Why Africa’s Cities Matter

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The first weeks of 2011 witnessed extraordinary movements for social change in the streets of North Africa’s cities. From Tunis to Alexandria and Cairo to Tripoli and Benghazi, citizens have poured into public spaces and changed the world. The people have shaken the tree of repression at its roots. As I write, it is still uncertain what the political outcomes will be in Tunisia, Egypt or Libya. The new governments in Tunis and Cairo appear to occupy highly precarious spaces, and outright civil war may be underway in Libya by the time this issue goes to press. Perhaps popular uprisings in still more cities suffering under Africa’s oppressive regimes will catapult the continent toward the political transformation that has been brewing for two decades or more. After all, largely urban social movements and civil society organizations have forced political change upon reluctant regimes on the continent for quite some time now, considering events of the last few decades in other African cities. Could this people power be the kind of force for change it has become in Tunis, if or when it emerges in Douala or Yaounde, Harare or Bulawayo, Abidjan or Bouake? And then I dream still further: might the popular and scholarly imagination in the west, too, begin to change, to recognize the dynamism and sustaining power present in the innovative energies people devote to their everyday lives in Africa’s cities? At the very least, I think, after the amazing spectacle—however problematic it may have been in other terms—of the FIFA 2010 World Cup for showcasing South Africa’s extraordinary cities—might we be moving to a time when our discipline of geography, and especially the sub-discipline of urban geography, as practiced in North America, recognizes why Africa’s cities matter?

Explaining our answers to our colleagues for this question can present us with a conundrum. This is because, as African societies urbanize, they often do so in ways that seem to challenge prevailing theories and models in the discipline—which has often led to normative “African Exceptionalism” explanations instead of to conclusions that the theories might be inapplicable to some African situations. Perhaps as a result of this apparent gap, African Urban Studies is emerging, or rather, re-emerging not least because of the continent’s increased assertiveness in its own affairs and its reemergence as a theater of the global contest between the West and China. The last ten years have brought a resurgence of interest in urban Africa in the social sciences and humanities, with a long list of major books most readers of this journal would already know. Africanist urban geographers have been important players in this resurgence. My experiences researching the literature of African urban geography, particularly while writing my book, African Cities: Alternative Visions of Urban Theory and Practice, sug-
gest a few enduring themes alongside more recently emerging ones in the subfield. These themes do not provide sound-bite answers to my title’s implied question, but they do suggest that those of us who do focus on Africa’s urban geography are providing myriad explanations of why the continent’s cities matter—to urban studies as a whole, and to the grand course of human events in our times.

The first theme might simply be the great range and diversity which exist in the contemporary experiences of cities on the continent. Recent studies suggest that certain truisms held as common for African cities may be falling by the wayside. Deborah Potts (2009), for example, recently challenged the truism that Africa has high rates of urbanization, while Franklin Obeng-Odoom (2010), in this journal, challenged the common notion that Africa’s rapid urbanization is not linked to economic growth. The great variability and variation in reliability of data on African cities makes comparability problematic, further challenging the notion that one can still speak of the continent’s urban areas as one. This is evident when one reads the recent UN report on the *State of African Cities* (2010): it has much to offer scholars of urban geography, but also glaring data problems and inconsistencies in trying to shoehorn the continent’s cities into common themes (e.g., the trendy insertion of climate change as a theme).

The considerable outpouring of urban studies scholarship from Africa has also gone in so many different directions that it is difficult to encompass, let alone read. Nonetheless, I would still contend that there are certain key debates that are relatively cross-continental, where scholars are asking how cities deal with the following seven concerns: (1) the enduring aftermath of colonialism; (2) the increasing informality of socio-economic life; (3) urban deprivation, poverty, inequality and socio-political exclusion; (4) the uncertainties and fluidities in the governance of urban service provision (waste, water, land, housing, electricity, and the like), particularly in this era of neoliberalism and contestation of it; (5) warfare, violence, and disease; (6) the expanding cosmopolitanism and connectivity of cities; and (7) the imaginative and generative character of urban cultures. The first four of these are longstanding emphases in African urban geography (even as they have been taken in new directions in contemporary times), while the last three are themes I consider to be emerging more recently in the subfield. There is not sufficient space for dealing with any of these in an essay of this kind; and the reality is that another scholar might emerge from soaking in the literature with a set of similar or different themes than mine. For some of these themes, too, there is little that may be distinctively African about the research: urban geographers the world round are increasingly concerned with post-colonialism, informality, inequality, violence, urban neoliberalism, cosmopolitanism, and cultural production in cities. What I find notable, however, is the degree to which we may see future urban geography research in which African urban geography is no longer the last-minute add-on, the exception, the abnormal, or the anomaly in urban geography, but instead a field belonging to a co-
equal region whose cities are, if not *The Norms* for the world, interestingly unexceptional!

Judging from the scholarly attention devoted to recent work by Filip de Boeck (and Marie-Francois Plissart 2004), Achille Mbembe (with Sarah Nuttall 2008), Jenny Robinson (2006), AbdouMaliq Simone (2010) and others, not only in urban geography writ large but in social theory and cultural studies literatures, we seem to be at a point where African urban studies can provide a broad, diverse array of insertions into these larger theoretical discussions. Yet an explicit concern with practice, with contributing to efforts to improve the quality of life for urban citizens, is one of the great distinguishing features of African urban studies scholarship—and, as Tunis, Cairo, Alexandria, Tripoli and Benghazi rise up, we must recognize that, for once, scholars are not far behind the people in recognizing the call of activism. It is pertinent to note, for example, how often in the books of AbdouMaliq Simone, which are generally thought of as theoretical works, the author’s emphasis lies squarely on urban practice and urban planning.

What the work of these and other scholars document again and again is that cities in Africa belong to the world. Models of world cities and global cities either disregard the continent’s cities or push them to peripheral margins. Intellectual thought and planning practice in urban studies more broadly often do much the same. Certainly, the region has been among the earth’s least urbanized parts, but that has steadily changed. To be sure, few of Africa’s cities are among the world’s largest or most economically powerful. Yet the interconnections of African cities with those of the rest of the world make it necessary to link the discussions and academic literatures far more than has been the case. Too often, still, a kind of tokenism prevails, or an alarmist African exceptionalism, when African urbanism does enter the broader literature.

The ever expanding African urban studies bookshelf has much to say to both urban studies and African studies. The first thing is that, despite my new book’s title, it may be preposterous to speak about ‘African cities’—it is certainly wrong to do so as if there is one type, or one theme. The Africa fable that lumps cities together typically collectivizes a crisis narrative, even in progressive accounts. There are surely elements of a crisis in many cities, but the universalizing fable misses quite a lot that is either not in crisis in African cities or is far more complex and nuanced than a lot of outside observers allow. There are quite different manifestations of postcoloniality, informality or new regimes of governance across the continent by which Africans are negotiating and navigating these crisis points, with significant variation in the effectiveness of this negotiation and navigation. So without being blind to socioeconomic or political problems in Africa’s cities, it is important to resist an overarching crisis narrative, in the interest of maintaining a concern with both theory and practice.

Given that concern with the crisis fable or the universalizing fable, it seems fair to ask: are African cities genuinely exhibiting patterns and processes that are
new and distinct from those in other cities of the world? And, if we work to build on the experiences, theories and practices emerging in urban Africa, is this local knowledge usable in alternative planning practice or replicable in other cities—whether in Africa or elsewhere? I argue for the importance of fostering the sorts of ‘zones of exchange’ that Harrison (2006) sought, to support the emergence of forms of ‘hybrid governance’ (a la Trefon 2009) that bring informal, indigenous, or Afropolitan ideas into dialogue—however contentious this dialogue might be—with western-derived ideas about formal, modern urbanism.

Pieterse (2008) suggests that we model these zones of exchange in terms of a ‘relational city.’ His five avenues of relationality are not intended as the only arenas of the contestations that comprise such cities, but they are a good start. He argues for examination of representative politics, stakeholder forums, campaigns of direct action, alternative projects of grassroots development, and symbolic politics. In my book I show examples, successful and unsuccessful, of some of this relationality at work in different ways in different African cities, from participatory solid waste management in Lusaka to reframing of the new Tanzanian capital at Dodoma, from re-engineering governance in Nairobi to re-imagining a literary lived space in Mogadishu, from Zanzibari migrants unmoored in Seattle to a Somali Eid-ul-Fitr in the Mall of America.

This brings me to the ultimate challenge of this essay: is there any potential for ‘African’ urban studies to be part of this alternative visioning of a deeper democracy that might lead to imaginative, relational and just city-spaces—beyond the events of Cairo, Alexandria, Benghazi or Tunis in 2011? One theoretical way to foster that potential in intellectual realms might emerge through developing responses to western urban studies. For example, we might look at something like Ed Soja’s (2000) 6 discourses of the post-metropolis and respond from Africa, as I do in my book. But for such an approach to not end up unnoticed in urban studies writ large or for it to avoid being seen as an attempt at what might be called special pleading on behalf of Africa, it is crucial to put African cities at the center from the outset, to start from there, unapologetically. Such a resituating of the discussion might lead to global rethinking of housing, land, industrial development, labor, governance, historical legacies, hierarchies, forms, functions, primacy, cultural production, migration, or demographics: in essence, all the stuff of urban geography. One outcome of this is simply to force us to see the complexities of urbanism, from Africa.

Africa is not all one thing, and no one country or city can be used as the example to stand in for all the rest—especially not South Africa or its major cities. Johannesburg probably shares as many themes of urban theory and practice with New York as it does with Dar es Salaam; Grahamstown reminds me in some very tangible ways of the small American college city I live in, at the same time that it has other concerns in common with Douala. Each city in Africa is itself multifaceted and comparable with both other cities on the continent and with
cities around the world. Mere comparability should not mask the reality that neo-liberalism is not the same across Africa’s cities, nor is informalization, governance reform, impacts of violence, or cosmopolitanism.

While there are bleak stops on any tour of urban Africa, not all is negative by any means. There are possibilities for deepening democratic practices in quite a few cities. Blanket approaches, whether of cheerleading or critique, such as those on neoliberalism, fall apart on closer scrutiny. African studies as a field should be careful to attend to the historicity and geographical particularities of cities. African urban studies itself has such different approaches within it as a field: scholars from economics, planning, history, sociology, anthropology, geography and the humanities enter into discussions of African cities from different angles.

Strangely, political science seems only an occasional presence in African urban studies, when it ought to be a central field to our analyses, because these are such fascinating years for urban politics in Africa. Surely cities in many parts of the world could gain from more ‘vibrant politics’ and ‘vigorous democratic contestation’ (Pieterse 2008: 162–63), but this seems to be a time for concerted efforts to bring these into being on the continent, as the events in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and elsewhere demonstrate. Pieterse focuses on building such politics: changing urban governance to open up decision-making; revising technological standards, or building and landscape design; rethinking production systems; and tackling inequality.

Despite huge variation, each city on the continent negotiates with some similar hauntings and conundrums. There is great diversity and range to the negotiating, but it still makes sense to work to further develop an ‘African’ urban geography. There may be a different path for each city, and no one single agenda, but each city is navigating through its historical and geographical narratives of what others see and mark out as ‘Africa’. The goals, as I see it, for African urban geography, are about negotiating and navigating more relational and just cities, deepening the democratization of urban practice, and turning urban studies and human geography as a whole toward the deeper examination of those African urban narratives. Clearly the moment has emerged for building on possibilities for dialogue and conversation across the divide between these Africans’ urban forms and norms and those of urban planners and practitioners from elsewhere. There is a transformation of consciousness implicit in the carrying out of such conversations, undergirded by a desire for it to have practical consequences that make the lives of the urban poor better, richer, fuller, and more just.
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