*

The above statements alone stand strongly to prove that these is an undeniable development of class interest and contradictory interests-cum conflict, which develops further, between and among people who live in these neo-urban structures. These structures alone, in concerning

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<sup>3</sup> Communities were being forcefully evacuated from Wanathamulla, Borella in Colombo 8 and including the 34<sup>th</sup>, 45<sup>th</sup>, 49<sup>th</sup>, 51<sup>st</sup>, 63<sup>rd</sup> and 66<sup>th</sup> 'wattes' or land sections.

they are as structures of capital cum-social relations, they will stand only for capital, in the side of capital. They will facilitate and expand the gap between social classes furthermore, under the internal mechanisms of maximum surplus generation and uneven distribution of wealth. The existing, camouflaged class pressure in the Sri Lankan neo-urban scenario indicates that it will explode sooner or later by raising multidimensional questions from both the government and existing economic system.

## **Conclusion**

The study articulates following theses with respect to the grounded reality of capitalist expansion, surplus generation and class conflict in the Colombo city.

Unwittingly Sri Lankan government attempted to restructure the ‘skin-beauty’ of the Colombo city but not the deep-rooted, historically ingrained, unavoidably class oriented contradictions of material development and their foundation logics, which are embedded in the political economy in a restructure-able manner. The Government mechanism itself became a facilitator and fulfiller of local and international capitalists and their goals, which are to be attained more in the long term, according to their economic forecasting manifestoes.

Structures indicate the understanding of the capital backed elitist intension on the development, class nature and conflict sensitivity at the present situation. Structures work as primary facilitators to expand the limits of cultural deepening of capitalist classes. Structures contain power. They change human consciousness and transcend their own existence where capital wants to transfer and to rise above all.

The post-war Sri Lankan neo-urbanization repetitively signifies, structures are not just things. They are highly able to create social relations; sometimes the felling of solidarity and sometimes,

oppositely, the feeling of discord (conflict). Structures of desire as a strong element of capitalist realism attempts to keep the solidarity between the individuals through neutralizing the 'differences among people'. Markets do it very cleverly by keeping everybody at the position of 'a buyer'. This solidarity is a fetish-unity to keep the class interests alive. They rely on each other as never before in the atmosphere of cultural capitalism, capitalist cannot transcend this fact ever. Is this the situation exists with respect to the structures of dispossession? The right question to be asked is not; do they live in solidarity and peace? But can they live in solidarity and peace?

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