

**KARACHI: ORDERED DISORDER AND THE STRUGGLE FOR THE CITY**

*Laurent Gayer\**

Reviewed by

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Ordered Disorder and the Struggle for the City, by Laurent Gayer, a research fellow at the French Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), is a bold book touching on the issues of multifaceted political and criminal violence that undergirds state-society dynamics in one of Asia’s fastest growing cities, that is Karachi. The book is dedicated to the late Architect Perveen Rehman and is based on the PhD research of the author and draws upon the sociology of Norbert Elias, anthropologist Michael Taussig and Bertolt Brecht.

Gayer uproots some of the preconceived ideas about Karachi, like the city being a secular city and the city being anarchic, disordered and unmanageable. The question Gayer asks is if Karachi were indeed on the verge of a turmoil and ungovernable then why hasn’t its violence escalated into a bigger conflagration and overcome the whole of the city?

Gayer explains his approach to writing about the city in an interview with Mumbai-based morning daily, Mid-Day: “I decided to adopt a synoptic perspective, which would try to make sense of the wonder that is Karachi, as a whole. Journalists and scholars alike denigrated it as a ‘chaotic city’, an ungovernable, utterly unpredictable urban mass. If I wanted to counter these dominant narratives, I had to adopt the same wide frame of analysis and show that, as a whole, Karachi does work despite and sometimes through violent unrest.”

Gayer establishes Karachi as one of the largest cities of the world, with a population of 21.2 million in 2011. Touching on the issue of Karachi’s predicament of *bori bund lash* (dead body in gunny bags) and target killings, Gayer cites various ethnic and political reasons behind the current state of the city. He traces the transformation of the city from the ‘Paris of the East’ and the ‘cleanest city in the whole of India’ in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, to the current reputation of ‘world’s most dangerous city’ and the ‘South Asian Beirut’.



Highlighting the role of Urdu poetry as a ‘channel of communication with the nascent state as well as a powerful tool of mobilization’, Gayer analyses the political and ethnic strife in the city, reflecting the sense of fear and streets becoming a battleground for rival armed groups competing for votes, jobs and *bhatta* (protection money).

Gayer observes that Karachi’s violence, which has become a part of the order of things, although, is not acceptable to

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the people of Karachi, but they cannot imagine a future without it. He also observes that the violence in Karachi shows a certain structure, pattern of organization and continuity in certain areas of the city, 'patterns of domination, rituals of interaction, and forms of arbitration'. The identification of these patterns, according to Gayer, has made the city manageable, both at the city scale and at the neighborhood scale. Although the sustainability of this relationship between the 'order' and 'disorder' is questioned by Gayer, but for now, according to him, the city 'works'.

The book traces the formation of a violent 'order sui generis' in Karachi from the 1980s onwards, in a context of escalating student violence, the rise of *Muhajir Quomi* Movement (MQM-a political party), the shifting role of MQM over the next few years, rise of different politico-military forces and the competition for acquiring control over the city, resulting in violent eruptions. The notion of 'order' has been understood as the underlying neutral structure of the city with various independent actors playing their role in the running of the city on a daily basis, whereas 'disorder' is temporary disruption of this organization.

The first chapter, being an introductory chapter, outlines the structural framework of the development of the city in terms of its post-partition economic, cultural and political vacuum, the struggle between new migrants to gain political supremacy, the development of the informal economy within the city, the transformation of the city 'following the revival of its role as the Antechamber of the Afghan conflict' and the militarisation of the political arena every now and then. Having set the economic, cultural, social, political and governance background, the next three chapters examine Karachi's 'post-colonial history of violence and violent transformations', outlining the success of MQM and the major challenges that it has faced in its evolution as a political party, and the emergence of political claims by the political bandits of Lyari and radical Islamist groups.

In Chapter five, titled 'Jihad Comes to Town', Gayer attempts to show how the authority of MQM has been threatened with the implantation of Taliban in Karachi. This account however, fails to go in great depth, as the preceding chapters do, about the sense of neighbourhood and the impact of this change on the everyday lives of people, and is largely dependent on stories from the media, without engaging with ground realities.

Chapters six and seven revisits the questions raised in the introductory chapters, and attempts to answer these. It highlights the transformation in the relationship of the city's

ordered-disorder, in the form of checks and balances moderating the violence of the city being displaced and uprooted. These chapters also shed light on the revised role of the public authority, the militarisation of the public space and the deregulation of the 'market of protection'. Chapter seven's specific focus is on change in the physical urban space of the city as a consequence of the city's history of violence and the adaptation skills and methods developed by the citizens to continue living in this fragile state of affairs, where it cannot be ensured that a person leaving the house will return home in the evening.

Some of the shortfalls of the book however, is its reliance mostly on English news sources, interviews of mainly male members of the political fraternity, and no interviews of religious minorities. The other shortcoming of the book seems to be its reliance on indoor settings, and not venturing out into the streets for absorbing the ground realities. The interviews were conducted in hotel lobbies, houses, and inside cars.

Being a non-biased political account, the value of this book cannot be understated. It is an interesting read revealing the politics of order/ disorder and social and ethnic changes experienced by the city over a period of thirty years. It is a value addition to the literature on the city, and is bound to be used for future reference.