



UNITED NATIONS
UNIVERSITY

UNU-WIDER

World Institute for Development
Economics Research

Working Paper No. 2010/42

Cityness and African Urban Development

Edgar Pieterse*

May 2010

Abstract

This paper explores one possible argument for how to respond to the epistemic troubles in the production of knowledge about urban Africa. The problem I have in mind is the preponderance of policy-oriented research on the development challenges and absences of African cities, as opposed to a more rounded theorization of urban life (urbanism), or cityness. The paper starts by recounting the challenge thrown forth by Jennifer Robinson and Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall to take African ‘cityness’ or ‘worldliness’ seriously in our engagement with the African city. This starting point leads on to an exploration of what cityness can mean, given the overdetermining effect of violence in African social life, in no small measure a consequence of the colonial era of terror and exploitation, but also now remade and re-embedded in enduring inequalities that mark everyday life. In my reading this issue looms so large in the contemporary city that I found it impossible, within the constraints of this essay, to explore in detail other dimensions of urban sociality. As a result I simply assert that in the absence of a deep philosophical understanding of the social, it is almost impossible to hold on to a liberal humanist moral project of the kind which frequently underpins policy prescriptions to improve the quality of life, livelihoods, governance and social fabric in African cities. Put differently, here I am interested to define what it could mean .../.

Keywords: African urbanism, everyday practices, social infrastructures, urban violence

JEL classification: R0, O10

Copyright © UNU-WIDER 2010

* African Centre for Cities, University of Cape Town, email: Edgar.Pieterse@uct.ac.za

This study has been prepared within the UNU-WIDER project Asian Development in an Urban World, directed by Jo Beall, Basudeb Guha-Khasnobis and Ravi Kanbur.

UNU-WIDER acknowledges the financial contribution to the conference by the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the continued support to the research programme by the governments of Denmark (Royal Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Finland (Ministry for Foreign Affairs), Sweden (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency—Sida) and the United Kingdom (Department for International Development).

ISSN 1798-7237

ISBN 978-92-9230-279-5

to explore the African urban without a humanist (philosophical) safety net, yet committed to an ethical project of ‘becoming’ and human flourishing. Thus, in the final instance I turn to some speculative reflections on what promise this line of argument may hold for a more policy-focused research agenda in a move to bring policy and philosophical debates into closer articulation.

The World Institute for Development Economics Research (WIDER) was established by the United Nations University (UNU) as its first research and training centre and started work in Helsinki, Finland in 1985. The Institute undertakes applied research and policy analysis on structural changes affecting the developing and transitional economies, provides a forum for the advocacy of policies leading to robust, equitable and environmentally sustainable growth, and promotes capacity strengthening and training in the field of economic and social policy making. Work is carried out by staff researchers and visiting scholars in Helsinki and through networks of collaborating scholars and institutions around the world.

www.wider.unu.edu

publications@wider.unu.edu

UNU World Institute for Development Economics Research (UNU-WIDER)
Katajanokanlaituri 6 B, 00160 Helsinki, Finland

Typescript prepared by Liisa Roponen at UNU-WIDER

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s). Publication does not imply endorsement by the Institute or the United Nations University, nor by the programme/project sponsors, of any of the views expressed.

Kinshasa is a city that not only by its size but by its very shape shifting nature resists objectification, colonization, synthesis and summary. It constantly remains out of focus. It is a city difficult to tame, and impossible to capture in one master narrative. It eludes any order which one imposes upon its realities. Its constant energy and movement refuse to be frozen in static images, in linear text. Its sum is always more than its parts (De Boeck and Plissart 2004: 8).

If one allows that quintessential postcolonial African city, Kinshasa, to stand in for a moment for all contemporary African cities, then it is clear that there are two problems with the state of urban knowledge in Africa (and the global south more generally). One, the continued insistence that there is a rational policy fix for the multitude of urban development crises—economic, social, environmental, infrastructural, and especially, political—is simply wrong. Two, the assumptions about the urban nature of African cities and towns are so paper-thin that the prospect of formulating appropriate policy-oriented knowledges about these places is rather faint. These two problems are obviously intertwined, as the first is arguably a product of the second. I would therefore argue that the time is long overdue to launch a corrective effort to rebalance the division of intellectual work between examining the nature of African urban life, i.e., African urbanism, and undertaking policy-oriented research that seeks to address the imperatives of developmentalism. More to the point, it seems that we have now passed the point where we can simply do decontextualized or disembodied policy analysis and prescription. This is not a new argument, but it is one that is seemingly struggling to gain traction, as evidenced by the fact that the bulk of urban research remains seemingly fixated on issues broadly in the domain of urban developmentalism.

In this paper I sketch an argument for how to respond to this skewed reality in the production of knowledge about urban Africa. I start off by recounting the challenge thrown out by Robinson (2002, 2006), Mbembe and Nuttall (2004) to take African ‘cityness’ or ‘worldliness’ seriously in our engagement with the African city. This leads on to an exploration of what this can mean, given the overdetermining effect of violence in African social life, in no small measure a consequence of the colonial era of terror and exploitation, but also now remade and re-embedded in enduring inequalities that mark everyday life. This issue looms so large in the contemporary city that, within the constraints of this paper, I found it impossible to explore in detail other dimensions of urban sociality. As a consequence I simply assert that in the absence of a deep philosophical understanding of the social, it is virtually impossible to hold on to a liberal humanist moral project of the kind which frequently underpins policy prescriptions to improve the quality of life, livelihoods, governance and social fabric in African cities. In other words, I am interested to define what it could mean to explore the African urban condition without a humanist safety net, yet committed to an ethical project of ‘becoming’ and human flourishing. In the final instance I turn to some speculative reflections on what promise this line of argument may hold for a more policy-focused research agenda.

1 Taking cityness seriously

The academic literature points in two opposing directions in the diagnosis of the urban revolution unfolding in the global south. On the one hand, radical political economists

such as Mike Davis (2006) paint a picture of utter devastation, with no end in sight as long as the global structural drivers of economic inequality are not addressed. In this work it is also suggested that the ‘moral’ and political capacity to live with extreme levels of poverty, physical oppression and social exclusion is basically limitless, which means that normative discourses appealing for more ‘democracy’ and stronger ‘political will’ are unlikely to achieve much. On the other hand, there is a vast policy literature that spells out a comprehensive package of governance, infrastructural, and managerial reforms that are up to the task of arresting and reversing the crises of urban poverty. *More Urban Less Poor* by Tannerfeldt and Ljung (2006) is a good example of this body of work in which prescriptions hinge on appropriate technology, institutional reform (substantive decentralization), capacity and, of course, political will. Significantly, both of these genres of urban analysis operate on the assumption that poverty, economic exploitation, political corruption, environmental degradation and so on are the primary issues to understand and ‘solve’ in these cities, even though they hold very different theoretical assumptions about the causes and prospects of these urban afflictions. In other words, preoccupations with developmental problems unify these theoretically divergent bodies of scholarship on cities in the global south.

Robinson (2002) suggests, in her thoughtful intervention in the *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* some years ago, that the most serious weakness in urban studies more broadly is the artificial and obsolete division of knowledge between cities in the west and the non-west. Robinson (2002: 531) argues that there is a ‘geographical division of urban studies between urban theory, broadly focused on the west, and development studies, focused on places that were once called “third world cities”’. Due to this deeply entrenched divide, theoretical research agendas tend to draw inspiration and example from urban dynamics and processes in Western cities that are deemed, implicitly, more developed, complex, dynamic and mature. Thus, urbanism is largely equated with complex social, natural and material interactions that unfold in western cities, whereas non-western cities are only good for describing absences and wanting, even if fuelled by a moral agenda to alleviate material deficiencies. These differences are played out and reinforced through the ascription and deployment of the notions of ‘modernity’ and ‘developmentalism’; the former relevant to the west, and the latter to the other. In a later elaboration of these ideas, Robinson substantiates her distinctions in the following way:

By urban modernity I mean the cultural experience of contemporary city life, and the associated cultural valorization and celebration of innovation and novelty. And by development I mean the ambition to improve life in cities, especially for the poorest, along certain policy-informed paths. A political investment in development, and the institutional promotion of development as a way of improving life in poor countries, following Escobar (1995), we can call, ‘developmentalism’. These two concepts are closely entwined. Together they work to limit both cultural imaginations of city life and the practices of city planning. For without a strong sense of the creativity of cities, of their ‘modernity’, the potential for imagining city futures is truncated (Robinson 2006: 4).

The upshot of this critique is that the very structure of the field of urban studies, divided in itself between theory and more applied domains, needs to be deconstructed and remade by rendering all cities equally harbingers of (diverse) modernities and in need of

transformation to achieve more socially just patterns of life and aspiration. This approach extends an earlier call by Parnell (1997: 903) to reconceptualize African urban spaces with reference to what she terms ‘conventional urban theory’, denoting the fields of theoretical enquiry that delineate (post)modern urbanism. Robinson’s work is a systematic attempt to unpack what Parnell’s challenge may mean in practice, and in the process, Robinson also fundamentally destabilizes the authority of existing theoretical frames because of their complicity in keeping the epistemological dualism alive. Clearly, the challenge is not simply to move onto the terrain of urban theory and work to enrich it with more and more layered accounts of particular modernities in all cities, even though this would be a great advance in itself, but rather to see how one can completely rethink and recast the pragmatic considerations of development policy on the back of a more textured appreciation of the urban and its probable and possible futures. But, before I move too quickly into the domain of policy, let us also consider the intervention by Mbembe and Nuttall to further a similar agenda to that of Robinson.

Mbembe and Nuttall (2004) propose a different way of rendering all cities equivalent as distinct but intertwined repositories of modernity, by pointing to the deterritorialized and circulatory nature of urban spaces in both material and imaginary senses. Consequently, they see the obsession with developmentalism as a symptom of a broader epistemic failure of imagination:

There have been limits to the capacity of the epistemological imagination to pose questions about how we know what we know and what that knowledge is grounded upon; to draw on multiple models of time so as to avoid one-way causal models; to open a space for broader comparative undertakings; and to account for the multiplicity of the pathways and trajectories of change. Where empirical work and local studies are carried out, generally they are poorly informed theoretically. As fresh questions emerge and new dramas take shape, the social sciences manifest a surprising lack of openness toward the humanities. Historical and political scholarship is not combined with fundamental philosophical inquiry, and this has led to a dramatic ‘thinning’ of ‘the social’. The latter is still understood as a matter of *order* and *contract* rather than as the locus of *experiment* and *artifice* (Mbembe and Nuttall 2004: 349).

According to Mbembe and Nuttall, taking on the challenge of writing the social back into our understanding of African ‘life forms’ requires an examination of everyday practices and imaginaries as they unfold at the nexus of multiple crossings that constitute urban spatiality. For, like most cities in the world, ‘the continent has been and still is a space of flows, of flux, of translocation, with multiple nexuses of entry and exit points. As evinced by numerous recent studies, the continent we have in mind exists only as a function of circulation and of circuits’ (Mbembe and Nuttall 2004: 351). This implies a spatiality that is predominantly shaped by the imperative, desire and tyranny of incessant mobility. Data on forced and voluntary migration across Africa indeed suggest that urban territories are as much nodal points in multiple circuits of movement of goods, services, ideas and people, as they are anchor points for livelihood practices that are more settled, more locally embedded and oriented (Adepoju 2004; Mamdani 2007; Mbembe and Nuttall 2004; UNFPA 2007). Nevertheless, it is also clear that the dynamics of economic globalization as it spills over into formal, informal and illicit economies, and especially their intersections, further reinforce and enhance the

imperative of mobility as a constitutive dimension of livelihood strategies of both the poor and middle classes in many African cities. Apart from the pragmatics of economic activity, the circulation of globalized symbolic registers that accompany religious identities and practices, the styling of the body through dress, and the expression of dietary and musical tastes all suggest that everyday social practices are profoundly shaped by globalized imaginaries (see for example De Boeck and Plissart 2004; Diouf 2003; Geschiere and Meyer 1998; Scheld 2007). Given the profound presence of these translocal senses of place in the routinized activities of the urban poor, it is clear that we have hardly begun to scratch the surface in understanding what non-localism or translocalism means in terms of identities, interiorities, social practices, networks, intimacies, etc. in psychological, sociological and philosophical senses. Surely, this supports Jenny Robinson's argument that a rounded conceptualization of cityness remains a big gap in our knowledge and understanding of African urban life, and thus, the absence of a fully fledged conception of Africa urbanisms.

An important aspect of Robinson's project is the idea that mainstream urban development policy frameworks are generally inappropriate because they fail to come to terms with the specificity of particular cities and places. By extension, she argues that once we turn our gaze to the unique particularity of specific places and the myriad of practices that reproduce relations, institutions, networks and generative energy in general, we will also notice more innovative options that can be activated to deal with the profound development challenges which exist. In other words, her work is an argument for policy innovation and creativity by taking seriously the embedded practices and sensibilities that underpin routine economic, social and cultural reproductions. But a first step is to hold in abeyance policy obsessions, in favour of efforts to produce a more patient, in-depth and nuanced account of the mobile, diverse and complex socialities that form and reform at the intersection of multiple identities, spaces, networks and imaginary registers. The rich, sometimes oblique, but always suggestive oeuvre of Simone (2004, 2005) is probably a good illustration of what such a research agenda translates into.

Phil Harrison (2006) is enamoured of this argument and draws inspiration from it to make a persuasive case for using postcolonial theory to forge a Southern-based theory to respond, specifically, to northern-dominated planning theory. Postcolonial theory, with its interest in how the colonial encounter violently repressed and sought to erase indigenous practices and associated knowledges, is a productive seam of analysis to mine for revelations of the inherent biases of Western rationality, and more importantly, the potential that resides in repressed and occluded knowledges that were never successfully done away with through the colonial encounter and the skewed modernist enterprise built on top of it (see Rakodi 2002). Through careful excavation, subjugated knowledges and subjectivities can be retrieved and revealed. There is amply opportunity for such excavations because the failure of the Western modernist adventure in much of the South exposes the cracks through which other practices, rationalities and world views can be glimpsed. This line of argument leads Harrison to suggest, echoing Mbembe and Nuttall (2004), Mignolo (2000), Robinson (2002) and Watson (2003), that we need to conceive multiple modernities, and by extension, multiple rationalities that underpin contemporary life. This move opens up a hopeful reading whereby Africa ceases to be a basket case of multiple pathologies by western modernist standards, and is viewed instead as an example of inventiveness.

Rather than seeing Africa as an incomplete or deteriorated example of modernity, we might focus on how Africa, and its many different parts, is—through the resourceful responses of its residents to conditions of vulnerability—in the process of becoming something new that is both part of and separate from western modernity. This new imaginary may provide a conceptual opening that would allow us to think about Africa in ways that are more hopeful and positive; that acknowledge the success of Africans in constructing productive lives at a micro-scale, and economies and societies at a macro-scale, that work despite major structural constraints (Harrison 2006: 323).

This hopeful agenda, aiming to turn what is conventionally regarded as evidence of underdevelopment or failed modernization into a sign of resilience, partial autonomy and inventiveness, is appealing. It is a theme that Robinson pushes strongly in her appeal for recognition and exploitation of the potential for urban policy that is less formulaic, and more infused with endogenous and creative approaches. This leads to a conceptual focus on the quotidian, mundane practices and routines that comprise the specificity and ordinariness of, actually, *all* cities (Amin and Graham 1997; Robinson 2002: 546). A serious engagement with the nature of the ordinary—cityness—is the only way in which one can get to a point where relevant knowledge can be generated about how to meet the challenges of cities.

There is unmistakably a hopeful leap being made in the important arguments of both Harrison and Robinson. Harrison suggests that the uniqueness of African modernities points to ways of living and institutional functioning that operates in terms of fundamentally different rationalities than what is normative in western rationality. These alternatives, by force of being different, being a source of resilience in the face of grave injustices, are surely a signal of hope and positivity. Robinson makes a similar suggestion in her argument that a deeper awareness of, and working with, the specificity of particular places and their own dynamics will lead to more creative, and one presumes, more effective, urban policy. I am deeply tempted to buy into this optimism because I share their postcolonial epistemological project, but I find myself yanked in a different direction by the spectre of terror in the African city.

2 The imponderability of routine terror

A recent report by Human Rights Watch (2007) catalogues how local politics in Nigerian cities have become hostage to an ostensible electoral system whereby all political parties, and especially their leaders, exercise their political agency through the brutal force of local gangs. It is estimated that around 11,000 Nigerians lost their lives in politically related violence between the 1999 and 2007 ‘elections’, and during the same period, three million were displaced (Human Rights Watch 2007: 19). Local political parties and politicians who establish and sponsor gangs that intimidate, abuse and attack political opponents and ordinary people, orchestrate this violence. The same gangs also commit electoral fraud during elections by stealing ballot boxes or loading them with fraudulent ballot papers. The various electoral commission reports suggest that the practice is endemic in both federal and local elections. The Human Rights Watch report (2007: 17) sums up the situation in these terms:

Political violence has become a central part of political competition across much of Nigeria and it takes many forms—from assassinations to armed clashes between gangs employed by rival politicians. This violence is most often carried out by gangs whose members are openly recruited and paid by politicians and party leaders to attack their sponsors' rivals, intimidate members of the public, rig elections, and protect their patrons from similar attacks. Alongside the gangs themselves, the individuals most responsible for the abuses they commit are politicians and party officials—from all parties—who sponsor and at times openly participate in acts of violence. The architects, sponsors, and perpetrators of this violence generally enjoy complete impunity because of both the powers of intimidation they wield and the tacit acceptance of their conduct by police and government officials.

This condition of orchestrated violence as an integral part of the contemporary political culture in Nigeria—the largest African ‘democracy’—must be considered against the backdrop of even more insidious terror that marks everyday life for the urban poor. Packer (2006) provides a powerful journalistic account of such terror in Lagos in a *New Yorker* report. What emerges from Packer’s insight into the micro-functioning of the city for the urban poor is a narrative of utter inconvenience, arbitrary violation of personal space and body, a world profoundly truncated around micro-negotiations to access extremely minimal spaces and opportunities in the city, always at a price. A price that is invariably gender-coded, which ensures that sexual abuse and predation are built into the fabric of everyday negotiations at the core of social and economic reproduction. In this account one is confronted by the tortuous drudgery of daily life, without functioning basic services but only sporadic drips of service provision accessible in small rations mediated by extortionists. This organization of daily reproductive functions is governed by a deeply embedded patronage system which has some elements of mutuality, but is by and large oppressive and exploitative; it is, furthermore, actively reproduced through very deeply rooted beliefs that such is the reality of life at the bottom of the pile. In Lagos this fate has a name, *Oga*, as powerfully captured here by Packer:

What looks like anarchic activity in Lagos is actually governed by a set of informal but ironclad rules. Although the vast majority of people in the city are small-time entrepreneurs, almost no one works for himself. Everyone occupies a place in an economic hierarchy and owes fealty, as well as cash, to the person above him—known as an *oga*, or master—who, in turn, provides help or protection. Every group of workers—even at the stolen-goods market in the Ijora district—has a union that amounts to an extortion racket. The teenager hawking sunglasses in traffic receives the merchandise from a wholesaler, to whom he turns over ninety per cent of his earnings; if he tries to cheat or cut out, his guarantor—an authority figure such as a relative or a man from his home town, known to the vender and the wholesaler alike—has to make up the loss, then hunt down his wayward charge. The patronage system helps the megacity absorb the continual influx of newcomers for whom the formal economy has no use. Wealth accrues not to the most imaginative or industrious but to those who rise up through the chain of patronage. It amounts to a

predatory system of obligation, set down in no laws, enforced by implied threat (Packer 2006: 70).

A very similar narrative of desperate survival comes through in the more personal account of Yohannes Edemariam (2007) as he travels back to Addis Ababa (from Toronto) to rediscover the city of his childhood memory in its contemporary incarnation. In this affecting account, we learn about how daily survival is practically achieved or attempted in a context where the overwhelming majority of the urban population is left largely to their own devices, and the exploitative systems of daily rule govern every facet of life in the slums of Addis. A theme that emerges very strongly in this piece is the degree to which sex work by girls and women becomes one of the primary livelihood practices, and how seemingly unavoidable and psychically corrosive this is. One of the characters we meet in Edemariam's essay is a young woman called Mekdes. She had fled to Addis when her relationship with her boyfriend turned violent, and in the process left her newborn child with her grandmother. In Addis, she knew no one, and ended up being inducted into the ways of the city by two newly acquired friends who had also ended up in Addis after fleeing from violent domestic relationships. Both of her new friends were sex workers and they inducted Mekdes into the trade. At some point in the conversation, as she laments her fate and especially her lack of options, she reflects:

Nobody can really deal with this kind of life ... Without knowing it, you start off at a certain okay place and slide downward, and when you find yourself in *this* place, where you are amazed you; it scares you. But you've reached the place, touched your feet to it, and so, because you have no choice, you just live (Edemariam 2007: 72).

For most poor youth in many cities of Africa, the city is a highly circumscribed funnel that delivers them to contexts within which they have very little option but to opt for a life of violence, excess and terror because of the profound deprivation that characterizes their households and neighbourhoods, and which coincides with the crumbling of earlier socialization frameworks. Winton (2004) reminds us that Galtung's seminal work on structural violence captures the way in which deprivation is itself a form of violence. In this reading,

... understandings of violence include psychological hurt and, in turn, alienation, repression and deprivation ... In urban contexts, it is *deprivation as inequality* that is the most important form of structural violence, and also that which relates most significantly to the emergence of everyday reactionary violence. Deprivation in this sense includes not only differences in income but also the lack of access to basic social services, the lack of universal state security protection, along with the severe corruption, inefficiency and brutality that generally hit the poor hardest, and the lack of social cohesion ... In situations of widespread and severe inequality, the urban poor are undervalued and marginalized, and their daily living conditions heighten the potential for the emergence of conflict, crime or violence (Winton 2004: 166-7).

If we accept this understanding, and consider the available data on urban poverty and multiple dimensions of deprivation and insecurity (Kessides 2006; Moreno and Warah

2006; Satterthwaite 2007; UN-Habitat 2006), the inescapable conclusion is that ‘the everyday’, i.e., mundane ordinariness, is profoundly sutured by structural and symbolic violence. This suggests to me that the focus on cityness, on the inventiveness of survivalist practices and the worldliness of African cities, is first and foremost a story about terror; a narrative about multiple forms and patterns of abuse; a rebus of pain.

3 Exploring cityness through terror

In his paper, ‘Terror and the city’, Ashraf Jamal (2003) provides one of the most provocative and troubling accounts of the condition of the South African city, soaked as it is in routinized violence not too dissimilar from the cases of Addis and Lagos referenced above. He opens his essay with an extract from a short story he had published the year before, which details at considerable length the gang rape of a street worker and leaves little (and too much) to the imagination. The narrator painstakingly retells every second of cruelty and violation, to the point where the pain and narcissistic implication of the act overwhelm the sensibility of the reader. The reader is overwhelmed precisely because the detailed explication of the acts of violation is much more than one would normally allow oneself to think about, or see reported in a newspaper account. It is also unnerving because one is forced to accept that such an imponderable level of brutalization is indeed well within the capacity of many people; a fact of (bare) life, and therefore suggestive of a broad-based debasement that is so cancerous as to be beyond the point of treatment or reversal. This moment of confrontation and acknowledgement is overwhelming because it forces one to admit that there is very little in our archive of knowledge, politics, institutional capability and, most importantly, collective sociality, that can stop, mitigate or eradicate this insidious force. Then all that remains is the question: What does it mean for our sense of self, our sense of a future, if all that we have is the poisonous outgrowth of unchecked and cumulative terror?

Jamal suggests that our epistemic challenge is to continuously arrive at this question, and through that painful recursive movement, learn to disabuse ourselves of a simply inappropriate and exhausted humanist morality. Jamal underscores this imperative vividly: ‘Terror, understood here, is not merely the sum of empirical acts of violence but a pervasive and variegated *psychic seam*. It is this seam that must be tapped if we are to understand why the city works yet does not work’ (Jamal 2003: 3). Thus, for Jamal the issue is not a choice between hope and despair, but rather the nurturing of an epistemic capacity to engage with the indeterminate zone of becoming that falls between these polarities. For,

... [it] is terror that challenges all claims to the substantive at the precise moment that it despairingly invokes the non-substantive. By insisting upon the prevailing despair that has gripped the South African imaginary—a despair that is flanked today by an unparalleled hope—I would not want to consecrate that despair in and for itself. Rather within and *between* despair and hope I would suggest that another way of living becomes possible. This other way is only possible once one accepts that the styling of self is coterminous with the styling of terror. For it is the epistemic and psychic reconfiguration of terror that will best enable us to embrace the

barbarism of the present moment. This embrace—at once intimate and violent—allows for both an implacable acceptance of a brute fate that emerges without pretext and reason as it allows for a limited conversion and transformation. This view lays no claim upon the future and neither does it measure itself against a preordained past. Rather it is a view that accepts the unresolved nature of the present moment as one that must be negatively questioned and apprehended. Only thereby will we free ourselves from the captivity of despair and hope (Jamal 2003: 23).

Thus, our task in re-describing the city, in the first instance, is not to look for an end to the horror, or to reach out for the moment of redemption; no, our most important imperative is to simply stare terror in the face without any anticipation that it will come to an emancipatory end. This is a tall order but one, I agree, that we cannot afford to elide because the violence that pumps energy through the spaces of daily survival and adaptation has a deep and expansive root network that it feeds off, as the work of Mamdani (2007) suggests.

In a recent paper, drawing on his wide-ranging work over the past two decades, Mamdani develops an argument to explain the constitutive nature of political violence in most parts of the African continent as religious and ethnic identities get mobilized in a process he defined as the ‘politicization of culture’. This argument is of relevance to our concern here because it suggests that armed conflict will remain a constitutive dimension of contemporary political life, especially as economic growth becomes ever more tied to extractive industries that feed the global commodities boom. The crux of Mamdani’s historically rich argument is that modern power in contemporary Africa is almost without exception premised on a distinction between civil and customary identities and the institutional implications that go along with such a distinction. This premise is a direct outgrowth of the colonial regime of governmentality which was essentially kept in play in the postcolonial era because the differential, customary regime, which subjugates in terms of a static notion of tradition, has been embedded in most contemporary political systems. He then traces how these distinctions create a fertile environment for new forms of inclusion and exclusion within national and sub-national territories; conditions that lead to almost all of the current and recent armed conflicts across the continent. This system of rule is particularly dangerous in a context where very large numbers of Africans are continuously on the move in search of better opportunities and to maintain their deterritorialized livelihood strategies. In other words, because of the inherited and maintained legacy of distinguishing between the indigenous and non-indigenous groups, lines of distinction are drawn that facilitate patron-based political cultures in which violent means of control and regulation are extensively routinized. This exposition points to the larger structural factors that shape the politics of African countries and cities, but that also reinforce and animate localized cultures of strong men and *ogas* who rely on violence to regulate and reproduce their patches in the city.

If we acknowledge these deep structural drivers of quotidian violence, then we need to heed Jamal’s challenge and forge a different set of registers and frameworks to work through their implications for what cityness really means in all of its contradictory fullness; and by extension, possibly disabuse ourselves of the optimism and positivity in the approaches of Robinson and Harrison.

At this point it is instructive to turn to the work of Diouf (2003) who has been at the forefront of a new scholarship that seeks to confront and theorize these violent tendencies, particularly in West Africa. Diouf proposes that the contemporary generation of youth in (West) Africa is socialized in a fundamentally different manner than before and at a time when youth are becoming the demographic majority in most countries (UNFPA 2007; World Bank 2007). Contemporary socialization occurs amongst the ruins of a nationalist project; a project that held on to a particular conception of young people and their 'proper' role in the post-independence phase of autonomy and development. Diouf (2003: 3-4) argues that '[in] its cultural and political versions, the nationalist project sought to do two things: to maintain the frontier between elders and juniors that characterized traditional African values, and to put young people at the centre of its plans for economic development and national liberation'. However, with the sustained economic crisis across much of Africa since the 1970s, the systematic drift towards a narrow agenda of resource-plundering by national elites, buffeted in turn by heightened geopolitical dynamics as a function of the cold war, the devastating effects of structural adjustment programmes, and ever deepening economic marginalization in a more and more integrative global economy, this naïve vision for young people turned sour. Diouf's project is to come to terms with the culturally inflected consequences of this ruined vision. The argument he mounts, I believe, provides us with some clues about how to fully acknowledge and move through the prevalence of urban terror as a generative current in the constitution of the everyday in many African cities. Diouf's core argument shines through brilliantly in the following abstract:

Excluded from the arenas of power, work, education, and leisure, young Africans construct places of socialization and new sociabilities whose function is to show their difference, either on the margins of society or at its heart, simultaneously as victims and active agents, and circulating in a geography that escapes the limits of the national territory. These transformations, which have been taking place for several years, affect both geography and history—especially history conceived as a chronology embracing age groups that are connected by obligations, rights, and duties. The ideological and cultural reorganization that flows from this posture of defiance takes place in the spaces deserted by political power and outside the communities and their dominant cultures, to the advantage of the margins and the unoccupied areas in which emptiness and indetermination are dominant: places that are ready to be filled, conquered, and named, and which favour the expression of rites and rituals intended to produce signs of identity. The function of these spaces, which escape the logics of public and administrative control, communitarian prescriptions, and state surveillance, is to serve as supports for acts that express within the public sphere, in a violent, artistic, or spiritual way, a desire for recognition and a presence (Diouf 2003: 5).

Key themes that jump out from the excerpt include the phenomenon of *exclusion*, which denotes the profound scale at which most African societies and cities simply fail the majority of urban inhabitants with the kinds of 'formal' opportunities that one has come to expect with the consolidation of modernity; yet, despite this unimaginable scale of social failure, youth display phenomenal agency by actively *constructing* their own places and social territories within which to forge different, morally ambiguous, bases

for identity construction. Furthermore, there is the evocative suggestion of *alternative itineraries* of bodily and imaginary circulation, which firmly place the subjectivities of youth in the deterritorialized domain of the translocal (Smith 2001); a theme that has of course been carefully mapped in the rich and occult-realist ethnographic elaborations of Simone (2005). Then there is that arresting image of ‘postures of defiance’, which intimate the confrontational and often deliberately offensive behaviours and tactics of youth as they put their bodies, sexual desires and offensive cultural proclivities on display, effectively daring mainstream society to respond, attempt an intervention, or even feign concern. Indeed, Diouf is probably right in claiming that the continuously reinvented rituals of transgression are ways of announcing presence and claiming symbolic space over a society and system that can do little but announce its impotence to deliver any semblance of a viable future.

In the remainder of his article, Diouf explores the new forms of association and sociality that young people enter into as they ‘make their way into the world’s market economy of desire and consumption’. In particular he focuses, somewhat counter-intuitively given the primary thrust of his argument, on religious associations, sport and cultural organizations, which in turn often lead to community-based cleansing campaigns and often also to various forms of micro-enterprise. It is beyond the scope of my current discussion to rehearse Diouf’s exploration of these practices as evidence of new bases of subjectivity, unmoored from the nation and patrimonial forms of community. The implication is that by getting a more in-depth understanding of these new forms of sociality, which operate in very different moral registers than what is often assumed in uncritical ‘community development’ and ‘livelihood’ policy models, we can perhaps get some purchase on aspects of cityness in African cities.

In the last section of the paper, Diouf introduces what I believe to be an even more fertile territory for exploration and theorization to get to the core of contemporary forms of cityness or urbanity: the body.

In most African societies, distress as well as success adhere to the body and are read on the body, especially among young people. Clothed, adorned with jewels, powdered, perfumed, and shaped, their bodies also bear the scars left by the struggle for survival or the longing for ‘a good life’ through licit or illicit activities such as prostitution, vagrancy, or delinquency. By living life on the margin, young people abolish the gap between adolescence and adulthood, and in some cases, between childhood and adolescence. Sex and violence become rites of passage and initiation which, like the new religious practices, produce a historicity of dissidence and dissent. By escaping the political and moral discourses that hemmed them in, and by moving into the cracks opened up by the crisis of the state and society, African youth has provoked an unprecedented moral and civic panic. Young people are now seen and constructed as a menace, as much because of their pleasures and leisure activities as because of the violence they can manifest. These two aspects have become indissociable from them, with their most evident expression in the AIDS epidemic that is ravaging the continent. To kill, to experience violence and pleasure, to move along the obscure paths of night and migration, of witchcraft, of the urban and rural undergrounds—all

these impulses produce new cultures, new sociabilities, and new meanings of pleasure, life, and death (Diouf 2003: 9-10).

What I draw from this framing is a fertile research agenda that can immediately open up a vast terrain for a more grounded, phonetic research programme that can potentially yield the microscopic details of everyday practices as imagined and experienced by the contemporary protagonists of the city who, through their abandonment by the nationalist development project, have been forced to carve out a distinctive, even if often monstrous, 'morality' of risk, chance, narcissistic pleasure, and also tenderness and intimacy (Clarke 2005; Flyvbjerg 2001; Law 2004). It is precisely because of the moral ambiguity embedded in such emergent socialities that we need a post-humanist philosophical framework to underpin such a research agenda. For, a fuller account of African cityness will only emerge when we cross-fertilize ethnographic texture, sociological patterning and topographies, spatial practices and registers and interpretive metaphors that stem from speculative philosophical enquiry and literary theory in the broad sense of the term.

4 In conclusion

The argument mounted here is in a formative stage and clearly incomplete. What has been left out for now, due to space constraints, is development of the theme of a post-humanist philosophical framing. It seems to me that this is the shared ethical agenda emerging from the postcolonial theoretical enterprise which seeks an engagement with development theory (Ahluwalia 2001; Sylvester 1999) on the one hand, and the relatively new focus on a trans-human theory of sociality arising from a stream of geographic theory intertwined with actor-network theory in sociology (Amin and Thrift 2002; Gandy 2005), on the other, and presents some fresh opportunities to theorize African urbanisms on their own terms and in a post-foundational manner.

As a final set of thoughts I want to touch on what this line of analysis may mean for urban development policy, because it is obviously impossible to establish a sequential research agenda whereby we first need to flesh out a more grounded and meaningful conceptualization of African cityness before we can move on to addressing the many and ever growing lists of policy challenges. The ambiguous and arguably uncontainable social explosion that is occurring in the wake of the new, highly mobile and often dangerous (*risqué*) practices of identity-making referenced above, presents a fundamental challenge to the entire raft of policy agendas premised on the possibility/desirability of stable, predictable modern rationality prevailing in African governments and societies. There can be little doubt that we need effective states, more consistent regulatory frameworks that can effect consequences, and resilient democratic institutions and forums within which just, fair and appropriate decisions can be taken to address the overwhelming needs associated with the material wellbeing of especially the urban poor (Pieterse 2008). However, what we now need to get our heads into is how one can bring such agendas into being, when politics and social life are irrevocably fragmented and reproduced by powerful vested interests that feed off dysfunction and low-intensity but routinized violence. In such contexts, it seems to me, the language of a policy fix—through institutional reform, capacity-building, political will and the like—feeds on itself precisely because it cannot contemplate, let alone understand, the profoundly new condition that is both beyond civility but also generative of a wide

range of inventive actions that must either be tapped or redirected, but without which a different urban future cannot be created. Let me make this point differently. Effective political and policy action cannot escape contamination by social-cultural forces it does not understand, and cannot ever condone, but which represent the only game in town for many poor and aspirational urbanites. If direct engagement on a different footing than the automatic resort to violent repression is to emerge, what kind of rationalizing discourse will it have to invoke?

Pressing down this path of painful, inherently irresolvable enquiry one invariably runs into brick walls. This brings me back full circle to the imperative of an unflinching engagement with the brutal, dynamic, fast-paced, generative, mobile, iconographic, novel and divergent practices that fill the space between stunted formal economies, indifferent states and elites, and splintering social life. The key is to enter this treacherous zone in the full knowledge that it will lead to philosophical and psychic heartache, but is an unavoidable journey if we are serious about engaging African futures and prospects on its own terms.

References

- Adepoju, A. (2004). *Changing configurations of migration in Africa*. Available at: www.migrationinformation.org/feature/display.cfm?ID=251. Accessed 19 June 2008.
- Ahluwalia, P. (2001). *Politics and Post-Colonial Theory. African Inflections*. London: Routledge.
- Amin, A., and S. Graham (1997). 'The Ordinary City'. *Transactions of the Royal British Geographic Society*, 22 (4): 411-29.
- Amin, A., and N. Thrift (2002). *Cities. Reimagining the Urban*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Clarke, A. (2005). *Situational Analysis: Grounded Theory after the Postmodern Turn*. New York: Sage.
- Davis, M. (2006). *Planet of Slums*. London: Verso.
- De Boeck, P., and M. Plissart (2004). *Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City*. Brussels: Ludion.
- Diouf, M. (2003). 'Engaging Postcolonial Cultures: African Youth and Public Space'. *African Studies Review*, 46 (1): 1-12.
- Edemariam, Y. (2007). 'From an Ancient Cloud: Getting by in Ethiopia's Slums'. *Harper's Magazine*, May, 67-75.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2001). *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Count Again*. London: Sage.
- Gandy, M. (2005). 'Cyborg Urbanization: Complexity and Monstrosity in the Contemporary City'. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 29 (1): 26-49.
- Geschiere, P., and B. Meyer (1998). 'Globalization and Identity: Dialectics of Flow and Closure'. *Development and Change*, 29 (4): 601-15.

- Harrison, P. (2006). 'On the Edge of Reason: Planning and Urban Futures in Africa'. *Urban Studies*, 43 (2): 319-35.
- Human Rights Watch (2007). 'Criminal Politics: Violence, "Godfathers" and Corruption in Nigeria'. *Human Rights Watch*, 19 (16A): 1-120.
- Jamal, A. (2003). 'Terror and the City'. Paper prepared for a symposium jointly conceived by the Isandla Institute and the Open University's Geography Department, London, 1-3 October.
- Kessides, C. (2006). *The Urban Transition in Sub-Saharan Africa: Implications for Economic Growth and Poverty Reduction*. Washington, DC: Cities Alliance.
- Law, J. (2004). *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research*. London: Routledge.
- Mamdani, M. (2007). 'Political Violence and State Formation in Post-Colonial Africa'. International Development Centre Working Paper Series No. 1. Milton Keynes: Open University.
- Mbembe, A., and S. Nuttall (2004). 'Writing the World from an African Metropolis'. *Public Culture*, 16 (3): 347-72.
- Mignolo, W. (2000). *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Moreno, E. L., and R. Warah (2006). 'Urban and Slum Trends in the 21st Century'. *UN Chronicle* Online Edition, 2. Available at: www.un.org/Pubs/chronicle/2006/issue2/0206p24.htm. Accessed 19 November 2007.
- Packer, G. (2006). 'The Megacity: Decoding the Chaos of Lagos'. *The New Yorker*, November, 62-75.
- Parnell, S. (1997). 'South African Cities: Perspectives from the Ivory Tower of Urban Studies'. *Urban Studies*, 34 (5-6): 891-906.
- Pieterse, E. (2008). *City Futures: Confronting the Crisis of Urban Development*. London: Zed Books.
- Rakodi, C. (2002). 'Order and Disorder in African Cities: Governance, Politics, and Urban Land Development Processes'. In O. Enwezor, C. Basualdo, U. M. Bauer, S. Ghez, S. Maharaj, M. Nash and O. Zaya (eds), *Under Siege: Four African Cities. Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Lagos*. Dokumenta 11_Platform4. Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz.
- Robinson, J. (2002). 'Global and World Cities: A View from off the Map'. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 26 (3), 531-54.
- Robinson, J. (2006). *Ordinary Cities: Between Modernity and Development*. London: Routledge.
- Satterthwaite, D. (2007). 'The Transition to a Predominantly Urban World and Its Underpinnings'. Human Settlements Discussion Paper. Theme: Urban Change. No. 4. London: International Institute for Environment and Development.
- Scheld, S. (2007). 'Youth Cosmopolitanism: Clothing, the City and Globalization in Dakar'. *City and Society*, 19 (2): 232-53.

- Simone, A. (2004). *For the City Yet to Come: Changing African Life in Four Cities*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Simone, A. (2005). 'Urban Circulation and the Everyday Politics of African Urban Youth: The Case of Douala, Cameroon'. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 29 (3): 516-32.
- Smith, M. P. (2001). *Transnational Urbanism: Locating Globalization*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Sylvester, C. (1999). 'Development Studies and Postcolonial Studies: Disparate Tales of the "Third World" '. *Third World Quarterly*, 20 (4): 703-22.
- Tannerfeldt, G., and P. Ljung (2006). *More Urban Less Poor: An Introduction to Urban Development and Management*. London: Earthscan.
- UN-HABITAT (United Nations Human Settlements Programme) (2006). *State of the World's Cities 2006/7. The Millennium Development Goals and Urban Sustainability*. London: Earthscan.
- UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund) (2007). *State of the World Population 2007*. New York: United Nations Population Fund.
- Watson, V. (2003). 'Conflicting Rationalities: Implications for Planning Theory and Ethics'. *Planning Theory and Practice*, 4 (4): 395-407.
- Winton, A. (2004). 'Urban Violence: A Guide to the Literature'. *Environment and Urbanization*, 16 (2): 165-84.
- World Bank (2007). *World Development Report 2007: Development and the Next Generation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.