

(Mis)understanding urban Africa

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SCHOLARLY REVIEW ESSAY

(Mis)Understanding Urban Africa: Towards A Research Agenda on the Political Impact of Urbanization

Daniel E. Agbiboa. *They Eat Our Sweat: Transport Labor, Corruption, and Everyday Survival in Urban Nigeria.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. 266 pp. List of Figures. List of Tables. Bibliography. Index. Hardback. ISBN: 9780198861546.

Noah L. Nathan. *Electoral Politics and Africa's Urban Transition: Class and Ethnicity in Ghana.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. 344 pp. List of Figures. List of Tables. Bibliography. Index. Paperback. ISBN: 1108468187.

Stephanie Newell. *Histories of Dirt: Media and Urban Life in Colonial and Postcolonial Lagos.* London: Duke University Press, 2019. 249 pp. Author's note. Bibliography. Index. Paperback. ISBN: 9781478006435.

Jeffrey Paller. *Democracy in Ghana: Everyday Politics in Urban Africa.* CUP: Cambridge University Press, 2019. 313 pp. List of Figures. List of Tables. Bibliography. Index. Hardback. ISBN: 9781316513309.

AbdouMaliq Simone and Edgar Pieterse. *New Urban Worlds: Inhabiting Dissonant Times.* Cambridge, Polity Press, 2018. 198 pp. Preface. Bibliography. Paperback. ISBN: 9780745691565.

The last decade has seen a growing consensus around two aspects of Africa's changing demographic and socio-economic profile and their impact on the continent's development. The first area of agreement is that "Africa's future is urban" (ISS 2016). Whereas the continent was overwhelmingly rural in the early years of independence, a majority of citizens will live in urban areas by 2050. The second area of intellectual convergence is that this demographic shift will have profound political and economic consequences (ODI 2018), including kick-starting stalled processes of democratization (Anku & Enu-Kalu 2019). It is easy to see why so many journalists and researchers have moved swiftly from empirical observation to theoretical prediction. On the one hand, there are a number of countries in which opposition parties fare much better in urban areas and have used this as a spring board to challenge the dominance of entrenched ruling parties, including Kenya, South Africa, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. On the other hand, this framing fits with existing assumptions about spatial identities on the continent. Rural dwellers are often imagined to be under-educated and ill-informed, stuck in a version of Mamdani's (2018) "despotic decentralization" in which both thoughts and political behaviours are controlled by ethnic and traditional leaders. By contrast, urbanites are more likely to be depicted as cosmopolitan citizens integrated into global information networks (Zeleza and Veney 2002), and hence empowered them to break out of traditional patterns of patronage and clientelism, and hence to hold the government to account. Working within this set of assumptions, urbanization will inevitably transform African politics and development for the better – forcing political parties and leaders to spend less time trying to buy and direct rural voters, and more time trying to persuade and satisfy their more demanding urban counterparts.

Yet even the slightest tug at the weave of this argument and it starts to unravel. While it is true that urbanites report higher levels of support for democracy and accountability, the differences are often very small. In 2019, 45 percent of urbanites surveyed by the Afrobarometer across 37 African countries expressed support for democracy while rejecting all authoritarian forms of government, just 5 percent

more than the average for rural areas.¹ Perhaps even more strikingly, the proportion of people expressing *no support* for democracy at all was higher in urban areas (5% as compared to 4% in rural locales). These findings jar with the notion that urbanization will drive democratization, but should not come as a surprise. After all, the similarities between the rural and the urban – and the blurred lines between them – is not a new revelation. Five decades ago, Joel Barkan's (1976) pioneering work demonstrated that the "conventional wisdom" that rural voters were politically ignorant and disconnected was flawed. Turning many of the biases that were prevalent at the time on their head, Barkan's research showed that those in rural areas were politically knowledgeable, in part due to the outsized role that leaders played in determining access to resources and public services outside of capital cities. Conversely, early sociological studies stressed the way in which competitions for scarce jobs and resources could generate an even greater focus on ethnic identity in cosmopolitan urban areas than more homogenous rural locations (Clyde Mitchell 1959; Askari 1969). The problem is therefore not that we lack research that provides a nuanced account of urban and rural political identities, but that these subtleties have often been overlooked – including by this author – in the rush to see urbanization as a politically transformative process.

Insufficient attention has also been given to the variety of impacts that urbanization is likely to have. The categories of "urban" and "rural" and too often depicted as binary alternatives with nothing in-between, yet a majority of the urban population growth that is projected will not occur in capital cities but in much smaller towns and peri-urban areas. While it is tempting to assume that peri-urban areas can simply be considered as "hybrid" locations that split the difference between urban and rural locales, recent research had demonstrated that they often feature a distinctive form of politics that echoes the politics of contestation so often seen to epitomise the city, but in a way that is particularly vulnerable to "clientelist subjection" (McGregor and Chatiza 2020).² The tendency to over-simplify the continent's complex urban tapestry, and to assume that urbanization will drive progressive change, means that important questions remain about what it means to be urban and what kinds of new social and individual changes urbanization – and the emergence of peri-urban areas and vast urban corridors both within countries and across borders – will give rise to. To be clear, the question is not whether urban, rural and peri-urban areas are the same: it is obvious that towns and villages have different economies, geographies, and social lives. The question is whether these differences amount to a fundamental shift in the way that politics is conducted, and how the relationship between individuals and the state is understood – do they, in other words, give rise to different political subjectivities (Cheeseman et al 2020)?

Some Latin American scholars have written of cities as crucibles for the emergence of new forms of citizenship. For Holston (2007), the twin processes of democratization and urbanization in Brazil led to "productive encounters" as citizens mobilised to assert and defend their rights in highly unequal and predatory settings. Such clashes are productive because they "entail conflicts of alternative formulations of citizenship" (2009: 245), and so "sites of metropolitan innovation often emerge at the very sites of metropolitan degradation". It is central to Holston's understanding of the significance of these conflicts that some of these conceptions are progressive, in the sense that they challenge existing social and economic inequalities (see also Earle 2012). A spate of research in Kenya in the early 2000s hinted at a similar potential, with cross-ethnic mobilization against land grabbing creating the potential for the transformation of "political tribalization" into a more productive form of "moral ethnicity" (Orvis 2001; Klopp 2002). But the "ethnic clashes" that followed the disputed 2007 elections disrupted this research agenda just as they did Kenya's democratic progress, and there have been few attempts to systematically assess the extent to which urbanization and (stalled) democratization are generating new forms of citizenship.

Since then, important work has been done on the historical evolution of African cities (Freund 2007); how urbanization has produced contestation over land, taxes, and urban property rights (LeVan &

Olubowale 2014; Goodfellow 2017); the impact of city governance on poverty (Rakodi 2004) and space (Guma 2016); and, the way in which government policy shifted to favour rural areas as governments chased votes following the reintroduction of multiparty politics, reversing any “urban bias” of the 1980s (Harding 2020). This work has complemented long-standing debates such as the controversy concerning whether we are seeing urbanization as opposed to a continual flow of people between urban and rural areas (Macmillan 1993; Ferguson 1994), and the extent to which urban-rural connectivity, facilitated by the flow of people and ideas and the advent of new technology, has brought rural and urban political subjectivities closer together (Gugler 2002; Potts 2010; Mberu et al 2013).

More recently, this melting pot of ideas has given rise to a new research agenda that has taken a much more nuanced approach to the question of how urbanites understand their rights and obligations, and their relationship to the state. This has been led by pioneering work on Zimbabwe by a number of scholars, inspired by the striking combination of a historically capable state, a vibrant urban political scene, and twenty years of economic decline. Sara Rich Dorman (2015) has asked who is considered to be urban and why. Kristina Pikovskaia (2022) has demonstrated how ‘informal sector organizations’ influence members’ understanding of citizenship, facilitating political participation and shaping their everyday politics. McGregor and Chatiza (2020) have written of “partisan citizenship”, and the way in which ZANU-PF has sought to control the politics of those living on the outskirts of Harare. Meanwhile, Simukai Chigudu (2020) has shown how inequalities in wealth and power shape public service delivery – and hence the contours of urban disease – but also inspire demands for more substantive citizenship. In a similar vein, Davison Muchadenyika (2020) argues that urban social movements based around housing cooperatives and homeless associations galvanise demands for social justice. Beyond Zimbabwe, scholars have also documented the importance of “urban kinship” ties – i.e. idioms of relatedness in the city that are often ‘articulated in the language of family’ – for social cohesion (Bjarnesen and Utas 2018: S5); explained how the high concentration of people in the informal sector in urban areas can lead to “passive networking” (Bayat 2009), generating what Robert Putnam (2001) would call social capital; and, demonstrated the potential for urban areas to inspire new forms of political mobilization (Resnick 2011; 2021).

Two things unite this otherwise diverse set of publications: first, the belief that there is something distinctive and hence worth studying about urban Africa, and second, a rejection of teleological theories in which urbanization is framed as an inevitable harbinger of progress and democratization. No contribution demonstrates this better than *New Urban Worlds: Inhabiting Dissonant Times*, a thought provoking and frequently brilliant book by AbdouMaliq Simone and Edgar Pieterse, who has played an important role in inspiring and highlighting African scholarship on urban issues as the Director of the Africa Centre for Cities at the University of Cape Town. In many ways, *New Urban Worlds* is a book about how *not* to understand urban developments. Simone and Pieterse provide a compelling critique of the tendency for those working within urban studies, and on the politics of Africa and Asia more generally, to put forward reductive narratives that elide the complexity of urban life (p. 89). Explicitly pitching their own research as an antidote to overly top-down and simplistic accounts, they revel in the messiness of urban encounters, and the way in which local specificities challenge and undermine broad generalizations. In-line with this approach, the seven chapters that make up the volume look at the “Paradoxes of the Urban”, “Precarious Now”, “Re-Description”, “Secretions”, “Horizons From Within the Break”, “Experimentations”, before the book ends with an “Epilogue” that features “A Story About Stories”. As the short and conceptual nature of these titles suggests, Simone and Pieterse are as interested in the question of how urban areas should be studied and thought about as they are about the kinds of politics that they inculcate.

Partly as a result, the book provides a smorgasbord of innovative and thoughtful techniques with which to learn and re-learn about urban areas. One of the most interesting of these approaches is to

engage with different kinds of storytelling to challenge official accounts and dominant narratives, a process that the authors describe as *redescription*. This is just one of three lenses that they adopt, the other two being *secretion* and *resonance*. While *secretion* highlights the informal “fixes” and ad hoc arrangements that fill in the gaps left by limited and faulty formal structures and institutions, *resonance* speaks to how individual interactions can build into broader processes and developments in ways that are frequently creative and reflect organic spontaneity rather than the existence of a grand plan.

This approach is a particularly valuable corrective to lazy predictions about the impact of urbanization because it emphasises the lack of order, predictability and serendipity that can characterise urban life. By highlighting complexity while simultaneously documenting the emergence of forms of resistance and solidarity, *New Urban Worlds* demonstrates how we can view cities as sites of productive encounters, à la Holston, without importing the misleading assumption that urban life will inevitably evolve into some kind of democratic panacea. A number of other features of the book are also commendable, not least the fact that it integrates African and Asian examples, and in doing so goes some way to de-exoticizing both regions. The ethnographic and bottom-up approach that the authors prioritise is well suited to their task, and works particularly well when employed to highlight the limitations of “technocratic utopias” that imagine that urban challenges can be resolved by introducing unaffordable and unsustainable smart cities (p. 59). A more productive and egalitarian approach, they argue, would be to harness existing urban energy and innovation by investing in less expensive ICT infrastructure in order to empower the masses rather than an elite minority.

Although Simone and Pieterse’s “experimental” and “cryptic” (p. 120) approach to understanding cities is a major strength of the book when the authors are critiquing existing theories, it can also be a weakness when it comes to identifying broader conclusions and lessons for future research. *New Urban Worlds* mirrors its source material by being complex, uneven, and unpredictable. In many ways this is a neat trick that helps to ram home the importance of avoiding teleological analysis. But while the different insights the book offers resonate with one another – and are likely to prove powerfully evocative for the well-travelled reader – it is not always easy to see what they amount to. The authors do provide some pointers as to how their vision of an “adaptive city” can be realised, most notably by harnessing the disruptive power of technology in ways that pay careful attention to the everyday experiences of non-elite citizens, while using experimental techniques that ward off one-size-fits-all approaches. But little is said about how the different ideas they propose can be integrated, and when and where adaptive cities are most likely to emerge. In other words, despite its powerful critique, *New Urban Worlds* is not immune to the alluring power of utopia.

Moving forwards, understanding the politics of urban Africa is likely to require us to find a middle-ground between top-down theories of the consequences of urbanization and the radically localised approach epitomised by Simone and Pieterse. This kind of mid-range approach will allow us to systematically assess the relationship between urbanization and political life. As Glaeser and Steinberg have argued, if urbanization is to drive democratic change, this is likely to occur through one of three main channels: cities may “coordinate public action”, enhancing the effectiveness of protests and uprisings; they may increase “demand for democracy” by shaping popular attitudes; and, they may engender the development of “civic capital”, enabling “citizens to improve their own institutions” (2017: 58). Understanding which (if any) of these channels is in operation in Africa will require a sustained research agenda that is likely to feature at least ten core questions:

1. To what extent do we see different forms or intensities of certain kinds of political behaviour – such as protests, uprisings and the assertions of self-government – in urban areas?

2. How do people think about their relationship to the state and their political rights and obligations as citizens – i.e. their political subjectivities – in urban areas, and how does this vary across the very different people that make up urban spaces?
3. How, if at all, do these political subjectivities differ from rural areas, and how is this shaped by the nature and intensity of urban/rural linkages in a given country?
4. If urban attitudes and behaviours are distinctive, is this best explained by some characteristic of the people who live in urban spaces – such as higher education or wealth, or how recently they moved to the city – some feature of the urban experience, such as population density or greater access to information, or the emergence of new societal norms and institutions, such as “civic capital”?
5. Does this predispose urbanites to certain kinds of beliefs about citizenship and certain forms of political behaviour – such as being more critical of the ruling party and voting for opposition parties and leaders?
6. Are urban effects primarily rooted in capital cities, or do they extend to smaller towns and peri-urban areas? How do urban political subjectivities vary within large cities, between cities, and between cities and peri-urban areas within the same country – especially when national politics features powerful regional divides, as in Nigeria?
7. How do urban political subjectivities vary across countries (and continents) and what factors – levels of democracy and industrialization, poverty, education, religion, patterns of urban settlement, type of colonial rule, and so on – shape these differences?
8. To what extent has urbanization changed the approach of political parties and leaders, and in particular how they attempt to mobilise support?
9. To what extent has the impact of urbanization on political subjectivities been shaped by urban planning policies and the approaches adopted by governments to manage population flows more broadly?
10. In what ways does the paradoxical and unpredictable nature of urban living complicate these patterns and so moderate – and perhaps even cancel out – the transformative potential of urbanization?

Fortunately, four further contributions to the study of urban Africa by Noah Nathan, Jeffrey Paller, Stephanie Newell and Daniel E. Agbibo begin to address some of this research agenda in very different, but equally persuasive ways, while doing justice to Simone and Pieterse’s call to adopt diverse and experimental approaches to the study of urban Africa. They also nicely complement one another. While Nathan and Paller give us different takes on Accra (Ghana), Newell and Agbibo bring very different methodological approaches and lenses to the study of Lagos (Nigeria).

The books by Nathan and Paller speak most consistently to the question of political subjectivities. Indeed, both texts are very much focused on the complicating our understanding of urban Africa by demonstrating the ways in which the interaction of class and ethnicity in the urban milieu has not straightforwardly resulted in the emergence of the more programmatic politics. As Nathan’s *Electoral Politics and Africa’s Urban Transition* notes in its blurb, “many expected that [the emergence of a large urban middle class and high levels of ethnic diversity and inter-ethnic contact] would help spark a transition away from ethnic competition and clientelism toward more programmatic elections”, but this has yet to happen. Instead, urban Ghana as “caught in a trap” (p. 5), in which clientelism and ethnic voting persist and lead to sub-optimal political and developmental outcomes.

Nathan sets out the logic of this trap as follows. The failure of the state to meet the service-delivery needs created by unmanaged urbanization gives voters an incentive to demand the kinds of particularistic goods that can be exchanged for political support around elections (pp. 19-20). At the same time, limited state capacity also means that politicians have good reason to doubt whether they really can deliver on programmatic promises. Taken together, these urban realities sustain forms of

ethnic and clientelistic mobilization and hence constrain political transformation. This first part of the trap is fairly generic. Indeed, there is nothing uniquely “urban” about it – if we take out “created by urbanization” and swap in “created by a widely dispersed rural population”, Nathan could be describing the factors that sustain patronage politics in rural areas.

The second part of Nathan’s story is more distinctly urban. Recognizing that they are in the minority and that politicians are unlikely to respond to their demands, members of the middle-class disengage from political participation, and do so at higher rates than other types of voters (p. 24). In turn, their abstention gives political leaders even less incentive to try and appeal to middle-class residents, and so the trap becomes self-reinforcing. The net outcome of the trap is therefore to preserve the status quo by reducing the influence of the one group that supports a transformative agenda. We should therefore not expect to see a linear relationship between urbanization, the rise of the middle class, and the curtailment of ethnic politics.

The book presents this core argument admirably clearly and concisely. Indeed, the central premise of “the trap” is succinctly summed up in the first thirty pages. What follows is an excellent example of how to stand up an argument with a number of links in the causal chain. Each chapter takes a key part of the argument and, using a research design specially selected for the purpose, deploys a rich array of evidence to build a persuasive picture of how urban politics operates. This is the very best kind of mixed methods research, blending survey analysis, interviews, focus groups, and census and electoral data together in a way that demonstrates what can be achieved when quantitative and qualitative methods are integrated into a cohesive and systematic approach. What elevates this discussion, and makes the book required reading, is the inspired move to leverage intra-urban variation in the Greater Accra area in order to build and defend the argument. Adopting this approach kills two particularly significant birds with one stone: first, it enables Nathan to challenge the tendency to homogenise the urban experience by demonstrating the significant differences at play within one city; second, it allows him to hold structural factors such as political institutions constant and hence highlights the effect of more localised factors such as the make-up of the population.

What emerges from this impressive research design is an account that is both thought provoking and nuanced. Nathan does not simply argue that the growth of the middle-class has had no effect, but rather demonstrates how and why demands for more programmatic politics among this group have led to greater changes in political dynamics in some parts of Accra than others. What really matters, it transpires, is not just how middle-class an area is but rather the interaction between class and the degree of ethnic diversity. Put simply: “ethnicity is not a significant determinant of vote choice in diverse, middle- and upper-class neighborhoods of the city, in contrast to much of the rest of Ghana”. By contrast, “Ethnicity strongly predicts vote choice in most of the city – including in middle and upper class neighborhoods – when they are ethnically segregated” (p. 22). Ethnic diversity matters because it shapes the incentives facing politicians; when politicians deliver club goods to neighbourhoods that are less homogenous, they are accessible to individuals from a number of different communities and so “cannot be targeted selectively” (p. 25). In turn, this makes ethnic forms of mobilization less efficient, and hence less attractive.

In making this argument, Nathan breaks new ground, identifying key drivers of urban political transformation and providing us with valuable tools for understanding why urban elections do not always look radically different from their rural counterparts. He also demonstrates just how much the impact of urbanization will be shaped by the extent to which urban planning is designed to prevent the emergence of ethnic enclaves in the city. This point could perhaps have been pushed even further – urban planning plays a critical role in shaping the potential for effective politics because through the design of housing estates and road systems it can increase or stem the flow of traffic to potential spaces of protest. Closing down roads and re-directing transport routes that connect to city centres

and preventing effective transport connections from being established between different parts of the city are all ways that authoritarian governments can try and fragment communities and insulate downtown areas – and the government buildings and institutions – from expressions of mass dissent.

The overall picture that Nathan paints of the factors that shape urban electoral politics is persuasive, but his heavy emphasis on the middle class as the agents of transformation raises two important questions. First, what aspects of middle class identity are most important when it comes to political subjectivities? Chapter two offers a sophisticated discussion of how to conceptualise and measure class that moves beyond reductive measures such as income in favour of an approach based on education and employment characteristics. But the book's strong focus on neighbourhood effects at times takes Nathan away from a more bottom-up perspective on what motivates individual voters, and the question of whether education or employment status plays a bigger role in shaping how individuals feel about democracy and the value of political rights and civil liberties. Second, does the potential for urbanization to generate new forms of political accountability lie mainly in the fact that urban areas feature more middle-class populations? If so, and living in diverse urban areas does not affect any change in political subjectivities among what, for want of a better term, we might call "lower class citizens", is this really an "urban" effect or a more generic economic one? After all, if the emergence of predominantly middle-class neighbourhoods is a pre-requisite for political transformation, we have essentially come full circle and are once again reiterating the core tenets of modernization theory (Chisadza and Bittencourt 2019). This would leave Ghana is a long way from Holston's vision in which urban political contestation acts as a crucible for new forms of citizenship among a wider cross section of urbanites, leading to a more radical challenge to the status quo.

The answers to some of these questions are provided by Paller's *Everyday Politics in Urban Africa*, which perfectly complements *Electoral Politics and Africa's Urban Transition* – indeed, one imagines the two authors having lengthy and productive discussions, refining and strengthening their analysis in response to one another. As with Nathan's research, Paller's work is steeped in the literature on urbanization both in Africa and beyond, and the early chapters of both books provide excellent literature reviews that anyone new to this topic would do well to read. But in contrast to Nathan's focus on electoral politics, Paller is more interested in the constant process of negotiation, struggle, and debate that occurs in urban areas – in part because this is what animates the people he talks to on a daily basis. As the title of his volume suggests, Paller's contribution is to approach urban politics from the bottom-up. Thus while he draws on a similar set of sources to Nathan, most obviously interviews and survey analysis, his palette is more weighted towards ethnographic methods such as participant observation.

This approach reflects the fact that Paller is less committed in testing a particular theory, and more interested in capturing and understanding the quotidian interactions of what we might call the urban political community – citizens, community leaders, politicians, and so on. This approach pays dividends, as Paller has a great eye for local dynamics, unpacking the ways in which urbanization can give rise to complex struggles over land, rights and political power. One of the great strengths of this impressive and readable book is its ability to give readers a real feel for how politics operates in urban spaces that is both narratively and intellectually satisfying.

As important consequence of this way of working is that Paller has a great deal to tell us about urban political subjectivities, as his very definition of every day politics is the 'institutional context of daily decision-making in a neighborhood—how people think, act, and feel about power on a daily basis' (p. 4). In addition to painting a complex and perceptive portrait of Greater Accra, *Everyday Politics in Urban Africa* also puts forward a clear comparison to rural areas, explicitly setting out what is often left implicit in scholarship in this area. Starting from the position that "politics in African cities are conceptually different from politics in rural areas" (p. 21), Paller argues that rural areas tend to be

more ethnically homogenous, more remote, and more dependent on the patronage of local leaders (p. 262). This means that, on the whole, they are relatively predictable – at least in the context of fairly stable and fairly democratic contexts such as Ghana. Urban areas differ from this picture in two contrasting ways. On the one hand, cities are highly diverse and dominated by the issue of the ever-growing population, which forces the price of land up and means that there is growing tension over access to water and sanitation. On the other hand, those in urban areas have a greater choice over and level of provision of services such as health and education. They are also located closer to the seat of power – the national legislature and State House – and so may be less dependent on the direct patronage of politicians and better placed to complain about the difficulties that they face. This combination makes urban politics potentially explosive: ethnic tensions inter-mingle with serious needs in a context of shifting alliances.

As with Nathan's work, one of the great strengths of Paller's analysis is that he does depict an undifferentiated city, but rather sets out a typology that captures intra-urban variation on the basis of "the way that urban Ghanaians understand their own claims to urban space" (p. 64). This typology divides urban space into three categories: indigenous settlements, stranger settlements, and squatter settlements. Indigenous settlements are neighbourhoods inhabited by a majority of indigenous residents; stranger settlements feature a majority of migrants who are purchased land from original custodians; and, squatter settlements feature migrant majorities who did not purchase territory from indigenous landlords. Paller demonstrates that these differences are important because they give rise to different forms of claims-making and legitimate authority – a key concept in the book, which refers to how "opinion leaders" (p. 50) can gain respect and build support.

Because stranger communities are seen to have purchased land legitimately from the original occupiers, they are considered to be permanent residents in neighbourhoods that come to be governed by "informal norms of cooperation and public legitimacy" (p. 48). Leaders in these areas gain respect not from ethnic and partisan identities, but "through their service to the community". Squatters did not purchase their land legitimately, and so are viewed as temporary residents, which means that "informal norms of personal empowerment and privatization of the commons" dominate in these areas (p. 49). Leaders in these areas face particular challenges because they are not accepted by the host population, and this limits the extent to which they want to invest in urban areas. Consequently, they often look to use their urban influence to bolster their chances of running for office in their hometown. Things look different again in indigenous areas, where politics is rooted in "autochthonous ownership claims to land and territory" (pp. 48-9) and so authority is rooted in traditional ties, ownership over land, and control of territory.

What does this mean for political subjectivities, and the question of where political transformation may come from? The different form that authority takes in each area is significant, Paller argues, because it sets the template for the kind of politics that is likely to be successful, and hence for the kinds of political mobilization that come to the fore. While "stranger settlements have developed responsive and legitimate leaders to serve the interests of the public, while indigenous and squatter settlements have not" (p. 30). Thus, we are presented with another nuanced account of variations in urban politics that highlights the factors that stymie political change. While urbanization may drive more programmatic politics where "strangers" are seen to have purchased land legitimately, fostering norms of cooperation and community service, politics is unlikely to become more programmatic in the many urban neighbourhoods where this does not happen. Paller's analysis thus coheres with Nathan's when it comes to the significance of neighbourhood effects and urban planning. There is less agreement, however, when it comes to the importance of the middle class – a term that only appears six times in *Everyday Politics in Urban Africa*. Indeed, many of the opinion shapers that Paller identifies in areas that lack responsive leaders seem to be clearly middle class, such as NGO leaders in squatter settlements and religious leaders in indigenous ones (p. 60).

This returns us to the question of exactly how class, urbanization and programmatic politics are related, and whether socio-economic (wealth, job status, education) factors or situational ones (neighbourhood composition), play a greater role in shaping the prospects of political transformation. One issue that both Nathan and Paller could have paid greater importance to is the significance of cross-class coalitions to effective protest and resistance. After all, a number of studies have found that the leaders of associations of ‘informal sector organizations’, street vendors associations, and social movements are of a “higher” class than those who follow them (Pikovskaia (2021).

The question of class and identity also pervades the second pair of books, which focus on Lagos, highlighting the recent boom in research on Nigeria’s economic capital –how many other sub-national regions have their own Studies Association?³ Their publication within months of each other turns out to be a happy accident, because Newell’s *Histories of Dirt: Media and Urban Life in Colonial and Postcolonial Lagos* and Agbiboa’s *They Eat Our Sweat: Transport Labor, Corruption, and Everyday Survival in Urban Nigeria* provide very different lenses through which to understand urban politics in the same place. While Agbiboa provides us with a snapshot of corruption in the transport section based on a twelve month ‘mobile ethnography’ of the Oshodi and Alimosho local government areas, Newell marshals a rich combination of newspapers, archives, interviews and focus groups to understand popular attitudes to dirt – and to who and what is “dirty” – in the *longue durée*.

Unsurprisingly given its focus, it is Agbiboa’s volume that most clearly follows the other texts reviewed here in challenging the idea that urbanization will inevitably lead to productive political transformations. A central part of the book is a study of the National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW) and the way that it has evolved from a loose collection of individuals seek escape from urban poverty by working in the transport sector into “the most politicized and violent trade union in Nigeria” (p. 146). Formed in 1978, when the government moved to merge various different drivers and service workers unions, the NURTW has become a byword for extortion and lawlessness. *They Eat Our Sweat* charts the evolution of the NURTW through the “changing role of Agberos” – the predominantly young men who parade and control motor parks and enforce “discipline” on the *danfo* minibus taxis that move millions of Lagosians around the city on a daily basis. Agbiboa shows how *agberos* emerged “during the socio-economic flux from the mid 1970s onward, when the material and mental insecurities of the Nigerian urban and rural economies generated a range of everyday practices for youth to get by” (p. 153). One of these was to “help” manage motor parks, finding and organising passengers for *danfos*, but over time this role was transformed due to their “incorporation into the NURTW as tax collectors and foot soldiers for the union’s “dirty work”” (p. 147).

Agbiboa exposes just how dirty this work really is by spending two months as a *danfo* conductor on the Oshodi to Ikotun route. This first-hand experience provides the author with an appreciation of how hard the job can be – calling bus stops, spotting potential passengers, and negotiating fees all at the same time. Just as importantly, it brings the researcher, and through him the reader, face-to-face with the tactics used by *agberos* to force *danfo* operators to pay the bewildering array of fees that they levy. As Agbiboa writes “In two months, I witnessed first-hand the violent death of four conductors in the hands of *agberos* due die to disputes” (p. 35). This is brave, bold and brilliant research, which provides insights that more conventional strategies would simply not give up. While it raises a set of ethical and safety questions that the book does not fully address, this approach generates fleeting glimpses of a visceral reality that is so often missing in academic work on urban life. In turn, the intimate portrait that Agbiboa is able to paint means that it really hits home when he concludes that “Violence, in this case, functions as a tactical means of re-establishing “order” ... social control and everyday profiteering in contested urban spaces” (p. 168). In other words, violence is not merely an occasional by-product of this system, but rather an integral part of it. *Agberos* engage in fights not only because this is the route to becoming more powerful and successful, but also because

to not do so leaves them vulnerable to atrophying territory and influence – and hence to attack from those who covet their position.

The focus on *agberos* and the NURTW also pays dividends because it enables Agbiboa to demonstrate a very different kind of urban “trap” to that set out by Nathan. As the final three chapters of the book explain, the symbiotic relationship between the union and the political leadership of Lagos state has created a deeply problematic nash equilibrium. On the one hand, the NURTW requires government and police complicity for its extortion racket to run smoothly, and so has no incentive to challenge patrimonial processes and problematic political leaders. On the other hand, the government of Lagos relies on the NURTW to intimidate political rivals and demobilize potential opposition among urban youth, which “explains the difficulty, if not impossibility, of doing away with *agberos*” (p. 147). Consequently, even administrations initially lauded for their reformist zeal, such as that of Governor Babatunde Fashola, had little impact where the *agberos* were concerned. In the words of a group of *agberos* in Oshodi: “*Oga Fashola gon ko to be*” (Even Fashola cannot ban us). Consequently, even though Lagos featured relatively supportive conditions for urban innovation (Cheeseman and de Grammont 2019), little progress was made in the area of transport.

Like the volumes by Simone and Pieterse, Nathan, and Paller, Agbiboa’s book should be required reading for anyone who thinks that urbanization will inevitably usher in a new wave of democratic politics. There is, however, a question as to whether corruption represents the most useful framework through which to understand the processes that Agbiboa describes. The first third of *They Eat Our Sweat* ably sets out why corruption is a compelling and intractable problem, and the different conceptual and methodological ways that it can be measured and understood. The book then sets out the “corruption trap” (p. 104) before looking at the art of urban survival and “Nigeria’s Transport Mafia” (p. 146). There can be no doubt that quotidian corruption runs through all of these stories, but the further into the book one gets the more graft appears as the grease that keeps the system going, rather than the system itself. As Agbiboa’s own titles and subtitles suggest, what he is describing is a mafia type operation in which criminal networks have become so embedded in the state that it is unclear where they end and the government begins. Corruption is one part of this story, but what really stands out about in the book is the continuous use of violence to enforce an unfair economic and political settlement. Systematic financial exploitation on the scale perpetrated by the NURTW is organized criminal extortion rather than graft.

Given this, one wonders whether a more useful intellectual starting point for the final part of the book would have been the literature on how protection rackets take hold in societies in which “trust is in short supply and democracy weak”, such as Diego Gambetta’s work on the Sicilian mafia. Although Agbiboa consistently locates his work in a productive dialogue with the secondary literature, there is relatively little engagement with work on organized crime, or with the large literature on vigilantism in Nigeria, which has ably described the co-optation of gangs of young men with the capacity to inflict violence into government structures (Pratten 2008; Reno 2015). Given the prominence of transport unions/cartels and groups of *okada* (motobike taxi) drivers in African cities, these literatures will surely need to be given greater attention in accounts of urban economic and political organization moving forwards. This is a relatively minor weakness, however, compared to the book’s many strengths: all told, *The Eat Our Sweat* does a superb job of illuminating the kinds of work and politics that occupy many liminal young men in urban spaces.

Despite their very different thematic interests, multiple threads connect Agbiboa’s research with Stephanie Newell’s new monograph. Perhaps the most significant of these with regards to political subjectivities is the idea of “dirty work”, and the range of prejudices associated with this term, in urban Nigeria. By looking at Lagos through the lens of who and what is considered to be “dirty”, *Histories of Dirt* raises a series of profound questions about how ideas of cleanliness, hygiene and healthcare are

constructed – and how this legitimises the production of social and physical boundaries. This is a masterful study that traverses generations and multiple methodologies to provide new insights into urban Africa through a distinctive and productive lens. Colonial archives, Nigerian newspaper archives and a combination of focus groups and interviews are all used to elucidate insights into popular and elite attitudes to dirt at different points in time, from the 1920s through to the “midcentury audience” (p. 10) and on to the modern day. Every chapter of this hugely ambitious venture is a pleasure to read due to the ability of Newell – and the team of researchers she worked with, who are generously mentioned throughout – to creatively use even the most problematic and limited sources creatively to say something fresh about the past and the present. Colonial sources and those that silence the voice of the “dirty” are thus read both conventionally and against the grain, as Newell wrings their secrets out as if squeezing the last bit of toothpaste out of the tube. In other words, this is one of those texts that is so imaginative and distinctive that you wish you had written it yourself.

In addition to being a constant source of insight, this research into the way that ideas of dirt have been used and abused throughout history also features a pleasant surprise, because it ultimately offers the most optimistic reading of contemporary urban civic consciousness of all five books. This appears particularly unlikely from the opening chapters, as the first part of the book deals with colonial attitudes to dirt and is predictably depressing. Thomas Malcolm Knox, on a tour of inspection of Lever Brother’s trading stations in West and Central Africa in the mid 1920s, writes that Lagos “turns out to be a town of unspeakable squalor”, with “filth everywhere” (p. 1). In these unabashedly racist treatments, dirt is seen as being caused by “dirty natives” and to be the “nurse of disease” (ibid). As Newell elucidates, in such accounts dirt is not just an empirical substance but becomes an “interpretive category” that is used to facilitate “moral, sanitary, economy and aesthetic evaluations of other cultures under the rubric of uncleanness” (p. 3). Understood in this way, the assertion that something/someone is dirty can become a means to justify removing oneself from its/their presence. This act of naming and shaming is, in other words, a way of setting and reasserting “social and behavioural boundaries” (p. 4). Most notably, flawed and prejudiced beliefs legitimised “racial segregation in the name of public health” (p. 7).

The final part of the book fast forwards to the present day, with chapters on “public perceptions of ‘dirty’ in multicultural Lagos”, “remembering waste”, and finally “city sexualities”, which considers the politicization of homophobia. In a sympathetic discussion, Newell shows how leaders and legislatures have participated in a “dirtying” (p. 142) of minority groups such as the LGBTI+ community in a way that reproduces colonial tropes. What at first might seem like a tangential last chapter thus turns out to reinforce the core argument of the book, namely that colonial, elite and “to some extent, middle-class West African” (p. 14) definitions of dirt are productive of prejudice and discrimination.

Newell is surely right to suggest that prejudiced attitudes to dirt can have both racist and classist roots. Reflecting the current focus on decolonization, however, she says more about race and colonial prejudice than about the way that class continues to shape attitudes. This makes sense for the book’s early chapters and is to an extent necessitated for the more contemporary analysis by the fact that the vast majority of interviewees are drawn from the lower classes. There remains a risk, however, that this approach overlooks key dynamics and social forces when the discussion moves into the post-colonial era. While Newell makes a number of references to class and status, the prevailing attitude of the political elite, and how it shapes the city, is sometimes lacking. This is unfortunate, as many accounts of the reforms implemented by Lagos State Governors Bola Tinubu and Babatunde Fashola have noted that they were at least in part motivated by a “high modernist” vision for Lagos (Cheeseman & de Grammont 2019). In turn, this led them to pursue policies that reinforced the kind of tropes that stigmatize the “poor” and the “dirty”. Thus, attempts to turn Lagos into a world leading city often reflect the “technocratic utopias” critiqued by Simone and Pieterse, and have gone hand-in-hand with slum clearances and efforts to push out undesirable individuals and groups. As Agbiboa

notes, “informal workers are commonly stigmatized as illegal and undesirable occupants of urban spaces and thus targeted by state restrictions and eviction campaigns based on neoliberal policies aimed at modernizing and ordering the city” (p. 17).

The centrality of class to these understandings is undeniable. Even *danfo* drivers and touts who make a good living through their trade may not be accepted as clean and respectable members of society because “the problem is not so much about the income as it is of social status and respectability” (p. 103). Significantly this is not just Agbibo’s interpretation – it is also reflected in the way that Nigerian political leaders frame issues of inclusion and exclusion. When a range of wealthy politicians used dismissive language to justify discriminating against *okada* drivers, the then Governor of Edo State, Adams Oshiomole, claimed that their mistreatment was a “class issue” and represented discrimination against the “working class”.

The comparative lack of attention to elite attitudes in Newell’s discussion of contemporary Lagos has significant implications for some of the core arguments of *Histories of Dirt*, because it leads to interpretations of Lagosian governance that will strike some readers as being somewhat generous. Newell notes for example, that under Fashola’s rule the Lagos Waste Management Authority (LAWMA) “successfully altered public opinion about the people who work with trash and environmental dirt in Lagos” (p. 138). There is no doubt a great deal of truth to this, but in the absence of a more systematic discussion of the ways in which the same Lagos State Government treats “dirty workers” in other sectors, it creates the impression of a broader progressive project that does not really exist.

More could perhaps also have been said about the significance of class prejudice in the colonial era, and the way this was transferred to post-colonial elites. After all, upper class Brits did not reserve their prejudice for slums in Africa; they also said remarkably very similar things about areas of endemic poverty back home. As Emma Butcher and Tim Blythe have pointed out, “respectable, middle and upper-class Londoners” during the Victorian era associated poverty with squalor and squalor with disease in just the same way as Thomas Malcolm Knox.⁴ As a result, they “believed fervently that they should be separated from the ‘great unwashed’ even in death”. Providing a more systematic treatment of class would have enabled Newell to disentangle the extent to which Knox’s views were driven purely by racism or reflected a broader set of upper class preoccupations in capitalist societies.

These caveats notwithstanding, *Histories of Dirt* has much to teach us about how conceptions of what is dirty and acceptable are contested. This is particularly true of the exceptional discussion of how those “with no influence over policy or the shaping of colonial discourse” (p. 92) turn out to have rather different – and potentially transformatory – relationships with the concept of dirt. It is out of the more subtle attitudes of this group – “African media consumers” (p. 91) – that Newell weaves the book’s more positive narrative about urban political subjectivities. Across numerous focus groups and interviews, “lower class” participants are revealed to be impressively reflective; able to recognise that their own views as to what is “dirty” might not be universal and hence should not be imposed on others. This leads Newell to suggest that the testimonies of her interviewees can be read as embodying a form of “civic consciousness”, in which “toleration of strangers’ and neighbours’ domestic practices took priority over their own individual views, and the latter, no matter how widely shared among their own social group, and no matter how visceral the negative responses they evoked, were bracketed off in a separate sphere from the ‘public’” (p. 94).

Newell’s vision of a “distinctive civic consciousness that prevents the sprawling, economically divided megalopolis from fragmenting into violence” (p. 113) may strike some readers as an overly optimistic reading. After all, media headlines on Nigeria typically focus on the Boko Haram insurgency, banditry, and conflict between farmers and herders. Yet other sources of data back up her argument. Survey

data, for example, suggests that Nigerians from different communities have become more tolerant of one another since the reintroduction of multiparty politics in 1999. According to the World Values Survey, the share of Nigerians saying that they would object to having a neighbour of a “different race or ethnicity” has declined from 32% in 1990 to 16% in 2020. The Afrobarometer points in a similar direction: in 2018 only 13 percent of Nigerian respondents said they would mind if someone of a different ethnicity were to live next to them, with 42 percent saying they would “strongly like” this.⁵ This pattern is not limited to urban areas, but studies in other countries have suggested that moving away from an individual’s birthplace and having parents from different ethnic groups – which is more common in urban areas – is correlated with a more “national” and less “ethnic” outlook (Bratton and Kimenyi 2008).

Newell clearly recognizes that the form of civic consciousness she describes is limited and paternal, at least in terms of the evidence generated from the interviews and focus groups her team were able to conduct. Its foundation appears to be a recognition of the value of mutual accommodation – that people from different communities have distinctive practices and norms, and that peaceful urban living requires not imposing one’s own prejudices on others. As Newell writes, “the sheer multiculturalism of the city prevented individuals from extrapolating general principles from the evidence of their eyes” (p. 101). This form of civic consciousness does not necessarily entail a common recognition of a shared set of interests across ethnic lines, or a determination to mobilise across inter-communal boundaries to resist exploitation from a self-serving political elite. In this sense one might say that it is rooted more in a kind of liberal notion – live and let live – rather than the more progressive forms of pro-active civic consciousness described by Holston in Brazil.

The emerging social norms described in *Histories of Dirt* are also likely to be rather more fragile and limited than a “multiculturalist” interpretation might imply, given that many of Newell’s interlocutors stated explicitly that they would have presented their views of the habits and behaviours of other communities rather differently were they not in the presence of a microphone (p. 94). But while this form of civic mindedness is unlikely to represent a challenge to the political status quo in the medium-term, it is a necessary prerequisite for the emergence of a more politically assertive pan-ethnic urban identity. It is also a process that has emerged among the “non-elite” and therefore appears to be more inclusive and far-reaching than the changes that Nathan describes, which appear to be dependent on the size and influence of the middle class. In this way, *Histories of Dirt* suggests a route through which urbanization may ultimately transform political subjectivities, and one wonders whether we would also find evidence of this kind of willingness to recognize and respect what is different about “others” if we looked for it in Accra – even outside of more middle-class areas.

Where does this leave the research agenda outlined above? These five books tell us a great deal about the ways that urbanization may transform every day politics. Simone and Pieterse advise us to distrust official narratives and to avoid teleological explanations and predictions at all costs. Paying heed to this warning, Nathan and Paller teach us that social and political change is likely to lag well-behind the growth of urban areas, and that we should expect aspects of ethnic and patrimonial politics to persist well into the future. Meanwhile, Agbibo ably demonstrates that even when new forms of political organization emerge they may be profoundly anti-democratic serve to perpetuate the status quo. So far, so pessimistic: political subjectivities and behaviours may look different in cities because of the distinctive way that competition for land, power and transport routes plays out compared to rural areas, but this does not mean that politics is any less “ethnic” or clientelistic. Yet Newell reveals that even against this challenging background a kind of civic consciousness can emerge that respects group differences, and may yet serve as the foundation for a more progressive form of civic activism.

To build on this set of impressive contributions, we need a further wave of studies to extend and deepen this work in at least two respects. Conceptually, it is of particular important that we develop

a deeper conceptual understanding and a more systematic empirical mapping of civic consciousness that have emerged in urban spaces, and the conditions that give rise to these variations. Empirically, developing a rounded understanding of urban identities in all their complexity requires us to take this research beyond economic and political capitals such as Accra and Lagos and into smaller towns and cities. Along with in-depth studies in a wider set of countries that feature different levels and patterns of urbanization, this will enable the within-case and between-case comparisons necessary to establish how far the arguments summarised here are generalizable. Only then will we be able to tell how and why (and if) urban political life is distinctive, and the implications of this for the future of democracy and development in Africa.

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Notes

¹ For the methods and data, go to www.afrobarometer.org.

² I am grateful to Kristina Pikovskaia for bringing this point and many others to my attention.

³ The Lagos Studies Association. For more information go to: <https://lagosstudies.wcu.edu/>.

⁴ Emma Butcher and Tim Blythe. 2020. "Living in fear: the dangers of Victorian London", *History Extra*, December 22. <https://www.historyextra.com/period/victorian/victorian-london-dangers-what-was-life-like/>

⁵ Fola Aina and Nic Cheeseman. "Don't call Nigeria a failed state", *Foreign Affairs*. May 5. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/africa/2021-05-05/dont-call-nigeria-failed-state>