

Session 9:
**Writing and Teaching Urban History in Africa in the
Twenty-First Century**

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In 1968 H.J.Dyos edited a seminal collection of essays entitled *The Study of Urban History*.¹⁸ This collection stemmed from the first-ever conference of British urban historians which was held at Leicester University (where Dyos was Professor of Urban History) in 1966. Included among the essays were seven dubbed simply, 'Discussion'. These were the written-up versions of questions and comments that followed the presentation of either single papers or groups of papers on topics such as methodological trends, sources for urban history, stages of urban development, the social structure of towns or defining or setting an agenda for the emerging sub-discipline. There is therefore a notable precedent within the field for this written summary of the presentations, questions and comments that accompanied the session on urban history at the centenary colloquium.

Each 'Discussion' was put together by a different participant and, consciously or unconsciously, reflected (to greater and lesser extents) a little of their own view about what was particularly worth recording. In other words, these 'Discussion' essays were not intended to be a verbatim précis of proceedings. Neither is this summary of the session on urban history.

It is worth admitting from the outset that there were shortcomings in the nature and range of the four presentations on offer in Cape Town in 2003. Most obviously, they did not offer coverage of the state of urban history across the whole of Africa, beyond its north-eastern and southern tips. Nor did they speak to one another directly. The three discussants had only seen a brief abstract of the main paper by Professor Nelly Hanna of the American University of Cairo, on

18. H.J. Dyos, ed., *The Study of Urban History* (London, 1968).

urban history in North Africa and the wider Arab world. Perhaps as a result they chose in their own offerings to focus on South African urban history rather than engaging with Hanna's comments. And only Dr Elizabeth van Heyningen (UCT research associate) went beyond historiography and touched (albeit very briefly) on the teaching of urban history. Yet each presentation, together with the subsequent discussion, raised issues, posed questions or offered insights that should prove useful to existing or would-be practitioners of the sub-discipline, as one trusts that the following summary will demonstrate.

Professor Christopher Saunders (UCT) opened the session by noting that, having until then been almost ignored by UCT historians, urban history had from the 1970s to the 1990s been a 'boom area' at the university. Yet now many of its former practitioners, including him, had moved on. He, for one, had been drawn into Cape Town history in the 1970s because of the contemporary threat of forced removal facing African communities in Langa and Nyanga.¹⁹ By offering this autobiographical insight, Saunders raised what became a recurrent theme in the session: what has motivated, or more controversially, should motivate, the study of urban history in Africa.

Hanna, whose own work has been largely on the urban history of Egypt, began by stating that a major difference between North and sub-Saharan Africa is that cities in the Arab world of the North are far more ancient. The sources for the study of the latter's history are voluminous, but a major problem was the lack of historians to study them, given the decline of history as a subject in Egypt. She suggested that there were some similarities between the dual nature of Arab cities – with 'indigenous' and 'European' towns side-by-side – and South African cities, with their distinction between the 'European' town and the 'black' townships. Although there was a pre-colonial urban historiography, Hanna noted that the academic study of North African (and Middle-Eastern) cities commenced with colonialism. By the beginning of the twentieth century European academics were drawing distinctions between what they saw as the ordered and 'logical' European part of town and the 'disordered', indigenous 'non-cities' which 'didn't make sense'. They used religion to explain the difference: the haphazard buildings and alleys in the indigenous town were reflections 'of the disorder of the Muslim mind'. The historiography of North African/Arab cities changed somewhat in the 1970s, influenced by the rise of urban studies and social history in Europe and the United States. Historians began using new sources which led both to new themes in urban historiography and (one can infer from Hanna's comments) new explanations of the built environment of the indigenous city. She had time to say something about two such sources. 'Waqf' deeds (of either religious or family endowments) often contained rich information about both the endower and the

19. And hence Saunders's first two essays on earlier forced removals and resistance: 'The Creation of Ndabeni: Urban Segregation and African Resistance in Cape Town' and 'From Ndabeni to Langa', both in C.C. Saunders, ed., *Studies in the History of Cape Town*, vol. 1 (1979).

buildings endowed. Ottoman court records (from about the 1530s) recorded the day-to-day dealings of a wide range of social categories, whether these were property transactions, marriages, loans, or conflict with neighbours. Such records had helped to make possible some uncovering of the (previously hidden) history of labouring people and ethnic minorities in Arab cities.

Professor Vivian Bickford-Smith (UCT) began by noting, like Saunders, that there was not much South African urban history (beyond the antiquarian or 'municipal record' kind) before the 1970s.²⁰ The explosion of work on urban history in that decade (and beyond) was a response both to contemporary processes, events and crises – like the 1976 Soweto uprising – as well as to the changing Western historiographical trends that Hanna has already mentioned. South African urban historiography, whether 'history-in-the-city' or 'history-of-the-city' (to borrow Paul Maylam's terms), contains some weaknesses.²¹ These include the fact that there have been few histories of South African cities from their origins to the present; that there is a dearth of comparative studies (a lacuna in British urban studies bemoaned in that 1966 conference); that many South African histories are confined to a focus on the urban experience of only one racial group rather than the interaction between groups; that there are few histories of small towns; that there is a lack of statistical methodology to trace the history of the likes of cost of living or property ownership; and that there are few histories of whole South African towns – rather than just their township components – that might reveal the history of urban planning through time. Yet South African urban historiography since the 1970s has been hugely productive and often of high quality. Perhaps this was because it was inspired in the apartheid years not only

20. Saunders had mentioned the pioneering work on Grahamstown's history by W.M. Macmillan and the non-historian Jack Simons's interest in Cape Town history. Bickford-Smith referred to Maynard Swanson's 1960s work on the possibilities of urban history in South Africa and his later piece on urban segregation: M. Swanson, 'Reflections on the Urban History of South Africa: Some Problems and Possibilities, with Special Reference to Durban', in H.L. Watts, ed., *Focus on Cities: Proceedings of a Conference Organised by the Institute for Social Research, at the University of Natal, Durban...1968* (Durban, 1970), 143-9, and M. Swanson, 'The Sanitation Syndrome: Bubonic Plague and Urban Native Policy in the Cape Colony, 1900-1909', *Journal of African History*, 18, 3 (1977), 387-410; to Rodney Davenport's research on the 1923 Natives Urban Areas Act: T.R.H. Davenport, *The Beginnings of Urban Segregation in South Africa: The Natives (Urban Areas) Act of 1923 and its Background* (Grahamstown, 1971); and to David Welsh's 'The Growth of Towns', in M. Wilson and L. Thompson, eds, *The Oxford History of South Africa*, vol. 2 (Oxford, 1971), 172-243. Bickford-Smith noted that other works of urban studies had been contributed by non-historians like Monica Wilson and Archie Mafeje, Philip Mayer and Ellen Hellmann.
21. P. Maylam, 'Explaining the Apartheid City: 20 Years of South African Urban Historiography', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 21, 1 (Mar. 1995), 20. Indeed, this issue of the *Journal of Southern African Studies* was a special issue on urban studies and urban change in southern Africa, and the introduction by Hilary Sapire and Jo Beall, as well as Susan Parnell's and Alan Mabin's article on 'Rethinking Urban South Africa', are useful overviews of past and contemporary trends in the sub-discipline in the mid 1990s.

by a political agenda but also by academic leadership (at UCT, Witwatersrand University and SOAS) which encouraged an international and collective research engagement that proved to be enormously exciting and supportive. At UCT, work on Cape Town history drew more on Dyos-informed, eclectic urban studies rather than the more rigidly neo-marxist revisionism that informed most Rand history, which might explain why Cape Town historiography was arguably more inclusive in terms of topics covered. This inclusivity informed, and enabled, the production of a two-volume illustrated history of Cape Town in the late 1990s.²² But now the collective study of Cape Town history in this department has all but collapsed, outside of work done by the Centre for Popular Memory, and writing about Cape Town has largely again become the responsibility of non-historians. Perhaps what Harrison Wright unsympathetically referred to as ‘the burden of the present’ had had a positive effect on urban historiography in South Africa, and we should be inspired once more to study the origins and histories of the multiple crises (still) facing our cities today.²³

Van Heyningen began by stressing that the two-volume histories of Cape Town had evolved from collaboration between staff and students at UCT, as well as people from outside the university, that had begun in the 1970s. She said that to begin with there was little expertise in urban history at UCT. What helped to rectify this situation was an Honours course she ran with Howard Phillips, which had enabled them to learn about the sub-discipline while generating student research. The Cape Town History Workshops, which commenced in 1978, had facilitated an engagement with outsiders and given rise to a series of small books called *Studies in the History of Cape Town*.²⁴ Writing the two-volume history of Cape Town was a collaborative effort between the three authors. They had wanted a relatively seamless work, rather than discrete chapters by different authors. To this end, they had hammered out a series of themes that they wanted to come through in each chapter. The authors drew on a multitude of available illustrations of Cape Town not just because they knew that the general public would be attracted by these, but also because such representations of the city could be critically discussed in the books. She suggested that the two volumes had brought a degree of closure to the History Department’s urban history project. But rather than this spelling the end of the sub-discipline in Cape Town, she felt that changing times – and particularly the opening up of international tourism after 1994 – had meant that urban history had mutated into ‘heritage studies’ in the city.

22. N. Worden, V. Bickford-Smith and E. van Heyningen, *Cape Town The Making of a City* (Cape Town, 1998); V. Bickford-Smith, E. van Heyningen and N. Worden, *Cape Town in the Twentieth Century* (Cape Town, 1999).

23. H. Wright, *The Burden of the Present: The Liberal-Radical Controversy over Southern African History* (Cape Town, 1977).

24. There were seven volumes in all. See C. Saunders *et al.*, eds, *Studies in the History of Cape Town*, 6 vols (Cape Town, 1979-1988), and E. van Heyningen, ed., *Studies in the History of Cape Town*, vol. 7 (Cape Town, 1994).

She ended by also identifying the need for comparative urban studies, and for stressing the need to identify the different identities of South African cities, as well as pointing out gaps in Cape Town historiography, including the paucity of economic history.

Dr Noor Nieftagodien (University of the Witwatersrand) felt that he was less burdened by nostalgia for past ways of studying urban history than others on the panel, since he had only recently entered the academy. He felt that one of the present problems in South African historiography was that there was far less history-of-the-city or of 'the urban', than there were histories of what had happened in urban areas. To redress the imbalance there needed to be more works both of synthesis and theory. Currently at Wits there was a considerable amount of work on the history of townships, with a huge demand for such history coming from local communities, and there needed to be even more if an overview history of Johannesburg were to be possible. Yet there were potential pitfalls. Many of these histories remained local, and were not looking beyond individual townships. In addition, much of this local history had been influenced by the requirements of tourism and heritage studies. This had often resulted in a narrow focus to the work, so that it could be linked to a nationalist agenda, and became subject to commercial imperatives. He felt that in recent years urban historiography had suffered from parochialism and from individual historians protecting their own intellectual fiefdoms. He suggested that we needed to produce more 'resistance history', while developing an awareness of how 'the urban' had shaped the character of such struggles and the need to keep a critical eye on the nationalist agenda. He concluded by warning that urban historians were being 'muscle out' by others within urban studies who were deemed to be of more use to urban policy makers because they were more obviously located on the development studies terrain. Urban historians should be involved in the struggles over resources, space and development. If they were, this would stimulate student interest and also ensure that class (as a theoretical tool) and class struggle were not neglected.

A selection of questions, comments and responses follows.

- * Dr Sean Field (Centre for Popular Memory, UCT) supported the idea of the fruitfulness of collaborative research and writing. He mentioned that this approach lay behind the production of a special edition of *African Studies* on oral history in the Western Cape.²⁵ Such collaborative projects encouraged methodological pluralism, and embracing such pluralism and explicitly discussing the different theoretical biases that inform our work would enrich urban historiography.
- * Dr Harriet Deacon argued that historians needed to get more involved in planning and development work, as well as the heritage industry. For

25. *African Studies*, 60, 1 (July 2001), edited by Vivian Bickford-Smith, Sean Field and Clive Glaser.

instance, they could be more involved in heritage impact assessments, which should not be left solely to the architectural historians.

- * Professor Rodney Davenport (formerly Rhodes University and before that UCT) made a plea for more work on local government. He said that as someone who had studied the administration of the 1923 Urban Areas Act, he was aware of the enduring damage that had been done by the policy of putting the poor on the outer margins of South African cities – not least because they suffered from far greater transport costs than would otherwise have been the case. We should also study the question of local government finances, and the relationship between local and central government over the matter of financing housing. We should also consider global comparisons between South African cities and others in terms of the structure of local government and the allocation of local taxes.
- * Professor Patrick Harries (Basle University) believed that urban history in South Africa had been driven by the agenda of the struggle, and was almost an exposé history of poverty, rightlessness and disease in our cities. He wondered whether urban historians in South Africa were now starting to look not just at victims in the past, but also at perpetrators. For instance, in terms of forced removals, was anyone looking at estate agents who had benefited, which could be discovered from Deeds Office searches, or were the imperatives of reconciliation too important?
- * Professor Neil Parsons (University of Botswana) suggested that the experience of ANC exiles had prejudiced the new South African government against site and service schemes as too ugly and demeaning. Instead, the state had to deliver ‘good’ housing. The failure to do adequately so since 1994 had produced a flight of the new black elite from the townships.
- * Dr Ruth Watson (University of London) wondered whether it was useful to distinguish between an ‘African’ and a ‘colonial’ city.
- * Associate Professor Howard Phillips (UCT) asked what the new topics were on the agenda of urban historians in the English-speaking world today.

Professor Saunders invited the panellists to close the session with some responses or concluding comments.

Nieftagodien, responding to the point about the flight of the new elite from townships, commented that the ANC government had made no real attempt to challenge the configuration of the apartheid city, and that this flight was the sole obvious change in this respect since 1994. He also claimed that Johannesburg was the only ‘African’ city in South Africa, yet local authorities there still attempted to hide or eradicate the ‘African presence’. He agreed with Davenport that we should study the history of local government, and suggested that we should look at the interaction between local authorities and civil movements.

Van Heyningen suggested that we should explore what might be meant by the term ‘African city’. Surely Cairo was an African city, even if the vast majority

of the population was Arab? She responded to Harries' question on 'perpetrators' in the past by saying that there had been different beneficiaries through time and agreed with Deacon that historians should be involved in heritage impact assessments because of the broader understanding they could offer.

Bickford-Smith, also replying to Harries, said that we knew little about estate agents' benefiting from forced removals beyond the preliminary research conducted many years ago now by John Western.²⁶ In response to Watson, he was not sure that distinguishing between an 'African' and a 'colonial' city was necessarily helpful. In terms of current international trends in urban history (Phillips' question), he thought that there was considerable continuity of traditional topics, but that there also seemed of late to be a particular interest in the question of space, place and identity (both of, and within, cities), as well as an interest in how the city, or particular parts of cities, had been imagined or represented. He had not meant to suggest that urban historiography in South Africa had collapsed, merely that it had seriously diminished as a trans-national and international project, and that it was the poorer for this.

After the formal proceedings had ended, a number of the panellists agreed that South African urban historiography could greatly benefit from a conference aimed at generating comparative urban studies (both within South Africa as well as with other African cities). It remains to be seen whether this desirable end will be achieved. Perhaps urban history might be the focus of a South African Historical Society conference?