

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

**Edgar Pieterse and AbdouMaliq Simone (eds)**, *Rogue Urbanism: Emergent African Cities*, Johannesburg: Jacana, 2013. ISBN: 9781431406234 (cloth)

## **On Rogue Urbanism**

The literature on the African continent's urban condition is already significant, and it's growing and becoming more relevant as Africa's urban population increases.

However, a large part of it is written abroad, and those writing on the continent face a deeply uneven political economy of knowledge production: according to a 2011 Convoco Foundation report, only 35 out of 9,500 science and social science journals surveyed are based in Africa (p.455). Moreover, a lot of the literature has a particular focus on policy - too often overlooking actual subjectivities and everyday life, and thus leaving out much of the urban condition. This is the context against which Edgar Pieterse and AbdouMaliq Simone, through the [African Center for Cities](#) at the University of Cape Town, planned and convened two colloquia in 2009 and 2010 to bring together a set of academics and artists to explore what "more credible" accounts of Africa's urban condition might look like (p.12). *Rogue Urbanism* is an assemblage of 33 texts and photo-essays by many of those who took part in these events.

There are many, often broad, definitions of 'the urban' in the book, and a wide range of approaches appear: some evaluate policy and mobilise data, others are more literary - even poetic, and still others are written from social science perspectives. Some are incredibly difficult to describe, given authors' unique ways of writing and the extraordinary connections being made, and it is these that I personally find most compelling. Most of the contributions are either from South Africans (or are South African-based) or from West Africa, with others from European countries (including colonizing countries like Spain, France, Germany, Belgium). A short introduction by Pieterse presents the genealogy of the book and its organization. The introduction doesn't aim to thoroughly weave the contributions into a unitary work: the book can be best understood as an "ensemble" (p.13), an "instigation for debate and research" (p. 15), "partial and necessarily incomplete" (p.15).

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## **‘Rogue’ Urbanism and Process**

‘Rogue’ is employed by the editors to shake-up presuppositions of what ‘cityness’ is when looking at African socio-spatial conditions. “Dynamics that are so unruly, unpredictable, surprising, confounding, and yet pregnant with possibility, invoking a rogue sensibility” (p. 12). The term ‘rogue’, as well as the five categories the editors employ to organize the contributions (‘urbanisms’, ‘palimpsests’, ‘deals’, ‘governmentalities’, ‘interstices’), do not reverberate much throughout the contributions. This could be due to the fact that the contributors did not engage in co-production, and hence didn’t have a chance to fully explore ‘the common’ amongst their work. Another consideration is that the group was assembled in a rather intuitive way. Through informal email exchanges with some of the participants, it emerged that the colloquia felt full of potential, casting light onto new fields - a worthwhile and innovative initiative. It was perhaps the follow-up that left many wishing for something else, but the editors admittedly state that there was not “the time or resources to create and sustain ongoing processes of collaboration and joint production” (p.13). The process behind *Rogue Urbanism* appears to have a degree of rogue-ness itself; surprising and unruly, pregnant with possibility.

## **Manifold Accounts of African Urbanities**

A set of themes reappear in many of the contributions: modernity, colonialism/postcolonialism, capitalism, and utopia/dystopia. While some use the term ‘dystopia’ to describe particular urban conditions, Van Synghel and De Boeck argue in their contribution, based on the work of Congolese artist Bylex on an African ‘Tourist City’<sup>1</sup>, that such urban developments have nothing to do with dystopia but, rather, should be seen as *utopias* of the post-political city (p.84). Elleh suggests that underprivileged settlements (such as shacks, shanty-towns and bidonvilles) are a product of African modernity, something that evolved through the clash between an industrially produced built-environment and the locally produced one (p.103). This modernity also came with its share of modern planning: segregated cities were

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<sup>1</sup> Perhaps inspired by ‘Cité du Fleuve’, a new city enclave in Kinshasa.

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*produced*, and many contributions in the book document this process. Ousmane Dembele, in his magisterial reflections grounded in the city of Abidjan in Côte d'Ivoire, describes the modernist project in African cities as a 'discomfort' (*malaise*) (p.298). He also makes one consider that, given the vast influence of traditional authority on the continent, the right to the city would necessarily need to confront the tension between "the urban land capital against the anti-value of customary property" (p.403). This coincides with Sandra Roque's account of the Angolan city of Benguela, where the (produced) dichotomy between 'city' (*cidade*) and 'slum' (*bairro*) serves as a charged field to reflect upon the segregated urban condition of this context: "*cidade* is everything [...] *bairro* has nothing" (p.220). While an apparent duality appears to be suggested by the recurrent emphasis on binaries, the contribution of Caroline Wanjiku-Kihato on the life of a female asylum seeker trading 'informally' in Johannesburg clarifies that the notions of private/public and formal/informal are frankly only reference points seldom experienced in their totality (p.335). The dialogue across contributions, while perhaps unintended, can be at times intense.

Some contributions to the book concentrate on neighborhoods and countries, others on the continent as a whole, but most focus on the city. As Andréia Moassab and Patricia Anahory's essay on uneven development ("elite-driven investments and shallow democratic institutions", p. 217) in Cape Verde demonstrates, though, what matters is not so much the size of the territory or population as systemic conditions of the kind found even in this small archipelago. Some contributions remind us that the 'city-dweller' in the African continent is not older than a hundred years, despite a number of ancient large cities in pre-colonial Africa. One of them is Dembele, who furthermore clarifies that 'the city' in Africa is essentially a colonial project, one in which 'Africans' performed the role of passive agents. Cities like Dakar, Bamako or Abidjan were planned by the French (p.407) in schemes where Africans were regarded as "savages", "migrants" in "the modern city" (p.409). He writes about cities where planning consists of a zoning of social classes and functions, which are "a dream of those in charge" (p.411). He is also one of the few to not only comment on the inadequacy of the living conditions of low-income populations in 'informal areas',

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but also expose the stupidity of the villas of the wealthy: badly oriented, without regard to the local climate, reflecting trivial interpretations of foreign stylistic references. How to feel at home in such places? The sense of novelty, amazement, and ‘glare’ (as in Joseph Tonda’s contribution on urban identities in Brazzaville) is inextricably accompanied with a sense of alienation, suspicion and anger.

The foreign reader will find unique and undaunted ways of accounting for the urban. Take Tshikala Biaya’s contribution on youth, ‘the street’ and violence in Kinshasa as an example of the ability to take the reader from a devastating personal story written in a frank, literary manner to a commentary on a public transport issue only a couple of lines later. For Biaya, this navigation is not without a violent component, but violence is here taken “not as a distortion or a social pathology, but as an articulated order” (p.154). Adesokan writes about “post-colonial incredibility”, a condition which is not “a crippling ‘crisis’ or a ‘norm’ to be coped with, but [...] a situation that must be changed programmatically” (p.193-4). ‘Informality’ is described without the complacency of the ‘making-the-informal-formal’ campaigners: “it is not so much that [informal] street trading is beyond the control of municipal authorities; rather, the practice thrives because...the people’s astute understanding of the negotiability of official rules” (p. 195). Violence, crisis, informality, dystopia, seen through the looking glass of the contributors (without a moral comment), are inherent attributes of these urban ecologies. The persistent question is ‘who benefits?’.

## **‘Left’ Epistemologies from the African Continent**

Is it possible to speak about Marxism, socialism, capitalism, Left and Right in the African context? *Rogue Urbanism* offers countless opportunities to make connections, both at the theoretical level as well as at the level of political projects. Namdi Elleh, in his magnificent account of the continent’s spatialities and temporalities, explains how Julius Nyerere’s ideas of an ‘Africanised socialism’ (“rooted in the principles of *ujamaa*, which intended to learn from African traditional ways of life”, p. 112) were tested as a principle to develop whole new cities in Tanzania. Akin Adesokan, in his fascinating account of filmmaking in Nigeria, uses the work of Ghanaian philosopher

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Kwasi Wiredu to explain how the notion of ‘communalism’ holds sway in West Africa: the way “in which an individual is brought up to cultivate an intimate sense of obligation and belonging to quite large groups of people on the basis of kinship affiliations. The inculcation of an extensive sense of the human bonds provides a material school for the enlargement of sympathies, which stretches out beyond the limits of kinship to the wider community” (p.204). While this is indeed not strictly ‘socialist’, it opens up space for meaningful exchange with other Left traditions.

## **Emerging African Cities: Who Emerges?**

At the margins of the neoliberal boosterism marketing ‘emerging Africa’ as an opportunity for investment, some contributions in book suggest another kind of emergence. The current ‘Africa rising’ trend in the pro-capital media is actively encouraging investors to not miss the opportunity the continent’s resources and to take advantage of what some are promoting as “the global economy’s ‘last frontier’” (see Mohgalu 2013). ‘Africa is emerging’, ‘the world’s fastest-growing continent’, one can read in the *Economist* (2013) and *Financial Times* (2013); and Obama flattered his South African hosts during his visit at the University of Cape Town last June by stating that “Africa is rising” (CBS News 2013). Critical perspectives on this don’t get so much airtime, but they are there and they ask: who benefits from this rise? And, is the rise really happening? (see Biney 2013). Through personal correspondence, Patrick Bond (not a contributor to *Rogue Urbanism*) pointed out another kind of rise, namely the doubling of the number of public protests and increasing civil unrest on the continent since 1996, based on Agence France Presse information (see African Economic Outlook 2013). Extreme dispossession and the ruthless quest for economic growth - these things must be critically examined. Take it directly from the rap musician Diam Min Tekky (quoted in Mamdou Abdoul Diop’s riveting account on Mauritanian urban ‘creole’ culture):

“It’s like we don’t take part in Mauritania [...] No one benefits from their rights [...] Youth is oppressed [...] We the ‘sons of the city’ have no work [...] Free yourself from

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this government who's not going to help you [...] There's no refuge, there's no future [...] Understand we're angry" (p. 317-318).

The 'emergence' of African cities is being contested!

## ***Rogue Urbanism and its Possible Publics***

The book's intended audience is quite specific: academics and those interested in art, architecture or African social issues, the publisher clarified to me. The editors are nevertheless involved in another set of more accessible publications, such as the bi-annual, magazine-style *Cityscapes* and the *African Cities Reader* - "a journal-like platform where Africans tell their own stories, draw their own maps and represent their own spatial topographies", co-produced with the Pan-African collective *Chimurenga*, and freely available online. While both are aimed at a relatively small constituency, they are arguably more accessible than *Rogue Urbanism*; this is not a 'popular' book. A large number of the contributions can be found in *Social Dynamics*, an academic journal produced in association with the Centre for African Studies (Pieterse is on the editorial board). However, some of the most unique and worthwhile pieces, such as Tshikala Biaya's, Mamadou Abdoul Diop's and Ousmane Dembele's can only (or, at least, most easily) be found in this volume. These, incidentally, are three of the four contributions appearing only in French, without an English summary.

## **Engaged and Credible Accounts**

For those unfamiliar with African urban theory and its debates this book serves well as an index to grasp some of the many lines of thought and ways of accounting for the urban experience in the (mainly Sub-Saharan part of the) continent in recent years (with two exceptions, all the authors are alive). The initiative to shift the focus from policy is very welcome, as the relegation of lived experience to evidence supporting abstractions happens too often: everyday lives become so many 'cases' to clarify this or that point or are marginalised to 'boxes' in research reports to serve merely as illustrations. One of the challenges for the future will be the better integration of lived

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experience and subjectivity, and I for one would like to see class issues better represented. Many contributions in the book reconstruct and lay bare class issues, producing the kinds of credible, socially-engaged accounts we badly need more of.

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