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TRANSLOCAL URBANISM IN SOUTHERN AFRICA: BETWEEN JOHANNESBURG AND MAPUTO

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Abstract

This paper investigates the link between mobility and urban space in the geographical context of Southern Africa. At the intersection of urban theory and mobility studies, this paper focuses on the relationship between mobility, informality and urban space in the ‘cities off the map’. Proposing and adopting the theoretical framework of ‘transnational urbanism’, it addresses the ‘mobile constitution of the urban space’ by investigating the link between trans-local geographies and socio spatial practices of “mukheristas”, Mozambican informal cross-border traders. Mukheristas deploy movement as a livelihood strategy as well as a transactional way to carve out space in the everyday life of the city. Navigating multidimensional constraints, they are able to connect heterogeneous spaces and networks across transnational distances.

The paper attempts to unveil the manifold configurations of agency underlying this process by following the practices, stories, and places of informal cross-border traders between Johannesburg and Maputo deploying multi-situated ethnographic explorations. Using a view from below and a relational approach to urbanism, the paper unfolds the mobility potential and related socio-spatial agencies, often ignored and/or underestimated as important components of the spatial processes pertaining to the the construction of the “urban”.

Keywords: mobility, informality, cross-border traders, urbanity, agency, Africa

JEL classification: F22, F29, J10, J61

Introduction

Movement has long been a distinctive feature giving shape to African societies, cities and regions (Simone, 2011). It has been alternatively used as an instrument of control and manipulation in the form of forced migrations and displacements by colonial regimes and of escape and autonomy in the form of rural-urban, interregional and international migrations by local populations, changing shape and characteristics over time.

Going back and forth, “Africans have long travelled widely across the region and the world, moving themselves and goods across many obstacles”, as AbdouMaliq Simone writes (Simone, 2011). In so doing, they have elaborated transnational circuits of movement and exchange between different cities that call for a concrete engagement by planning and regional policies in order to productively appraise such movement.

This requires the substantial effort of moving from the assumption of stability about the relationship between populations and place towards a vision of cities as interdependent systems.

The ‘relational thinking’ (Söderström, 2014) of contemporary urbanity I refer to, however, differs from an isotropic world of swirling flows. Instead, it considers relations as “historical products, moored in material forms and generating change through power-mediated processes” (Söderström, 2014). Therefore, it is necessary to view relations in light of their historical development and through the lens of moorings and barriers underlying the constitution of interconnected platforms of urban spaces.

The research the following paper is drawn on adopts this perspective in order to interpret underestimated dynamics at the base of the construction of the contemporary world, where mobility is more and more a constitutive aspect as well a clue of structural constraints, inequality and exclusion.

The research focuses on the practises of “*mukheristas*”, informal cross-border traders commuting between Johannesburg and Maputo, in the attempt to represent the territory-in-between they shape by navigating structural limits through their agency.

The paper is organized as follows: First, the theoretical framework and the context of my research will be presented. Second, the empirical experimental methods that have orientated the investigation will be described. Third, the the case-study I focussed on will be duly presented and commented on. Forth, policy implications will be outlined and discussed in detail. Finally, in the conclusions possible ways to engage with the numerous issues emerging when one critically looks at the relationship between movement and urban will be stated.

Theoretical framework

In the last decades migration studies have been crossed by an articulate debate emphasizing the need of respatializing the study of migration in relation to cities (Collins, 2011).

One of the most significant matters raised concerns the need for a close examination of the intersection between migration and cities in a way that goes beyond the vision of the city as a bounded container for migrants in favour of a relational-territorial configuration, connected to other territorial configurations, in the ‘constantly changing geographies of globalization’ (ibid.).

This relational-territorial approach implies a particular attention to the making and re-making of places and territories through networks of flows.

Migrant groups fall within these flows and as such they cease to be seen in a problematic way to finally be envisaged as urban dwellers. Moreover, the relational shift suggests to move from the attention to cartographically drawn territorial limits to “*spatial, infrastructural and institutional moorings that configure and enable them*” (Collins, 2011; or Hannam et al., 2006).

This is at the centre of the call for a critical approach to the mobility studies proposed by Söderström. In the book *Critical Mobilities* (2013), the author endorses the occurrence of the ‘mobility turn’ that John Urry and Mimi Sheller set forth in their article “The New Mobility Paradigms” of 2006. Mobility studies seem to be aware of the historical significance of movement and mobility, as old as the history of mankind inasmuch as expression of the human aspiration to freedom (Palidda, 2008). Nevertheless, they argue the contemporary topicality of the phenomenon. This topicality doesn’t uniquely regard the intensity or ‘liquid’ nature of mobility, but also its complexity and influence on socio-spatial transformations all over the world.

Although drawn on mobilities as the *condicio sine qua non* of globalization, the ‘new mobility paradigm’ distances itself from globalization studies for its focus on power of discourses and practices rather than flows or speed (Sheller, 2011). Therefore, mobility research, calls for a critical re-thinking of the relation between bodies, movement and spaces (Sheller, 2011), in order to shed a light on what is at stake.

Acknowledging the different ontological understanding of mobility proposed by the ‘new mobilities research agenda’, Söderström underlies the “new epistemological foundations based on the consideration” of its centrality (Söderström et. al., 2013).

With his explicit stance in favour of a critical attitude in mobility studies he shows the way to bring out their potential of explicitly addressing unavoidable mobility-related questions of inequality, domination and constraints.

In my view, this implies the adoption of the same perspective of the territorial agents or, in other words, a learning of trans-local processes drawn on an everyday basis, in order to contribute to a deep and articulate trans-local knowledge of urbanity.

The notion of trans-locality, definable as “*situatedness/groundedness during mobility*” (Brickell and Datta, 2012), facilitates the understanding of the role of mobility in connecting and transforming places.

Going beyond the concept of transnationalism (Glick Schiller, 2011), it stresses the importance of local-local connections during transnational migration in a way that shifts the comprehension of locality from a level of isolation to one situated within a network of spaces, places and scales interconnected by plural types of mobility. In such a ‘place-based’ rather than ‘place-bounded’ understanding of the local, identities are negotiated and transformed (Brickell and Datta, 2012) according to the interplay between mobility and power that occurs moment-by-moment.

The everyday urban experience of people is becoming more and more affected by trans-local practices and criss-crossing networks. «Every-day life is thus a transversal site of contestations rather than a fixed level of analysis. It is transversal...because the conflicts manifested there not only transverse all boundaries: they are about these boundaries, their erasure or inscription, and the identity formation to which they give rise» (Campbell, 1996)). Campbell (1996) talks about a reformulation of the notion of every-day life as the ‘transversal politics of everyday life’, which focuses on the relationship between mobility/trans-local networks and space. This directs towards the try to grasp the everyday life experiences of trans-local migrants and mobile subjects in terms of their concrete social and place-making practices, in so re-constructing the ‘*territoires circulatoires*’ (Tarrus, 1992) they shape.

These are made of conquered ‘spaces-in-between’, that are the nodes in which networks converge, overlap, conflict or collaborate in a complex inter-textual landscape.

My proposal is for the adoption of the theoretical framework of ‘translocal urbanism’. I mean by it a heuristic device for the comprehension of contemporary urbanism based on the ‘mobile constitution of the urban space’ through its transnational and translocal configurations. Translocal urbanism aims at understanding the development of “ordinary cities” (Robinson, 2006) looking at the ways in which it is produced by translocal relations. It also represents a peculiar semantic field in which not only the characters and “the meanings of the places produced by and, in turn, producing globalised mobilities” (Söderström, 2012), but also the power of the regulations they depend on, come to the fore.

At the same time, mobility is a socially constructed and regulated movement, encompassing among the other things relevant aspects of competence (Cresswell, 2008).

Therefore, the ‘translocal urbanism’ approach is strongly concerned with the spatial manifestations of mobility as well as the multifaceted dimensions of agency embedded in it.

The present paper explores such issues posing the more accurate question of what kind of agency derives from the practices of mobility in contexts marked by strong structural limitations (such as the African one) and what kind of spatial configuration it takes.

This is envisaged as a fundamental step for the development of planning as a sensible practice of knowing (Davoudi, 2015) and learning (McFarlane, 2011) able to steer the design of policies towards a positive use of the ways in which movement respatializes social dynamics and resources (Simone, 2011).

Method and scope

The adoption of a relational and trans-local lens of investigation demands an appropriate research method. It is necessary *"to follow the object of the study across sites and scales in order to map the relationships between different actors, locations and levels"* (Marcus, 1995).

Hence my methodology (mainly drawing upon qualitative research) has been articulated into the main operational macro-spheres that I call 'listening to' and 'chasing'.

By 'listening to' I refer to the use I made of semi-structured interviews, participant observations and narrative inquiry by visual tools, as the first manner to approach the complexity of the field.

My interviewees were not only *mukheristas*, but also other local actors connected to informal cross-border trades, such as drivers, employees at the station, owners of transport companies, hoteliers, receptionists, business intermediaries, customs officials, street vendors and dealers. Cross-border transit, in fact, directly and indirectly involves a huge variety of subjects, not all of them mobile, many of them playing the role of power brokers. It is necessary to provide a representation as close as possible to these intricate ramifications in order to deconstruct the assemblage they form and to unravel the power relations underlying it.

Through snowball sampling (Silvermann, 2000) I subsequently got to the identification of privileged subjects for in-depth interviews with Mozambican informal cross-border traders.

Given my interest in their stories, narratives and everyday life, that is an eminently mobile life, I decided to follow – or even to chase - them along their trans-local routes.

I carried out two fieldworks, the first one between May and July 2014 mainly in Johannesburg and the second one between October and December 2015 in Johannesburg, Maputo and along the Maputo Corridor. Both of them turned out to be multi-situated ethnographic explorations along the tracks of cross-border traders.

I deployed such an experimental way of engagement with informal cross-border traders and the places they cross as the only manner I could envisage to explore their trajectories, frontiers, intersections and tactics (De Certeau, 1989) deeply and in first person.

The institution of *mukhero* and the case of *mukheristas*

The word *mukhero* comes from a corrupted English phrase: *"May you help me carrying this bag to that side?"* referring to processing at border facilities, which in Shanga and Ronga Mozambican national languages sounds like 'mukhero' (Raimundo, 2005)

It refers to Mozambican informal cross-border trading, mainly conducted between South Africa and Mozambique, though commuting flows encompass multiple scales, going from the regional level (in the case of trade between different provinces with neighbouring countries) to the international one (including trades with Brazil, Thailand, Hong Kong, Dubai and China).

In this last case, the trade concerns the purchase of synthetic hair and cheap cosmetics in countries like Brazil and China to be resold in the booming Mozambican cosmetic industry, as E., a former *mukhero* guy I interviewed on a bus from Maputo to Johannesburg, explains: *"The business in Brazil, China and India is about this artificial hair. They go to buy in these countries. They get much profit from this. You see, these "heads": you pay about 7,000 MZN (Mozambic currency). It's about 200 ZAR (South African Rands). But in India or in China or in Brazil it can cost about ZAR 1,000 ZAR. Usually are the youngest to do this. They are from 20 to 35 years old. They are the young generation of mukheristas working on a global scale. Because you can transport the hair in a bag like this, you can transport 5 or 7 cages here and*

then you pay nothing but you can carry 100,000/200,000 MZN in a small bag like this. There they put it, they squeeze it. Transport is about 25/20.000. You go and you come. Because if you take a straight flight from Maputo it is expensive. But what they do is to take bus to Johannesburg and then straight to China or to Brazil. The flight is cheap. If you find promotions it is about 25,000 MZN (10,000/8,000 ZAR), you go and come back. Doing this business they got their own saloon and their houses in South Africa». (E., a former Mozambican *mukhero* - June 2014, Johannesburg).

I focussed specifically on the flow of people commuting between Johannesburg and Maputo. This falls within the ‘historical transnational space’ (Vidal, 2010) connecting southern Mozambique with eastern South Africa, that has been shaped by migration and extensive informal cross-border trading.

This transnational space has been constructed by alternate historical events connected to the shifting economic and political systems in effect during and after apartheid.

It dates back to the beginning of 1900, when it was created by the social figure of the young male adventurer predominantly coming from rural areas of Mozambique and working in South African mines. It was the product of the work system based on temporary migration of the apartheid-era, that periodically forced migrant workers to go back home in order to retard their self-organisation (Vidal, 2010).

Migration has long been a crucial component of the asymmetrical and subordinate crossborder relationship between South Africa and Mozambique, based on White South African capital exploitation of Black labour (Söderbaum and Taylor, 2009)

Also after the demise of apartheid and the independence of Mozambique, with the establishment of formal democratic institutions in both countries, migration from Mozambique to South Africa has continued: what was once a difficult and dangerous journey to South Africa is now far easier thanks to South Africa's automatic 30-day-visa policy.

The South African 30-day-visa policy allows citizens of 29 countries/territories including Mozambique who hold valid national passports not to require South African visas for visits of up to 30 days. It so represents an easy loophole for informal cross-border traders to carry out their economic activity.

The practice of *mukhero* is currently dominated by the presence of women, called *mukheristas*, consistently with the phenomenon of ‘femigration’ that is the increase on a global scale of women choosing to move to other countries particularly for work opportunities and in most of the cases migrating independently, rather than accompanying or joining husbands in host countries (Nkomo, 2011).

Aged 25-45, women represent the 70% of regional informal cross border traders between Mozambique and South Africa (Peberdy and Rogerson, 2000) and the 80-95% of applicants for visitors visas for trading or shopping in SA (Peberdy and Crush, 1998).

Nowadays *mukheristas* manage thousands of USD and Rands, possess trucks and chains of supply stores and have become prominent in the local economy.

Mukheristas travel to South Africa as often as twice to three times a month, using mostly busses and minibuses, to a lesser extent the train. Once in Johannesburg, they buy goods in wholesale store-in most of the cases, in Dragon City, a huge area of Chinese shopping malls in the city centre, and in some other shopping centres in the ‘Town’-to make resale at tripled or quadrupled prizes in Maputo. Here, they deliver the goods to retail merchants, mainly coming from Nigeria and Burundi, who work both in the wholesale and retail markets (such as Estrela Vermelha market, Xipamanine market, Chikene market, Mandela market, Museu and Zimpeta market), where they go back the day after to take money.

‘Informals’, a misleading characterization

The association of *mukheristas* with informal trades is ascribable to full or partial evasion of trade-related regulations, for instance through non-possessing of legal license (Cruz and Silva, 2005).

The word *mukhero* itself is often used and perceived as a vernacular, derogatory expression pointing out the smuggling-related aspect of the practice. The activity may sometimes encompass proper illegal practices, such as misclassification, under-invoicing and/or bribery of customs officials, that however mustn't be confused with the phenomenon of illegal economy.

The smuggling, in facts, concerns legitimately produced goods (staple food commodities, low quality consumer goods such as clothes, shoes etc., pieces of furniture and electronics as indicated above) and as such it is a fundamentally legal import-export activity drawn on the exploitation of the differential of currencies between the two countries.

However, the characterization of this trade as 'informal' is shall not misleading, given the multiple thresholds of contact between formal and informal in this phenomenon, starting from the multiple linkages between the formal and informal sectors in buying and selling (Peberdy, 2002).

The institution of *mukhero* actually feeds both the formal and the informal market. The first one is in the hands of border officials, who tax the transit of goods and people as much as they like. The second one results from the violation of the law, for example by exceeding the trade limits permitted by law or by bribing border guards simply because it is cheaper than paying taxes. This clearly shows how the process of informality that characterizes the transit of goods and people across borders between African countries is common and widespread (Chabal, 2009).

Furthermore, the idea of marginality that the association of the *mukhero* practice to informality implies is completely misrepresentative: the volumes of these trades are large, they often exceed formal sector cross-border trades; informal cross-border traders comprise a significant part of small, micro and medium enterprise activity in countries in the region and may have a significant impact on formal and informal retail markets; and, last but not least, they play a significant role in regional trade relationships (Peberdy, 2002).

Here, the notion of informality clearly shows how it refers to the process by which modernity and tradition interact in a dynamic agency that seeks to overcome existing constraints to achieve "decent" living conditions (ibid.).

Informal cross-border traders do not consider themselves to belong to a sort of virtual underclass but rather to be human agents with legitimate recourse to their own agency to navigate and take advantage of the environment they live in against and across structural constrains.

They, indeed, embody the spirit of African entrepreneurship. Driven by a lack of formal employment opportunities and succeeding in challenging conditions through sheer determination and a savvy business sense, they make up a crucial, though often overlooked part of the national and transnational economies in the continent (ibidem).

The character of informality has rather to be attributed to the high degree of vulnerability to which informal cross-border traders are exposed. Lack of storage facilities, lack of affordable accommodation, fear for safety and security and experiences of crime (especially theft), xenophobia, police harassment and regulatory issues regarding visas, passports, trading licences, tax refunds and customs control are the hardest difficulties.

In contrast to all these hurdles, cross-border traders have deployed a wide range of 'tactics of invisibility' (Kihato, 2007), Ostanel, 2011)) in order to develop their informal business, defend their rights as persons and citizens from risks or threats. In the same way, they manage to avoid control and surveillance.

Invisibility can be a form of everyday life action with political and transformative significance, even when it is not directly associated with being 'political'. For they are always mechanisms for resisting and challenging the normative regulations within one's environment.

The agency behind invisibility

This strategy of invisibility, by contrast, makes particular relevant the agency of migrants. This aspect led my research action, aimed to discover what happens behind the invisibility practiced by these apparently marginal actors and in which manner.

To look at agency in relation to movement in Africa means to conceptualise movement as a practice in which «the sense of the local passes through continuous configurations across geographical distances and divides» (Simone, 2004).

The notion of 'agency', intended as the 'power to', the ability to face and act on opposition, limits and constraints, can embody a passive form - when action is taken when there is little choice - and an active form - when it encompasses purposeful behaviours (Kabeer, 2010).

In this second case, agency may turn out to be transformative: it can act on restrictive structures and constraints and challenge them, initiating processes of change.

Inside limited spaces of manoeuvre, *mukheristas* use mobility and cross-border practices as a way to avoid capture and, hence, as a form of agency, through which they operate tactics at the interstices of strategic constraints (de Certeau, 1984).

Through the multiple forms of agency that the economic activity of informal cross-border trade encompasses, *mukheristas* gain financial independence more easily than in the wage labour market. This allows them to have a major weight in the family, to be equipped in situations of exclusion (loneliness, celibacy, infertility, domestic violence), to transfer hope of a better life to their children, sometimes even to re-invent their womanhood (Cefai, 2003). All this lies in the value of trans-local agency, corresponding to the capacity of crossing the borders and organizing life across borders, as the story of Antonia shows.

This doesn't mean that borders have disappeared. Conversely, borders are inscribed at the heart of the contemporary experience, playing a strategic role in the world-making. Actors are still classed, raced, and gendered bodies in motion in specific historical contexts, within certain political formations (Smith, 2005). However, the border offers an epistemic point of view able to disclose the dynamics that are currently reshaping power and urban space (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2014).

In the case of the border between South Africa and Mozambique, the interesting element standing out is that it is used as an opportunity to extract economic resources. As such, it is shaped and reshaped by informal cross-border trades as well as by border officials, against what declared in the policies.

Mukheristas are cross-border traders and proactive borderers at the same time (Rumford, 2011).

Moreover, they are territory-users and makers. By working as logisticians in connecting the wholesale trade carried on by Chinese and South Africans in South Africa to Mozambicans informal markets - so linking the global markets to the local and regional ones - they display 'socio-spatial' agency.

Here the two terms of the composed adjective 'socio-spatial' are actually interchangeable, assuming the Lefebvrian concept of space as social construct (1974). This implies both the incremental production of space as a 'shared enterprise' (Awan et al., 2011) as well as its political deep nature. In this sense, spatial production is part of a dynamic and hence of a temporal, evolving sequence, which multiple actors contribute to and individuals live out their lives within (Awan et al. 2011).

Deploying movement as a multifaceted strategy of urban survival, cross-border traders readjust to shifting contexts and shape spaces time by time.

In the hostile and xenophobic South African context, they either congregate to the settlement areas of the ethnic group of origin or silently occupy liminal spaces in the city, in so deploying the formerly mentioned ‘tactics of invisibility’. In Maputo, in contrast, they have a much more tangible impact, as part of their earnings are used to open up new economic activities and to purchase plots of land on which to build new houses, thus contributing to Maputo urban expansion.

The most relevant aspect underlying their practice, however, is the process they put in place in (in)visible interstitial spaces of connecting heterogeneous social networks. Wholesalers, retailers, formal and informal transporters (including truck, bus and minibus drivers), hoteliers, storekeepers and buyers of the most diverse cultural and social backgrounds are linked across the border by the practice of *mukhero*.

At the same time, spaces are adjusted to alternative uses, such as in the case of the open space used for informal *braai* in the story of Antonia or vacant spaces re-used as stores and facilities for *mukheristas* and their drivers.

This can be defined as a ‘transactional’ way of finding and carving out space in the everyday life of the city (Lefebvre, 1947; 1961; 1981).

Space is instrumentally approached and the relations among the networks are chiefly driven by economic individualistic reasons. Nevertheless, it reflects a complex spatial agency because it is built through the liminal tension between socio-economic networks and the self (Awan et al., 2011).

The ‘transactional relationships’ put into being by *mukheristas* set up a system of conjunctions and of ‘assemblage’ (Simone, 2011), McFarlane, 2011), Fariás and Bender, 2012).

Such a system is able to generate social compositions across a range of individual skills and needs, which forms the infrastructure of a platform providing for and reproducing life in African cities (Simone, 2004).

Without a deep understanding of this peculiar form of African urbanity, able to recognize and appraise the capacities and openings it generates though avoiding romanticised interpretation, any intervention or policy will risk to miss the opportunity to identify alternatives for a more inclusive, just and really development-oriented urbanism.

Conclusions and discussions

The case of informal cross-border traders between Johannesburg and Maputo provides relevant sparks about the relationship between mobility, informality and urban spaces that can be extended beyond the local context. In a more and more globally interconnected world, urban environment only apparently off-the-map (Robinson, 2006)) increasingly show how issues reformulating the principle of the ‘right to the city’ go beyond geographical boundaries. In a view of modern cities and regions that privileges a relational rather than a territorially bounded approach, urban issues and politics become topological (Amin, 2008)).

A first issue has to do with the fact that mobility acquires multiple manifestations that are not simply of ephemeral relevance to our understanding of cities but rather constitutive of urban and region making. They can, therefore, only be grasped by adopting a focus on mobile people (including migrants) as ordinary urban dwellers and to their everyday life as often trans-locally lived. Looking at the trans-local everyday life of informal cross-border traders, the empirical reality of a micro-regions exploited and shaped by their agency in order to survive (and even prosper) among difficulties unravels complex relationships between distant cities, state and society, power and agency. *Mukheristas* shape an underground territory “in-

between” (Kihato (2013)) made of interstitial spaces and routes to and within Johannesburg and Maputo that is scarcely taken into consideration and supported in terms of policies.

Such a peculiar territories shows how traditional, dichotomic categories like formal-informal, official-unofficial, global-local are blurred (ibid.) and power turn out to be continuously reconfigured.

Secondly, this view from below not only of mobility and urbanity but also of globalization (Portes, 1997; or Della Porta, 2006) re-casts the common notion of marginality.

Through their capacity to smartly navigate the structural constraints and opportunities they encounter, in fact, informal cross-border traders prove to be proactive social agents able to constitute globalization even as they are impacted by it (Desai, 2009).

Their practices have important implications for political economies, social justice and urbanity.

This leads us to necessarily rethink governance and development.

Informal cross-border traders demonstrate how urbanisation, more than consisting in city life, means construction of intersections between actors, spaces and actants and circulation of commodities and possibilities. They also demonstrate how mobility is a way of life constituting new links between places (Simone, 2014).

It is therefore necessary an approach to governance and development that promotes the ‘mobility capital’.

This means first of all permitting that people keep going and coming through visa policies and sustainable border fees as well as a transparent management of the flows.

Secondly, it is necessary to provide a welcoming and enabling environment in the contexts of destination and a fair redistribution of the resources in that of arrival. This concretely results in giving value to the new spaces of transaction, operation and habitation informal cross-border traders create across region as well as to their practices.

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