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ARTICLE

The urban effects of the emerging middle class in the global south

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Abstract

This article explores the implications of a growing middle-income population on the cities of the global South. The emergence of this group, situated between the poor and the very rich, long the standard binary categorization of understanding the global urban South, has important implications for physical reconfigurations and changing social structures. We discuss the reasons behind the rise of this middle-income category, note some of its characteristics and review its urban impacts. We focus on just three themes: new consumption patterns, housing markets and, urban politics. We contribute to broader theories of global urbanism by highlighting how an expanding middle-income-class are shaping and configuring a new urban realm in the global South.

KEYWORDS

consumption, global urban south, housing, middle class, urban politics

1 | INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is very simple: to review a range of studies that reveal the growing general importance and specific impacts of new middle-income groups in the making and remaking of cities in the global urban South. This research is relevant for three main reasons: i) cities in the global South are experiencing exponential growth and most of the mega-cities in the world (those with more than 10 million habitants) are located in developing countries (United Nations, 2019); ii) the global South is where the middle class is experiencing the largest and most rapid growth (Kharas, 2017); iii) frameworks for understanding how middle class expansion affects cities are mostly developed in the global North (Parnell and Oldfield, 2014; Robinson 2006).

Some background: It was long a truism that traditional theories of the city privileged the global urban North and marginalized the experience of the global urban South (Parnell and Oldfield, 2014; Robinson 2006). But the urban

South is now no longer understood as the informal variant of the urban North. At least four approaches advance this claim. First, there is a focus on the connections between cities as part of global urban networks. Work in this paradigm sees cities less as separate entities and more as connected hubs in a globally circulating transfer of capital, people, knowledge and practices (Derudder et al., 2012; Taylor, 2004). Second, there is also work on showing how transnational issues, such as right to the city or gentrification, unfold in different ways in cities around the world (Samara et al., 2013; Gaffney, 2016). The dynamics of urban change in the global South are part of global restructurings of what some scholars refer to as the urban now (Short, 2017). This new and existing body of work now includes a wide range of work with an emphasis on agency rather than just the structural constraints. Third, there are theorized case studies drawn from the cities of the global South, such as Simone's evocative work on Kinshasa and Jakarta (Simone, 2004, 2014). This type of work advances cosmopolitan postcolonial urban theories more attentive to the conditions of the global South (Robinson, 2016; Roy, 2011; Watson, 2009). Chinese cities are especially popular sites for urban research (Wu, 2015). Fourth, there is a realization that even the term "urban South" is a vast generalization across many different urban experiences. Ren (2018), for example, shows how theories of modes of governance, such as neoliberal urbanism, developed primarily in and for the urban North not only have less relevance for the urban South, but even within this category, differences between China and India are so substantial as to render inadequate the singularity of the global urban South.

An important intellectual context is postcolonial theory. Writers such as Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha have outlined the negative impacts of colonialism, its capture of discourses, its privileging of certain peoples places and ideas and its creation of the subaltern. Postcolonial urban theory, in particular, calls for more cosmopolitan forms of urban theory that incorporate the experience of cities and people outside the metropolitan centers of the global North. Numerous writers go further and call for the theorizing of a distinct Southern urbanism (Bhan, 2019; Robinson & Roy, 2016). While Robinson and Roy (2016) advance the need for a focus on a distinct urbanism of the global South, Storper and Scott (2016), in contrast, argue that this can create a provincialism of theory and what they refer to as a "new particularism".

We accept the distinctiveness of urbanism in the global South, in part because the emerging middle-income is increasing in size and importance in comparison to the global North (Pressman, 2007). But to avoid "provincial particularism" we show how middle-income groups in both North and South create similar urban worlds in and through capitalist societies dominated by mass consumption, privatizing transportation systems, private housing markets and neoliberal urban politics.

The paper takes up the general challenge of developing theories of Southern urbanisms in the context of a global perspective by highlighting an increasingly large and visible middle-income group, their impact on cities and the role of cities in their emergence.

2 | THE RISING MIDDLE-INCOME

Urbanization is increasing across much of the global urban South. Currently 55% of the world population lives in cities and by 2050 it will be 68% with 90% of that growth in Asia and Africa. In other parts of the global urban South, such as South America, where growth rates are less spectacular, urbanization was traditionally very high, with over 80% of the population living in cities, almost twice the proportion of Africa and Asia (Montero and Francesa, 2017; Magalhães, 2016).

Defining middle-income is not easy. There is not even a consensus on how to measure the share of middle-income population (Pressman, 2015). Some define it with reference to annual household income. Shirgaokar (2014), for example, in a study of traffic in Mumbai, defines an "emergent middle class" with a purchasing power parity in US dollars of between \$3,000 and \$11,250. Below is the "very poor" and "working poor" while above is the "established middle class" and "upper class". Others define it by the middle share of

the national income distribution while others use an absolute level of affluence and lifestyle (Visagie and Posel, 2013). Two broad ways are used to define the middle. One of them is based on income using the range of 10 to 50 dollars a day (Angulo et al., 2014; Milanovic and Yitzaki, 2002; Banerjee and Duflo, 2008). Another definition refers to social characteristics such as education, occupation, consumption and socioeconomic strata (Castellini et al., 2014).

The Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) makes the distinction between “income” and “class” to classify the population defined as “middle income”. In terms of income, the group is defined as households whose income ranges between 75% and 200% of the national median income. It is further subdivided into three categories: lower-middle income (75% - 100% of median income), middle-middle income (100% - 150% of median income), and upper-middle income (150% - 200% of median income). In terms of class, it is referred to as a group who share the same socio-economic status, which can include self-defined class identification, employment status, and cultural capital (OECD, 2019). Given the broad range of possible classifications and definitions, the term “middle-income-class”, although awkward, perhaps best combines the classifications used.

In one of the most comprehensive studies to date, Kharas (2017), by adjusting for variation in prices, defines the global middle-income as those who make between \$11 and \$110 a day (which corresponds with the OECD standards). Under this definition, 3.7 billion or 48% of the world’s population are now middle-income with annual additions of around 50 million. Most of this growth is in the global urban South. Populations projections suggest that by 2030, over 60% of the population in Asia will be considered as middle class.

Number (millions) and share of the global middle class by region								
	2015		2020		2025		2030	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
North America	335	11	344	9	350	8	354	7
Europe	724	24	736	20	738	16	733	14
Central and South America	285	9	303	8	321	7	335	6
Asia Pacific	1,380	46	2023	54	2,784	60	3,492	65
Sub-Saharan Africa	114	4	132	4	166	4	212	4
Middle East and North Africa	192	6	228	6	258	6	285	5
World	3,030	100	3,766	100	4,617	100	5,412	100

Source: Kharas (2017), page 14.

The growth of the middle class across the South is due to a combination of the global shift in manufacturing from the global North to the South, a twenty-year steady rise in basic commodity prices and the rise of more redistributive policies. The result: a decline in absolute poverty in many countries and a rise of a middle (Koo, 2016; Lama and Sened, 2018). The vast majority of this middle-income category has electricity, running water, educational services for their children and some form of mechanical transportation. Kandogan and Johnson (2016) describe a positive feedback loop with economic development leading to a growing middle-income group and the growth of this group looping back and leading to further increases in economic activity. While globalization has expanded the size of the global middle-income (Das, 2009), the same process makes this newly affluent group vulnerable to economic dislocation as commodity prices may fall and the global pool of hypermobile capital can easily and quickly switch to other sectors in other places (Ravallion, 2010).

The urban implications of this emerging middle-income can be investigated from different angles. We focus on three themes: new consumption patterns, housing markets and urban politics.

3 | NEW CONSUMPTION PATTERNS

The nature of globalization has changed in the last twenty years from the globalization of production to the globalization of consumption (Lynch, 2019). China, for example, has shifted from a low-wage exporter of cheap goods to the fastest growing consumer market in the world. In the past decade per person income in China has increased 120% compared to only 15% in the USA, albeit from a much lower base. By 2030 the fastest growing countries in the global South will account for 51% of global consumption. Although, projections point to declining economic growth in the longer term, conspicuous consumption continues to grow in the short term (Paus, 2014; Cadena et al., 2016).

Much is written about the conspicuous consumption of this new consuming class in the global South (Podoshen et al., 2011; Visser, 2015; Roth, 2014). The emerging middle-income is viewed as highly ambitious and aspirational in their spending patterns (Castellani and Parent, 2011; Taylor and Casey, 2015). A middle-income status implies the ability to afford more goods and services and pay a little extra for better quality goods and services (Murphy et al., 1989). Aspirations, long stunted by low income status, are now possible including owning a home, and a car, college education and regular family vacations (Madison Institute for Research on Poverty, 2010).

The impressive economic growth of Latin America during the 2000s, a consequence of the boom in commodities prices, influx of remittances and access to outside credit, has percolated down to spending patterns. In Colombia, for instance, the combination of economic growth and middle-income expansion led to a marked increase in consumption. In 2004 an average Colombian household spent about US\$523 on living expenses including rent, food, utilities, education, transportation, debts and entertainment. By 2012 the figure rose to US\$971. Purchasing power increased about 4.6% every year during 2004–2012 period, a truly impressive growth rate. Disparities between low and high socioeconomic status households also changed. In 2004 a high socioeconomic status household spent 11.4 times more on entertainment as compared as to a low socioeconomic strata household; by 2012 this difference was reduced to only 3.8 times (Dinero, 2012). Spending on entertainment is a good surrogate for disposable income across all socioeconomic strata. More discretionary spending and conspicuous consumption are no longer the preserve of the rich and affluent.

As people progress from absolute poverty into middle-income status they have more disposable income. Quite simply, people can spend more. What are some of the urban effects of this transformation in spending?

In Vietnam after the 1986 the implementation of *doi moi*-the policy of opening up the country' economy to international trade and foreign investments- a high-consuming urban middle-income emerged rapidly reflected in surging consumption of a wide variety of goods, from household appliances and food items to vehicles and luxury products (Hansen, 2017a). The middle-income category is expected to grow from 12 million to 33 million people between 2012 and 2020. Products that were not accessible or affordable before will become increasingly so, such as cars, dishwashers, meat products and air-conditioning. In urban areas the changes are most prominent and so are the side effects: increased amounts of waste, smog, pollution and use of fossil energy.

The new middle-income consumption patterns are in part aspirational (Kravets and Sandikci, 2014) expressed, for example, in the rising coffee culture and the growth of coffee shops across urban China (Ferreira and Ferreira, 2018). Consumption is not only aspirational but also, in part ethical. While a study in South Africa found a neglect of ethical consumption with an emphasis on thrift and aspirations (McEwan et al., 2015), a study of new consumers in Vietnam reached a different conclusion While these new consumers showed little awareness of sustainable consumption there was a motivation to live healthy lifestyles and protect the planet for future generations (De Koning et al., 2016; Ilbine et al., 2015).

The urban middle-income now constitute an important new market and a major source of revenue for local and global companies. In the future we are likely to see brands and strategies specifically targeted at this new consumer group (Cavusgil et al., 2018; Javalgi and Grossman, 2016; Cui and Song, 2009).

One important urban impact of this increased consumption is the rise of the mall to meet the aspirational demands of these new consumers. New malls in particular are important forms of investment that fixes mobile

capital into the built environment (Shatkin, 2008). Mouton and Shatkin (2019), for example, outline the role of mall property developers in fixing the urban landscape of Manila. There is a demand for the mall experience because the establishment of massive shopping centers in urban centers provides a safe environment that embodies and reinforces middle-income consumption patterns and aspirations. Across the global urban South from Turkey (Erkip and Ozuduru, 2015) to Nigeria (Idoko et al., 2019), the mall is a symbol of modernity, westernization and aspirational consumption. The new internal shopping spaces provide a rich contrast to the often chaotic, crowded and polluted traditional shopping areas. The new malls promise modernity, comfort and a more cosmopolitan identity. Large malls are places for an internationalization of consumption as international brands become key anchors (Meyer-Ohle, 2014). The mall is not only a new consumption space, it also provides the setting for new forms of social interaction and social identity. New malls in South African cities for example are places of interaction in shared social spaces that were previously segregated (Chevalier, 2015). One study of a mall in Kazakhstan found it an important space for young people to see and be seen by others. Young women especially were attracted by the opportunity to experience the newest fashions and build social relationships (Jäger, 2016). In Turkey shopping malls are embraced by women as they can provide more security and greater freedom than more traditional public space with its often more rigid regulations on women, their attire and their behavior (Erkip and Ozuduru, 2015).

In Latin America the increase in mall construction is also driven by demand for a middle class lifestyle and attendant consumption. Across the region over 320 malls were constructed from 2010 to 2015 to fuel the growing conspicuous consumption (Dávila, 2016). Mexico, Brazil, Peru, Colombia and Chile now all host mega shopping malls that attract locals and tourists. According to the International Council of Shopping Centers (ICSC), between 2016 and 2021, it is expected that over 26 million square meters will be added in cities for retail selling space. Moreover, shopping contents are a hub of economic dynamism in the region. By 2016, US\$800 billions were spent on malls, over 17% of Latin American GDP, and one out of seven jobs are now in the retail industry (ICSC, 2017).

Increased consumption takes myriad forms including, for example, increased electricity usage which raises issues of power generation and transmission (Khalid, R. and Sunikka-Blank, M. (2018). But the rising consumption of the new urban middle-income also involves the construction of identities and experiences as well as goods and services. A study of Starbucks, for example, found that consumers are purchasing not just coffee but are also consuming comfort, pleasure and an image of a desired western middle-income status (Shiau, 2016).

4 | HOUSING

The emergence of a middle-income, especially in its upper reaches closer to the affluent than the poor, has important ramifications for the housing markets in the global urban South. There is a commodification of housing markets as more affluent households who can now buy their accommodation. The rise of new commodified housing markets in Chinese cities, for example, has meant a steady increase in house prices and the displacement of the poor to the periphery of the city (Burdekin & Tao, 2014). In certain cases, a new propertied middle-income aligns itself with the demands for the privatization of urban land markets.

Three specific themes can be noted. First there is the wider diffusion of gated communities. Gated communities were initially the preferred housing model for the upper classes to isolate them from crime and poverty. The gated communities provided services such as safety, entertainment, and green space. This built form has percolated down the income scale and is no longer the preserve of the very rich.

There are numerous case studies of gated communities in individual metro areas including Istanbul (Akgün and Baycan, 2012; Kurtulus (2011) and Delhi (Dupont 2016). The dynamics vary across the world. Le and Le (2018) demonstrate how gated communities in a new town close to Ho Chi Minh City arose in the context of the transition from centrally-planned to market-based economy. Choon-Piew (2009) argues that gated communities in Singapore are part of the state's agenda and are less socially and spatially divisive than those depicted elsewhere. The development of secured residential enclaves in Delhi, India was driven by capital flows from nonresident Indians and the new

aspirations of the local middle-income (Dupont 2016). Despite the differences, there are recurring themes of desire for security, retreat from failing urban government and the polluted city, and a search for exclusivity, elitism and social homogeneity.

Gated communities are now the preferred model of urbanization in Latin America (Michellini and Pintos, 2016) where their spread has been reported in several countries including Argentina (Janoschka and Borsdorf, 2004; Roitman and Phelps, 2011), Brazil (Coy, 2006), Chile (Borsdorf et al., 2016), Colombia (Koch, 2015) and Mexico (Kanitscheider, 2002; Sheinbaum, 2010). This form of urbanization is rapidly spreading since the 1980s, mostly as a consequence of increasing rates of violent crime and the search for security (Glebbeeck and Koonings, 2016; Kruijt and Koonings, 2009).

Gated communities were initially the preferred housing model for the upper classes to isolate them from crime and poverty. The gated communities provided services such as safety, entertainment, and green space for upper class citizens. But now gated communities with private safety schemes, a pool and private parking systems are the preferred model for the emerging middle-income and even subsidized housing for the poor (Borsdorf et al., 2007; Magalhães, 2016). Residents –even in the poor and subsidized gated communities– have to pay for the provision of services such as safety, road and green areas maintenance, services that under other conditions are public services.

An urban realm is being constructed that divides the cities between those who live in informal settlements exposed to poverty and crime (Ward, 1976; Ferguson and Navarrete, 2003; Roy et al., 2016) and those who are able to afford private services, comfort and luxury in private gated communities. There is the explicit dichotomy of cities divided into “golden prisons” and “no go areas” (Glebbeeck and Koonings, 2016), leading to the growth of private urban government (Le Goix and Webster, 2008), fragmentation, segregation, and exclusion (Klaufus et al., 2017).

Second, there is a pronounced gentrification as an expanding middle-income exerts its weight in the housing market (Janoschka and Sequera, 2016; Lees, Shin and Lopez-Morales, 2015; Steel et al., 2017; Delgadillo, 2016). A persistent theme of the urban South is the displacement and dispossession of the very poorest in the making of the middle-class city. With specific reference to Buenos Aires, but capable of wider application to the global South. Muñoz (2018) writes of the precarity of home for many residents in marginal communities. And goes on to argue that since home is an important space for access to resources, precarious housing should be part of arguments for rights to the city. Precarity is a global phenomenon but particularly pronounced in cities of the global South (Harris and Nowicki, 2018; Inostroza, 2017; Van Gelder, et al., 2016).

The poor are displaced because, in part they are outbid by the residential demands of the emerging middle-class. A study in Sri Lanka found that rising demand especially among the middle and upper classes resulted in a steep rise in land prices in the main city of Colombo (Niriella, 2018). A similar process in association with the urban regeneration and renewal programs has led to a mass eviction of the poor across the cities of the global urban South. Baviskar (2018) writes of the structural violence at work in gentrifying global cities. The optimistic new world of malls and apartments for the rising middle class is built on the fear and anger of the displaced poor: a process noted in the cities of China (Huang and Yang, 2017; Wang and Lau, 2009; Wu, Edensor and Cheng, 2018; Wu 2016), Ethiopia (Planel and Bridonneau, 2017), India (Baviskar, 2018; Doshi, 2019; Mehta, 2016), Indonesia (Yunianto, 2014), Malaysia (Tin and Lee, 2017), South America (Gaffney, 2016) and Turkey (Örneği, 2016; Özdemirli 2014).

In some cases, gentrification is not just the result of private market forces but is linked to the actions of the development state (Ip, 2018). Randhwana (2012), for example, shows how Deli Metro Rail Corporation is entangled in the larger process of gentrification in the city through dispossessions of the poor by giving priority to metro routes for middle class neighborhoods. The process fulfils the elite's dreams of a “world class city” on the back of the dispossessions of the poor.

Third, there is a reformulation of our understanding of housing markets which for too long was dominated by images of the global urban South with a bipolar division of gated rich and informal poor. The rise of the middle-incomes subverts these traditional dichotomy categories. There is an emerging “middle housing market” between the two polar types (Lemanski, 2017). Real estate developers have responded (Yap, 2016) but there are still limits to the ability of the private market to meet the needs of the middle and lower middle because of lack of housing financing.

Jana and Sarkar (2018) show that in spite of the subsidies offered in India's New Town Policy the market price of housing stock continues to be beyond the reach of most. Even with government intervention as in China, housing misallocation occurs with regressive results (Liu and Wong, 2015).

Middle-income status is not inconsistent with informal housing. Zhao and Zhang (2018) highlight that in Beijing some informal gated communities have a high quality of life and good services, with public facilities and public transit. Denied access to the formal market, migrants combine with village owned enterprises to fashion a form of housing that has the ambiguity of middle-income housing, informal settlement and gated community.

There is also a consolidation and upgrading of informal settlements as long-standing residents increase their income and disposable spending (Schwarz, 2016). Longitudinal studies in South Africa (Ntema 2017) and Mexico (Ward, 2012) show that residents in many long settled informal settlements use growing income to increase housing improvements expenditure. The result is an upgrading of informal settlement to create a new category that includes characteristics of both middle-income and informal housing. Although the lack of tenant security continues to be hindrance (Makachia 2011; Nakamura, 2016), the consolidation of informal settlements is now an important policy agenda for the global South (Ward and Smithy, 2015).

5 | URBAN POLITICS

We can define urban politics as the operation of power at the city level. It involves the process by which decisions are made that protect or undermine the collective wellbeing of particular groups. An analysis of urban politics also considers the spatial distribution of resources and the provision of public goods (Stoker, 1998; Auerbach, 2013). To what extent do the new middle incomes constitute a distinct political force in the urban politics of the global urban South? Recall the distinction made by Marx between a class in itself and class for itself. A class in itself is an empirical reality just like the emerging middle-income category in the global South. A class for itself is a self-conscious interest group. To what extent then is the new middle-income category in the global South a class for itself?

We can distinguish between different political arenas. At the national level many commentators share an optimistic belief that rising incomes will lead to more democracy and democratic accountability. The evidence is not convincing. There is no obvious connection between rising middle-incomes and democratization (Chen and Lu, 2011; Tang, 2011). The Chinese middle-class in general seems more concerned with social and economic status than political participation (Xin, 2013; Chen and Lu, 2011). A similar trend is reported in Latin America, where, as income increases, satisfaction and trust in government decreases (OECD/CAF/ECLAC, 2018). There is no one to one correspondence between the emergence of new middle-incomes and the creation of a progressive middle class. The process depends on the size of the middle class, a sense of optimism that the future will be better and that their economic gains are secured and whether they feel threatened by the lower income groups. (Birdsall, 2015; Teichman, 2015).

At the city level, a detailed study of Cali, Colombia identified a distinct middle-income group in the city with more disposable income (Martínez et al.; 2019). These middle-income households had 60% more in monthly income than the traditional poor. While this disposable income turned into consumption patterns of increased spending on non-essential goods such as clothing, entertainment and vacations, there was no discernible middle-class ideology distinct from the poor. There was no "class for itself". Despite some differences, there were enormous similarities between low and middle-income groups in attitudes to social welfare, perceptions of government, consumption spending and aspirations. While a more affluent group had emerged they had not crystallized into a separate class with markedly different views on government, public policies or wider aspirations. There was no middle-class with separate political agendas from the poor. The shared experience of living in the city plays a part. Public goods such as transport and security are shared concerns of the poor and the middle income as well as a commitment to social welfare programs. There is no easy assumption that this new urban middle income group becomes an urban middle class with political interests different or divergent from the poor. This means that the new middle can become a

potent force in demands for a more livable city rather than just a distinct articulation of separate and divergent urban political agendas. In Latin America, for decades the many movements that spread across the continent had the “popular classes” as the base and promoted their political participation and involvement (Petras, 2018). However, it is now the middle incomes in the region that are exerting significant political pressure.

Even if they do not create a distinct ideology, the middle incomes are now an important player in the urban political arena. As in the urban North, they defend their interest as residents, property owners and users of public services. Their actions exhibit the issues of exit, voice and loyalty first outlined by Hirschman (1970). In India the middle class often becomes, what Anjaria (2009) has described as, “guardians of the bourgeoisie city” to exclude many of those involved in the informal economy. Across the global urban South, as in the global North, a new propertied middle class often aligns itself with forces promoting the privatization of urban services and land markets. Notwithstanding the problematic use of the term “class”, an expanded urban middle class has the potential to be a new actor in the political arena as it is often associated with a renewed urban environmentalism and an increased concern with quality of life (Rodan, 2013).

As with any interest group there are tensions. In high consumption capitalist societies, city transformations are part driven by the consumption patterns and demands of the middle-incomes. Some theorists refer to the “building of middle-income cities” in the South as cities are transformed to fulfill consumption patterns and lifestyles of this emerging class (Vasconcellos, 1997). This feature is very evident when we look at transportation. The emerging middle incomes are the main driver of increased private automobile use and the subsequent shifts towards motorway construction in many cities of the global urban South. The new middle-income groups clearly influence city traffic with more extensive commuting by private car. But while one study showed the growing importance of middle-income car users in shaping Guangzhou city (Dai, Zhou and Ye, 2016), another study in the same city showed that the middle-income home-owning communities, forming a broad ring around the historic core of the city, are increasingly vocal and active in their demands to enhance local environmental quality and restrict local motorization (Zacharias, 2012).

All over the global South the number of private vehicles is increasing at meteoric rates. There are now close to 10 million motorcycles on the streets of Ho Chi Minh City. According to UN-Habitat, by 2035 the number of private motor-vehicles will be about 1.6 billion and the largest share will be found in developing countries (Un-Habitat, 2013). The emerging middle-incomes are characterized by high dependence on private motor vehicle for transportation, what one writer refers as the motorizing middle-class (Shirgaokar, 2014).

The evolution of a middle-class and the affordability of high-quality cars fuels the growth of the private automobile sector in cities of the global South. Increasing motorization leads to suburbanization (Dai, Zhou and Ye, 2016). China and India are heavy drivers of this trend. It is projected that by 2035 China will have approximately 350 million private cars. India also reports a significant increase, with numbers of private cars and particularly motorized two-wheelers growing at a rate of over 20% annually (UN-Habitat, 2013). Latin America also reports an exponential growth. In Mexico, two new cars enter into circulation every time a child is born (Jain, 2011). In Colombia, a country that has only experienced economic growth in the past two decades, by 2018 there was one car for every three citizens, almost one motorized-vehicle per household (Runt, 2018).

The increasing rates of private vehicle ownership across the global South, not only respond to lack of urban planning and poor public transport system, it is also a matter of social status and social mobility. One of the major symbols of the middle-income upward mobility is the ownership of a private means of transportation. In South Africa for instance, the threshold for “middle-income affluence” includes owning a telephone, television and a private motor vehicle while owning a house is not necessarily linked to affluence, probably because of subsidized and affordable housing programs (Visagie and Posel, 2013). In Vietnam, motorbikes ownership grew substantially in the 90’s because they were outright symbols of purchasing power. Nowadays cars represent a new form of social distinction and comfort (Truitt, 2008; Hansen, 2017b).

In India the introduction of a cheap car, marketed as the People’ Car by Tata Motors in 2008 was a failure because it was too associated with lower income status. India’s new middle-class, wanted their affluence embodied

in higher status vehicles: they did not want to be seen driving the “people’s car” but a distinctly “middle-class car” (Nielson and Wilhite, 2015).

Many of the larger countries in the global South, such China, India and Brazil, have adopted the American model of suburbanization and car ownership, that goes against compact cities development and sustainable transportation modes (Charoentrakulpeeti, 2006; Shirgaokar, 2014; Cervero, 2013).

There is a vigorous debate about the policy implications and feasibilities of implementing effective public transportation systems that foster environmental sustainability in cities in the global South (Hook, 2005; Pojani and Stead, 2015; Cervero, 2013). Public transportation is a policy mostly framed to alleviate poverty and reduce disparities through reducing travel time and transportation costs for the poor who often live in the outskirts of the urban grid. But promoting investment into mass transit systems is a very complex issue. With a few exceptions of cities in China and India, mass transit systems in the global South are often owned and operated by the private sector with different degrees of government involvement and regulation. This makes it very difficult to establish when and under which condition public spending should go into collective transportation systems (Hook, 2005). Even when public transport is promoted such as in Mumbai, the public transport agency gives priority to metro routes that service middle class commuters (Randhawa, 2012).

Investing in road construction and infrastructure fulfils the demands of the growing middle-income segments. Road construction is now used as yardstick for measuring progress and modernization of city landscapes’ even though this intervention has shown little effect in the long term on traffic reduction (Pojani and Stead, 2015). Building more roads to meet middle class demands translates into less investment in public transport, less investment in existing road maintenance and often inadequate road signage and limited parking (UN-Habitat, 2013).

The combination of middle-income growth, income increase, and the demand for private motorized vehicles is now translating into a significant increase in traffic congestion, reported all over the global South with exceptional examples of traffic congestion in Beijing, Mexico City, Sao Paulo, and Delhi.

The rapid increase in motorized vehicles without attendant improvements in road safety has led to an epidemic of road accidents. A recent global status report reveals that 1.35 million die each year on the roads, roughly 3,700 a day, with an increasing proportion of fatalities in the global urban South (World Health Organization, 2018). Road traffic injuries are now the single biggest cause of death for children and young adults, and that more than half of all traffic deaths are pedestrians, bicyclists and motorcyclists. While traffic fatalities have declined in the urban North, they have increased in the urban South.

New and enlarged consumption is especially evident in the increase in private vehicles. The increasing number of motorcycles and cars has an important effect not only on congestion but on the quality of urban air (Lelieveld et al., 2015). Air pollution and congestion in cities such as Delhi for example are in part a function of an expanding middle-income able to purchase more vehicles.

6 | CONCLUSION

We showed how the emerging middle class in the global South is reshaping and reconfiguring cities. We used three lenses: consumption, housing, and urban politics, using transportation as a means to exemplify how the middle class can shape political decisions and urban planning.

The middle classes are responsible for a significant increase in private consumption that is often inspired by the lifestyles of the rich. Living in gated communities and using a car rather than public transportation are only the more signs of this upwards mobility. The impact on housing markets is to reinforce gentrification and the expulsion of the poor to the outskirts of the urban grid. A range of urban planning strategies have arisen that reflect their interest: more roads, more shopping centers, more gated communities, even for the poor. Land uses are also privileged to give space to the kind of developments that the middle classes prefer, such as the mall. The emerging middle incomes are inhabiting a more privatized city with a greater degree of separation from the urban poor. This trend is apparent in

the urban North but is more prevalent in the South where the new middle incomes are not so much inhabiting a public city but creating a more privatized city.

An example of how the middle class shapes the urban realm is the privileging of massive road construction over public transportation systems, despite the consequences of increased congestion, pollution and accidents.

The affluence and consumption reported across the global South does not necessarily translate into more active and involved political actors. This new class is more concerned with social status than collective or democratic problems unless the problems refer to private concerns, such as being threatened by lower income groups, property values, safety and use of public services that are at their disposal. The new middle income is both retreating from the public city as well as helping in its creation. Yet with its demands for a better quality of urban life the new middle classes in the South, have the potential to become a powerful voice to rise the demands for a more livable city.

There are both similarities and differences between the middle income of the global urban South and North. Both seek access to shopping malls, decent housing and private transport. But there are differences. Decent housing in the global South often means gated apartment, yet in the global North it largely refers to a single-detached home.

A vast new middle is being created that is remaking the global urban South. It is clear that the urban politics in the cities of the global South increasingly reflects the interests, power and contradiction inherent in this rising middle-income-class. We have reviewed a wide range of literature that points to this central dynamic of urban change. We have outlined the broad contours, but much work remains highlighting particularities, tensions and inconsistencies. And as an uncertain future unfolds, exploring the directions of subsequent progress will make a fascinating entry to understanding both Southern urbanisms and the global urban condition.

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