
19. Mobile space-times and the rescaling of political community

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This chapter explores how people's fragmented social worlds, uncertainty, and mobility are shaping the future of politics and the analytical tools needed to assess them. Medieval city-states and more modern industrial urban centres once generated novel modes of citizenship and exclusion (Isin, 2002; Marcuse, 2011; Vigneswaran, 2013). These then became analytical and normative standards against which scholars continue to assess civic participation, membership, mobilisation, and justice. In short, cities gave rise to modern politics and political analysis. With most of the world's population already urbanised or making their way to cities soon, cities and large towns will also shape our collective political future. Yet many of today's cities are unlike those of the past, and the politics they are generating are likely to challenge long-standing ethical and epistemic metrics.

This chapter analytically foregrounds the urban sites and processes that will affect most people in the decades to come: cities in the global south. It focuses particularly on rapidly urbanising African cities, which grew from 27 million people in 1950 to 567 million in 2015 (OECD/SWAC, 2020, p. 14). Before 2050, almost 1.5 billion people will make at least part of their lives in African cities (OECD/SWAC, 2020, p. 14). Most of these people will live in urban spaces – cities and suburbs; high-rises and informal settlements – that have recently emerged or are undergoing dramatic transformation and churn. Even as these cities become more populous than ever, their socio-political and economic generative power remain poorly understood. Industries that shaped urban life and gave birth to broad forms of solidarity elsewhere are largely absent. Instead, urban residents face precarious employment and cities that often consume more than they produce. Political institutions, social services, and religious bodies with the potential to bind and border residents – as citizens, as minorities, as insiders and outsiders – exist but compete for loyalties and authority. These are contests whose outcomes remain uncertain. As mobility and urban growth continue, actors and interests may come and go. Or they may continue to consolidate as amalgams of ever-evolving modes of regulation operating at multiple spatial and temporal scales. Whatever the future holds, they are generating socialities, subjectivities, and forms of power and authority that will shape urban life in the decades ahead.

There are few reasons to expect the kind of solidarities and democratic demand-making that historically emerged from industrially driven urbanisation, pre-industrial city-states, and ancient imperial urban centres (Cooper, 2018; Isin, 2002; McNevin, 2022; Vigneswaran, 2013). Diasporas, multi-localism, and economic and institutional fragmentation make it unlikely that urban engagements consolidate into a singular public or civic space. Indeed, heterogeneity is likely to persist for generations. This will give rise to political normativities that conform poorly to existing ethical and epistemological frameworks. Instead, claims and mobilisation will operate simultaneously at multiple spatial and temporal scales. A resident who appears marginalised and mute in one city may be actively engaged in reshaping cities elsewhere.

Or waiting to do so. Demands on state actors will continue, but as states decreasingly act to regulate the production of space and meaning, formal citizenship may be supplanted by bonds with the private, religious, or informal. As Paller (2019), Bénit-Gbaffou and Oldfield (2014), and others demonstrate, these sometimes competing modalities can occur in close geographic proximity. Such neighbourhood politics may be shaped by specific settlement histories and associated bases and practices of political authority. Often these are bequests from colonial segregation and zoning, which often intentionally fostered differential inclusion and forms of citizenship (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 2014). Others result from strategies – or lack thereof – associated with post-colonial urban planning (Harrison & Croese, 2023). The primary research informing this chapter not only suggests these multiple political modalities exist within geographies, but also extend across both space and time.

Although intended as a conceptual inquiry rather than an empirical report, the chapter somewhat promiscuously draws on almost 20 years of research in small and medium-sized African cities and a more recent project in Accra (Ghana), Nairobi (Kenya), and Johannesburg (South Africa). It concentrates specifically on urban ‘gateways’ or ‘estuaries’ (see Biehl, 2020; Hofer & Kaufmann, 2023; Thomaz, 2022, 2024) – parts of the urban landscape where new arrivals from near and far (i.e., domestic and international migrants) interact with longer-term residents and those relocating from elsewhere in the city. The data referenced here are from interviews with approximately 1500 people across the three cities (just over 500 individuals in each city). This total was divided evenly across each city’s three pre-selected communities – foreign migrants, domestic migrants, and long-term residents. It is also informed by subsequent qualitative interviews.

The remaining text proceeds through three short movements. The first tracks the dynamics and dimensions of urbanisation in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Doing so highlights how economic and environmental insecurity are connected to uncertain forms of mobility and future-making poorly disciplined by the consolidating forces of church, state, or markets. It then leverages contemporary observations of political form and orientation to speculate on the future of citizenship, political subjectivity, and solidarity. The chapter ends with a brief commentary on the ethical and epistemic implications of these possible futures.

URBANISM AFOOT

The world is urbanising. In the coming decades, once modest cities will expand dramatically. The sources of growth are many and often indistinguishable: environmental change (i.e., flooding, desertification, rising temperatures) will render rural and coastal areas risky or unviable; rural conflict and violence will drive people to seek protection (while exposing them to distinctly urban insecurities) (Gizelis et al., 2021); and the spatial concentration of wealth and production in urban sites will attract people through their relative prosperity. Close to 80 per cent of the world’s GDP is produced in cities, and such wealth attracts people.¹ Already more than half (approximately 56 per cent) of the world’s population, or 4.4 billion inhabitants, spend the primary part of their lives in cities. By 2050, the size of the urban population is expected to double, with more than 70 per cent of the world’s population at least partially urbanised. These trends are markedly pronounced in the global south, where urban populations will likely top 1.34 billion by 2050. Even more so in Africa, which will likely host many of the world’s largest cities by 2100 (see Cheeseman, 2022; Goodfellow & Jackman, 2023).

The magnitude of new arrivals and mobile populations is already generating tremendous gateway zones and neighbourhoods. In these sites, people from myriad ethnicities, religions, and languages cross paths along their multiple trajectories. Rarely designed to serve new arrivals and mobile populations, they are areas with the kind of accessible, flexible housing and reconfigurable building stock necessary for new arrivals to gain a foothold in the city or stay long enough to pass through (see Meeus et al., 2019; Zack & Landau, 2022). These zones absorb and propel multiple movements of people as the cities transform around them. Sites on the urban edge rapidly transmute from swamps, fields, and forests to densely inhabited city spaces. Inner cities churn with populations on the move. The reclassification of urban areas often incorporates spaces still under ‘traditional’ authority while the practical extension of urban labour, housing, and service economies incorporate formally rural spaces into the urban fabric (see Angel et al., 2021; Roy, 2011).

Africa’s emerging conurbations offer relatively greater possibilities for income and services, yet these are possibilities amidst enormous precarity. While there are extended histories of urbanisation on the continent, most contemporary African cities were intended as sites of extraction or domination (Cobbinah, 2023; Freund, 2001). Designed for the comfort and ambitions of a small economic and political elite – foreign and domestic – and necessary workers, they were intended as centres to remotely control or manage a rural, often deeply ethnicised, population (see Green, 2020). With the population embedded or emplaced in rural areas, travel to the urban centres was often transgressive and risky. Africa’s cities were largely not designed for the populations now living there, and they have always offered tremendous barriers to economic and political inclusion for most residents (see, e.g., Kihato & Muyeba, 2015; Meagher et al., 2018). Apartheid South Africa presents an extreme in which citizens were made foreigners in their own cities, but the ethos of segregation and ruralisation extended across much of the continent (Crush & Riley, 2019). It continues to inform urban planning modalities that often marginalise and exclude new arrivals despite the rhetoric of inclusion and equity (Freund, 2001; Whitehouse, 2012; Yiftachel, 1998).

Decades of under-investment in urban infrastructure or overt anti-urbanisation policies have generated forms of ‘do it yourself’ urbanism. This bears features associated with neoliberalism, but the term implies the privatisation or dissolution of prior social safety and public services that rarely existed for most residents. Apart from public servants and select formal sector employees, there has rarely been the public infrastructure needed to reach, incorporate, or ‘capture’ the citizen’s imagination or actively shape their solidarities (see Bayart, 1993; Hyden, 1980). The results are that state policy and global-local regimes of regulation are often limited to geographically narrow sections of the cities or to new developments designed for those with resources to buy land and property or work in business or the formal sector (see Maclean & Esiebo, 2017).

Stone (1993) famously refers to urban regimes as relatively stable and coherent networks of public and private interconnected systems of employers, officials, labour, and other residents. African cities present ‘systems’ of order or regimes, but these are often labyrinthine and prone to relatively rapid reconfiguration and fragmentation (see Simone, 2017). There are supply chains of labour and political patronage, but with superfluity rife and states often relatively irrelevant, these networks are often fragile and fragmented. States – typically the centre of regime analysis – are themselves often chimerical from the perspective of urban residents. The ‘arrival’ and ‘migration’ infrastructures which structure mobility in other parts of the world also resonate poorly with the realities of African cities (see Hernández-Leon, 2012; Sorensen

& Hansen, 2012). People are moving across the continent and many employ smugglers to ease their way across borders. Yet to speak of infrastructure implies a level of intentionality, consciousness, and stability that is rarely evident. There are winners and losers. There are also rational incentives and responses. Rarely are there formal or stable regimes of complicity or compliance that extend beyond personal, often self-made networks (see, e.g., Hornberger, 2011). There is non-regulation, some strategic and some not. This is not chaos, but multiple systems of order that intersect, disconnect, and rub up against each other in ways both smooth and full of friction. These range across moral and material economies: corruption, patronage, family, and other, often gendered, cultural constructions. At times informal systems may link to state authorities through patronage networks or other systems of indirect rule (cf. Misago & Landau, 2023; Paller, 2019). However, this cannot be presumed and often regulation takes place in the distant shadow of the state where state capacity or strategic absence makes space for alternative structures and political rationalities.

Echoing Hyden's (1980) position on Africa's intransigent peasantry, many urbanites remain 'uncaptured': not fully beyond global capital or cultural flows but with a level of autonomy born of frail or disinterested states. With their enhanced agency, even political and economic elites often seek to evade the demands of urban regulation. As they increasingly vacate cities or move behind walls (see Caprotti et al., 2022; Goodfellow & Jackman, 2023; Herbert & Murray, 2015), they promote geographic and social distance from the less fortunate, public security apparatus, and participatory urban politics. Increasingly people – rich and poor – inhabit spaces beyond state regulation or where states are too weak (or frightened) to go. In some instances, they are intentionally erratic and unknowable to avoid accountability or risk (cf. Biehl, 2022; Damianos, 2023). The limited engagement of non-urban Africans in substantive policymaking or state-centred political mobilisation has direct implications for the nature of urban life. As Dyson (2009) suggests, the state-locus of political cosmologies cannot be presumed. In countries where states have historically been predatory, absent, or illegitimate – and options for local organisations and elusions exist – popular political imaginaries are even less likely to centre on reshaping public institutions. This has historically been the case across much of sub-Saharan Africa and will continue to be so. This does not mean they remain beyond politics. What is needed are tools to make sense of the politics they practice.

TRANSFORMING POLITICS AND SPACE

The materiality of cities – gritty, glamorous, violent, and vibrant – imbricates with socio-political spaces forged by fantasy, speculation, and aspirational imaginaries (cf. De Boeck, 2022). People *may* live longer in cities than in rural areas, their children *may* have better access to education, and *possibilities* exist for physical and economic security. Yet with institutional fragmentation, environmental precarity, and limited bases for social solidarity and mobilisation, faith in 'development' has foundered and incremental paths to progressive futures are few. Ambitions are often informed by individualised, gendered, and generational success narratives, but the means of achievement remains elusive. As people make lives across multiple sites – from where they come, live, and hope to go – they forge connections both material and moral. Circulations of messages, memories, and remittances accompany modifications in goals, values, and norms. There are liberatory aspects to these shifts even as profound dislocation and violence can accompany efforts at urban self-reinvention. Men and women

escape the expectations of watchful families, assuming public and private identities and living arrangements that they cannot readily take on when monitored in the communities from which they originate. From the gateways or urban estuaries in which these multiple pathways converge, constellations of peoples and sites interlinked within and across space and time begin to emerge (see Debele, 2020; Landau & Kihato, 2020; Worby, 2010). This is how cities emerge that are simultaneously cosmopolitan and heterogeneous, connected through tissues that prove more durable than many narratives about cities tend to convey.

Amidst this web of connection, individuals remake the spaces around them, generating novel forms of mobile urbanism and belonging. Collective, space-bound membership is possible, but to what end? Many African cities – or at least significant sections of them – have become cities of strangers with few clear pathways or incentives for local economic or political incorporation. With neither long-term employment nor publicly provided safety nets, people retain strong material and moral connections to ‘multiple elsewhere’ (Mbembe & Nuttall, 2004; see also Madhavan & Landau, 2011; Turner, 2015). Many localised attachments are only loosely structured by dominant social norms or a comprehensive vision for urban development (cf. Asher & Okoth, 2020). People cross urban boundaries to work, play, and pray side by side in multiple languages. They slide past each other, leaving light traces while fashioning loose bonds. Speaking scores of languages and following almost an equal number of religious denominations, they connect and disconnect with neighbours and kin across diasporas.

These emergent possibilities for social life require us to see the multiple rhythms of the city, lives made at once for the here and now and simultaneously for futures in spaces that may only ever be visited in landscapes of dreams and aspiration. Some of the people entering gateway zones long to return home after their working lives find the spaces and people to which they return unrecognisable. Others build diasporic futures with investments and families in places they may never reach (see Ferguson, 1999; Johnson-Hanks, 2022; Rast, 2012). People’s aspirations are often imbued with fantastic images of contemporary achievement: the wealth of Nollywood films, hip-hop videos, the millenarian and miraculous promise of Pentecostal preachers, or selfies from friends and relatives fabricating successes at odds with their material conditions (cf. Cazarin, 2018; Wilhelm-Solomon et al., 2017).

Whether liturgical or popular, informed by current affairs or historical and cultural bequests, imaginations include trajectories and markers of progress often closely associated with geographic mobility: a move to the city, a move across borders, a journey to Europe or America. Yet material circumstances, the increasing policing of borders between African states, and Europe’s lockdown of African migration, which fashions borders into barriers, make these journeys increasingly difficult and life-threatening (Freemantle & Landau, 2022). Many become stuck in place and time, unable to progress or reach the next milestone of success (Katz, 2004; Oldfield & Greyling, 2015; Ramakrishnan, 2014). Without such achievements, they cannot return ‘home’, but nor can they move forward, suspended in a state of what the anthropologist Alcinda Honwana (2014) calls ‘waithood’.

If nothing else, Africa’s urbanisation simultaneously centres and unsettles the margins. The processes underway ask scholars and activists to see these urban gateways as politically generative spaces, frequently contoured by sustained and varied forms of mobility. They are created, transformed, or maintained through interactions among the multiple ethnic, political, or religious groups within them but also through connections to allies, families, and interlocutors elsewhere that people on the margins draw in.

In these spaces, we begin to see a range of possible futures beneath a framing that is initially domestic but gives way to reveal broader forces at work. Urban gateways and estuaries are ultimately more than transitory spaces on the edges of power that contain and frustrate personal or collective trajectories. They may serve this role, but they are also sites of contestation, membership claiming, identity formation, and boundary production (see Hall, 2021). They are places where the political and institutional practices that define centre and periphery are taken up, adapted, recast, and reinvented. In these places, conceptual categories of insider and outsider are forged with, or without, reference to material or institutional opportunities and endowments. They are places where new margins are drawn, sometimes creating spaces of exclusion and incorporation within the periphery. As people retain orientations to sites elsewhere, what was a community's centre becomes the margin of another. They are also places where new solidarities are forged. They are places where people develop new practices to break down divisions, but also new practices to mark out and enforce divides. As people move, mix, and merge, the margins can become new loci of action and contestation. Economic and political fragmentation means multiple centres and margins, with each space potentially serving as both.²

As space-time compression, multi-localism, economic precarity, and political fragmentation continue apace, these urban spaces are decreasingly discrete sites on the edge of the 'real' economy and politics. They are instead locations where lives are made, in which people sell Chinese or Dutch fabrics or – tellingly – maps of the globe, on the side of the road that they carry with them on their cross-border journeys for resale. And for the almost billion people who will soon live in these cities, they are the new normal. They are spaces at once hyperlocal and immensely global. They are marginal yet also central, emerging as connected sites together through multiple circulations within material and moral economies. Increasingly, these constellations will define self, city, and our future politics.

RECONSIDERING DEMOCRATIC INCLUSION AND MOBILISATION

What will become of these connected islands of space-time that are forming across African cities and elsewhere in the world? Over time, this mobile urbanism may coalesce. The results might include more stable transformations of gendered and generational relations (cf. Dodson, 1998; Lubkemann, 2007; Massey, 1994) or ethnic groups hunkering down and forming enclaves; neighbourhood associations formed around spaces, debates, or themes; hometown associations (cf. Oldfield & Greyling, 2015). Yet there are few reasons to expect that these orders will soon consolidate. Strong incentives exist for mobility, translocalism, and disconnection with only limited options or benefits from local engagement. Translocal or oscillating lives, diasporic imaginaries, and deterritorialised politics may become the new normal. Yet there is not one African history, nor will there be one political future (cf. Dalberto et al., 2013). The future remains uncertain.

This points to the need for a broader epistemological and ethical realignment for both normative scholars seeking interventions to address marginalisation and inequality and others seeking to theorise emerging 21st-century politics. As Hoelscher et al. (2023, p. 2) note, 'most African countries are urbanizing without significant structural economic change, rendering many social scientific theories based on the experience of "early urbanizers" in Europe and North America of limited relevance in the African context'. Indeed, understanding politics

amidst the emerging agglomerations and exclusions demands new modes of reflecting and theorising divergent yet intersecting configurations of space-time.³ These reflections must move beyond the teleologies and normative ethics of modernism, Marxism, and other liberatory analytical modes. There is a need to develop an understanding of political authority and institutional configurations that reflect people's fragmented, uncertain, and mobile futures: modes of engaging in constellations of connected and disconnected spaces and regulatory systems and the people shaping them.

When considering the implications for democratic mobilisation and solidarity, it is worth reflecting explicitly on how scholars epistemically and ethically mobilise ideas of inclusion and participation. At a normative level, scholars often align with the United Nations' eleventh Sustainable Development Goal's (SDG) call to build 'inclusive cities', or with appeals for residents' 'rights to the city'.⁴ Even when implicit, norms of representation, visibility, and local investment often serve as means of evaluating the effectiveness, structure, and morality of urban diversity management. For some advocates, this is largely about economics: access to work, basic services, and possibilities for upward mobility. For others, it is about political inclusion: consultation and the ability of all urban residents to shape the municipal policies affecting them. The understanding of inclusion informing most policy approaches – from Urban Vision plans to the SDGs – draws inspiration from progressive politics forged in industrial cities in North America and (to some extent) Latin America. Lefebvre's famous demand that workers have rights to the city is premised on their contributions to building its infrastructure and wealth (see Purcell, 2016). Moreover, it presumes an ideal of urban ownership, if not of land, than of the city's future. Lefebvre's ethos has gone on to inform the drafters of the SDGs and Habitat III. These and myriad other proposals and proclamations call for urban inclusion premised on ideals of localised belonging; of representation and visibility; of recognition and status where you are. They work from an ethics of inclusion that presumes people wish to remain in the city to the exclusion of other places. Yet models of place bound by incorporation, assimilation, or integration are no longer adequate as either an empirical or ethical guide (see Bakewell & Landau, 2018). As people build translocal lives – often governed by processes beyond formal institutions – local, state, or social recognition and ownership may cease to be the goal. For some, situatedness may be something they actively avoid.

The translocalism and informality described above raise questions about the desirability of inclusion, which is so often a metric for 'urban success'. Instead, political participation and inclusion – like the economic and social lives described above – are often temporally and spatially dispersed and multi-modal. People shun local engagement while supporting political parties and processes elsewhere. They attend churches, go to community meetings, or help repatriate corpses to maintain their status in villages they otherwise visit only now and then, while they actively resist forging binding connections with their urban neighbours and institutions. Apart from Pentecostal churches, which often encourage members to distance themselves from non-parishioners, residents of the continent's urban gateway zones belong to few associations; find little value in attending government meetings; and express remarkably low levels of trust in 'locals'. Many are deeply suspicious of people from their own countries or communities of origin, fearing that close connections with them will result in additional demands or serve a surveillance function, potentially embarrassing them to people back home (Cazarin, 2018; Kankonde 2010; Landau & Freemantle, 2022).

This helps explain why across many of the continent's cities there are not only relatively low levels of civic engagement but also faint or partial desire for it. There are those who

retain normative and practical commitments to classical forms of democratic engagement, yet these are often in the minority. There are multiple reasons for this orientation, but the desire for engagement with formal political structures remains thin across survey respondents. In the Accra survey, 75 per cent of people who were born in the city said they would *not* attend an official local planning meeting if given the opportunity. That figure was close to 80 per cent for domestic migrants and even higher for those from other countries. Those in Nairobi and Johannesburg were slightly more inclined to participate, but only just. In the meantime, similar percentages of people report interest in attending a political rally, party meeting, or community group. While voting remains high on people's agenda, other forms of inclusion and local representation do not.

Rather than an analysis measuring 'inclusion' or 'participation' in localised or dichotomous terms, this too must be respatialised. After all, what looks like exclusion and political marginalisation in one neighbourhood may be part of a strategy for status and influence elsewhere. Workers in Johannesburg, for example, may continue to live in a backyard shack or single, rented room for decades. While they register in urban data collection as indigent, their urban self-denial allows them to buy land, cattle, and status within the community whose respect they desire. Hiding urban wealth is also a way to shelter one from the redistributive demands of kin and colleagues, allowing individuals or families to accumulate the resources required for onward movement. Recognising these constellations of belonging and inclusion means explicitly recognising that people seek varied forms of recognition and membership in multiple places. This may create alternative urban cartographies with disconnections between neighbours and municipal institutions but vibrant conduits between a Nairobi street corner, a village in Somalia, and a mosque in Minnesota (see Strelau & Tsalapatanis, 2022). It may connect a small shop in Johannesburg to a political party in Kinshasa or a farmer's cooperative or chamber of commerce in Mozambique. As much as supply chains and commuting corridors, these forms of participation shape urban policy outcomes and interactions.

Pentecostalism, one of Africa's most muscular social forces, is perhaps the greatest driver of belonging across corridors and constellations (see Landau, 2014; Wilhelm-Solomon et al., 2016). While relatively few people in our three-city sample attended public meetings or party events, almost all were part of (and contributed money to) religious organisations. Large numbers of the churches build on their strong connections to institutions in Nigeria, Ghana, Congo, and the United States, and many of them are increasingly political. However, their preaching is often extraterritorial, overtly denying the legitimacy of state laws while speaking of the dangers of local connections. Both the state and the sullied are enemies of salvation. If our concern is with the actors shaping urban space and governance, surely these are among the most significant (see Maclean & Esiebo, 2017). Indeed, as they pray, parishioners draw on variegated liturgical language to make demands on cities while locating themselves in an ephemeral, superior, and unrooted condition in which they can escape localised social and political obligations.

The forms of participation (and self-exclusion) we see emerging across many African cities are connected to urban residents' multiple and often translocal economic, social, and political aspirations. Rather than seeking strong, localised relations and influence, some – by choice or necessity – orient their participation elsewhere. This is not to justify the active exclusion of populations by political or economic elites, but it raises important analytical questions for policy analysis. Accepting that urban political participation and local recognition are not universal normative goals (and may counter emic understandings of urban 'success') frees analysts

to treat them as both a subject for empirical inquiry and a potentially powerful heuristic. As scholars seek means of comparing urbanism (Robinson, 2016), finding ways of comparing the nature and geographic scale of participation becomes a way of reading the city. Doing this effectively means opening the form and scale of participatory forms and recognising the role ‘stateness’ and translocality play in shaping urban space. As such, observers will benefit from considering categories or continua of participation that can provide more nuance and comparative leverage. Seeking a means of assessing participation at multiple geographic scales, individual or collective projects, and residential environments holds the promise of a broader comparative account of urban policymaking.

If understanding urban politics is about how institutions hinder or encourage participation, there is a need for considerable agnosticism. This need not mean abandoning moral commitments to equity and fairness across communities and continents. However, analysis that reads cities as deviations from a moral principle or valorises certain forms of engagement (cf. Holston, 2019) risks overlooking or mislabelling generative forms of engagement. Instead of judging them, it may well be more productive to use the presence and prevalence of participatory forms (including non-local and translocal engagement) as means of characterising and comparing cities.

A comparative, spatialised, and temporalised perspective on politics allows scholars to consider forms of participation and, importantly, the desire and geographic basis for it as means to understand political and policy processes. In this regard, formal meetings – consultations with political parties, policing forums, participatory budgeting consultations, and the like – become just one way in which citizenship is expressed and participation practiced. These must be considered alongside substantive interactions with non-state actors and with leaders (formal and informal) outside the city’s geographic boundaries. This furthers others’ observations about multi-level policymaking, but in ways that avoid centring state policy as the ‘dependent variable’. It extends the efforts to ‘see like a city’ which usefully positions urban government within a diverse and multi-local ecosystem. It goes a step further in asking scholars to see politics as an outcome of processes that may have little to do with direct city government action or are taking shape precisely because city officials are deliberately absent, administratively under-resourced, or effectively kept away from neighbourhoods and policies through the actions of developers, gangsters, and others. Most importantly, by decentring the focus on local authorities, it makes space for the multiple systems of political and social authority that intersect (but are not contained) within cities or urban boundaries. All are part of managing diversity when viewed within an urban frame.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: TRANSLOCALITY, INFORMALITY, AND MOBILISATION

This chapter calls for more expansive ways of assessing urban politics. It does so in at least three ways.

First, while recognising that scholars of urban politics often analytically include non-state actors (e.g., business, civil society organisations), they unduly privilege state institutions as the locus of advocacy and the ultimate standard-bearer of urban policy. While states remain important actors, the range of alternative modes of local and translocal regulation at work in African cities often means states are only of secondary, practical concern. Even if cities and

ports are among the few sites where sub-Saharan states have exercised centralised control (see Herbst, 2000; Leonard & Straus, 2003), they are often amalgams of regulatory systems working at different spatial scales and moral registers: what Holston and Appadurai (1996) refer to as honeycombs of jurisdiction and regulation. Like cities elsewhere in the global south, urban populations' demographic dynamism often outstrips the capacity or interests of state regulators (see Auerbach et al., 2018; Bank, 2011; Buechler, 2008; Caldeira, 2017; Harms, 2016; Ren, 2018).

Second, that understanding urban governance and policy – and the broader possibilities of politics – requires a distinctly translocal and transtemporal perspective that not only considers global supply chains and international institutions (public and private), but also often less visible material and moral circuits of exchange. As people increasingly move into and through primary and secondary urban centres, they may spend most of their time in a city while their political and moral engagements remain in sites well beyond the limits of urban policymakers. This results in a form of translocal 'do-it-yourself' urbanism, which blurs the geographical and institutional boundaries underlying conceptions of the urban and urban politics (see Mains, 2011; Myers, 2021; Turner, 2015).

Third, there is a need to challenge approaches explicitly or implicitly assessing politics through a focus on inclusion and popular participation. Take, for example, the eleventh SDG: to 'make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable'.⁵ Underlying this is a normative pronouncement that provides a series of comparative analytical metrics that resonate strongly with much research on urban policymaking. This chapter asks whether a focus on inclusion and local, state-centred participation effectively enables scholars to understand the politics and priorities of urban spaces and populations. This is not to advocate for economic, social, and political marginalisation but rather to recognise that due to histories of 'stateness' (Dyson, 2009), scepticism of official interventions, and collective projects, many urban residents have little interest in participating in official policy. Moreover, those seeking to build lives may actively avoid engagements to remain effectively 'uncaptured' (cf. Hyden, 1980; Kihato & Landau, 2006).

Doing so requires a dual recalibration. The first is to shift beyond the localised trifecta of business, civil society, and state that tend to position government as the locus of mobilisation and influence. As work on xenophobic violence in South Africa (and violence elsewhere) suggests, the state often disengages from the de facto regulation of peoples, processes, and places (see Misago & Landau, 2023). These become sites for experiments in governmental form (see Iskander & Landau 2022; see also Super, Chapter 16, in this volume). The general irrelevance of state policy in many people's lives further suggests the value of coding as regulators and policymakers as actors that may have little engagement or make little reference to official policies or institutions. The second is a recalibration of scale. While scholars have long recognised the need to see municipalities as 'nested' within state and national bodies, there is an increasing awareness that cities are connected horizontally. These connections are often as much social as material. The policies shaping lives in those sites – whether agricultural and land use policy, taxation, and banking, even education and housing – affect how people live, engage, and mobilise in the cities in which they reside.

Our analysis of politics must adapt to this approach with a heightened focus on informality and a rescaled epistemology. This should recognise the spatio-temporalities of life in the city – what Lefebvre might call its polyrhythmicity – but also the multiple urban configurations produced through the mobility of people, goods, and ideas. There is a need to go beyond the

stacking or nesting of urban policy in vertical relations with provincial, national, and global frameworks. This is invaluable, but a spatial approach considering corridors, catchments, and the constellations forged through material and socio-economic connections will better capture the multiple temporal and geographic policy spaces shaping contemporary cities. Work by Banerjee (2011) and others adopting a ‘transnational’ or ‘translocal’ perspective starts us on this process, but there is a need to include constellations and not just connections that can help us build socialised, spatialised, and temporalised approaches that reveal what Johnson (2012) might term ‘systems of systems’ but with a specific focus on material *and* social forms of entanglement.

There is also value in reconsidering how many of the normative foundations work as metrics for comparative analysis. It is, for example, still possible to use levels of civic participation, social cohesion, and representation as comparative metrics without proffering these as universal objectives: the Weberian distinction between ideal-types and normative ideals. Doing so allows us to assess what, for example, social cohesion and community do and *should* mean when people who live with multiple temporal and geographic trajectories share space. It may also help avoid efforts to make visible populations that might otherwise wish to remain invisible or to avoid the kind of ‘insurgent citizenship’ or ‘autoconstruction’ the literature often celebrates (see Thomaz, 2022; see also Caldeira, 2017; Holston, 2008). These are people who see cities as spaces of extraction, not belonging, and fear inclusion and incorporation as a threat to their longer-term projects.

In an era of informalised work and regulation, a focus on law and formal migration policy – even at multiple scales – is inadequate to explain social, economic, or developmental outcomes. Instead, we must understand the migration experience simultaneously across multiple geographic and temporal scales, both formal and social. At the very least, it requires a more substantive understanding of the multiple trajectories under which urban residents are living their lives and the spatial and temporal horizons informing them. This means new forms of research. It means new forms of engagement. Perhaps most importantly, it requires constant self-reflection on the societies we want versus the societies we are likely to get. Until we reconsider what we mean by justice, by inclusion, and by sustainability, scholars and planners risk building cities that only exacerbate the inequality and exclusion we seek to address. There will be those who suggest these observations do not apply beyond Africa’s rapidly transforming urban centres. Without denying their distinctions, even the cities where modern political analysis began – Frankfurt, Paris, New York, London – are increasingly looking like the kind of fragmented, precarious spaces we see across sub-Saharan Africa.

The African experience brings the implications of mobility, economic and environmental precarity, and political fragmentation into stark relief. It challenges the ethical and political concepts informing progressive politics: representation, marginalisation, belonging, and progress. Instead, it points to emerging forms of translocal and transtemporal modes of membership through which mobile and non-mobile populations find recognition, elude, or undermine regulation, and build futures. Yet Africa has no monopoly on these variables (cf. Suliman & Weber, 2019) and the processes discussed partially explain the limited forms of sustained, place-based solidarity movements seen across much of the global south. Recognising the multiple modalities of politics practised within and across space, there is value in developing more heterogeneous normative and analytical frameworks for assessing the future of politics in Africa and elsewhere.

NOTES

1. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/urbandevelopment/overview>.
2. Many of the ideas in this paragraph draw from Iskander and Landau (2022). See also Piven (2008).
3. For more on the chronotope, see Blommaert (2017) and Steinby and Klapuri (2013).
4. See <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal11>.
5. See <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>.

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