

Exploratory Notes on African Urbanism

Edgar Pieterse

African Centre for Cities | University of Cape Town

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It is pertinent to move away from the tropes of segregation, fragmentation and bifurcation in thinking about the African urban condition. However, it would be an error to simply trade the dominant ideas on polarisation for an account that only foregrounds interconnections and fluid intermingling. Instead, what is required is a careful explication of tendencies towards new forms of segregation and unforeseen collaborations but with an eye on how these dynamics are never complete or uncontested or unambiguous. In light of this angle I want to use this paper to suggest that one aspect of this new research agenda is to articulate three dominant literatures on African cities that, if read together, or held in tension epistemologically, can take us in new directions.

The academic literature dealing with urban Africa tend to fall into one of three categories: a) technically oriented policy discourses that seek to gather as much data on numerous problems/failures and develop policy answers premised on the assertion that these solutions are likely to work if there is 'political will' and finance to implement the policy proposals; b) critical political economy perspectives on urban conditions and processes seen through the prism of the spatial functioning of capitalism and its attendant state regulation/facilitation; and c) ethnographically oriented approaches that either simply opt for in-depth case studies to decentre the grand sweeps of the first two approaches and/or also embeds such cases in a broader philosophical project to illuminate the nature of social life or being in the African city, marked as it is by a variety of complex social-cultural phenomenon and processes. All of these literatures tend to function in rather hermetically isolated ways which is part of the reason why it is so difficult to get a purchase on the complex nature and directions of transformation in urban spaces at various scales. I will first explore the first two of these literatures as two sides on one functionalist/structuralist coin before moving on to a discussion of the third body of work. I then mount a provisional argument for how we can potentially articulate the underlying obsessions of each perspective before concluding with some reflections on methodological implications.

Between policy-fix and political betrayal

It is probably fair to assert that the bulk of academic work on African cities are concerned with the multiple dimensions of poverty, economic marginalisation and dysfunctionality, and political under-achievement in terms of establishing viable and effective local governance. This is predictable and understandable given that cities in the Africa manifest the worst living conditions compared to cities anywhere else. For example, the most recent UN-Habitat report catalogues that 6 out of 10 urban dwellers in sub-Saharan Africa live in slums. Furthermore, the degree of deprivation of slums in Africa is much worse than counterparts in Latin America or Asia (UN-Habitat 2008). Of course at the root of

this condition is long-term economic failure manifested in an inability to diversify sectoral composition, low growth rates, narrow ownership structures and widening inequality. Consequently, the vast majority of economically active Africans rely on variable opportunities in the informal sector for work and income. These workers invariably live in makeshift conditions, usually bereft of basic services (energy, water, sanitation, waste) or any form of tenure security (White, et al 2008; McGranahan, et al 2008). Moreover, these precarious living conditions residents are typically criminalised which add a profound sense of vulnerability to eviction and/or extortion to peoples' lived realities (Landau 2007). Given the sheer scale of these elementary problems of effective insertion into what should be networked urban life, it is understandable that most scholars will labour to bring the dimensions of these conditions to light with an eye on what should and could be done to make a material difference to the quality of life of such urban dwellers.

This literature typically takes its cue from development studies and consequently focuses on the urban dimensions of economic growth and development. Themes that arise from such work focus on the role of enabling functional land markets in conjunction with 'connectivity' infrastructures to facilitate and catalyse increased investment, productivity and access to various distant markets. The idea is that national industrial strategies require city-level expressions and management to work in practice (Kessides 2006). Around the corner of these perspectives stand the various development finance institutions that are keen on expanding the number of potential borrowers (Ajulu and Motsamai 2008). A strong research current connects the focus on urban productivity with good and relatively autonomous urban government. Thus, another major focus of urban research has been decentralisation and municipalisation (Manor 1999). These reform measures have had an incredibly difficult run in Africa, which of course proliferates a substantial cottage industry on the elusiveness of decentralisation and the entrenched dynamic of continuous re-centralisation despite rhetorical commitment to devolution and decentralisation.

In betwixt the focus on urban productivity and decentralisation is the expansive body of work on democratic urban governance, which seeks to reinforce the push for decentralisation but with a strong focus on civil society empowerment and enrolment in urban management processes, especially since local government typically do not have the resources or capabilities to address the vast needs of urban citizens (UN Millennium Project 2005). The final dimension of the applied policy oriented research pertains to the raft of urban services and their underlying infrastructures that allow for social and economic reproduction of the city (Tannerfeldt and Ljung 2006). This work can be divided between sectorally focussed research, e.g. water and sanitation, energy, transport, waste, environmental services, housing, and so on. Two kinds of questions anchor this work: How to extend services to the majority of urban dwellers when there are limited fiscal resources and even less administrative capacity? Also, how to generate economies of scale in infrastructure provision when the majority cannot really afford to pay for services and when ruling elites have vested interests in the perpetuation of informalised systems of provision? This is by no means an exhaustive characterisation of this seam of work on the African city but will suffice to delimit the driving

intellectual curiosities that keep this work alive and flourishing.¹ At the heart of this genre is a deep-seated belief that good policy plus political will can solve the urban development crisis in Africa. It represents a modernist faith in what can be achieved if one aligns comprehensive package of governance, infrastructural, and managerial reforms. *More urban, less poor*, by Göran Tannerfeldt and Per Ljung (2006) is a good example of this genre in which prescriptions hinge on appropriate technology, institutional reform (substantive decentralisation), capacity, and of course, that ephemeral elixir, political will.

In sharp contrast to the policy fix genre stand the political economists who tirelessly work to demonstrate how the well-meaning policy discourses essentially serve as a foil to create conducive local conditions for relentless capitalist exploitation. There are a number of variants of this genre, ranging from the hard-core structuralists who can only see neo-liberal instrumentality at work (Bond 2005; McDonald 2007), to more Foucauldian perspectives that seek to combine regulation theory with a more refined conception of power and hegemony (Miraftab 2004; Robins 2003). Some of the more sophisticated and compelling examples of the latter group are undoubtedly found in the prodigious work of Faranak Miraftab (2003; 2004). One example from her work will illustrate my point well. In a provocatively titled essay, “Making Neo-liberal Governance: The Disempowering Work of Empowerment”, Miraftab asserts that for all the reference to, and promotion of participatory democracy and empowerment in post-apartheid South Africa, one should be cautious to take the formal discourses and attendant policy frameworks at face value. According to her, a set of radical and transformative discourses such as community participation, empowerment and social capital have been turned into depoliticising “tools of the trade for governments [and] establishments such as the World Bank” (Miraftab 2004: 239). The key intellectual challenge in the contemporary moment is to understand how this (re)appropriation has taken place. She takes up this challenge by analysing the initiatives of the City of Cape Town municipality in the domain of waste removal that was framed as acts of community empowerment. After a careful tracing of the origins of the scheme, its operational parameters and direct benefit to members of a poor community in Khayelitsha, she finds that “empowerment is clearly reduced to its economic dimensions and to something that is acquired and consumed individually.” Insidiously, the “rhetoric of empowerment is used to divert from the fact that it is not ‘out of refuse’ but out of the underpaid labor of the local workers that the entrepreneurs and the private company makes a profit” (Miraftab 2004: 249). Through this finding she confirms the general trend of neo-liberal urban reforms across the world (Brenner and Theodore 2002). At the heart of this reform agenda is a political project that seeks to turn potentially transformative ideas into its opposite. Thus, Miraftab (2004: 253) suggests that we look beyond the rhetoric in its own terms but rather start “paying attention to the post-apartheid government’s efforts to *tame* community participation and *control* the claims of citizens on the state.” This seam of

¹ There is a clear political economy of knowledge production associated with this literature. Various development agencies such as UN-Habitat, the World Bank, multilateral development agencies and the like all invest in this kind of work to justify their policy choices and preferences. Also, this body of work underpin the negotiations between these agencies and African governments in the recursive cycle of the aid and lending development industry. It is noteworthy that these agencies increasingly enrol ‘indigenous’ scholars as consultants, which explains in part why this type of work dominates the research agendas of many African universities.

analysis appears in her other studies (Miraftab 2003; 2004; Miraftab and Wills 2005) and in a growing body of literature that explores community-level protests against municipal authorities across South Africa (e.g. Bond 2005; Desai 2002; McDonald and Pape 2002).

Standing back from the moral rectitude of the analytical project, I cannot but conclude that it would have been very surprising if Miraftab found anything else; for surely, the majority of public servants are not equipped with the training, exposure, personal history/biography or socialisation to take radical redistributive politics as their mantra. If one takes a sober view of the history of the state, the evolution of public administration (i.e. systems and processes of knowledge and institutional architectures), the dominant (popular) cultures in the society that structures the worldviews and aspirations of most people, how would it have been possible for these actors to have had a different approach or perspective? In other words, it seems misplaced to me that we can conceptually tear civil servants out of the culturally framed class and social identities they embody (especially psychologically) and expect them to act as if they are goal-driven, highly efficient 'revolutionaries' who want to change the social order for the good and embracing of radical versions of mobilising ideas such as a empowerment and participation. In my view one could apply this criticism to most of the growing body of work on neoliberal governmentalities in African cities.

Even though the Foucauldian scholars are open to counter-hegemonic work they still cannot but return to a narrative that the only thing (of significance) going on in local government or urban management is the relentless pursuit of neo-liberal reforms to achieve ever greater degrees of liberalisation, privatisation and cost-recovery. These reforms invariably go hand in glove with increasingly violent repression and oppression of grassroots groups opposed to these agendas. Research in this mould tends to demonstrate the huge disjuncture between the participatory and developmental rhetoric of participatory or developmental local government and the actual effects of neo-liberal governmentality. The source of this practice usually gets traced back to larger circuits of power/knowledge that circumscribe national and local governmental policies and technologies of governance. Consequently, the World Bank and other such agents of cutthroat neo-liberalism are always lurking in the background, pulling the strings. Local elites are all too happy to dance to the tune since their own power and futures are tied to this nexus of power and control.

Following on from this line of reasoning, there is also often a ready-made answer at hand to solve all the problems of uneven development and material exclusion:

To make any progress, delinking from the most destructive circuits of global capital will also be necessary, combining local de-commodification strategies and tactics [of municipal services] with the call to defund and close the World Bank, IMF and WTO. Beyond that, the challenge for South Africa's progressive forces, as ever, is to establish the difference between 'reformist reforms' on the one hand, and reforms that advance a 'non-reformist' agenda on the other, allowing democratic control of social reproduction, of financial markets and ultimately of production itself. These sorts of reforms would strengthen democratic

movements, directly empower the producers, and, over time, open the door to the contestation of capitalism itself (Bond 2005: 253).

Typically, the findings and analysis in this register is either episodic or epic. Episodic analyses tend to describe specific instances of state duplicity, exclusion and repression with very little reference to particular dynamics in terms of intrastate contestations or broader historical and spatial-scale dynamics. Epic studies demonstrate how municipalities are caught up in large swells of liberalisation and marketisation which leave little room for local agency or control. In this vein, unless the global balance of power shifts, prompting national shifts, local prospects for transformation or social change is almost zero. The most visceral expression of this conceptual approach is of course the seminal work of Mike Davis in *Planet of Slums*. He foresees an interminable state of exploitation as the surplus humanity in slums remains duped for the “future of human solidarity depends upon the militant refusal of the new urban poor to accept their terminal marginality within global capitalism” (Davis 2005: 202). He can find no evidence that the current choices of the urban poor to express sociality via religious affiliations can further this cause at all.

This approach is hugely problematic on at least three grounds. Firstly, it is far too simplistic in terms of the workings of power with regard to fluid institutional dynamics, actor motivations and capacities, contingency, and especially where one might find and potentially exploit contradictions in different elements in the state (Pieterse 2005). Secondly, it is a thoroughly unstrategic approach because in its purism and moral certitude it only serves to alienate those with power who could potentially be persuaded (this is the point of deliberative democracy after all) that there are alternative and maybe better ways of doing things. Appadurai (2002) has of course been working to demonstrate the potential of a grounded tireless politics of engagement. Thirdly, it is often ahistorical and fails to appreciate the tensions built into the contemporary political configurations of postcolonial settings that are invariably shot through with all manner of compromise and strategic openings (Hart 2008; Pieterse 2006a; Robinson and Parnell 2007). My criticisms are not about dismissing the importance of uncovering repressive and exclusionary practices in contemporary systems of urban management and attendant governmentality. Such critical work remains indispensable.

My problem, echoing Barnett (2005) and Hart (2008), is that such analyses flatten highly fluid, adaptive, contradictory and to extent open-ended social and institutional dynamics to the point where it obscures the ground on which a highly strategic, tactical and opportunistic politics must be built because that is the terrain offered by our emergent cities (Pieterse 2008). At the core of the radical political economists work is an unsatisfactory account of the social, which in turn renders their work on politics one-dimensional, which leaves one with little more than the consolation of being morally righteous and virtuous as champions of the cause of the urban poor and exploited. On this note it is opportune to turn to the third literature on the African city, which is in a more ethnographic and philosophical register.

Thickening the social

Mbembe and Nuttall (2004) strongly endorse the call by Robinson (2002; 2006) to broaden our theoretical grasp of non-Western cities by starting with the assumption that all cities are equivalent as distinct but intertwined repositories of modernity; i.e. banal and ordinary but also equally harbingers of the capacity for extraordinariness and novelty. Thus, Mbembe and Nuttall (2004) rail against the developmentalist dispositions of both the policy-fix and political economy genres; regarding such renderings of African cities as an epistemic failure of imagination.

There have been limits to the capacity of the epistemological imagination to pose questions about how we know what we know and what that knowledge is grounded upon; to draw on multiple models of time so as to avoid one-way causal models; to open a space for broader comparative undertakings; and to account for the multiplicity of the pathways and trajectories of change. Where empirical work and local studies are carried out, generally they are poorly informed theoretically. As fresh questions emerge and new dramas take shape, the social sciences manifest a surprising lack of openness toward the humanities. Historical and political scholarship is not combined with fundamental philosophical inquiry, and this has led to a dramatic “thinning” of “the social.” The latter is still understood as a matter of *order* and *contract* rather than as the locus of *experiment* and *artifice* (Mbembe and Nuttall 2004: 349).

According to Mbembe and Nuttall, taking on the challenge of writing the social back into our understanding of African “life forms” requires an examination of everyday practices and imaginaries as it unfolds at the nexus of multiple crossings that constitute urban spatiality. For, like most cities in the world, “the continent has been and still is a space of flows, of flux, of translocation, with multiple nexuses of entry and exit points. As evinced by numerous recent studies, the continent we have in mind exists only as a function of circulation and of circuits” (Mbembe and Nuttall 2004: 351). This implies a spatiality that is predominantly shaped by the imperative, desire and tyranny of incessant mobility and opportunistic searching (Simone 2004a). Data on forced and voluntary migration across Africa indeed suggests that urban territories are as much nodal points in multiple circuits of movement of goods, services, ideas and people, as they are anchor points for livelihood practices that are more settled, more locally embedded and oriented (ADB 2008; Adepoju 2004; Cheru 2008; Landau 2007; Mamdani 2007; UNFPA 2007). Nevertheless, it is also clear that the dynamics of economic globalisation as it spills over into formal, informal, and illicit economies, and especially their intersections, further reinforce and enhance the imperative of mobility as a constitutive dimension of livelihood strategies, of both the poor and middle classes in many African cities. Apart from the pragmatics of economic activity, the circulation of globalized symbolic registers that accompany religious identities and practices, the styling of the body through dress and the expression of dietary and musical tastes, suggest that everyday social practices are profoundly shaped by globalised imaginaries (e.g. Diouf 2003; de Boeck and Plissart 2004; de Boeck 2005; Geschiere and Meyer 1998; Scheld 2007).

Given the profound presence of these translocal senses of place in the routinised activities of the urban poor, it is clear that we have hardly begun to scratch the surface to understand what a non-

localism or translocalism means in terms of identities, interiorities, social practices, networks, intimacies, etc. in psychological, sociological and philosophical senses. Surely, this supports Jenny Robinson's argument that a rounded conceptualisation of cityness remains a big gap in our knowledge and understanding of African urban life, and thus, the absence of a fully fledged conception of Africa urbanisms. One scholar who has been making interesting headway in fleshing out this lacuna is Mamadou Diouf in his work on the hyper inventive subjectivities and social practices of urban youth in West Africa.

Diouf proposes that the contemporary generation of youth in (West) Africa is socialised in a fundamentally different manner than before and at a time when youth are becoming the demographic majority in most countries (World Bank 2007; UNFPA 2007). Contemporary socialisation occurs amongst the ruins of a nationalist project; a project that held onto a particular conception of young people and their 'proper' role in the post-independence project of autonomy and development. Diouf (2003: 3-4) argues: "In its cultural and political versions, the nationalist project sought to do two things: to maintain the frontier between elders and juniors that characterized traditional African values, and to put young people at the center of its plans for economic development and national liberation." However, with the sustained economic crisis across much of Africa since the 1970s; the systematic drift towards a narrow agenda of resource plundering by national elites, buffeted in turn by heightened geopolitical dynamics in function of the cold war; the devastating effects of structural adjustment programmes; and ever deepening economic marginalisation in a more and more integrative global economy, this naïve vision for young people turned sour. Diouf's project is to come to terms with the culturally inflected consequences of this ruined vision. The argument he mounts, I believe, provide us with some clues about how to fully acknowledge and move through one imponderable seam of everyday cityness in many Africa cities—the prevalence of urban terror and violence (Mbembe 2003; Pieterse, forthcoming). Diouf's core argument is compelling:

Excluded from the arenas of power, work, education, and leisure, young Africans construct places of socialization and new sociabilities whose function is to show their difference, either on the margins of society or at its heart, simultaneously as victims and active agents, and circulating in a geography that escapes the limits of the national territory. These transformations, which have been taking place for several years, affect both geography and history—especially history conceived as a chronology embracing age groups that are connected by obligations, rights, and duties. The ideological and cultural reorganization that flows from this posture of defiance takes place in the spaces deserted by political power and outside the communities and their dominant cultures, to the advantage of the margins and the unoccupied areas in which emptiness and indetermination are dominant: places that are ready to be filled, conquered, and named, and which favor the expression of rites and rituals intended to produce signs of identity. The function of these spaces, which escape the logics of public and administrative control, communitarian prescriptions, and state surveillance, is to serve as supports for acts that express within the public sphere, in a violent, artistic, or spiritual way, a desire for recognition and a presence (Diouf 2003: 5).

Key themes that jump out from the excerpt include: *exclusion*, which denotes the profound scale at which most African societies and cities simply fail the majority of urban inhabitants with ‘formal’ opportunities that one come to expect with the consolidation of modernity; yet, despite this unimaginable scale of social failure, youth display phenomenal agency by actively *constructing* their own places and social territories within which to forge different, morally ambiguous, bases for identity construction. Furthermore, there is the evocative suggestion of *alternative itineraries* of bodily and imaginary circulation, which firmly place the subjectivities of youth in the deterritorialised domain of the translocal (Smith 2001); a theme that has of course been carefully mapped out in the rich and occult-realist ethnographic elaborations of Simone (2005; 2006) and Malaquais (2006). Then there is that arresting image of “postures of defiance”, which intimate the confrontational and often deliberately offensive behaviours and tactics of youth as they put their bodies, sexual desires and offensive cultural proclivities on display, effectively daring mainstream society to respond, attempt an intervention, or even feign concern. Indeed, Diouf is probably right that the continuously reinvented rituals of transgression is about announcing presence and claiming symbolic space over a society and system that can do little but announce its impotence to deliver any semblance of a viable future.

Simone (2004b) picks up the hyper generative dimension of daily life through his invocation of the metaphor: ‘people as infrastructure’. It denotes the ways in which most people in African cities must position and deploy themselves in highly mobile and flexible ways in order to see and seize minute opportunities for economic and social advancement; opportunities that more often than not turn out to be blind alleys and dead ends which only serves to further accentuate the imperative for nimble positioning. The incessantly mobile contortions implied intimates that people must regard their bodies, practices and networks as a kind of scaffolding to effect agency. Simone puts it in the following terms: “African cities are characterized by incessant flexibility, mobile, and provisional intersections of residents that operate without clearly delineated notions of how the city is to be inhabited and used. These intersections, particularly in the last two decades, have depended on the ability of residents to engage complex combinations of objects, spaces, persons, and practices. These conjunctions become an infrastructure—a platform providing for and reproducing life in the city” (Simone 2004b: 407-408).

Articulating three genres of urban scholarship

The obvious point to make here is that neither the policy-fix nor the political-economy approaches have the epistemological disposition to engage with such open-ended and fluid conceptions of the social and their particularistic dimensions. It is therefore unsurprising that scholars who work in those genres find these philosophical attempts to map and detail the sociality of everyday life at best a confusing diversion for how does one make policy in the face of incessant indeterminacy and emergence? And at worst a dangerous distraction from the real politics of militant mobilisation which cannot afford the endless fracturing of the poor, subaltern and working classes in the face of relentless capitalist exploitation. To some extent, these objections are understandable given the scale and gravity of urban deprivation and abuse that mark most African cities. However, at the same

time it is equally clear that until analytical accounts can come to terms with the multidimensional specificities of particular urban spaces, at various scales (household, quarter, wards, city-regions, social conurbations, mobility trajectories, etc), it is unlikely that one can engender a resonant politics or policy programme. So, the inescapable challenge we must confront is how to conceive of a knowledge project that can hold in tension a critical material reading of power dynamics in the city, alongside a rigorous engagement with the imperatives of 'viable' and 'relevant' policy which is indispensable to imagining and engendering effective state action, and informed by a rich, complex, often oblique grasping at the edges of profoundly dense and mobile socialities.

The starting point for this agenda must be the extremities that flow from the pervasive overflow of violence and terror in most African cities, particularly in the quarters where the poor hustle a living. In this regard the philosophical injunction of Ashraf Jamal, working through the brutalisations of South African cities, is instructive. Jamal (2009) proposes that we eschew a choice between despair and hope; the obvious moral axis that come to the fore in any confrontation with the visceral implications of bodily attacks and violation. Instead, he proposes a challenging disposition: "Terror, understood here, is not merely the sum of empirical acts of violence but a pervasive and variegated *psychic seam*. It is this seam that must be tapped if we are to understand why the city works yet does not work" (Jamal 2009: 3). Thus, for Jamal the issue is not a choice between hope and despair, but rather nurturing an epistemic capacity to engage with the indeterminate zone of becoming that falls between these polarities. This implies a continuous return to the heart of the violence and finding psychic and ethical ways of dwelling there precisely because of our impotence to resolve the underlying historical and contemporary drivers of this condition. In finding a necessarily philosophical language for making a restless peace with ones impotence, one can cultivate an ethical sensibility that appreciates a more subtle, more humble, and more affectively attuned sense of social being, becoming and transformation. A sensibility, according to Brian Massumi (2002), that recognises that even the most fleeting and modest act/movement of freedom is ontologically equivalent to grand sweeps of freedom because it is impossible to claim a position of authority that can authorise one act of freedom greater or lesser than another. The implication of this is that amongst progressives we need to dispense with the moralistic arguments about whose transformation project is more radical or realistic (Amin and Thrift 2005). Instead, our focus needs to fall on the wide array of small and large practices (imaginaries, strategies, tactics) available in the numerous cracks of the contradictory dominant system. The more urgent political challenge is to better understand the *art of articulation*. Artful politics requires of one to distinguish between different domains of politics and especially the articulations that spark at their interfaces. Such an exploration invariably demands a pragmatic interest in the fine-grained work of institutional embedding. It is in this regard that we have to make spacious room for practical, pragmatic and if serious, differently radical work on the minutia of urban policy concerns.

For example, by holding this epistemological tension, one can imagine the power and necessity of practical policy research questions around the full gamut of urban services that make up the operational dimensions of urban infrastructural functioning. Questions such as: Firstly, what are the

funding streams for the service and how does it relate to investment cycles and cross-subsidisation demands so as to make sure a progressive movement towards universal coverage is on the agenda? Secondly, what are the technological standards and assumptions that inform the level and delivery of the service? How do these standards mediate tensions between: efficiency and sustainability; capital-intensive and labour-intensive; internally delivered and outsourced; sectorally coherent versus integrated into holistic packages of provision? Thirdly, what are the capacity implications of delivering the service as part of a broader objective to advance developmental outcomes such as political empowerment, fostering low-carbon infrastructures and patterning, economic enrolment of the unemployed, greater social engagement if not integration? Would a radically different approach require as a precondition retrained staff or institutional incentives or both and how long would it take to ensure adequate capability to work developmentally? In fact, what kind of incentive/sanctioning system makes operational sense in the context of a given service or cluster of services that will be characterised by a specific mix of professionals and frontline implementers who function by virtue of historically defined power relations? Fourthly, what type of institutionalised citizen interface is required to ensure responsiveness and oversight towards the realisation of rights and obligations once a more progressive or inclusive benchmark has been established? Fifthly (and closely related to three), in terms of institutional design, at what geographical scale must the service be delivered to achieve both economies of scale and effective area-level coordination, integration and citizen engagement? Depending on the answers to these questions, what types and levels of management are required to make the service function smoothly especially if there may be inter-governmental dimensions to the service or the larger family of services it belongs to? I have deliberately belaboured these policy oriented questions because it demonstrates that one must and can hold onto a policy research agenda but such work gets radically altered when informed by a politicised reading of urban reproduction on the one hand, and a culturally attuned appreciation of social dynamics, especially amongst the urban poor, on the other hand.

The question that clearly arises at this point is: how does one engender and sustain this epistemological approach to urban research on (African) cities? I will conclude this paper by addressing this question through methodological observations.

In conclusion

The real challenge is not merely to describe the failure of cities in Africa to emulate Western models of urbanization, but to seek a deeper comprehension of why these urban agglomerations have developed the way they have. In other words, what is needed is a much more nuanced and rounded view that not only acknowledges the spatial unevenness of the urbanization process but also treats African urban residents as active agents in constructing meaningful lives for themselves rather than simply passive victims of inexorable structural processes beyond their control. [This approach is premised on a] view that urbanization is a complex, multifaceted, and sometimes contradictory process that encompass multiple pathways without a privileged, common end-point. To think of multiple pathways is to

challenge the claims to a singular urbanization process that takes place through recognizable stages along a linear path (Murray and Meyers 2006: 3).

Following the approach of Murray and Myers it seems clear to me that we need to move towards a knowledge/research disposition that seeks to work across the three categories of literature in order to hold a more robust and multi-dimensional conceptual model that can allow the diverse dimensions of the African city to come to the fore on the basis of careful, empirically grounded data and speculative philosophy and theory building in a postcolonial frame, broadly speaking (Pieterse 2006b).

A particularly suggestive and rich methodological approach to more carefully situated accounts of everyday life can be gleaned in recent adaptations of grounded theory to a more spatialised conception of social contexts. Adele Clarke (2005: xxxii) provides a rich reworking of grounded theory by developing a detailed methodological framework to augment it “with a situation-centred approach that in addition to studying action also explicitly includes the analysis of the full situation, including discourses—narrative, visual and historical.” At one level, situational analysis and other methodological approaches that take practice seriously as having meaning and consequence in its own right (Appadurai 1996; Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2000; Flyvbjerg 2001; Long 2001) is a crucial starting point for fleshing out our knowledge of African urban life because so much of these places are simply ignored or glossed over by normative discourses such as informal settlements, slums or illegal settlements. However, what are particularly useful in Clarke’s elaboration are the cartographic research instruments she proposes to generate a more complete understanding of the situation within which particular actions take place and take on meaning and consequence. These instruments are: situational maps, social worlds/arenas maps, and positional maps.

Situational maps “lay out the major human, nonhuman, discursive, historical, symbolic, cultural, political, and other elements in the research situation of concern and provoke analysis of relations between them” (Clarke 2005: xxxv). In other words, it is where framing theory and other exogenous theories come into play to come to a broad assessment about the context that frame the particular set of practices under investigation.² Social worlds/arena maps in turn “lay out all the collective actors, key nonhuman elements [including natural and technological], and the arenas of commitment within which they are engaged in ongoing discourse and negotiations. Such maps offer meso-level interpretations of the situation, explicitly taking up its social organizational, institutional, and discursive dimensions (Clarke 2005: xxxv-xxxvi). This is important because it allows one to connect broader framing contextual elements with institutional and organisational expressions of various kinds of relations, which is my reading is often over-looked in either overly structuralist or ethnographic accounts of social and economic dynamics. Lastly, positional maps are closer to the ground, so to say, and therefore “lay out the major positions taken, and not taken in the data vis-à-

² For a useful and clear account of framing and exogenous theories, see: Allmendinger, P. (2002). ‘The Post-Positivist Typology of Planning Theory’ in Allmendinger, P. and Tewdwr-Jones, M. (eds.) *Planning Futures. New Directions for Planning Theory*. London: Routledge.

vis particular axes of variation and difference, focus, and controversy found in the situation of concern... [Furthermore,] positional maps are not articulated with persons or groups but rather seek to represent the full range of *discursive* positions on particular issues—fully allowing multiple positions and even contradictions within both individuals and collectives to be articulated” (Clarke 2005: xxxvi). This approach is particularly salient because too often readings of urban dynamics in African cities are simplistically reduced to the exploiter versus the exploited, whether this be coded in class, ethnic, religious or gender terms. As a result we tend to miss the complex and usually contradictory positionalities that people and groups adopt in order to figure out how best to stay in the game and potentially advance their interests or agendas, as the work of de Boeck (2005), Simone (2004a), and Malaquais (2006) suggests. Again, if we are to advance a more grounded and differentiated understanding of African urban settlements this kind of work is essential.

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