RECLAIMING THE AFRICAN CITY: THE WORLD AND THE TOWNSHIP

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Introduction

The twenty-first century has been hailed as the century of the Southern African city. Southern African cities are bursting through their colonial bonds; stimulated as well as distorted by neo-liberal globalisation. They are not only bigger than colonial cities; it is said in the dominant literature, but qualitatively different. Colonial cities were the receptacles of regional labour flows. Contemporary cities are the receptacles of global ones. The African populations of colonial cities could never stabilise nor create local urban identities. But contemporary African cities are creating multiple urban cultures. By contrast to their regional predecessors they are simultaneously essentially global and intensely local.

It is the argument of this chapter, however, that the novelty of contemporary African cities is being over-stated. The regional model of the colonial city was always an intellectual construct rather than a reflection of reality. I shall argue that colonial cities, too, were both global and local and that the methods and questions of the new urban scholarship, if applied to them, would prove immensely fertile.

The Propositions of the Recent Literature on African Cities

One of the many collective studies now under way on the African city is the Nordic Research Programme on ‘Cities, Governance and Civil Society in Africa’. A chapter in its first volume is suggestively entitled “Between Ghetto and Globe”. Abdou Maliq Simone writes:

The globalisation of economic transactions, on the other hand, creates new urban arrangements, which compels cities to consider their prospects, complementary to those of urban entities in other countries, rather than securing their development within national space. Erstwhile
connections between physical [...] and social allegiances are less rooted in specific localities than spread across multiple territories, sectors and nations.¹

Simone concentrates on the ever-widening networks of informal and criminal activity within Africa itself and their connections with the global economy. He shows, for instance, how the Sufi brotherhoods in Dakar use “extensive networks to control much of the mercantile sector of the Sahel and more recently, the highly lucrative trade in consumables and electronics from Asia.”² He describes how the inner city of Johannesburg has “become a staging area for individuals from Francophone countries, Ethiopia, Somalia, Nigeria, Ghana and Kenya.”³ He brings his two national case studies together by remarking that “Soninke traders originally based in Dakar...[whom] I interviewed over ten years ago in Bangkok had built up substantial contacts in the port of Cape Town.”⁴

Simone concludes:

If cities are increasingly characterised by parallel realities, Johannesburg harbours chasms in-between them, which, in turn, are being shaped as conduits that in small but significant ways contribute to a re-spatialisation of intra-continental contact... [...] to form an integrated urban system [of Johannesburg] but an almost built-in ability to 'recognise' where the city is located within a global urban system and within Africa itself. Johannesburg as an urban system seems to act like an 'immigrant' in its 'own' continent.⁵

A different way of conceptualising South African cities in a global world is suggested by Robert Thornton in his “step towards a theory of the social edge.”⁶ Thornton suggests that South Africa is really not so much a nation as it is the hinterland of three city-states:

South Africa is a country stretched as thin as a sheet over three points of power and wealth. [They amount to city states, not just cities. They

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³ Ibid., p. 56.
⁴ Ibid., pp. 58–59.
⁵ Ibid., pp. 60–61.