

Recognising the Real Value of African Cities

Frances Brill warns that the urge to conduct academic research through an Anglo-American lens may skew findings.


Cities are continually compared. The idea of the “Global City” has created a system of hierarchies which every place is desperate to top. Stand-out architecture and huge foreign investments define the “success” of a city. These hierarchies, policy formation and the dominant discourses in urban studies prioritise Anglo-American ideas and places. New York, Chicago and London dominate; policy tourism is seen as a one-directional movement from west to east and achievement is relative to western standards. But there is a “new geography of urban theory”. Cities in the global south are being put “back on the map”. Comparative urbanism challenges existing ways of looking at the “urban”. It asks the researcher to see value in studying cities of the global south; to look across the supposed north-south divide and to compare in an imaginative way. This is putting African cities at the centre. It is recognising the huge value they add to ideas and to understanding urban processes.



African cities such as Cape Town should not be viewed through an Anglo-American lens

Take work on gentrification – a loaded term well recognised in the British political-academic-lexicon. It was coined and defined by processes in London. As a concept it has been studied internationally, with a heavy focus on Anglo-American settings. Recognising the call for a comparative approach, many authors are moving away from this. Harris¹, Lemanski² and Lees³ have challenged the dominant discourses and examine gentrification in India and South Africa. They illustrate the rich narratives which can be found across the globe.

Cities in Africa are making names for themselves. Years of analysing them as sites of economic development or social movements neglect the value they add to broad discussions of urban processes. They too have experienced the forces of globalisation, of neoliberalism and urban change. Their experiences should be considered in detail as sites of all the urban processes sociologists, economists and geographers’ study. They are not an “African” example, they are an example full stop.

Taking this call on board it is crucial to recognise how local contexts, governance and every other distinguishing feature dictate how policies impact a place. Just as London and New York  mayors

have unique powers so do Cape Town and Nairobi's local institutions. Policies become hybridised. This is not a call to stretch concepts beyond usefulness. It is not about trying to make processes globally applicable. It is about recognising the innate value of cities in Africa in the context of broader debates on the urban. It is about bringing cities of all sites, shapes and sizes into the discussion. It is about comparing the unlikely and showing how they differ and how they are alike.

In my work I examine a concept often portrayed as a quintessential British phenomenon: **the New Town**. But I am studying the development of new towns in an African context: in Dar es Salaam and Johannesburg. I am showing how ideas in their global circulation have morphed, they have changed to suit different settings and so in each place to which they travel they must be studied. It is not enough to use the stories provided in a British context to discuss the roles of "new towns" in urban theory. To study what shaped the policy formation behind them, what the governance structures are, the finance and the socio-economic impacts in an African context adds to a greater understanding of the urban as a whole. We must bring all cities into the discussions.

1 Harris, A., 2008, 'From London to Mumbai and back Again: Gentrification and Public Policy in Comparative Perspective', *Urban Studies*, 45, pp. 2407-2428

2 Lemanski, C., 2014 Hybrid Gentrification in South Africa: Theorising across the southern and northern cities. *Urban Studies*, doi. 0042098013515030

3 Lees, L., 2000, 'A reappraisal of gentrification: Towards a 'geography of gentrification'', *Progress in Human Geography*, 24(3): 389-408.

Frances Brill is a research student at UCL.

The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.

March 2nd, 2015 | [Featured](#), [Urbanisation](#) | [1 Comment](#)

⌵

