

Recentring the City: An Anthropology of Secondary Cities in Africa

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Abstract: This text summarises an ongoing research project about small cities which are usually not included in the research agenda on global cities. We aim at bridging between research focused on global or world cities and that on smaller or secondary cities in Africa. Arguing against the view of smaller Third World cities as mere towns, as "not yet cities", and therefore irrelevant to world city theorizing, this project intends to develop an alternative analytical approach to think differently about these small cities in the South. Basing ourselves on ongoing ethnographic research in Ghana, Congo and Namibia, we argue that these secondary cities are fully urban in that they generate networks and practices that extend far beyond the local limits of these cities and their immediate rural hinterland, and that they often manage to do so in more successful ways than their larger counterparts. At the same time these secondary cities are sites in which new and different forms of urban life and imagination are being shaped, offering the perspective of an alternative African urban future.

Keywords: secondary cities; Africa; urban anthropology; networks.

INTRODUCTION: A PLEA FOR SECONDARY CITIES RESEARCH IN AFRICA

Our current research programme, which is a comparative effort at understanding specific patterns of urbanisation, and the specific qualities of the urban experience for a great number of people in Africa today, focuses on forms of urban culture and social change within secondary cities in three different parts of Africa: Congo, Ghana and Namibia. It scrutinizes the networks and relations that exist between secondary cities, as well as between such cities and the level of the village on the one hand, and major cities (and beyond) on the other. Secondary cities usually form more recent poles of growth, often also with a more diffuse genealogy, than larger metropolises. The ambivalent situation of these towns (in the periphery of the centre and in the centre of the periphery, in so far as these notions still retain their meaning) generates a particular, and by definition highly hybrid, socio-cultural urban dynamic which in turn influences the outlook of social, political and economic life in the more visible national metropolises. It is our belief that the societal constellation of these larger cities cannot be sufficiently understood without bringing in the social, cultural and economic role of these secondary cities. Therefore, our research question, put in its most general form, asks what constitutes the specificities of urbanity within the intermediate context of the secondary city. The latter is one of the nodal points from which to understand both more local and more global worlds. We believe that it is on this level that processes of identity-formation, and of positioning with regard to issues of 'modernisation' and globalisation, often find their most poignant expression.

For a long time anthropological research confined itself to the analysis of local level village realities, a level of social organization and community which symbolized small scale, informal *Gemeinschaft*, all too easily associated with non-western societies, certainly when it comes to Africa. Yet, as the demographic data clearly show, the contemporary realities of the African continent go against this deeply engrained view of Africa as rural.

More recent anthropological research in Africa has started to focus on urban centres and on processes of social and cultural change within the context of mega-cities such as Lagos, Kinshasa, Johannesburg or Nairobi. This rather recent focus on large scale urban formations in Sub-Saharan Africa has however revealed two main *lacunae* in our understanding of processes of urbanisation. On the one hand the mega-city, as the centre of

political, social and economic activity, is taken to be a *pars pro toto* for the nation. Ironically, however, selecting large urban centres as analytical units prevents us from understanding these urban centres in relation to the wider (inter)national as well as more peripheral, semi-urban and rural context through which they also exist. This one-sided approach of the African metropole pays little attention to the relations and networks which develop between diverse cities and towns, or between the city and its various peripheries. On the other hand, standard approaches of city-life in major urban centres often disregard the much smaller 'secondary' cities, and the intricate ways in which these smaller towns interconnect and in turn relate to the metropole. These secondary cities often remain out of sight in contemporary research to urban development and change in the African context. Yet, we believe that these towns often 'work' better than the metropole, where life is fraught and shaped by much stronger social and economic tensions and contradictions. In the secondary city (and more generally in the margin of the state) there often is more room for improvisation. Local commerce, trading routes and smuggling networks determine the economic sphere in important ways; local forms of associational life (the middle ground of 'civil society') has a far greater influence on local politics than is the case in larger urban centres, and the functioning of local, decentralised political authorities is often shaped and cross-cut to a far greater extent by constantly shifting alliances between local stakeholders. Similarly, these secondary cities often generate wide-ranging networks, though not necessarily in terms of their technological or institutional capacity. All of this means that the secondary city obeys to a specific 'situationist' logic which often goes against the interests of the nation-state or the main urban centres that embody the state. In other words, such secondary urban centres are important laboratories for the definition of identity around religion, nation, ethnicity and locality.

By taking the secondary city as our main analytical unit, i.e. not only as an entity in and of itself but also as an important point of connection between rural communities, larger urban centres and beyond, we intend to offer an '*urban anthropology of network societies*'. Contrary however to Manuel Castells' sociology of cities in the information age, the networks which we consider do not, or not in the first place, come about through technological innovations. The cities we are currently analyzing (Butembo, Kikwit and Kahemba in D.R.Congo; Techiman and Navrongo in Ghana; Opuwo and Oshakati in Namibia) often occupy a weak and peripheral position on the formal map of the territories which constitute the global city and make it visible. And yet, these urban centres are often leading cities within a more invisible regional, (trans)national and even global network of material as well as mental territories, interconnected, entangled, and transposed by more informal infrastructures and cultural imaginaries that "destabilize the prevailing terms of social stratification" (Simone 2004). It is precisely these destabilizations and thickenings of urban articulations that we intend to explore. Rather than looking at the material transformation of the social fabric, triggered by the deployment of new information technology, we aim at understanding the social and cultural dimensions of urban life (i.e. specific forms of commerce, movement, authority, violence, combat and crisis), and the often unexpected ways in which these dimensions impact on and generate the materiality of the urban and its various uses.

It would lead us too far within the confines of this paper to deal with each of the selected cities in detail. Here it suffices to mention that each of the selected cities in its current form is, of course, the outcome of sometimes radically different historical trajectories. Each of these cities is also socially, politically and economically contextualised in very different ways. This turns a regular comparative research into a rather difficult, if not impossible, endeavour. What we aim for, therefore, is not so much a straightforward comparative analysis of these cities, nor do we try to establish a typologist approach of different types of urban context. Rather we aim at analysing certain dynamics and processes which contribute to the fact that these cities seem to function relatively well, all be it in very different ways. One of the elements, for example, that Kahemba, Butembo, Kikwit, Navrongo, Techiman or Opuwo seem to have in common is that they are located at or near borders, or function as crossroads between various flows of people and goods that pass through these cities. Instead of being relatively isolated towns with a limited reach into their local rural hinterlands, these secondary cities play a much larger role, both regionally and (trans-)nationally. How these cities, for example, make use of borders, margins and marginality, and of openings, closures and border-crossings, how they generate connections between on stage and off stage, between, public and hidden transcripts, between mobility and immobility or between a diurnal and nocturnal urban life, is something that we need to pay closer attention to, specifically since the actual contents of this urbanity often remain out of sight, or seem to be difficult to grasp and comprehend because they are often not institutionalised, but grounded in the ordinary realities and in the physical and mental trajectories of urban dwellers' everyday lives.

THE INTERNATIONAL ACADEMIC CONTEXT OF SECONDARY CITIES RESEARCH

Until fairly recently, postcolonial African cities were rarely the subject of scholarly attention. Innovative approaches to re-imagine the urban often continue to be written with the cities of the North in mind (Amin & Thrift

2002; Mongin 2005). Koolhaas' (2000) work on Lagos certainly generated a new interest in African cities. Another important moment was the 'Cities under Siege' initiative of Documenta XI curator Okwui Enwezor (Enwezor, Basualdo, Bauer, Ghez, Maharaj, Nash & Zaya 2002) in which four African cities (Lagos, Johannesburg, Kinshasa and Freetown) were compared. In recent years a number of important books and articles have been published in special issues and volumes devoted to African cities (Howard 2003; Malaquais 2005; Murray & Myers 2007; Rakodi 1997), or on specific cities such as Johannesburg (Malaquais 2004; Mbembe & Nuttall 2004; Bremner 2004), Dakar, Abidjan, Pretoria, Douala and Jeddah (Simone 2004), Kinshasa (De Boeck & Plissart 2004; Trefon 2004), Dar es Salaam (Moyer 2003) or the cities of the Copperbelt (de Lame & Dibwe 2005; Ferguson 1999). Recent publications have also documented the historical, colonial and pre-colonial roots of African cities (Anderson & Rathbone 2000; De Meulder 2000; Freund 2007; Jacobs 1996; Lagae 2001) and the specific informal economies, popular youth cultures, and forms of dwelling and diasporic life that African urban contexts generate (Bryceson & Potts 2006; Jewsiewicki 2003; MacGaffey & Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000; Petit 2003; Pieterse 2005; Roitman 2005; Simone & Abouhany 2005; Hansen 2000; Hansen & Vaa 2004; Hansen, Dalsgaard & Gough 2008).

More generally, there has been an increase in works on non-western cities (Low 1996; Gugler 2004; Robinson 2006; Silva 2003), often focusing on slums and urban zones of social abandonment (Biehl 2005; Rao 2006), or in combination with a larger debate about globalisation (Castells 1996; Sassen 1999; Simone 2001), cosmopolitanism (Breckenridge, Pollock, Bhabha & Chakrabarty 2000; Malaquais 2005; Ossman 2002), governmentality (Appadurai 2002; Chatterjee 2004), or notions of tradition and modernity (Pile 2005). Much of this research focuses on the cultural, ecological or geographical context of the mega-city, or on the interaction between these large urban environments and the rural periphery (Lynch 2005). Contrary to small cities in the US and Europe (Bryce 1977; Markusen, Lee & Digionanna 1999; Ofori-Amoah 2007; Schaeffer & Loveridge 2000; Swanson, Cohen & Swanson 1979) the intermediate level of the secondary city in the Global South, and in Africa in particular, and the networks that are generated by such cities, have received far less scholarly attention, some exceptions notwithstanding (Bell & Jayne 2006). Yet, such cities and their networks seem to play an increasingly important role in shaping the particular forms through which processes of globalisation are unfolding within Africa. This often is a globalisation that no longer finds its starting point in the former colonial metropolises but rather originates in new world powers such as China or India.

All too frequently it is assumed that standard urban theories, ranging from the early modern theories of Weber, Simmel and Benjamin to the more contemporary writings of urban theorists such as Lefebvre, Harvey or Castells and the Los Angeles School of Urbanism (Parker 2004), are applicable to the kind of city under scrutiny here. However, as was already indicated in a recent UN-Habitat report (<http://www.unchc.org/programmes/guo/>), the indicators and tools to describe, understand and influence the current urban dynamics in Africa are often lacking. The stimulation of large scale processes of urbanisation was one of the tenets of the structural adjustment programs (SAPs) that were inflicted upon Africa by the World Bank and the IMF in the 1980's. The reasoning behind this was that important urban centres would function as powerful motors of development and programs. Two decades later, however, it has become clear that the massive movement from the countryside to the city, which the SAPs encouraged, often only produced underdevelopment and poverty. The space of the African city (and more generally the cities of the Global South) all too often appears as just that: "a 'black hole', a slum, a space of marginalisation, malnourishment, illiteracy, unemployment and exclusion, a dumping ground for 'surplus humanity'" (Davis 2006).

With the gradual fading of formal frames of reference as defined by the state, administrative, political and social boundaries often lose their demarcating powers and become very flexible and shape-shifting frontiers. The current postcolonial urban context is sometimes even marked by processes of ruralisation in the very heart of the polis (both materially and mentally, infusing the cityscape with practices and moralities that find their origin outside the urban), while in rural hinterlands new urban dynamics spring up in surprising forms. Again, this indicates that the urban-rural, or centre-periphery opposition, common in more classic urban theory, is in need of rethinking (Browder & Godfrey 1997). The forms of viability and the physical and social identities of these urbanscapes often defy our common understanding of the conventional townscape and thereby remain outside of reach, hidden and invisible.

A THEORY OF THE 'SHADOW'

'Shadow Cities' is the title of a recent book by Neuwirth (2005) on squatter communities in the cities of the Global South. The title seems to imply that the lives of those living in such urban environments are bound to remain in the shadow, and therefore to remain unseen and unknown. Countering this idea, our research deals with the

material, spatial, social and mental production of urban life in secondary African cities. The underlying theoretical preoccupation is with visibility/invisibility. On the most general level our basic question is: how can we begin to see and understand what happens inside the 'black hole' of African urban worlds? 'Blackness' or 'shadow' have, of course, long been common discursive tropes to talk about African realities. Images of darkness, of phantoms and of 'shadow' abound: the dark continent, the heart of darkness, *Afrique fantôme*... In a similar vein the image of the shadow has pervaded Africanist ethnographies for a long time now: anthropologists, and scholars of Africa more generally, have written about shadow economies and shadow networks (Duffield 2002), shadow states (Reno 1995) and twilight institutions (Lund 2007), shadow cities (Neuwirth 2006), shadows of war (Nordstrom 2004) and shadow globalization (Jung 2003). Similarly, the contributors to 'Law and Disorder in the Postcolony' (Comaroff & Comaroff 2006) reflect upon postcolonial realities characterised by informality, irregularity, clandestinity, illegality and occult practices 'in the shadow of the law' (see Spyer 2006; Comaroff & Comaroff 2006:16ff). In the work of these scholars, the postcolony becomes a world where the shadow and the invisible have become, as it were, 'institutionalised' (Nordstrom 2004).

Rather than dismissing the forceful image of the 'shadow' or the 'black hole' analogy (also used, for example, by Castells (2000), who calls Africa 'the black hole of the information society'), as yet another example of the hegemonic and colonising discourses that underpin the disconnection – or at least the specific hierarchies through which Africa is connected to a wider global world – we intend, on the contrary, to take very serious the contents and possibilities of the shadow which have, perhaps, remained under-explored and therefore too often 'black', dark and invisible. Ferguson (2006), in his recent book 'Global Shadow: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order' (2006), urges us to re-appraise the notion of the shadow, just as Hecht & Simone (1994) did long before that for the notion of the *invisible*. Similarly, C. Nordstrom (2004), in 'Shadows of War. Violence, Power, and Profiteering in the Twenty-First Century', held a plea for 'an ethnography of the shadow'. Responding to this plea, we attempt to reconsider the notion of the shadow, and of (in)visibility, to arrive at a 'shadowgraphy' of the city, i.e. at a better understanding of the specific modes of connection and disconnection that give shape to different networks acting upon each other and intervening on different levels of social life. A shadow, writes Ferguson (2006), is not only a dim or empty likeness, it also implies a bond and a *relationship*. A shadow is not a copy, it is not only negative space, or a space of absence. It is present absence, or absent presence. One might add that the shadow's ability to transform itself is one of the key elements for understanding it. The shadow helps us to think about processes of doubling and un-doubling. It forces one to think differently about dimensionality. Shadows are not solid objects, they lack dimensionality. The urbanscapes which will be researched are, in many ways, like shadows: essentially mirroring but shape-shifting realities, resisting objectification, colonization, synthesis and summary.

In summary, to take *shadow* as an analytical starting point offers a possibility to reflect differently on the place of the selected secondary cities in relation to their surrounding rural worlds, as well as in relation to larger urban centres on a national level and beyond. In order to do so we do not only look at *machines of the visible* (material infrastructures and technologies) but also at *machines of the invisible* (the bodies, words, the practices, dreams, desires and imaginaries of these urbanites, and the specific ways in which these bodies and minds are made to move and connect; the specific ways, also, in which embodiment is able to display and rework certain hierarchies). These *invisible machines*, we believe, construct the postcolonial urban world by networks of lines of information, of thought, of concern, of actions, of all the different kinds of connection that we have between the inhabitants of these cities and different parts of the outside world. Each intention reveals its apparatus, each apparatus its intention. By looking at apparatus and intention together, i.e. at material transformations and the social machine generating them, what appeared as shadow and urban 'black hole' will reveal 'the thing' of the urban, i.e. its content. No longer sucking in the lives and narratives of urban dwellers and rendering them invisible, the secondary city will reveal itself to be a powerful producer of urban narratives, experiences and various *lines* (both material and spiritual) that produce the surroundings, the forms, but also the contents, of these specific urban worlds.

The invisible also points to something else. In the urban realities that we have tried to analyse in recent work on the Central-African urbanscape (De Boeck & Plissart 2004), or in ongoing research in Techiman by Frederik Lamote, for example, the only way to capture and interpret the forms of local life the city generates is by taking the notion of the shadow and of the invisible quite literally. Here local reality *is* the *occultus*, in its double sense: not only the processes that structure urban local lives are often clandestine and therefore remain hidden, but local reality itself has become impossible without a 'knowledge of the hidden' and of the spiritual worlds beyond the physical reality of everyday life. Indeed, in most of the cities under scrutiny, people continuously switch between two modes of existence: the reality of the first world, of the diurnal, and a more invisible urban world that exists in what may urban dwellers themselves refer to as the nocturnal 'second' world, or second city, an

occult city of the shadow, forming a *mundus imaginalis*, a topography and historiography of the local *imaginaire* that is no less real than its physical counterpart. In Techiman, for example, the forces of the occult and the invisible do not only play a major role in the electoral outcome, but are also driving forces behind forms of urbanisation and the material expansion of the city itself. It is, to use Marianne Ferme's phrase, an "underneath of things" (Ferme 2001) that is collectively shared by all and determines the lookout and make-up of the urban tissue. In the same respect the night is an important mirror through which to observe the urban fabric. Many cities happen at night, or function through a sharp contrast between light and dark, as Kristien Geenen's research on Butembo's *cabarets* or pubs reveals.

Local urban experience, in summary, seems above all to be generated in the folds and shadows of the city that itself exists as a huge friction zone, marked by a generalised feeling of uncanny-ness. Rather than offering a steady ground, an unchanging background or canvas against which to read the passage of time and of one's life, enabling one to generate a sense of stability and meaning and to interpret change and transformation, the local manifests itself as a pool filled with quicksand. This is not only true with regard to the level of an unmoored *imaginaire*, but also with regard to the very materiality that determines people's lives.

A METHODOLOGY OF THE LINE: BODIES, NETWORKS, MARGINS AND MOBILITY

Ultimately, then, something about shadows makes us very conscious of the activity of seeing. An 'ethnography of shadows' makes us aware of how people construct meaning and have the inescapable need to shape, and make sense of shapes. Our methodology is one of *illuminating the shadow*: if you have an image, and a shadow across it, you invert what is light and what is dark, and then the shadow starts to function as a kind of spotlight. In order to illuminate the shadow, we use the *line as a methodological tool*, the lines that shape new forms of urban sociability. As Fanon (1965) famously stated in 'The Wretched of the Earth': the colonial world was a Manichean world divided into compartments. Today we cannot continue to look at the postcolonial realities by means of the same compartmentalizing linearities that applied to the centre-periphery, rural-urban, or local-global oppositions of the colonial world.

If 'the shadow' is about doubling, about a bond and a relationship, it means that, in order to perceive it, we have to develop new ways of perception, new ways, above all, to perceive *connectedness*. Our research is about adjusting the analytical lens and focus in order to see other, hitherto more invisible, lines that establish these connections, networks, and numerous strands of transposed meaning and action in the multiple but simultaneous territories between more local and global levels that constitute and mark these urban worlds today. How can we uncover some of these other lines usually excluded in the figures that our analytical models commonly map out to determine and capture the urban spaces in the practice of the everyday life? The ordinariness of many of the lines and of the analytical connections we make is often responsible for creating the impression of the black hole in itself. By contrast, we believe that the *lines* and *connections* drawn out by long term field research in the secondary cities under scrutiny will defy such closure and exclusion, and call into question established notions of flexibility and fixture.

For example, the *lines* generated by the movements and physical interactions of people, ideas, commodities and other products of popular urban culture are no longer describing straight lines between here and there, between production and consumption, between starting point and arrival. In urban popular cultural practices and narratives linearity has come to mean something else. It encompasses the unpredictable and the unforeseeable. Mudimbe, in a beautiful text on lines and the paradoxes about allegories of identity and alterity, states: "Our physical geography, the whole domain of our culture, including mental configurations and our relations to nature, are topographies structured by lines" (Mudimbe 2006:2). In his essay, he starts with the idea that the lines generated by the movements and physical interactions of people, ideas, commodities, etc. can no longer be described or interpreted as 'straight' lines. Indeed, postcolonial subjects' lives do no longer unfold as 'straight stories', to paraphrase film director David Lynch's movie title. In popular cultural practices and narratives linearity has come to mean something else. Local biographies and physical interactions are not, and probably never were, generated as straight lines between today and tomorrow, between here and there, between possibility and the impossible, success and failure, life and death. Rather, they develop into cultural topologies that basically are deviations of straightness, and are often marked by instability (in economic terms certainly, but also politically, or morally). Living in the urban local often means that one cannot afford to live with the safety net of steadiness and durability. Setting off from unexpected points of departure, these lines connect figures of a praxis in their dimension of a negation of standard straight lines. They force urbanites to live simultaneously in multiple territories, pushing them to strategically use multiple identities, thereby making of each of these urban dwellers a community in themselves. This is not so much to make the – by now overly

familiar – point concerning the much celebrated capacity of postcolonial subjects to strategically use multiple identities in various contexts.

The point we want to make, rather, is that all of this never seems to be carefully planned in advance. People are, of course, conscious actors and participants in their own lives, struggling to some extent to stay in control, and therefore continuously busy to seize and capture the moment and the opportunity to reinvent and re-imagine their lives in different ways. But at the same time these processes of seizure remain highly unpredictable. Rather than existing through habit and routine, or being formatted by the temporalities of the static and the unchanging, postcolonial urban lives are often shaped through movements of the unexpected, which constantly seem to be steering local actors off course, launching them into new orbits. Such lives, therefore, are never fully autonomous projects either. Rather, they seem to consist of constant stops and starts, directed by the tricky and unforeseeable processes of seizure and capture, which in turn are structured, not only by the spatialities of various networks, of shifting contexts and of connections, but also by the specific temporality of the *moment*, unpredictably caught in between the immobility of endless waiting, and the effervescence of sudden movement. Living in the local of the urban, which in itself has become increasingly unstable and nomadic, constantly generates new opportunities and openings, while simultaneously also causing sudden closures and producing a lot of fall out and collateral damage along the way. Living and surviving in the urban moment therefore often necessitates an extreme (mental and physical) flexibility. Often generated instantaneously, and therefore rarely knowing where they will end up, the meandering lines of local lives constantly generate conjunctures and conjectures of sudden action and passivity, power and powerlessness, expectation and disappointment, rise and fall, dream and nightmare.

A particular kind of *line* that is important in shaping the urban context and outlining its praxis is that of the margin. Again, this is a flexible and permeable line, offering a possibility to generate sources of power by means of the specific ways in which people are capable of crossing (physical, conceptual) borderlines and navigating through spaces that constitute margins. Margins are often vital points of the socio-political body, where diverse networks meet and merge. The margin generates a density or thickness in which, for example, economic power can be redefined into political authority or vice versa, where priests and prophets can become civil servants, where nothing is static and fixed, and where identity and subjectivity (with regard to the state and the administration, for example) are constantly negotiated, for the urban body is also a highly political body, in spite of, or precisely because of the state's 'absence' (which becomes a presence on another level, for example in the whole informal economy surrounding the issuing and obtaining of documents and official papers, certificates, stamps and licenses which the city generates too).

Another trail to reflect differently upon the specificities of contemporary urban life in the Global South is to consider the role of the human body in designing the city's activities. The body often forms a basic infrastructural unit within the construction of urban space. What we need are new ways to reflect upon the movements these urban bodies describe, the lines they trace individually and collectively through time and space. Inhabitants of cities are increasingly embedded in extremely complex and mobile networks of exchange and interdependence, which are not only situated beyond the fixity of the infrastructural level, but also beyond the level of the city as geographical entity. Urban life cannot be understood without paying attention to the ways in which people move in, through and beyond cities. Not only do the networks generated by city dwellers interconnect various geographical spaces, but, as Ann Cassiman's research on female migratory processes from North to South Ghana reveals, they should also be read as forces with a concrete expression in diverse, often intersecting, associational networks, each with their own life span, their own functionality, and their own impact. Not necessarily anchored in any precise geographical location or territory, these networks are often open-ended sites of flux, of contact, transmission, circulation and migration. Through these various 'streaming' realities, information and connectedness are being channelled, reoriented, and transformed. Increasingly, therefore, what we term 'city' is a virtual site. It often has become a state of mind rather than a physical reality on the map. And in order to understand what this specific kind of city life is about, it will be necessary to take into account the content of the urban imaginaries, longings, dreams and desires which are generated by and in turn generate this urban flow.

CONCLUSION

Taking all of these levels into account transforms city dwellers from passive victims into active participants. It generates a specific 'agency' in a specific urban experience, in which urban dwellers design their own social, economic, political and religious agendas, often situated far beyond the level of mere survival. It also creates the capacity or the possibility to become a wilful actor in these specific urban networks. This might range from

participating in smuggling rings, commercial networks or networks that channel the flow of remittances between the city and its diasporas, to membership of religious organisations, often with a strong trans-national character. In order to understand cities, let alone intervene in them, we urgently need to take into account precisely this level of agency, of networked agency and the great mobility that characterizes it.

In summary, then, because of the often instantaneous, spontaneous, improvised and random nature of the lines that unfold throughout individual biographies, and because of the equally unplanned ways in which these individual biographies get caught up and become entangled in other lines and networks of physical and mental contact with other people and other discourses, practices and ideas, the line of one's life rarely is a straight line forward. It is almost never uni-directional or teleological. Therefore, perhaps, urban lives remain difficult to capture within the historicist approaches of modernity and its accompanying ideologies of linear development, progress and accumulation. Living and surviving in the local moment of the urban, on the contrary, almost never is a project that one can plan ahead of time. To deal with the urban is to deal with hazard. Prepared to open up to the unexpected, and not necessarily by choice, urban lives are profoundly marked by the dynamics of the hazardous and the accidental, and that is also why their memories often remain diffuse and opaque. In this way local popular cultures, as diverse theatres of dreams and theatres of war, generate a world that continuously de- and reconstructs itself, continuously stops and starts, and keeps history, memory and questioning in motion.

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