



## Transcript Ep.75: Book Review Roundtable: Lively Cities: Reconfiguring Urban Ecology

**[Intro]** *This is the Urban Political. The podcast on urban theory, research and activism.*

**[Nitin Bathla]** So welcome, dear listeners, to the newest episode of Urban Political Podcast, which most likely will come out during Christmas. So Merry Christmas to those listening. So today I'm hosting this podcast jointly with my colleague Lindsay Howe, who will just introduce herself in a moment. And just to mention also that this podcast will be coming out simultaneously with a review forum on the book *Lively Cities* in *Urban Geography*. So please do head to *Urban Geography's* website to read the review forum where several of our respondents have written responses to Maan's book. So thanks again for joining, and I pass to Lindsay Howe.

**[Lindsay Howe]** Yeah, Nitin, thank you so much for allowing me to co-host with you today. This is my first time on The Urban Political Podcast, so hopefully I'll remember to speak slowly enough. I have a bit of a problem with my American accent, so I hope you can all forgive me for that. Yes, but my name is Lindsay Howe and I'm a Professor of architecture and society at the University of Liechtenstein in Vaduz, where I run the Urbanism and Society Research Group. And our group focuses on the connections between people in space, and how doing so provides us with the tools to confront sort of the very urgent societal challenges that we all face today in fields ranging from urban geography to architecture and design. So I kind of bridge between these fields and teach things like urban theory and also studio design. So it's a very broad field that I'm involved in, and I'm very pleased to be able to engage with this book and this lovely group of people here today.

Maan, I really enjoyed reading *Lively Cities*. As you know, we've spoken about this, how much fun it was to read this book. Because I think what you've done, and also for someone like me that comes from sort of a mixed background in my area, it really opens you up to thinking about the production of the urban in a way that allows you to be wonderfully surprised and wonderfully invited in. So I think, you know, these objectives that you set out, even just from the very first page of the book, I found really compelling. When you say that there's many versions of urban theory that simply brush aliveness aside as this phenomena of little importance compared to the effects of capital planning and design. Because aliveness, in a sense, it's too messy and complex and too differentiated for sometimes these general theories to engage with. And as a student of architecture, I was taught to read space through precisely the effects of capital planning and design that you mentioned. So it's such a wonderful broadening of perspectives to be able to consider these ideas, like aliveness, like conviviality, and how you might be able to really draw together this theory of the urban in a minor key.

One thing that I also found extremely compelling was how this idea of aliveness allows you to break down the typical way we might analyse things in urban studies. So oftentimes, we'll talk about flows of capital accumulation, the extraction of animal life is something that you could really sort of classically analyse and theorize. And you can trace sort of the chains of commodification that, for example, animals like cattle are a part of, and how more-than-human forms of life gets infrastructured and subsumed into the urban. But these aren't just capital flows or beings to be bottom sold and processed and consumed. They're unruly and unpredictable and lively, as you so aptly put it. And these are absolutely fundamental qualities to space as we know it, to cities and the urban as we know it. So I

found that the vocabulary you introduce us to in the book is extremely compelling, especially when we talk about things like being observant participants in the urban, and kind of turning ethnographic research on its head. I found that was a really wonderful and quite novel gesture that you made in lively studies and de-centring the typical narratives we're confronted with, to instead be around all manner of beings and things that are alive. So it really shows us this range of contradictions and conditions, and this also lovely term you use, *meshworks*, that they form. Because I think acknowledging things and discovering things in this way has the potential to really reveal the material politics and the power structures of the urban that lie behind them.

So I just wanted to go a little bit, just to introduce the chapter that I'm most engaged with, which is this idea of a minor ecology of infrastructure, unpacking the infrastructural relationship between the macaques and the built environment. Because I think that really demonstrates what the whole book does so well. I was really fascinated by the idea you describe in this chapter about the macaque's ability to negotiate the city, drawing from their enmeshment with the infrastructural environment. How pipes, cables, buildings, and walls all become bridges and ladders, and the very essence of these unintentional landscapes that scholars like Matthew Gandy have described. And while we humans might think of electricity provision as a utility, or as a service, it's actually furnishing a habitat, an infrastructure that is no longer, as you say, an effect, but a cause that escalates circulations. And I thought, you know, as someone, like I said, coming more from architecture and working in southern Africa, because most of the work I do is centred on Johannesburg, and I know work thoroughly with people. But reading things in this way, really, I felt broadened my perspective and enriched what I also try to do with my own work in Johannesburg. Because the sentiments about the minor key of urban studies and the importance of looking beyond capital planning and design to these unintentional landscapes and things that perhaps flip beyond the gaze of the State and the eyes of the State, that also deeply resonates with the work I try to do with people. A lot of times vulnerable social groups also dwell at the margins, and they're at the fringes of planning practice and theory.

So I like to imagine that this idea of the urban in a minor key can also apply to humans, and the sense of a call to integrate sort of the everyday and quotidian struggles that the majority of humans face to just be able to survive and hopefully even to thrive in the urban, persisting simultaneously in spite of and also *because* of it. So I think I really appreciate it very much being able to see things through this lens of the more-than-human. And I also think that this agency of all manner of beings that's really encapsulated in lively cities, it's such a compelling way to think about resistance, about adaptivity, opportunity, and agonism as well as an extremely important concept in the face of sort of potentially imminent destruction.

And your narrative of the more-than-human really reveal that powerfully in a way that I think the human-centred and urban studies in a major key research sometimes is not capable of really encompassing. And I'm really looking forward also to hearing more about what everyone else's perspectives are on the book today, and also learning more about what your future research directions are going to be. We've spoken a little bit as well about some of the work that you've been doing on wetlands outside of Delhi, the eviction of informal settlement residents... I think that those kinds of ideas of these phenomena, the interstice of the more than human and sort of the other than urban elite, I find particularly fascinating and a wonderful interstice to drive forward this idea of urban, maybe not just only in a minor and major key, but many different wonderful, fascinating keys in between. So thanks for allowing me to participate in the podcast today and to be here with all of you. I think Nitin, I'll pass back to you to introduce the other people, the speakers.

**[Nitin Bathla]** Thanks Lindsay. So I'm just adding this as a note and I'll edit this out later. Maybe instead of doing the bios and response separately, we could just go on. So Ghazala, you could just introduce yourself and then go on with your reflections. So Ghazala, we have you next.

**[Ghazala Shahabuddin]** Thank you, Nitin. And thanks a lot for involving me in this discussion as well as sending me a copy of this wonderful book. Thanks to Maan also for recommending that I read it. And as Maan knows and Nitin knows, I was very hesitant earlier. I said, you know, I'm going to be a scientist, the only scientist, sort of reading it from a very different perspective and from a very limited knowledge of environmental politics and environmental history. You know, I'm basically an ecologist by training. I work out in the wilderness, but I basically look at questions at the intersection of human society and biodiversity, which means that all of the flora and fauna and the ecological processes, you know, how they respond to human intervention. So in that sense, this book was really interesting to me because it's all about where humans and animals intersect.

I'm also deeply interested in the politics of ecology, and I've written a little bit about that. So it's been really, really interesting for me to read this book. Of course, as I told Maan earlier, the first chapter was a little difficult for me. But after I got into the nitty gritty of the everyday life of the city and the liveliness of the city, it got really interesting. So my major takeaways from this book is... first of all, I think it's... I have read a little bit of stuff on human-animal relations when I've been working on the cheetahs reintroduction and I've worked on a few other things like that. And I think it's really fascinating that you brought this whole perspective to India and to an urban situation. You know, I'm used to reading about wolves in Japan or cheetahs in Kuno Palpur sanctuary and so on. But this really brings animals at the centre of human existence, which is most currently urban, most of all, and rapidly becoming more and more urban, the human experience. So in terms of a book on human-animal relations, I thought it was really, really a valuable piece of literature that can be read and used for teaching as well.

So, and as Lindsay also said, you know, the perspective of the anthropologist is there, but then the lovely part is trying to look at the issue from the animal's perspective. What does the animal see? How does the animal see the city? And I think that's really novel, the way the cow sees the city or the monkeys use the city or parakeets endear themselves to all sorts of all kinds of humans and create niches for themselves. So that's from the animal's perspective that I found was really unusual.

As an ecologist, I feel that what it really brings to me is that nature is really resilient, you know. You can do whatever you like, but nature is going to have its way. Several decades of monkey eradication or attempts to eradicate monkeys from Delhi have not succeeded. They're stronger than ever before. So, once nature gets a foothold, you really cannot do anything about it. You have to live with nature and we already are living with nature, but you have to recognize that fact. And I think that urban humans, they just don't want to recognize that part of their existence. And it's increasingly being brought home to us that unless we really figure out animals, we're not going to be able to live comfortably in a productive manner in the city. So I think resilience of nature is one thing.

The other aspect I found that was really interesting was the urban ecology aspect. So as an ecologist, we read a lot of stuff on the resources inside cities, how people are using them, not using them, what we are doing wrong, or why is it not sustainable, all those sorts of things. But here we are looking at how the urban ecology is created almost out of so many situations and we've really not looked at that. So for an ecologist, it's really interesting to have that perspective on the urban. Another thing that is useful to me as a person who also practices and tries to bring about sustainable management and so on is the whole concept of sanitizing the city. You know, we've tried to do so many things to the city,

but the way the politics work out in the city is just not allowing that kind of sanitization. And I find that very interesting, because a lot of cities have tried it. And I mentioned in my review about how Singapore as a city has tried extremely hard, it has a very sanitized environment, it has culling of crows and culling of cats, and it has historically tried to separate the production landscape from the consumption landscape. So the major narrative is that we need to create a comfortable way of consumption in the city, and that is what the elites, most of the elites have created. What we are doing right now is to make cities into a basically a production landscape, into a consumption landscape. But we are moving away from the rural and the agrarian, that was basically the original way the city was and trying to detract from the sustainability aspects really. So a city can be so much more sustainable if you can somehow reconcile consumption with production, but that's not going to happen, because there are various forces... the powerful, the power structures are such that anything that stinks, anything that is organic is wished out of the city, and that's the powerful narrative that we are dealing with.

Finally, I think the book gave me a new perspective on the biopolitics of invasion. I have read a number of authors that talk about invasion biology and how looking at it from the other point of view, after all, you know... plants and animals have around the world ever since we started keeping records. And so there are large numbers... you know, we cannot say that there are communities that should or should not have a particular species. But at the same time, as a conservation biologist, I do feel that there are certain situations where you can actually say that certain species have a deleterious impact on the environment. It may not be possible for science to immediately find the evidence for it. But there is some value in looking at some of the anecdotal accounts about how invasive species are causing a decline in biodiversity in certain instances. And that, I think, needs to be debated a little bit more. And I think the chapter on biopolitics gave me a good handle to start thinking about some of these invasion biology issues. Thank you. Thanks again for doing this. And I'm looking forward to the other speakers as well.

**[Ravi Sundaram]** Hi, I'm Ravi Sundaram and I'm based in Delhi. I'm a professor at CSDS, which is a research institute based in Delhi. And I co-direct a program called Sarai, which sits at the intersection of urbanism and media. And that, in a sense, is also my own autobiography. And what is remarkable about reading this book is that it brought back many connections of my own. And I'll explain what I mean. And so AbdouMaliq Simone has this great essay that he wrote years ago, where he said: there's a time where States lost the capacity of setting up designations of the urban. There are certain designations of the urban and these designations get suspended. And when they get suspended, all kinds of capacities emerge. New capacities emerge, connections emerge. But I think new forms of thinking emerge. So I started off my work on cities at a time when the old edifices of modernism, modernist planning, a kind of neo-Marxian thinking of cities was playing out. And there's a sense in which one could read the city ideologically or to the ideology of neoliberalism. So I was unhappy about all these things. I was really unhappy because, you know, once you lose designation philosophically, you have to work through it.

So I did two things. I did a lot of fieldwork, which is there in this incredible book. I thought through ideas. So what are the questions that I asked? So the question I asked was, I was deeply uncomfortable with this, what I said, the modernist partitions of the city, which is where Cold War modernism and planning emerges in the 50s and 60s. This notion of the separation of forms of life and circulation, clarity of representation through the plan, right? These are things we're familiar with. The second is this whole kind of what Maan calls neo-Lefebvrian and I'd like him to talk about it, this kind of reinstatement of the old Marxist logic of capital. I was not comfortable with that. So I was asking myself, OK, if techniques is quite central to the dramaturgy of the urban (we're talking around the year

2000, 2005) things are really changing fast all over the South. Lots of things are happening. So what is anima? What is life? Is it an essence? Is it a series of capacities? Is it a set of connections? And then where does it fit in with all these post-colonial anxieties about cities? How to manage life? Is it just about humans? If it is other than human, how do they interact? So I think what is so exciting about this book... in a sense it's a very important reflection and a kind of feed forward into the future, just as I felt I had to reflect on the heritage I had come with.

So you have these transactional flows in urban life. Sometimes they're transactions, they're animate, like the macaques outside the temple that Maan talks about. There are forms of mimicry involved, there are collaborations involved, where monkeys are sharing food, there are partitions of food very beautifully described in this. There are hierarchies of geography, the way people travel. And there's a very important shift, which this book does, which I think is crucial: it reflects on the intellectual heritage of the last 20 years. One is the new materialist shift, the distinction that Maan makes between matter and qualities, and the way the frictions are organized, what does that look political.

So let me just list out some of the things that I want to talk about, and Maan you can come back and we can open this conversation. And I'm not being very empirical because listeners may not have read the book yet. So the stage is audacious, it's two cities, it's looking at life, it's a mixture of archival and fieldwork, very similar interests that I had. Even though I was looking at Delhi, my interests were global, entirely global. My references were global, I was interested in Lagos and Delhi. But this thing about what the other-than-human, what you call the other-than-human, where you're really expanding the zone of the fabric of the urban. I was interested in techniques and you're bringing in this larger zone. And what is interesting in the way you set it up. You're saying it's not necessarily transgressive, it's constitutive. Because if it's only transgressive (which again, I was not focused on resistance) you're only setting up a hierarchy of relationships, where you set up a hierarchy of the resistant and the transgressive, or you talk of the other lovely stuff that you do of something that disrupts, or failure... you know, this is a diagnostic nightmare that planning has, which is failure. Planning is going to fail, it's going to be a modernist plan. So I like the way you use it as a standpoint to move ahead.

And the other thing is about circulation. What circulates, when is circulation suspended, the failure of planning is something that we have dealt with for the past 30, 40 years. It's a very productive failure, but because it allows us to think around where we can go. And this is very nice chapter, which I would encourage listeners to go back to and read, where you have these municipal corporation trying to deal with monkeys and macaques... and they're bringing in a philosophical concept in the case law, which Marx takes and makes... it makes the basis of a chapter, which is commensality. How do things associate together? Are they wild? Are they natural? Do they have subjectivity? You know, it's so you have case law... So this is a very interesting style. And I like the strategy, where it's a very fine grained, evoking. So you have something that's philosophical yet it's fieldwork driven. And it's dealing with archival material. So, what is the problematic, I think, is very nicely staged.

So you have something that you see uniquely as human-only in the classic modernist city, which is assembly. Assembly is seen as uniquely human. Remember that famous thing, "cities are places where crowds meet". Participation, seen as uniquely human with the platform age. Witnessing. You witness, you observe through the eye, techniques of observation, again, that chapter around Hanuman temple in Delhi... who observes? what is observation? which is the classic anatomical philosophical project of the enlightened, what is observation. And then what is very nice is this plasticity of connections, you know, connections break, and sometimes they stretch the way, macaques meander around spaces, they collaborate, and then they break. Right. So I really like this staging of this commonality that you set up, but sometimes there are breaks. But then it's not necessarily resistant, it is not necessarily, you know, a form of alterity. It's a very dynamic form.



And that is what I think needs to be brought back into the urban, because one of my concerns has been with the financial crisis of 2008, a kind of very classical neo-Marxist reading of the city is coming back. And it will be a disaster if that comes back, and we go back to the bad old days. What is nice about this book is that it opens the way of new projects, for new projects to emerge. And that's what I'll say for now.

But I'd really like to come back. And I'd like to come back to one or two points. And Maan, maybe you can bring us up. One is this point you make about variation, which I was very struck in my own work; nothing is ever finished. And this is always the beauty of engaging with fieldwork in the urban, you know, this notion of a suture. Once something's unfinished, mapping this out is really a challenge for the researcher. So it's something that we struggle to writing that, you know, how do you map this process out? So I'll stop here. And I look forward to your responses. Thank you.

**[Thomas Crowley]** Hi, I think I'm next. My name is Thomas Crowley. Again thank you so much for involving me in this, giving me the chance to read this fantastic book. I'm currently a PhD candidate in Geography at the Department of Geography at Rutgers University in the US. And my current research is in Maharashtra, but I lived in Delhi for about seven years. And actually, when I was there, I was working on environmental history and environmental politics, and particularly working on a project to try to retell Delhi's history from the vantage point of the Aravalli mountain range, which in Delhi is known colloquially as "the Ridge". And so, and it was also fun to read the book, because some of the actors that I came across, especially the monkeys, the macaques, then were reappearing in these different guises. And this whole story of Monkey Man, who, you know, a popular Bollywood movie was made on, I mean, these sort of the ways that the natural and the supernatural kind of blur. And yeah, that's something that I've always found very striking about Delhi. But it was really interesting to see that. And yeah, it was really what I appreciated.

I would echo what everyone else has already said especially about animals as their own participant observers. You know, we think of ourselves ethnographers as the participant observers, but to think of cows and parakeets and monkeys (which are the three species that we get to live with and travel with in this book) what might they want out of a situation? How do they change their behaviours? And for me, I think what was extremely generative was this linking of Delhi and London. I feel like there's been a lot of recognition that this binary between Global North and Global South is overdone. It's not useful, either academically or politically. But I think nonetheless, with very few exceptions, most works of urban ethnography or urban studies generally still stick to their sort of case, which was the case with me also in Delhi and now in Maharashtra. So to be able to traverse back and forth between those spaces, as species themselves do, as commodities do, as ideas do... I found that really powerful. And also using this lens of seeing London itself as a post-colonial city and as self-evidently a post-colonial city... it's not something you have to argue for, just based on its history, its culture, its society, its liveliness... I mean, the presence of these parakeets, among many other things, it is a post-colonial city.

And also then using that kind of insight to also look back at evolutionary biology and to question, just as certain strands of Marxism have their own sort of teleology and sort of ironclad laws. So also some readings of evolutionary biology have these very kind of linear and teleological ideas of how species develop and diverge. And I think, especially in the parakeets chapter, what you show... a lot of the science went above my head, but the basic sense that actually urban infrastructure, for instance, is changing how speciation or at a subspecies level, how these sort of biological changes are happening. And certainly colonialism itself had huge ecological impacts. So going through that was really fascinating.

In terms of what I would love to discuss more, one was precisely this question of political economy and this critique of kind of these new Lefebvrian models. But then also drawing on theorists who, I don't know if they'd call themselves Marxists, but people like Aditya Nigam and Kalyan Sanyal, who are, I think, advancing this very, kind of taking capital seriously, but saying that the way it's been theorized has been sort of disabling, especially for cities like Delhi, especially for the global South. So how do we think about capital in a way that recognizes that it exists in the city in various ways, often kind of unpredictable and non-teleological, but also sees spaces outside of it. And then kind of where is that boundary between inside and outside? How do we draw it? Can we draw it?

And then the other point, which is related to my current research, which is on caste in the city and how the city transforms or doesn't transform caste. I know there were a couple of really suggestive points in the book, for instance, around when you're talking about monkeys and how they sort of get invoked in astrology, but astrology itself also has its own sort of internal hierarchies and caste hierarchies. And I kind of wonder how that adds a sort of layer of complexity to human-animal interactions, like because of all of the ways that human societies themselves are internally divided. And then the way certain animals are seen or not seen, how that all plays in. But yeah, really looking forward to the conversation.

**[Maan Barua]** Thank you so much, Lindsay, Ghazala, Ravi, and Thomas. It's really, really wonderful to hear another set of views on a text one's been working on for so long, where you kind of start really thinking about it too much, you know, by stepping back. And it's really nice that you all have such provocative comments. I could try and kind of go through some of them serially, and then hopefully we can kind of open this up into a bigger discussion.

Lindsay, you talked about the idea of the minor key, the urban and the minor key. And just at the outset, in terms of where this project was located and where I see it now, I think this book on Delhi and London's urban ecology is part of maybe a triad or trilogy of things that I've been working on. So I've just finished, or almost finished a text now on urban wetlands. I'm trying to look at the city from wetness. The other work that I'm doing is actually on metabolism and trying to think about questions about landscape and body and the transversal relations between infrastructure, body, landscape, material, when we think about eating, many foreground eating. Basically, I think this project of an urban and a minor key is first, you know, in this book thinking about ecology, but then moving into questions about surrounds. And the second book really is about the amphibious or amphias in surroundings and bios in life. So it's about wetlands and it will move on to some work on metabolism. So this is where I would sort of situate this particular intervention.

What I've tried to do in this book and really been inspired by a lot of your work and especially Ravi's book *Pirate Modernity*, which I cite as one example of a minor urbanism in the sense that it was writing for an audience that was not yet there. It was an audience that was to come. And that I think is really exemplary of what I think minor urban theory strives for in the sense that you're not speaking to the zeitgeist in a sense. You're trying to think of doing something else, something much more loose.

But it's also, I think, really about working with the urban canon. And I think Lindsay, you really mentioned this point that we need to think of human practices as minor too. And we see this, for instance, in the ways in which Monkey Man is summoned suddenly to make these claims for, you having electricity restored in residential colonies. So it's a kind of minor politics because it operates under the sort of thresholds of detectability and yet it's a very poignant way of trying to get access to staples. I mean, this is my take on Monkey Man, but we can certainly think of this in relation to the human. I think what the minor does is also works with the major language. So it's not to abandon the

major language at all, but maybe to think of how we could bend it, how we could kind of make it do something different. And just in terms of what I'm thinking about at the moment is with this work on the amphibious, is to try and think about concepts from wetness, from water. And, you know, can we think about the urban not from ground, but from the fluid or from something which is wobbly, which is not that certain.

This is where I would kind of think about it. But let me then go on to some really important comments that Ghazala has made and whose work I've really, really gone back to time and time again. And in the other hand that I wear as someone who works on sort of rural areas and elephants and plantations, and Ghazala has done amazing work as an ecologist, which I think is really very important because we also have to think about different schools of ecology. And what's amazing about the Indian school is that there's been a long set of engagements with the social, because you can't talk about ecology in India without the social. And I think Ghazala really exemplifies that in terms of her wider work. And I take this point on the biopolitics of invasives to heart. And I'm really aware of the many situations in which say a species can be deemed invasive and therefore inherently problematic, especially when it affects the rural or the urban poor. But what I try to do in this book is take a step back to say: what is the history behind calling something invasive? And you see this with Elton, he coins the term at a time when there's a sort of imminent threat of a German invasion of Britain. And later in the 50s, when he writes about it, he says, well, these are ecological bombs waiting to detonate again, the influence of the Second World War on his thinking [is visible].

And that led to all these sort of interventions to try and eradicate invasive, the war on invasives, which has not been very successful. And I think that the poignant question... I mean, there are two questions that emerge here. The first is how do we think of situations where species respond to human intervention? So just going off topic a bit, but if you think of lantana, there's a lot of work that now shows that the more you try to remove lantana from plantations and so on and so forth, the more vigorously it comes back. So people have been trying to think of ways to live with lantana. I mean, yes, lantana has been horrendous for biodiversity in many places, but then what do we do? How do we live with it? I think that's one thing. The second, of course, is the entire biopolitical project around it. It is what I tried to do in the book was compare Delhi and London in terms of this biopolitics. If you look at London, the parakeet populations are quite well mapped. There are some kinds of censuses. There are figures about, you know, their nesting success and so on and so forth. So it's really a biopolitical project. But when you start looking at these things in the Indian context, and many people have written about it (Stephen Legg comes to mind immediately) but [they showed] how this project is sort of partial, right? It is never fully instituted in the Indian context. What you see with the macaques really is a politics of aesthetic, as Asher Ghertner calls it, the will to distribute order and disorder. So there aren't any definite censuses of how many macaques there are in Delhi or street dogs for that matter, but it's an affront to the aesthetic vision of the city striving to be world-class, which many people, Amita Baviskar and a lot of others have written about.

So I think that comparison of... do we call this biopolitics? What do we call this? Is this biopolitics? Is this biopolitics that it meshes with the vernacular? I think it's very interesting. It's also interesting when you look at major urbanism, because there's some fantastic work coming out from Delhi on the right to be counted and so on and so forth. So, you know, how do you think about this in a human versus an other than human realm? I think it's something which we could talk about. I mean, Ravi, thank you so much. You've actually been way more eloquent than I ever can in terms of summarizing some of the ideas of the book. And I must tell all of you, but also people who are listening to this podcast, that there was one moment when I was having a conversation with Ravi, right when I was starting this book, he told me two things. He said, well, one is, you know: don't think of all of this entirely as a problem



because that's how the State... I was saying, oh, I want to look at macaques and cattle and so on and so forth. And he said, well, look, you know, don't frame it because the State or certain actors frame this as a problem. But if you do so, then you get into this trap of only thinking about it as a problem and what is the solution. So this point that came up earlier that how these things are not merely recalcitrant but constitutive in a way I really owe to Ravi. And the second point he told me is: think of non-human habitats or an other than human habitus. So whenever that term is used in the book, I owe a lot to him.

There's so many points of thought here. For instance, what are the logics of capital, which Thomas also mentioned. This is something we really need to think about very seriously. So I'm coming from a background in sort of first biology and chemistry, and then biogeography and then human geography, where the kinds of urbanism that's done in my little corner of human geography, there's been an expulsion of Marxism in some sense. So in a way, this book was about bringing back a kind of Marxist reading, especially the political economy. So if you look at new materialism, which one of the critiques at least that I tried to make was: is that how do you now do new materialism by bringing in political economy? Or how do you do political economy by bringing some of the concerns of new materialism into it?

And the second, of course, is the reading of post-colonial capitalism. And here, I think it's really important that if we are to take the sort of neoliberal thesis of total urbanization, then we also have to take seriously not just the urban, but processes of capitalism, the variegated forms of capitalism that we see. And I think Aditya Nigam is really spot on in his analysis of a kind of molecular economy, where he talks about things that escape the coding structure that is capitalism. And you see this really in the dairies in Delhi, how they're trying to escape some. So it's not that they are pre-capitalist, but they strive in some ways to be non-capitalist. And I found Kolyan Sanyal's work really important because again, when you think of the kind of circuits of capital, there's a kind of general assumption in straitjacket Marxism that the capitalist is in the MCM prime relation and labor is in CMC, right? The labor sells his commodity to buy a basket of goods. But what Sanyal really shows is how in circuits of post-colonial capitalism you can have someone starting with money and ending up with more money, but the surplus is always generated into simple commodity production and not necessarily in expansion. And I think that's ethnographically, at least it bore out in the case in Delhi when I was looking at the dairies, which are run along family lines. They say, well, we can't make these intensive dairies as much as we would like to. We don't have the capital. So they operate in these sort of interstices and they operate along these lines, which is a money economy. It starts with money, but labor again is organized along family lines and so on and so forth. So surplus is created, but surplus is invested back into simple commodity production, which is milk.

So I think what's very interesting is seeing these sort of phenomena within the urban that also points not just to a variegated kind of form of urbanization, but also the variegated economies that exist there. And I think for me, this was really, really vital in terms of how we think about capitalism. And I would say, yes, capitalism has come back to bite really badly, but we need to pass this way more than straitjacket kind of cut and paste Marx onto the Indian context or onto any context for that matter.

Going forward, some of the points that Ravi makes, especially on variation and the unfinished nature, that's really vital. In fact, the current work I'm doing, one of the chapters is actually on incompleteness. It's about a building that's made, and it's drawing a lot from Nitin's work, actually, about how urban infrastructures, urban things can be incomplete and how therefore that, as Nitin and his colleagues have argued, it can be double-edged, can destroy worlds, but at the same time, open up opportunities. And just going back again to this question of variation and capitalism, you see in this one dairy that I described, it was a contested plot. Somebody wanted to build on it, but because of some court case, it

was lying fallow. So here you see the circuit of capital is interrupted, but then all kinds of activities start to happen there. The sorting of waste, the raising of cattle, small repair shops that have cropped up... So it's within the sort of interstices of the movement of capitalism that we can also see other forms of urbanization coming. And I think here, again, going back to the vocabulary of the book, it's really these variations, that's almost as a kind of musical score that you can start thinking: ah, what is the minor treatment of the sort of major language that is going on? And I think it allows us to see the major, but also see that, look, there's much more going on.

I want to kind of conclude with maybe two more points. Ravi's question about observation and techniques is really very interesting, especially because this has really got me to think now much more about the public sphere. What do we summon into the public sphere? It's amazing that in Delhi, people are summoning Monkey Man, or they think about Hanuman, all of which are real. So this sort of form of dwelling that we see is at once terrestrial and celestial, right? It's continuously in this mode. And it's because of Hanuman worship that the monkey population has gone up, mediated by astrologers and priests and so on and so forth.

Here, we again need to think carefully about some of these figures that we summon, because if you think of astrology and you just, right in the beginning, kind of bracket it out, saying this is all saffronised, casteised thinking, (which it is) then are we also sort of, in some ways, missing out on the richness of urban experience which makes those relations in here, right? So what Ghazala was saying earlier, that nature is resilient, I would kind of stretch that to say, it's actually these enmeshments that are resilient. They're resilient in the face of grand capitalist theory that all of this will go away. It doesn't.

But I'm trying to make these sort of transversal connections, I think, between these points. Of course, Thomas, your work... and again, this is what I said, my little corner of geography, that we often operate out of so many silos that I feel really bad that I kind of encountered your work much later. It was actually a sheer luck, being in kind of Bari and Sons in Delhi, that I saw a copy of your book. And I said, oh gosh, I wish I had encountered this before, but it was a lovely encounter situated in Delhi. But going back to this last point of London that you mentioned in the question of nature, and what I was trying to do, I think, in that chapter is to say: look, yes, we do know London is a post-colonial city, but there's so much writing about nature in the West, broadly put. And what I was trying to do, therefore, is taking this figure of the parakeet which has its connections with India, as a kind of interlocutor, as something which is an uneasy creature to work with. It's sort of invasive, it's deemed invasive, but people like it. And yet, it's steeped in these colonial histories. We try and kind of unpack this broader post-colonial condition that it's not just in here in Delhi.

And this goes back to what Ravi was saying, that his work was amazing because it's about Delhi, but it's an intervention that could help you read any other city. And I think taking inspiration from that, taking these sort of analytics from Delhi and London, and trying to think of some broader questions, I think, was what I tried to do in this book. And thank you so much for your generous comments, but we could probably open this up into wider conversation.

**[Nitin Bathla]** Go ahead, Ravi.

**[Ravi Sundaram]** So one of the things that sort of I liked in thinking through this idea of infrastructure is a minor key. And if you brought in things like a transaction which is seen as commodified, necessarily commodified. So I want to ask you, Maan, in terms of what you describe as the economy, which is an

economy of exchange between macaques and humans, which is deeply spacious, deeply almost phatic in the sense that it can just happen in a kind of fraction of a second, there's a hierarchy of older and younger in this exchange process, right? That's why I think a lot of these forms of exchange are not reducible to a larger logic of capital, which define the urban. There's so much more for us to understand in this logic of these forms of exchange. So where would you see these as opening and expanding this idea of an economy in the city? Because of course, Asian cities are deeply capitalist cities that form different forms of circulation that happen. Sometimes speculation can also be minor, as we know from Solly Benjamin's work on Eastern Delhi, where a lot of informal settlements happen through speculative... working the informal share market, you build these informal settlements. So that's a kind of minor key. So if we talk about the economy and forms of exchange in this other than human, because again, economy, Adam Smith: uniquely human, right? Humans through rationality apply the rules of it. So what happens to this notion of the economy?

**[Maan Barua]** Well, that's a fantastic question, Ravi. And you really get to the heart of the matter here. What do we say is the economy? Well, one reading that's been fairly salient in human geography and anthropology, I guess, is the whole kind of cultural economy idea that the economy is a set of cultural practices. What I think this does, however audacious or modest my claims might be, is really makes us think: what constitutes the economic? Is it how... you know, you have these all kinds of debates about culture and economy, where the culture is embedded in the economy, the base superstructure argument, or the next set of cultural economy argument that the economy is a set of cultural practices, and therefore we need to read it in that vein. And then you have these sort of extensions of what could be called in one way "political ecology", that ecology is embedded in, or economy is embedded in an ecological base. But I think it doesn't do enough. So we kind of need versions of economy where the economy is simultaneously cultural and ecological. So when we think about those transactions, or you can play on that. Let's talk about the transactions between people and macaques, you see how there is... the ecology becomes part of the economic but through situated practices that are both human and other than human.

The other example that I had in the book was how the bird feeder... now, you know, in Britain, for instance, the bird food industry is something like 25 million pounds. And, you know, it has all kinds of effects on the growth of sunflower seeds. So now most of the world's sunflower is actually produced as a bird seed. The other very popular seed is the Niger seed, which is creating all kinds of problems in Southern India, because farmers are growing Niger and getting mov[ed] from production for use value to production for exchange value and all of that. But the consumers of that commodity at the end is the goldfinch dangling on the bird feeder. So here we can think of kind of Guattari's idea that does the consumer also become a producer in a sense? And if so, is the consumer human, or is the consumer other than human? Of course, there are these sort of chains of mediation where, you know, it's a seed selling company or the banana vendor and the devotee buying the banana to feed it to the consumer, which is the macaque. So there are these chains of mediation, but I think it really boils to this question: can we think about ecological economy or a lively political economy that is different to the versions of ecological economics based on energy and so on and so forth, to these other sort of, you know, situated sets of practices where we really rework what is economy? I think the book is trying to go towards that. And probably this is, again, as you said earlier, this is an opening for thinking in this vein.

**[Lindsay Howe]** I have a question for you as well. I'd like to pick up on what Ravi was mentioning, actually, about Solly Benjamin's work, because he's an important reference point for us in South Africa as well, talking about sort of these informal settlement contexts. So I was wondering, Maan, if you could comment to us a little bit, first of all, for our listeners who haven't read the book, about this comparative gesture that you make between London and Delhi and how that structures the book? And if you could say, perhaps, if you were going to take a new case, where would you go next geographically? What would be the extension of that logic for us?

**[Maan Barua]** Benjamin's work on informality is really phenomenal and I think really seminal in terms of thinking about questions of the informal and the relationship about the question of post-colonial capitalism, broadly put. And I think that, therefore, the uptake as well in other global South contexts. I think since that work, and I'm not talking about his work per se, but, you know, since his reception and the uptake also by people like Ananya Roy, think Christian Schmidt here makes a really important point that informality now has become this sort of catch-all word for a lot of other practices and modes of urbanization that, in a way, it sort of starts to lose its specificity or its analytical rigor. So, you know, talking about plotting and so on and so forth is really... you know, plotting urbanization, different modes of ways in which cities expand, I think is really important. And I think a lot of you here are involved in that project of expanding an urban vocabulary, which I think is really vital.

In terms of your second question, I'm actually working now in a city called Guwahati, which is in the northeast of India and where I kind of grew up for a little bit. And I find that a very interesting space for two reasons. So one, you know, in this logic of comparison; it's an ordinary city. So Delhi is actually a very special case. I mean, if you read Ravi's book, you see the kind of planning imaginary, the capital and so on and so forth really playing out in a very particular way in Delhi. But when you go to a city like Guwahati, none of this is there. It's not striving to be some world-class city. It's not, you know, it doesn't have this sort of biopolitics of trying to remove animals from the city and so on and so forth. So you don't see this. So in that sense, it could be called an ordinary city. But what I find immensely generative about working there is the whole realm of the vernacular. And here, actually, I'm really thinking about the chapter in *Pirate Modernity* where there's a reference to Paul Gomra Ka Scooter, which I think is an amazing work because I think a lot of what we would call Southern Urban Theory is still discursively in the English language. This is what I see in Guwahati as well, the vernacular in terms of the way the city is written by authors from Guwahati. Some of it is fantastic work. I mean, it's one writer that I've been thinking of and working with, whose work I've been working with is called Saurabh Chaliha, who never acknowledged who he was. And he received India's highest literary prize, but the prize had to be given to him or sent to him by post because he refused to acknowledge that he was the author of these works. And in his work, you see how the city is continuously invented through language and his description of the city. So that's where I'm at the moment. You know, the vernacular is this really rich realm to think of so-called ordinary cities. So that would be where I'm situated at the moment.

**[Ghazala Shahabuddin]** One of the things I found about the book was, you know, the really good understanding of ecology and zoology, which you brought into this really multidisciplinary work. I mean, it's really commendable. So I'm really just interested to know, since I'm a zoologist by training (I work on birds), what are the other animals in India that really interest you as common cells in different parts of the country? Or are there any special species that you really want to look at in future for a particular reason or not?

**[Maan Barua]** So the kind of my choice of what to look at is by and large been dictated from what people talk about in a particular place. So it's not sort of so much species driven but you know, when you're in Delhi, everybody talks about the monkeys or the macaques being a problem. And you see the cattle. Similarly, London, you know, the parakeets I got into because it's one bird call that I would hear and immediately feel at home because I knew the sound of the rose-ringed parakeet, which is what it makes in Delhi or in Assam. So in Guwahati, I've actually been looking at the world's most common bird, which is the broiler chicken.

Chicken production and all the supply lines and how the chicken enters the city, how it gets dismembered and they often land up in fisheries in the city's outskirts. So the chicken becomes fish. When the fish eat it and the fish comes back into the city. So it's actually trying to think with that. The other two features I'm very interested in with this work in Guwahati on metabolism is the vulture, vultures more broadly, which was an urban bird and almost extinct. And again, has all these sort of metabolic consequences.

And the other is the greater adjutant stork, which was there in the wetlands in Guwahati. It was very prominent. But for me, the kind of species, and I say this is where I would kind of be very different from an ecologist is that for me, I'm more interested in the animal or the non-human or the other than human as a vector into the city, as a kind of guide to look at practices that we wouldn't take for granted rather than that being the end point. But I think the conversation is certainly important. And I think in India, of course, there's so many things to look at. I mean, *[unintelligible]* could be very fascinating. As are the street dogs. We've been doing some research around that so that that I think is also fascinating.

**[Thomas Crowley]** And that's also a methodological question. Like I really like the parts of the book, also just the descriptions you gave and how alive it was of the attunements that it's in both sides. You know, humans become attuned to animals as animals are becoming attuned to humans. And sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't work. But kind of as an ethnographer, as a researcher and as a writer, how did you practice that attunement and I mean, what did you feel were the challenges or the excitements of doing that?

**[Maan Barua]** It is participant observation, right? You hang out and the deep hanging out, you just hang out in a place and see what's going on. And that's when you start noticing these sort of... these encounters, where they compose or where they fail to compose. And of course, each creature kind of demands a different kinds of kind of sensibility. So when you look at macaques versus following a cow or looking at parakeets, I think they're very different. But what I think was most productive was the unusual kind of spaces following any creature can take you. You know, some little gully here, you go into an informal settlement and the cow is moving through all these little by-lanes which you can never imagine they exist. But you know, suddenly you see somebody's put vegetable peels for the cow and the cow knows exactly where to go. So you're kind of following the animal in the city in a really uncanny kind of way. You know, you start tracing parts that you would never do so as a bipedal, ocular-centric human.

But I think the other thing, of course, is that this is pegged on to archival work, because I think a lot of ethnography tends to be presentist, but if you're comparing, it becomes really vital to think about the histories of these two cities around managing cattle or be it parakeets or macaques. But I think in terms of the challenges is that you also have to kind of mindful of the moments when, you know, animals



escape, animals sort of, or any creature that you're following recede from purview, where you don't really know what is going on at all.

So I think those are some of the challenges. And of course, I have a PhD student who's been doing wonderful work on cattle in Delhi, and she says that actually the spaces that cattle cries open are also highly gendered, which is a point that I didn't make in the book. And she being a woman following this said: well, you know, many places that the cow went to, I couldn't go because, you know, they said just don't come here, get lost basically. So I think there are those kinds of challenges where fairly structural inequality or structural issues actually play out in terms of doing field work. And of course, being a kind of Hindi speaking man, I probably was able to access quite a bit of the spaces, but again, in a very particular kind of way.

**[Nitin Bathla]** Thanks for this really generative discussion. Thanks for taking the time. And I hope you enjoy listening to this really great episode. Thank you.

**[Lindsay Howe]** Thanks so much, everyone. I think you can see from the discussion alone, which we could have done for much, much longer, what a wonderful contribution to the literature this book has been. So thanks so much, Maan, for giving us this lovely book to work with.

**[Maan Barua]** Thank you all for such generous and amazing comments. I think which some of them, you know, we should probably just sit down again somewhere. Cambridge or Lichtenstein or Delhi to actually flesh some of these questions out, the unfinished nature of the urban, how do we really rethink economy in this moment, the question about what are publics, and how do we really do theory right, think it is really important. But thank you all, it's been amazing.

**[Outro]** *Thanks to you for listening. For more information, visit our website, [urbanpolitical.podigy.io](http://urbanpolitical.podigy.io). Please subscribe and follow us on Twitter.*