

African Urbanism and the Global City

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Debates over the effects of globalization have led to various claims about politics today and where politics might be headed. Some analysts have pointed to outcomes that include the decline of the nation-state, the "clash of civilizations," a rise in global conflict and a decline in local control.¹ Regardless of the veracity of specific claims, the greater interconnectivity that comes with increased contact with people from diverse backgrounds from all over the world demands a revaluation of our conceptions of politics.

By privileging the sovereign nation-state political science finds itself working within the discursive horizons that the nation-state prescribes. Alternatively, cities offer a political ontology that is closer to the reality of how our globalized world functions. By privileging Western cities urban political science is missing an opportunity to learn about

Travis is from Lantzville, B.C., a great town to grow up in. Many people wonder what went wrong with Travis. Travis is interested in African politics and has written an article arguing that Africa will be the most important continent for geo-politics in the coming years, economically, politically and culturally contested by the United States, China and Islam. Travis kept this article on his laptop, not trying to publish it, and was mightily dismayed when he discovered that he couldn't sue the Harvard Review for recently printing his ideas. Back to Lantzville litter-patrol for Travis. He would like to thank all the students he exchanged ideas with, and Dr. Magnusson, who pushed him to think seriously and not be a "stupey-dupe."

other cities—African cities being the focus here—and how this knowledge can be used to understand all cities. Therefore I argue that we should decentre the state as our object of investigation and instead look to the city as a political space that is more helpful in understanding politics. We should also better understand how African cities work.

In their *Notes and Sketches* Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno reflected on what they saw as the culmination of Western civilizing logic.² In a world shaped by advanced capitalism, the culture industry and urbanism, Westerners had forfeited reflection and mediation in order to align themselves with the drives and desires of society, propaganda, the party and the sovereign nation-state. The authors are speaking specifically about Western civilization; in contrast they mention Africa as “the last part of the earth which has vainly sought to protect their poor herds from civilization.”³ Their analysis points to a perceived binary between Western order on one hand and African disorder on the other. In the *Eurocentricism in Urban Theory* section below I make the case that this perception is persistent throughout political science. In the final section I argue that rather than a binary there exist many similarities and connections between African and Western cities. The concepts of the global city and urbanism as a way of life help us breach the divide and recognize the informal order and disorder that exist in both spaces, spaces that are characterized neither by the order of unthinking conformism, nor the disorder of uncivilized herds. Jane Jacobs approaches this middle ground in her analysis of the global, yet local sidewalk ballet:

Under the seeming disorder of the old city, wherever the old city is working successfully, is a marvelous order for maintaining the safety of the streets and freedom of the city. It is a complex order... [we may] liken it to the dance—not to a simple minded precision dance with everyone... twirling in unison and bowing off en masse, but to an intricate ballet in which the individual dancers and ensembles all have distinctive parts which miraculously reinforce each other and compose an orderly whole. The ballet of the good city sidewalk never repeats itself from place to place, and in any one place is always replete with new improvisations.⁴

Decentering the State: The Global City

In his introduction to *Powers of Freedom*, Nikolas Rose describes state-centric analyses of politics as “obsolescent” in an era when world politics has transcended the boundaries of the sovereign nation-state:

We are seeing the proliferation of forms of politics and types of contestation which cannot be calibrated in terms of the dichotomies of traditional political thought. The challenges posed to the idea of the nation state by the themes of globalization and localization are too familiar to require much elaboration.... These challenges disrupt the images of spatialization and communication that underpinned conventional notions of nation states, their territorial unity and governability.⁵

Rose describes these conventional notions of the nation-state as deriving from nineteenth-century philosophical and constitutional discourse, which "imagined a centralized body... with a monopoly of the legitimate use of force in a demarcated territory."⁶ Rose employs Foucault's concept of governmentality; in these terms, government "refers to all endeavors to shape, guide, direct the conduct of others... it also embraces the ways in which one might be urged and educated to bridle one's own passions, to control one's own instincts, to govern oneself."⁷ Town Hall meetings, church groups and community watches are some examples of processes where people convene, debate and govern themselves. Rose adds that "from this perspective, the question of the state that was so central to earlier investigations of political power is relocated. The state now appears simply as one element ... in multiple circuits of power, connecting a diversity of authorities and forces...."⁸ Rose encourages us to decentre the state in our political analyses and to look elsewhere for ways of understanding the complex forces of globalization and localization that characterize contemporary world politics.

Warren Magnusson's work on the global city and urbanism as a way of life takes up this challenge in positing the city as an alternative political space and drawing our attention to the connection between governmentality and the city's practices of local self-government. The term global city refers to the fact that many if not all cities have an economic, social, cultural and political presence in the world. Magnusson argues that cities are "key switching points for globalizing cultures and organizational centres for social, political and religious movements."⁹ Cities are also interconnected, hence the idea that we all live in a global city. He finds that "[w]hereas the state is characterized by sovereignty, cities are characterized by complicated practices of government and self-government."¹⁰ He adds that multiple authorities are the norm in the city, and when cities provide agreeable conditions for people to live it is because of "the ensemble of activities that these various authorities mediate, not because of the sovereignty that particular authorities purport

to exercise."¹¹ Magnusson directs our attention to how this political ontology, or urbanism as a way of life, can lead to creative and promising ways to deal with the conflicts and challenges of contemporary politics:

The now familiar notions about global cities and the larger processes of globalization draw our attention to the way that cities work as connectors... [T]he city is unique in its capacity to generate productive connections between people who are alien to one another. One not need be of the same religion or community or share the same allegiance or vision of the future to connect with others peacefully and productively. The city facilitates this, by bringing people of diverse backgrounds together, and giving them reasons to cooperate and live peacefully with one another. ... To be "urbane" or "civilized" is to take difference in stride, react with tolerance and curiosity to alien customs, and to see the diversity of the city as an advantage. Every city is potentially global in that it welcomes people in and reaches out everywhere.¹²

Thus far I have cited Rose and Magnusson to argue for replacing the state with the city as a tool for political analysis, and described the usefulness of the global city and urbanism as a way of life as concepts that lead us to new political possibilities that are more amenable to the diversity, complexity and connectedness of contemporary politics. But in order to gain a better understanding of the interconnectivity of the global city and of the variety of self-governance in diverse localities, we must extend our analysis of the city beyond the conventional confines of the West. Urban political theory has largely neglected to take into account the diverse realities of African cities, making it difficult to understand their experiences and overlooking the opportunity to use such findings to reflect on all cities.

Eurocentricism in Urban Theory

In an essay on the cultural politics of globalization, Dipesh Chakrabarty discusses the problems of interpreting Indian history through categories derived from modern political philosophy. He finds that "these categories, in spite of their global relevance and even origins, have never quite transcended the peculiarities of European histories within which they were initially conceived."¹³ Similarly, Siba Grovogui argues that for the most part African realities have not been taken into consideration by Western-derived modes of thought. He argues that dominant conceptions of nature, reason and time:

originated from parochial recollections or memories of the experiences and trajectories of Europe and/or European-derived entities. Although they left out entire classes of events, experiences and trajectories, most of them non-Western, these partial recollections and derivative observations served as bases for exclusive scientific verities.¹⁴

Grovogui goes on to add:

Few Western theorists assume that Africans, their modes of thought, ideas and actions have been integral to the dramas of modernity. They appear in Western narratives only as appendages of Western makers of history; on terms defined by the latter; armed with ideas springing from Western intellectuals. The unstated implication is that these 'others' have not offered any valid discourses or practices outside of the strictures of the Western political languages and imaginary."¹⁵

Like Grovogui, I am interested in how Africa has been left out of the dominant political discourse. Urban theory has in large part omitted the African city as a political space for testing political limits, boundaries and imaginations. This can in part be explained by language barriers and distance from Western urban centres and research institutions, but it is largely due to the fact that urban political analysis assumes an organizational density that is often embedded in the frameworks of laws, systems and institutions found in Western cities. The Western experience, which includes the industrial revolution, mass consumerism, modern amenities and liberal progressive freedoms that lead to certain structures of politics, economics and institutions, is taken as the norm. The absence of familiar structures and institutions such as a reliable police force, fire department, city hall or public transportation in even the largest African cities (such as Dakar, Kinshasa and Lagos) is perceived as an institutional thinness. Thus it proves difficult for Western urban theory to categorize and understand ways of African urban organization without understanding it as African disorder and/or lack of Western order.

Louis Wirth's influential articles *Urbanism as a Way of Life* and *The Urban Society and Civilization* offer a point of entry into how urban politics at once narrows its focus on the Western city yet opens space for exploring the connectedness of global cities. In the latter article, Wirth writes that "[o]ur cultures are still many, but our civilization is one. The city is the symbol of that civilization."¹⁶ Here Wirth points to urbanism as a globally shared experience, yet in the same breath he claims that

"our American cities, like modern cities everywhere, constituting as they do the frontier of civilization, are parts and products of the expansion of Europe."¹⁷ As such Wirth centres his analysis on the American city and sees modern urban civilization as derived from the expansion of Europe.

Wirth finds that culture is distinguishable from civilization, as the former emanates from diverse origins and is pluralistic, while the latter is singular and emanates from urbanization. He maintains that civilization originates in the modern Western city. Therefore we are left with a vision of urbanism as a way of life and the consequent global civilization as products of Western experiences, instead of as interplay between cultures culminating in a shared global city. Wirth argues that:

the concrete and immediate social problems of Chicago and the processes underlying them were, in their essential features, the problems and processes of every city; that they were in fact, typical of the whole of our industrialized, urbanized world, and if properly analyzed would expose what this twentieth century cosmos (or chaos) is and how it came to be.¹⁸

Wirth seems to indicate that our knowledge of the global implications of one city, namely Chicago, can flow in one direction; that is to say that we can posit the local experience of Chicago as the global experience of all cities. He does not acknowledge the influence of other cities on Chicago.

Wirth also touches on a number of general qualities of the city that exist outside of the Western context. These include the definition of the city as a "relatively large, dense and permanent settlement of socially heterogeneous individuals," and a description of the urbanite as sophisticated, cosmopolitan and taking part in multiple groups and organizations of diverse interests.¹⁹ These characteristics are evident with African youth today who have been raised in urban environments where it is normal to own a cellular phone, watch the newest Hollywood films, sport American fashions, converse in multiple languages and still attend church, mosque or traditional religious gatherings. It is also true of African cities that they attract a large proportion of youth and working class; that the birth rate is significantly lower than in rural settings; that women are likely to have children later in their lives; and that more mothers find employment.²⁰ In all of these ways the African city appears not so different from what we are accustomed to in the West. What we in the West are perhaps not so accustomed to is how our cities and politics reflect African experiences. I will describe some examples in the section *African Urbanism*.

Turning our attention to other influential Western urban theorists we see that their approaches and subject material have also emphasized the Western experience of urbanism. Le Corbusier used modern, rational techniques to plan cities which abstracted from local experience in favor of a universal order. This search for efficiency and order is reflected in steel/glass modern architecture, grid street and power systems, urban transit and zoning. Similarly, Lefebvre, Castells and Jacobs all take the Western city as their point of analysis and thus associate the problems and issues of the city with those of Western urbanism, such as the production of space in Paris or social movements in American cities.

Since I am arguing that Magnusson's vision of urbanism as a way of life is a helpful concept for recognizing the complexity and connectedness of the global city, it is advisable to examine how effective these concepts are in understanding the African experience of urbanism, or conversely, if they are projections of specifically Western experience and modes of thinking. Magnusson argues that "[u]rbanism as a way of life is not confined to particular countries... it transcends the particularities of nations and cultures." He adds that, "the world is very much like a huge city, with a powerful but non-sovereign government at its centre." He also compares the municipality to the forms of organization we find within all cultures: "like the tribal authorities of indigenous peoples, or like churches or ethnic associations or business councils or professional bodies or countless other self-governing organizations, the municipality is actually formed out of the effort at self-government."²¹ Yet he recognizes that the concept of the municipality has closer ties to Western notions of the city than perhaps elsewhere: "the idea of a municipality as a political entity of a different type remains with us, especially here in North America."²²

Certainly it can be argued that local self-government in African cities conveys different forms of organization than we see in the Western municipality, hence African urbanism as a way of life will express cultural particularities. We can see this in how most African cities often do not have a "powerful, but non-sovereign government at their centre." City halls and other public services usually lack the resources and the confidence of residents to constitute a strong presence in urban life. Rather, order in African cities often emerges "in situations characterized by a proliferation of authorities of many different types."²³ Order emerges in the sense of Jacobs' "eyes on the street," where street vendors, telephone booth operators, young children, their protective siblings and mothers, relatives and friends congregate on the street and in the shade to escape the Sub-Saharan heat, to do business and to socialize. Business

is frequently conducted through informal contacts; policing is usually a communal affair, not left up to the local or state authorities; local transportation often looks like a 1970s Peugeot station wagon, pineapples and luggage stacked six feet above the roof, 8-12 passengers crammed into 5 seats, rather than a centrally organized bus system. In many ways the African municipality contrasts its North American counterpart—yet there are also important similarities.

The African city is a concentration of "a proliferation of authorities of many types." In light of Magnusson's definition of the municipality as a form of organization that "enables self-government more generally, something it can do by facilitating citizen participation, connecting authorities of different sorts with one another, and stimulating innovation,"²⁴ I find that the African city is an intensive practice in local self-government, even more so than in Western cities. Therefore the African city can be conceived as an important example of the kind of non-sovereign, non-statist, local self-government that is consistent with the order of the global city. Still, returning to my original concern that "municipality" might express Western reality more effectively than African, I would caution that any analysis of African cities must allow space for the diverse and complicated forms of informal self-government that at first glance might appear more like disorder than our conventional understanding of order.

African Urbanism as a Way of Life in the Global City

What appears as "urban anarchy" there is related to the "sidewalk ballet" here. Practices then have an influence on popular culture and forms of collective action now. Louis Wirth recognized that modern cities were influenced by societies from other places and times when he stated that urbanism as a way of life bore the imprint of earlier folk societies, and that the population of the city is made up of heterogeneous people from rural and other urban environments. He argues that "we should not expect to find abrupt and discontinuous variation between urban and rural types of personality."²⁵ Wirth was looking specifically at the American city and its hinterland. In light of the insights we have gained from post-colonial studies, especially pertaining to diaspora and the increasing interconnectivity of diverse peoples and cultures, I argue that we cannot expect to find abrupt and discontinuous variations between any societies that have adopted urbanism as a way of life. Reflecting on the work of Wirth and Magnusson, I argue that urbanism as a way of life describes the conditions under which much of the world's population exists.

Therefore the boundaries that appear to exist between here in the West and there in Africa are more flexible and porous once we centre our analysis on the city. I will offer two narratives that speak to this; the first looks at connections between times and spaces, the second describes the existence of urbanism as a way of life in the African city.

Abomey á Ouidah: Le Berceau de Voudun

In the centre of Bénin, the small, French-speaking republic to the west of Nigeria, lies the modern city of Abomey. A highway runs through the centre of town, lined by two-storey glass and steel government buildings on one side, make-shift markets made of wooden stalls lining the other. At the entrance to the city stands a fifty-foot tall statue of the last great voodoo king Gbehongzen, arm outstretched, palm facing out to the oncoming French imperialists in a historical gesture of resistance and refusal. The statue overlooks a plaza where today you can find artisans selling their work to tourists, most visiting from *l'occident*. Foreign contact has extended Abomey's reach from beyond the immediate region, even beyond Africa, into what is today a global scope—leading to important connections and influences to places and times that might at first glance appear surprising.

Abomey's status as a global city began long before airplanes and the Internet. It started in a similar fashion to how Magnusson describes the spreading-out of urbanism: "Cities spread out, link together, and ultimately colonize the countryside... The outside to the urban is gradually internalized, so that urbanism as a way of life becomes all-encompassing."²⁶ From the 17th to 19th centuries Abomey was the site of the royal palace and capital of the powerful kingdom of Dahomey. The influence of Dahomey's kings stretched across much of what is now southern Bénin, spreading their customs, languages and wars. Abomey quickly grew into an urban hub for trade, an expansion fueled by the slave trade with the Portuguese and French.

The road that leads from Abomey to the coast is called "La Rue des Esclaves" (the road of the slaves). It was along this path that the captured were marched to the waiting European ships where they would remain aboard until their arrival in the New World. Their point of departure was often the city of Ouidah, internationally known as the "Cradle of Voodoo." It is here that every seven years voodoo kings, practitioners and followers gather to celebrate their tradition. It is also from here that voodoo began its spread to the New World.

Slaves were often settled in Brazil, the Caribbean and the Southern United States, where they took up new lives in subordination to their colonial masters. They carried their traditions with them: religion, song, dance; social, political, economic and cultural practices of organization and interaction. The flow of people and ideas changed the political landscape of the New World. In Brazil, African culture mixed with European and indigenous cultures to create a society that has been considered at once an example of hybridization and tolerance and a state of unrivalled urban poverty and violence. Yet among the disorder of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro analysts are taking note of the informal local self-government and innovative strategies of survival. This mix also gave us Pél  , the world's greatest soccer player, a popular figure whose symbolic importance goes beyond sport to the realm of race and politics; he inspired generations of black soccer players and helped break down the race barrier in professional soccer.

Abomey and Ouidah have also marked the political landscape of the United States of America. The influence of voodoo and African culture on evangelistic religion in the South is evident, where white ministers mix the gospel with snake handling, a practice common in Ouidah today. With the movement of African-Americans across the country we can see a proliferation of social and political movements, such as the civil rights movement and other forms of race politics mixing with religion and culture. Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X and Motown music mixed New World politics with monotheistic religion and manifestations of African-American culture. Mohammed Ali is a famous example of the hybridization between sport, culture, race, religion and politics. His choice to refuse the US military draft and return to Africa to fight the famous "Rumble in the Jungle" brought the world's attention to Kinshasa, the capital of Zaire (now the Congo), as a global city.

Back in Abomey, the traces of war and slavery that began the diaspora of Africans to the New World is ever present in the city's memory. The royal palace has become a museum, recognized by the United Nations as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. At the other end of La Rue des Esclaves on the beaches of Ouidah stands another gigantic monument, "Le Portail des Esclaves," a representation of the arch slaves marched through on their way to the ships that would take them to the New World. In Ouidah and Abomey we find the shaping of other continents, other societies and other cities. It is an example of two African cities telling a story far beyond their apparent boundaries.

Dakar: Crossroads

The city... has attracted within its confines the racial and ethnic stocks of all the world and has more or less amalgamated them and blended their traits into a new aggregate of hybrids, here mingling with one another and there segregating themselves from one another, here collaborating and there at war, but in any case building a complex of cultures unprecedented in human history. This heterogeneity of the human materials in the city is at once a source of ferment and stimulation and of the frictions and conflicts that characterize modern society.²⁷

When reading Wirth's description of what we could call "urban multiculturalism" from a North American standpoint, we probably think of Montreal, Los Angeles or New York City. We may think simultaneously of racial friction and the cultural mosaic of which many of us are proud. We might even imagine that there is something unique about North America in the way people from all over the world are capable of living in our cities in relative accord. We overlook that North American cities were not the first to be home to such diversity and complexity.

Dakar, the capital of Senegal, is a cosmopolitan port city of 2 million people. Historically and geographically it is situated at the interstices of African, Islamic and Western cultures. Islam first came to the city in the 11th century; Europeans began trading there in 1444. Modern Dakar is one of Sub-Saharan Africa's most important cultural capitals, where music and film gain international attention and a thriving economy makes it one of the richest cities in West Africa. But as Wirth noted, with complexity comes both stimulation and conflict. Though Dakar has remained the seat of a democratically elected government it has faced episodes of political violence. Throughout the 1990s electoral controversy often spilled onto the streets, but as the millennium ended Dakar was host to a peaceful transition of power. The city retains its position as a global hub of activity with a busy trading port and a multi-lingual, multi-ethnic and multi-religious population. More recently it gained the attention of extreme sport enthusiasts all over the world as the destination in the motorcycle-racing documentary "Race for Dakar."

In an unexpected space and with origins in a distant time, we find a city that has been part of the global network many years before anything comparable appeared in North America. Urbanism as a way of life in Dakar has developed in a focal point between disparate cultures, where mundane, daily practices of trade, communication and local self-government have made for a space of exchange between peoples. How

this has been achieved, how practices of self-governance and exchange in an environment of diversity and complexity have resulted in a relatively congenial existence for millions of people, how Christians, Muslims and traditional religious followers have been able to maintain a beneficial coexistence, are questions that urban theory can explore in Dakar.

Conclusion

When we decentre the state and focus on the city as our object of analysis we open new avenues of understanding. The global city and urbanism as a way of life encompass the flows of ideas and people from times and places we might not otherwise recognize as influencing here and now, times and places we habitually relegate to there and then. Likewise, the African city is often depicted as wrought with disorder. This paper is a call to move away from a Eurocentric standpoint and to recognize the African city as an important political space for urban analysis. Rather than focusing on the lack of formal institutions, rules and infrastructure, urban analysts will find it instructive to focus on the informal practices of local self-government that constitute the African city. Such research is likely to provide results that are applicable to cities around the world, giving a better understanding of the complexity and connectedness of urban life.

Notes

¹ See for instance Crawford Young, *The Rising Tide of Cultural Pluralism: The Nation State at Bay?* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1993); Samuel Huntington, *Clash of Civilizations* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997).

² Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

³ *Ibid.*, 209.

⁴ Jane Jacobs, "The Uses of Sidewalks: Safety," in *The City Reader*, eds. Richard T. LeGates and Frederi Stout (London: Routledge, 2003), 117.

⁵ Rose, 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁹ Warren Magnusson, "The City of God and the Global City," *CTheory.net*, www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=520 (March 2007), 2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹² Ibid., 5.

¹³ Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Globalisation, Democratisation and the Evacuation of History?", in *At Home in Diaspora: South Asian Scholars and the West*, eds. Jackie Assayag and Véronique Bénéï (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003), 127-8.

¹⁴ Siba Grovogui, *Beyond Eurocentricism and Anarchy* (New York: Palgrave, 2006), 4.

¹⁵ Ibid., 8-9.

¹⁶ Louis Wirth, "The Urban Society and Civilization," *The American Journal of Sociology* 45, no. 5 (1940): 755.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 745.

¹⁹ Louis Wirth, "Urbanism as a Way of Life," *The American Journal of Sociology* 44, no. 1 (1938): 8; 16.

²⁰ Ibid., 20; 21.

²¹ Warren Magnusson, "The Principle of Local Self-Government: Towards a New Political Imaginary?," lecture at York University, Toronto, 27 November 2003 (obtained from author personally), 6-7.

²² Magnusson, "The City of God and the Global City," 25.

²³ Magnusson, "The Principle of Local Self-Government," 7.

²⁴ Magnusson, "The City of God and the Global City," 26.

²⁵ Wirth, "Urbanism as a Way of Life," 3.

²⁶ Magnusson, "The Principle of Local Self-Government," 2.

²⁷ Wirth, "The Urban Society and Civilization," 750.