

Urban Studies: A View from the Continent's Southern Tip

This is an important moment to engage in urban debate and to reflect on urban studies in Southern Africa and across the continent. African cities are deeply divided, hotbeds of discontent and protest, as well as sites of dynamism and change, contexts in which socio-economic and political inequalities reproduce and shift. For universities, the contemporary moment is fraught and creative, a context of dissent and mobilisation one in which we are challenged, in South African in particular, to become more accessible and democratic, to decolonise. This mix of mobilisation grounds and inspires thinking on knowledge production in urban studies and the substantive readings of cities that we produce (Parnell and Oldfield 2014).

In this short piece, I share some of the contention and excitement that infuses this field and its position in African and global southern debate. Kate Derickson's (2015) thinking is a useful starting point. She delineates the ways we approach cities as 'Urbanisation 1' and 'Urbanisation 2' (borrowing from Chakrabarty's concept of History 1 and History 2). Urbanisation 1 is exemplified by the planetary urbanisation thesis that posits the complete urbanisation of society, a difficult argument to deploy in African contexts. In contrast, Urbanisation 2 research is characterised by diverse interventions, united by a political and epistemological strategy to refuse Eurocentrism and to 'provincialise' urban theory (Derickson:648). In articulating this distinction, her approach makes clear differences in intellectual, political and geographical genealogies that shape these approaches to urban studies. In this schema, African urban studies fits readily into Urbanisation 2, contexts in which many urban stories demand attention and where urban life cannot be reduced to a singular 'urban story' or theory.

Necessarily then, in African urban contexts our work must be diverse, messy even, reflecting modes of

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urbanisation, which are substantively complex and contested. Our theories and positions, and our research strategies and navigations, need to embrace and interrogate the complex ways in which practice, policy, and politics interplay. These contexts shape what and how we know, the methods of our research, as well as with whom we know, the publics and debates which inspire and demand research. Can we embrace this messiness? Can we navigate pathways through it?

These questions and challenges arose in the Southern African City Studies Network conference agenda, a biennial opportunity to share urban studies research, hosted in March 2016 at the Urban Futures Centre at the Durban University of Technology in South Africa. The conference opened with a keynote panel on urban theory and the place and contribution of African scholarship in urban studies. Three panellists kicked off the discussion. The first, Bill Freund, a leading scholar on African cities situated his commentary in the complexities and messiness of African urbanism, pithily suggesting that 'every African city is a *gemors*, a complex mess' (2016). Our need as a field, therefore, is theory and practice that reflects this reality, engages it, unravels and untangles it. Molemo Moiloa, an artist and architect and the second panellist, shared her work on poetics and aesthetics in African public art, practices that cut against the grain of normal languages and assertions on African cities as dysfunctional developmental nightmare. She spoke to the politics of knowledge production and its circulations, describing her frustrations with asserting arguments about African cities and public art in global forums as 'throwing stones at bullet-proof, supposedly transparent-glass cases' (2016). And, Caroline

Wanjiku Kihato, the third panellist and a scholar of urbanism and migration, challenged us conceptually. She suggested that the urban theory produced in our region represents 'models and spare parts scavenged from elsewhere' (2016), found in and referenced from cities elsewhere. She asked: Can we break out of these habitual taken-for-granted ways of knowing that rely on ideas from afar? In asking this question, she challenges us to develop a sensibility that is curious, a form of questioning that seeks new ways to see, new partnerships to know and work together that brings new voices into our urban African conversations. In doing this work, she suggested, our goal should be an epistemological reorientation, a frightening but also freeing objective. This bold agenda is essential I think to grapple with the complexity, contention and creativity found in African cities.

This epistemological and political challenge reflects a drive to open up urban studies to the worlds that inspire and shape our cities, aligning with Derickson's framing of Urbanisation 2. Both assert a critique, and a need to build theory as a motivation and anchor for knowing and engaging our cities. This is the sensibility that I think, in large part, shapes urban studies research in our region. We have a commitment to a scholarly agenda that embraces innovation and experimentation, through, for instance, diverse forms of writing and research practice. Our research partnerships and collaborations bring universities into conversation with the state, and with civil society, and community organisations, with, for instance art projects and theatre producers, with artists and architects, and with colleagues elsewhere on the continent and across the globe. Our work spans micro-scale ways of reading cities and requires large-scale data-driven approaches, both essential to engage the realities of the rapid growth of African cities (see, for instance, Parnell and Pieterse 2014; Parnell and Oldfield 2014).

This mix of questions, scales, imperatives and collaborations, stretches and challenges our expertise and capacities, as well as our theories and our methods. It also inspires us to work boldly, drawing on multiple methods, from large-scale data and its modelling and trends, to the intimacies of ethnography, bringing together a mix of new approaches, with the rigour of more established social scientific approaches. This requires a commitment to and capacity to listen, to democratise our research and scholarship, to collaborate and embrace multiple voices, and expertise in our cities. This is a challenge to mark our location, to challenge what Roy describes as urban theory's 'disembodied voice and unmarked location' (2015:6). Inspired by Adrienne Rich, she suggests that: 'To speak is to speak from a place on the map, which, is also a place in history ... [and] to embody urban theory, to mark its location, to trace its biography, is a crucial step in acknowledging the project of power that is academic knowledge' (Roy 2015:6).

In 'marking our location' and in 'tracing its place in history', the projects of urban studies on the African continent are plural, shaped by multiple thematics and analytical objects, spanning questions of development and infrastructure in cities, art and politics, access to essential services, as well as justice and democracy. This is a collective analytical and political, one that is substantive and urgent. It is also an opportunity to build richer more inclusive conversations that embrace theory and practice, and collaborative work and writing, conversations that can be deepened and enriched in networks and conversations that engage in and across the continent.

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