



## De-Westernising Urban Theory

Armelle Choplin

### Reviewed:

Edensor, Tim and Jayne, Mark (eds.). 2012. *Urban Theory Beyond the West. A World of Cities*, London/New York: Routledge.

Myers, Garth A. 2011. *African Cities: Alternative Visions of Urban Theory and Practice*, London/New York: Zed Books Ltd.

Simone, AbdouMaliq. 2010. *City Life from Jakarta to Dakar. Movements at the Crossroads*, London/New York: Routledge.

*Three recent publications share a common aim: to move beyond the dichotomies of Western vs Third-World cities, developed vs developing cities, North vs South. By examining the case of African cities in particular, they provide the reader with a vision and understanding of other urban trajectories and offer valuable tools for contemplating the future of cities.*

While the quantity of literature and scientific meetings on the subject of Western cities continues to grow, the other cities of the world remain relatively poorly understood. While it is true that recent publications have highlighted the importance of the urban phenomenon in developing countries, they are all too often limited to major case studies such as Shanghai, Dubai, Mumbai, São Paulo and Johannesburg (Verdeil 2012). Other cities are rarely taken seriously in urban studies, as geographer Jennifer Robinson highlights in her work *Ordinary Cities* (2006). She argues for a “postcolonisation” of urban studies through a deconstruction of the category of “Third-World city”. In her view, this category perpetuates a “neo-colonialist” and capitalist way of thinking: it implies that there are Western cities on the one hand, around which urban theory was forged, and Third-World cities on the other, the degree of development of which can be measured only in terms of the former.

The authors of the three works reviewed here share Jennifer Robinson’s view and call for the “de-Westernisation” of urban theory. Geographers Tim Edensor and Mark Jayne (University of Manchester) and the contributors to their work encourage a shift of focus in this domain, as does the geographer Garth Myers (University of Kansas), who proposes an alternative urban standpoint based on a number of African cities. AbdouMaliq Simone, an urban planner and professor of sociology (Goldsmiths’ College, London), meanwhile, insists on the connections within and between Southern cities rather than their dependence on Northern cities.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Although the North–South dichotomy is contested, Simone does not shy away from it: he talks about the “Global South” and the “Global North” on a number of occasions.

## **Elsewhere in the extensive postcolonial urban world**

In *Urban Theory Beyond the West*, the authors – among the most in vogue in the English-speaking world (Melissa Butcher, AbdouMaliq Simone, Yasser Elsheshtawy, Filip de Boeck, etc.) – make the case for re-evaluating certain categories (order *vs* disorder, formal *vs* informal) and divisions (East *vs* West in Europe, North *vs* South, or divisions inherited from colonisation) that were developed in Europe and the United States and which are out of step with the reality of cities analysed elsewhere. In the process, this work takes the reader to the streets of Buenos Aires, Delhi, Santiago, Dubai, Managua, Kinshasa and other cities besides. The themes of public space, mobility, perceptions and state intervention highlight urban practices and trajectories that differ from those of Western cities.

Myers and Simone, by placing the focus more directly on African cities, also present other relationships with the city. Myers notes that African cities are rarely mentioned by the most widely read researchers in the field of urban studies, who often have only a vague knowledge of them. He points out that David Harvey, despite having influenced many researchers working on African cities, has little to say about Africa himself (p. 5). More generally, this lack of knowledge accounts for the propagation of simplistic ideas, some of which Myers and Simone seek to qualify in greater detail from a perspective rooted in the daily life of African city-dwellers. They challenge the conventional monographic approach, instead preferring to develop themes likely to be relevant to other cities around the world.

Myers's work is structured around five chapters, beginning with Lusaka and developing to incorporate other case studies: with each successive chapter, the city becomes postcolonial, informal, chaotic, scarred and cosmopolitan. The theme of cosmopolitanism directly reflects the thinking of Simone, who, between Jakarta and Dakar, shows the multiple and intense links between these cities in the process of globalisation. For Simone, the city is a place of intersections (chapters 3 and 5) between inhabitants in perpetual motion. Through examples taken from Phnom Penh, Abidjan and Kinshasa, or even specific streets in Johannesburg, he describes the different forms of "agency" (ability to take action), i.e. how poor people manage – by "making do", "doing together" or "doing differently" – to make the city "viable". The city becomes a place of negotiation, collaboration, and social forms that are as interesting as they are fleeting, such as piracy. Finally, Simone questions the existence of a "black urbanism" (chapter 6) resulting from various situations and tactics implemented throughout the long history of African populations the world over. In his view, certain "black" urban spaces are connected: he cites the examples of the neighbourhoods of Bangkok or Guangzhou frequented by African traders, the French *banlieues* inhabited by migrants from West Africa and the Caribbean, and slavery memorial sites in Ghana visited by African-American tourists. According to Simone, these places offer the people that converge there opportunities to settle, share information or do business.

## **The African city: a new postmodern icon?**

Although these works enable us to de-Westernise our way of thinking, they may nonetheless leave the reader with certain reservations. First, the analyses generally focus on capital cities, thus ignoring a significant part of the urban world. In addition, these analyses, supposedly rooted in everyday life, often remain theoretical or even philosophical. One might also criticise Simone's tendency to engage in long digressions, where African cities become mere objects overloaded with meaning and symbols of hyperfluidity, hypermobility and hyperconnectivity. The same could also be said of Myers, who adopts a similar approach to Simone, opening his work with a question – "What if the postmetropolis is Lusaka?" – and developing his arguments in a manner inspired by the work of Edward Soja (2000) in Los Angeles. Although this perspective is interesting, the reader might also find it somewhat problematic, in that it uses a theory developed for a Northern city, thus seemingly contradicting the stated goal of dispensing with Western urban theory.

Certain passages are occasionally reminiscent of the enthusiasm of “starchitect” Rem Koolhaas (2007) who described Lagos as being a city at the “forefront of a globalising modernity”. Such an approach can lead one to entertain certain romanticised visions, or even culturalist visions, in cases where the creativity of the “African Man” is praised. Presenting the Southern city as a work of art in the making gives the image of a completely depoliticised and dehistoricised space (Fourchard 2006). By marvelling at the resourcefulness of slum-dwellers, Koolhaas and others tend to reproduce the liberal discourse whereby the entrepreneurial is valued, and thus indirectly justify the abandonment of these populations by public authorities. In this regard, Koolhaas’s vision of the slums converges with the neoliberal thinking of Hernando de Soto (2006), who proposes to legalise the informal sector in order to transform the poor into micro-entrepreneurs – a theory that today guides many development projects – despite the fact that emphasising the ingenuity of the poor and their “resilience” leads to a depoliticisation of the debate on poverty by failing to question its causes (Ferguson 2006).

### **Transcending North–South boundaries and creating a dialogue between English- and French-speakers**

Although publications in English by intellectuals such as Achille Mbembe (Mbembe and Nuttall 2008) and Arjun Appadurai (2000), who help to raise awareness of Southern cities, are to be welcomed, these works should not, however, fall into the trap of being merely a pretext to talk about (post)modernity. To avoid such pitfalls, works must remain firmly rooted in the empirical. Additionally, from a French perspective, one might regret that the bibliographies of these three works, though extensive and invaluable, do not include more works by francophone researchers. Although the de-Westernisation of urban theory is an approach to be commended, the aim should not be to idealise anglophone scientific output to the point of creating a new hegemonic model of thought. It would be more stimulating to encourage dialogue between researchers from continental Europe, the United Kingdom and the United States, as well as – and, indeed, above all – from Southern countries.<sup>2</sup>

In any event, the parallel comparison of these three works shows the growing importance of incorporating Southern cities into more general debates on the urban world. In some respects, they are experiencing the same dynamics as – or even foreshadowing what might happen (for better or for worse) in – Western cities. Although metropolitanisation, privatisation, financialisation and exclusion processes are now common to every city on earth, they sometimes occur more suddenly and rapidly in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Privatisation effects can rapidly destroy already weak public services, and the populations in question do not have (or perhaps have already lost) either the strength or the means to resist these brutal changes. This is, at least, what is explained in *Theory from the South: Or, How Euro-America is Evolving Toward Africa* by anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff (2009), who are currently working in South Africa, their country of origin, after having spent part of their career in American academia. In their view, it is Europe and America that are tending to evolve according to processes observed in Africa, and not the other way round as is typically assumed. The same may also be true for cities...

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the research produced by the African Centre for Cities, in South Africa: [africancentreforcities.net](http://africancentreforcities.net).

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