

## **AFRICAN CITIES: MATERIAL LIFE AND POST-COLONIALITY**

African cities have become a major topic of social science research, a dramatic reversal in a generation of the situation where African studies had long been dominated by rurally based intellectual constructs. Identity is notoriously a difficult topic on which to seize but clearly the urban maelstrom is the place where new identities are forged. The creative cultural vitality in these cities as well as the apparent absence of material infrastructure characteristic of classic urbanism poses a challenge to the apparent analytical alternatives.

One problem with this new urban-based literature is a tendency to generalise as though Africans were a generic term unique unto itself but also that one African city is interchangeable with the next. Once we agree with Jennifer Robinson that African cities are 'ordinary cities', we also need to consider the specific histories and particularities of individual cities in order to study them. A quick survey of a number of South African cities that I have studied alongside many others will make this more evident. It is true that a discourse of governance we can call neo-liberal is found everywhere but that doesn't mean the challenges it puts up and the resistance to it lead to identical results that negate all other politics and social phenomena. Similarly, there are plenty of urban horror stories to collect but it is in fact very distorting to see these burgeoning organisms through that prism alone.

One response has been the production of perspectives that can be grouped as post-modern or culturalist. These perspectives not only have observational power but are important in describing new forms of artistic expression, music, dress and religion. Yet it will also be argued that crucial and not unfamiliar categories of understanding contemporary life still need to be considered as well. Thus class, exploitation, family structure and economic realities raise basic questions which have to be asked too. How people are fed, how they make a living, what kind of institutions they need to access, are more than relevant.

A key insight comes from the dominance in Africa today of economies dependent on the sale of mineral and other commodities with only limited

numbers of direct employment opportunities but very considerable rentier incomes that filter through the state and the city, especially the centre or capital city. Structural adjustment policies have done little to develop Africa but they have created conditions in which these extractive activities can be performed and intensified once again by multi-national companies (not necessarily Western and no longer in a colonial integument) in a profitable manner in many countries in the continent. The city is where powerful influences from outside are refracted, reflected and recreated in local garb.

'Post-colonial' as Vivek Chibber writes, becomes very often an explanatory excuse to wipe out crucial categories of understanding because they are so-called Eurocentric. It is not that the phenomena in Africa one may be studying reflect some model, as he has put it, a very idealised one from capitalism in its early years in the West, but that the questions posed by Marx, Gramsci or for instance Weber, are still very interesting and relevant. The challenge is to find a way to relate rich new and distinctive histories to older analytical categories and place them in tension with one another in order to deepen understanding and bring it up to date.

*Bill Freund is Professor Emeritus of Economic History at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and Visiting Professor at the University of the Witwatersrand. He lives in Durban on the east coast of South Africa. He writes about urban and labour history in Africa as well as political economy. His books include The Making of Contemporary Africa, for which he is writing a third edition currently, The African City: A History and has co-edited The Durban Vortex: A South African City in Transition. He is also currently trying to write a developmental history of the 'old' South Africa 1910-90.*