

The now-times of (post) apartheid

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Abstract

This commentary explores the multi-temporalities of the pasts which relate to South African cities ‘now’. Inspired by Myriam Houssay-Holzchuch’s article in this volume, and the wider engagements of French scholars in the South African context, this commentary takes as a starting point Walter Benjamin’s idea of history as thought through ‘now-time’. In doing so, I assess the declining relevance of the ‘post’ in thinking the futures of South African cities.

Keywords

‘now-time’, post-apartheid, South Africa, urbanisation

Myriam Houssay-Holzchuch’s (2021) thoughtful article stages a series of questions about ‘post’(ing) apartheid. She does this analytically by exploring the multi-temporalities of South African urban history, and tracing these in the materialities of urban life. I draw inspiration in my response here from Myriam’s evocation of the ‘dream’ image to think about this. Walter Benjamin (1999) famously uses the image of the dream to explore the multi-temporality of history. Inspired by the Surrealists and Leibniz, among others, Benjamin formulated the proposition that the ‘historical object’, our knowledge of the past, was constituted at the moment of ‘awakening’ (as from a dream), in the ‘now’ of recognisability – the moment when different elements from the past flash together, suddenly, in some kind of constellation through which we can understand the past and, in turn, also the present. In this moment, too, he suggests, resides the possibility of some kind of weak messianism, of other immanent futures. In this sense, (multiple) histories can only ever be written from the point of view of a particular time and perspective (and we would today

add, place and positionality).¹ He called this ‘dialectics at a standstill’, or a dialectical image. Composing historical critique in this way draws together elements of explanation from different times and places, ‘blasting’ them from the continuum of history, say, from apartheid to post-apartheid, to form new constellations of interpretation.

Thinking the history of apartheid ‘now’ tells this past differently from the concerns which shaped analyses in the 1980s or 1990s, for example, in the crucible of violent (binary, oppositional) struggle and a revolution wrested from the unwilling. How might thinking from ‘now’ reframe understanding of South Africa’s cities today, their history, and the potentiality of their future? What might an awakening, with the weak messianic, revolutionary potential of writing history from ‘now’ (Nuttall, 2004),

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comprise in thinking beyond ‘post-ing’ apartheid and the apartheid city?

Fragments of a future

A first point to draw out from Myriam’s focus on the space-time entanglements of the post-apartheid city is that different aspects of the past matter, viewed from ‘now’. Together with the analysts of (post)-post-socialism, we can (and should) approach the past highly selectively to understand the present (Schönle, 2020). Narratives which trace the history of ‘apartheid’ and its persistence do not necessarily tell the history of ‘now’. During apartheid, many things were not (only) about apartheid. They were about (racial) Fordism, techniques of financing city government, ways of mobilising urban life, the design of houses for the poor, and the delivery of services in times of financial and political uncertainty. To reckon (now) with the past, we have to also forget apartheid. Previously trivial elements of the past come into perspective as highly significant ‘now’. For example, the (apartheid) mode of financing local government through property tax and service charges has allowed for redistribution and development, as well as sharpened conflicts over delivery (Robinson et al., 2020). And it is the external dramas and relationships of the African National Congress (ANC) in exile which shaped governance, appointed presidents, and underpinned party loyalty and corruptibility (Gumede, 2005; Johnson, 2010). To make sense of ‘now’, it is with more recent post-apartheid pasts that we must reckon. To trace a history of corruption, for example, we need: the seductions of European bribery to secure lucrative contracts in the early 1990s (Feinstein, 2009); the well-designed proportional representation electoral system which reinforced party power and entrenched corruption (Muthien and Khosa, 1995); the enlightened black economic empowerment mechanisms which supported creative access to corporate and state enterprises but which have since led to the ‘politicisation of procurement’ (Chipkin and Swilling, 2018: 55). Together these have installed, at the heart of both state and business, practices which have had the unintended consequence of legitimating and

enabling plunder, including of municipal assets and resources built up over generations of careful management, in which many cities justifiably take pride (Moodley, 2019; Olver, 2017). Stealing cities and capturing the state – the constellations of pasts which allow us to think about how to contest these phenomena in the present and shape the future need to reach escape velocity from apartheid as the explanatory tether.

The second point Myriam develops concerns taking inspiration from the city itself to think about entangled space-times. The apartheid city has always been more than just a city – its organisation and form was a cornerstone of the power of the apartheid state, and its transformation a major stake in the imagined post-apartheid future (Robinson, 1996). In relation to Myriam’s concerns with space and the city, does the analytic of ‘now’ time, the dialectical image of reading history, as multi-temporality, from the present, have something to add? She argues that it is in the city that the juxtaposition, or layering, of the ruins or remnants of past modernities, and the immanent construction of futures for the present is apparent – brecciation and palimpsest are prompts to think these configurations of multi-temporality (Bartolini, 2013). Myriam stays rather close to the insights and dynamism revealed in the happenstances and juxtapositions of the physical fabric of the city. With her, we are scouring the landscape for the past(s). We see in the spaces of the city, the ‘suspensions’ and ‘liminality’, the ‘tomasons’ or leftovers of apartheid (Gervais-Lambony, 2018), indicating the incompleteness of the project to overturn a past which we knew then, in the time of revolution. However, the terms of the critique might get stuck, too, in this way, if our past and our (failed) future are thought from another era. What can we find of pasts and futures, what constellations might flash into view, if we traverse the city, now?

From some perspectives, the South African city has transformed almost beyond recognition since 1990. Moving through the city (for me this is usually Johannesburg), what I see are the new bridges and public architecture, extending roads and train lines, multiplied examples of gated privilege, new malls and office towers, but also modest houses stretching

to the horizon. Overall, we can observe the emergence of a sprawling city-region that seems to never end, bringing the three major municipalities (and several smaller ones) of the region (Gauteng) into a single configuration (Gotz et al., 2014; Harrison, 2019). Or, stuck indoors, standing at a window, high in the city, I see the exhilarating but oppressive proximity of massed buildings from the 1930s and 1960s booms, providing the setting for the bustling, chaotic, and (dis)ordered hum of the people in a city trying to get by. These buildings have been through several intense cycles of change – dynamic in their apparent immutability. In the centre-city, early deracialisation of high-rise residential buildings in the 1980s gave way to increasing densities of occupation by locals and migrants through the 1990s, including a period of hi-jacking of buildings by gangs. This was followed by a process of renewal in some areas which has invented a new format of closely managed low-income housing in the inner city (Mosselson, 2019).

If we travel outwards, across the sprawling city, where are we ‘now’? How about Cosmo City: conceived in high apartheid as Norweto (North Western Township), but built by the still ambitious post-apartheid state (Haferberg, 2013). This is an economically ‘mixed’ residential area in which the city managers have taken great pride, so informal constructions – backyard shacks – have been strongly regulated. Looking across this carefully planned expanse, I ask myself, is it a township? Is this apartheid? Some things look just the same as Soweto, its southern cousin, South Western Township, ever did. Contemporary versions of the small houses which characterise South Africa’s townships, some for rent, some for sale. Communal facilities, schools, and clinics, a shopping centre. Well tarred roads. Some things are pure repetition of the apartheid past, like an inkblot across a folded page. As Norweto, it was envisaged, just like Soweto, as a place to dump the poor at a distance from all the things whites wanted for themselves. But it is now only a 20-minute drive from the new, dynamic Northern business district. Soweto, which initially seemed so distant from the city, over time acquired privileged access to the centre of Johannesburg; now it is far from the employment opportunities which are

found increasingly in homes and offices of the northern centres and suburbs. In addition to the huge expansion of extensive lower-income housing developments, all of South Africa’s cities have grown, in a bubble-like way to the north, with high-end urban developments, large new shopping malls, and gated elite and middle-class housing. These are also landscapes which express apartheid histories – the northern extensions of Johannesburg, Cape Town, and Durban were made possible by the racial fragmentation of government and the competition among municipalities which pitted them against each other, US-style, for development, income streams, and jobs (Todes, 2014). Together these numerous low- and high-income developments have transformed the spatial structure of the city.

More generally, though, the meaning of many different elements of South Africa’s cities has been unsettled by the dynamic nature of urbanisation such that the constellations of spaces and times which make sense of the urban ‘now’ bear no clear relationship to the historical object, ‘apartheid city’. The dynamics of the city ‘now’ reflect pre-colonial pasts (Bass, 2011) as much as developer ambitions and ingenuity in constructing low-income housing the face of rising land values or activist bureaucrats and planners whose energies and visions still carry, 30 years later, the (post-ed) hopes of a better future (Ballard and Harrison, 2020). The future city is being made, simultaneously, from the land holdings of apartheid era farmers speculating on the expansion of townships (Butcher, 2020), with the confidence of apartheid-era property tax systems which subtend the possibility of strategic planning across the whole city (Robinson et al., 2020), and with the myriad extreme efforts of mothers and workers, traders and carers, whose journeys both rely on and are blind to the apartheid history, as it is the city, now, which must be traversed to keep life going (Culwick et al., 2015).

Wake up!

We live metaphors to imagine where we are, to make (sense of) our worlds (Houssay-Holzchuch, 2021, Table 1). But as scholars we construct

concepts. These port, in various ways, the empirical world. The previous section stretched out ‘now’ time across the multiplicity of spaces and pasts which make up the city in South Africa. Looking from ‘now’, what kind of an historical object is the South African city? To understand the city, to think the future of the South African city past the outdated gaze of the post (apartheid), we have to wake up to other pasts and to emerging spatial forms. *Vukani! Wake up, this is Joburg!* (Zack and Govender, 2019; Zack and Lewis, 2014).

South Africa’s cities sprawl and extend out across the country, reconfiguring its elements to create new constellations of meaning. More than this, these cities are and have always been deeply entwined with urban places across the globe, shaping and being shaped by the wider urban world. Learning from South Africa, as Myriam recommends, is more than an academic exercise, though – it has been a generous, projective labour in which the tools of the (capable) state have been invented and stretched, shared and inspired in collaborations across the country and continent by South Africa’s urban scholars (Oldfield, 2014; Pieterse et al., 2018; Watson and Odendaal, 2013). In return, I suggest, we can think the future of the South African city with anywhere, too. This will likely confound any Southern categorisation (even the nicely plural one of the French conjugation, *les pays suds*, which I learnt from Myriam). Following French philosopher Jacques Rancière and the US anthropologist of Brazilian urbanism, James Holston, for example, Julian Brown (2015) imagines that the possibilities for contesting the political order are emerging in many different settings in South Africa (law courts and unions, neighbourhoods, streets and government), and that transformation could arise anywhere. In the widely documented, extensive, and insistent popular urban mobilisations across the country contesting the political settlements which have emerged in the post-apartheid era (Bond, 2004; Desai, 2000; Hart, 2013), might a new political subject of the future South Africa be forged? Hopes for the future (South Africa needs this) might find resonance in thinking from the urban ‘now’: from pasts that have not yet been recognised and on the grounds of spaces which have yet to form themselves.


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Note

1. In this commentary, I write as a white South African whose political energies have been on the side of the struggle against racism. I write based in London where I have lived over the past 25 years while retaining close familial and working contacts in South Africa. A scramble of selves and places, but my identification seems to persistently start (t)here.

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