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Is a Normative Description of the Form of African Cities Possible?

Sometime in the last few years a baby was born in Malawi, a rural worker moved Mexico City or former small town in China was upgraded to a city and a tipping point was reached. The world became more then one half urban. As such, it is unsurprising that urbanism, understood as the study, design, and planning of cities, is taking on a central place in the discourse of social theory. However, the developing world in general, and Sub-Saharan Africa in particular, have not received the level of attention of the developed urban world. Although, to some extent, this lack of attention can be blamed on anti-urban biases in development agencies and donor nations, a significant issue in the study of urbanization in the developing world is to what extent the cities of the developing world can be described in normative terms. In this essay, I will examine the usefulness of normative theories of the form of cities in describing and explaining African urbanization.

Before we can examine African cities in this context, we must first begin by examining the discourse of normative city development in general. For Marx, urbanization was best described through modes of production. He suggested there were four "phases" through which all urbanization occurred: the Asiatic, Ancient, Feudal and Capitalist Modes. These stages can further be described as the "unity of the town and city," "the ruralization of the city," "antagonism between town and country," and "the urbanization of the country" (Southall 1998). By defining urbanization in these terms, Marx suggests a historical movement from the earliest "phases," which are then, of course, assumed to be somehow "less civilized" to later ones. In this construct, it is appealing to attempt to place the world's cities into different categories based upon their presumed level of advancement to the Capitalist Mode of production. We begin to see here how problematic theories of urban development can be in describing areas of the world that are considered "less developed" by the West. Within this framework, there is only room for one historical trajectory for urbanization to follow. Any place that refuses to follow it falls outside of normative framework of urban development.

Of course, Marx's theory, not unlike other, more modern, theories of urban development, such as Saskia Sassen's Global Cities theory, is extremely focused on economics as a defining characteristic of urbanization (Robinson 2006). Kevin Lynch, in an unpublished paper, suggested that a normative theory of the *form* of cities is possible (Lynch Draft). Indeed, Lynch suggested that the physical form of the city was a better reflection of the social fabric of urban spaces then is the economic form of the city. This is in line with Henri Lefebvre's theories of the social production of space, to which I will return later (Cornwall

2004, Lefebvre 1991). Within this Lynchian framework, there are three normative models for city form: the Cosmic, Machine and Dynamic models.

In the cosmic model, cities arose for religious and political reasons. Indeed, the very form of the city is a reflection of cosmological insights. As in the cases of the ancient Khmer City of Angkor Thom or the Aztec capital of Teotihuacán, the layout and design of urban space is an expression of religious and political power derived from astronomical sources. In Africa, there are numerous examples from the Congo, the Ashanti Empire and in Egypt. Like all three of these frameworks, there is also a desire to place certain types of city building within certain time periods. This can be misleading. Although the most "classic" examples of the Cosmic model are capitals of long forgotten empires, it is interesting to note that almost all modern capitals are also designed in this way, not necessarily based on the stars, but to reflect certain hierarchies of power, whether it be religious, authorization or democratic. As we reflect upon the African city, we will see that cities designed during the colonial period generally reflect a very stark hierarchy of place (Myers 2003).

The second normative framework, the Machine model, can also be thought of as the modernist model. In this conceptualization, the city is not a reflection some cosmic truth, but rather an expression of rational thought. It is literally a "machine for living" (LeCorbuisier 1987). Like a machine, the city is tailored to deliver services, provide for the needs of inhabitants and facilitate economic transactions. The two "classical" models of type of city are Brasilia and Chandigarh. Like the Cosmic model, Machine cities are usually laid out on a grid. Although, in reality, a hierarchy of power within the urban space usually emerges, in theory, Machine cities should be equitable. All spaces should be equal. Indeed, many of the earliest Machine cities, such as Philadelphia and Savannah, had this as an explicit goal. All space was subdivided equally and every citizen receives an equal share. This can be considered an physical expression of the equal rights of equal citizenship (Blockmans 2003). Some, as in the case of Savannah, also create an explicit link between urban and rural citizenship. Within Africa, the best examples of this type are the new national capitals designed in the wake of the independence era, such as Lilongwe.

The Dynamic model (or what could also be called the Organic model) is often defined by homeostasis. It is, in fact, the least "urban" of the three models. Best described by Ebenezer Howard's Garden Cities, this model rose in response to the rapid urbanization that took place during the nineteenth century (although most of its protagonists would probably claim a basis in the mediaeval European cityscape). It is imagined as a city with a definite boundary, both physical and demographic. Once a boundary is reached, a new city should be created, rather then allowing the current one to expand. City builders of this model often show a fascination with rural landscapes, regionalism and biology. The physical form of the city is often defined by "curviness," rejecting both the hierarchy of the Cosmic model and the equality of the Machine through a supposedly more "natural" form.

Since this model mostly addresses a utopian, idealized city, few pure examples exist in the world. Yet, these theories have been remarkably resilient, informing the design of suburban settings around the world. As an idea with roots in England, it is unsurprising that most cities of this type within Africa are within former British colonies. Indeed, some of the first "garden cities" ever built were in Kenya and Tanzania.

Most important to this discussion is that we do, in fact, have a normative framework for discussing urban form. Since cities are, by nature, entities that change over time, many, if not all, cities will display characteristics of all three models. As a short example, Beijing was originally designed in a rigid hierarchy using both Chinese philosophy and cosmological layouts. Today, highways cut through the original city in an attempt to "mechanized" the city, while bucolic upper-class suburban cul-de-sacs twist around the outside of the city. From the perspective of African urbanization (and perhaps urbanization in the developing world in general) is the failure of normative theories of city form to account for the location and form of informal settlements. Within the Lynchian framework, there is little space for the autoconstructed city. This is perhaps unsurprising, considering that the monster slums of today were still only developing as he was theorizing in the 50's through the 70's. Perhaps the greatest need within this theoretical framework is the ability to conceptualize the form of the informal city.

Of utmost importance to our discussion is the understanding of the way that space is produced (Cornwall 2004, Lefebvre 1991). For this, we must turn to Henri Lefebvre's seminal book, *The Production of Space* (Lefebvre 1991). According to Lefebvre, there can be a "concept of space corresponding to contemporary social conditions (Schmid 2008)." In this way, his concept must relate to both existing conditions, as well as the theoretical and philosophical conditions that govern the human race. Lefebvre suggests three dimensions to space: spatial practice, the representation of space, and spaces of representation.

Spatial practice "designates the material dimension of social activity and interaction" (Schmid 2008). It is the existing physical and social environment, the Lacanian reality (Žižek 2005). From the perspective of this study, we might understand spatial practice as the actual, existing physical environment: the built environment, topography and geology, climate and environment.

The representation of space is discursive and dialectic: "descriptions, definitions and… theories of space" along with "maps and plans, information in pictures and signs" all fall into this category (Schmid 2008). This is an extremely important issue within a post-colonial context. Since these representations are dialectic, it must be understood that different people may have different ideas of what space represents. From this perspective, the "failure" of African cities to fit into a normative western theory of urbanization may have more to do with the discourse of the post-colonial African social reality then with the actual failure of

African cities to be normative. In other words, the conceptual frameworks don't fail, western assumptions about Africa do.

Finally, the spaces of representation are the "symbolic dimension of space" (Schmid 2008).

> "This dimension of the production of space refers to the process of signification that links itself to a (material) symbol. The symbols of space could be taken from nature, such as trees or prominent topographical formations; or they could be artifacts, buildings, and monuments; they could also develop out of a combination of both, for example as 'landscapes' (Schmid 2008)."

Elsewhere, I have examined the extent to which this Lefebrian conception of the nature of space means that we can expect identities to be "territorialized" [1](Lockrem Forthcoming). One of the foremost questions that is raised within this framework is to what extent we can claim a unitary "African" identity to produce the social reality that, in turn, produces the space of African cities. In other words, we must address the degree to which "African" can be considered a reasonable category (as opposed to a kwaZulu city or a Nigerian city or even a Muslim, Animist or Christian city). The scale at which we can examine urbanism is a relevant and unanswered question. Indeed, the fact that we accept that there is an "African city" shows that to a certain extent the representation of those spaces that are classified as African have been produced through a social scientific discourse that begins a long way from Africa's shores in a way that is unrelated to the actual, existing spatial practice of the African city.

So then, what are the dominant views of the African city? Caroline Kihato writes "much of the literature on African cities depicts them as space that are in perpetual crisis, plagued by corruption, disease and poverty" (Kihato 2008) while many other sources tend to dismiss them as irrelevant (Robinson 2006, Gugler 2004). Both of these discourses can be read as western dialectics. Indeed, the idea that the cities in Africa are places of perpetual crisis is a discourse that seems to have much in common with some of the dominant racialized discourses of the American city (Davis 1998, Macek 2006). Steve Macek makes the point that there is often an *assumption* of disorder any time a group of non-whites congregate. This can be clearly shown by newspaper captions following Hurricane Katrina in which white people were said to be "gather supplies" while black people were "looting" despite the fact that the pictures sat only inches apart and had near identical content (Dyson 2007). Placed within this discourse, it is

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[1] This theory derives, but is separate, from the idea of "deterritorialization" put forth by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. In their argument, deterritorialization is an act of destruction perpetrated by an authoritarian state (i.e. the destruction of the physical representations of the Aztec Empire by their Spanish conquers). I argue that territorialization is a process that is constantly ongoing on multiple scales (global, national, local, ect) and that it is, in fact, one of the primary experiences of urbanism, not just something that occurs in times of great upheaval and not something that is always created in a top down way.

unsurprising that African cities are set apart within even academic discourse (which, of course, is dominated by western voices).

This focus on crisis (or at the very least "unruly" nature) of African Cities exists even in development literature. Carole Rakodi claims two roots to perceptions of chaos. The first is the experience of unchecked urbanization in the developed world; the second is fear of "volatile urban populations" (Rakodi 2002). One must ask under which of these heading race falls. Simone, on the other hand, suggests that a different discourse is needed in talking about African cities (Simone 2006). In suggestion the "pirate city" as a possible framework, Simone does two things. First, positively, he suggests the possibility of extracting the African city from the normative discourse and examining the dialectics that actually produce African space (a la Lefebvre). In other word, he suggests the possibility of studying African cities through the social facts that produce them. Yet, on the other side, by using the concept of piracy "considered as the act of taking things out of their normal or legitimate frameworks of circulation and use…" he essentially confirms the legitimacy of the frameworks that were so problematic in the first place (Simone 2006). It becomes a matter of trading agency for legitimacy. While I believe that Simone has framed it in this way in a tongue in cheek way (those who cheer pirates are usually those who think the rules are wrong in the first place), I would argue that a framework that provides both would be more appealing.

The second discourse about African cities is that they are irrelevant. As addressed earlier, this discourse stems largely from an over reliance on economic indicators as a measure of relevance (Robinson 2006, Gugler 2004). Indeed, the very fact that a very large number of people live in these cities should be enough to prove their relevance. Robinson points out:

> "My own home town, Durban, for example, is labeled a near-isolate according to these (Global Cities) criteria. Certainly it has practically no headquarters function within the national economy and it has few branches of major multinational accounting, management consulting and banking firms (although it has some). But this still misses the fact that this city of almost 3 million people is a major trading port of Africa and the second manufacturing city of a significant middle-income economy – clearly it is not an isolated place!" (Robinson 2006)

And just as clearly African cities cannot be disregarded in urban research.

Within this context, it becomes increasingly clear that normative descriptions for African cities may not hold up under examination. Of course, it also becomes increasingly clear that the normative descriptions of most of the world's cities do not entirely hold up. As Jennifer Robinson puts it, we don't have world cities. We have a world of ordinary cities. Indeed, it is the distinctiveness of African cities that fits them so clearly within the world of the urban. Just like any other city in the world, the cities of Africa are produced and reproduced as spaces,

representations and experiences from a multiplicity of sources. Indeed, the failure lies not with African cities for failing to meet our normative theoretical frameworks, but with our frameworks for failing to take in the potentiality of cities outside of economic and political consideration.

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