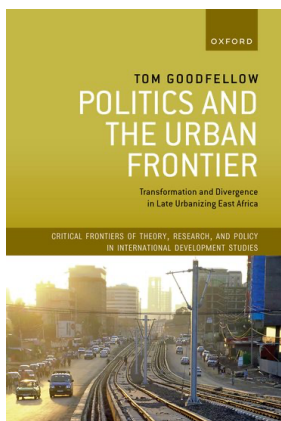

Book Reviews

Tom Goodfellow 2022: *Politics and the Urban Frontier: Transformation and Divergence in Late Urbanizing East Africa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press



Africa's cities have become fertile ground for establishing new models of development which correspond to set standards. In East Africa, these development models have been marked by different kinds of investment, experimentation with new forms of finance, and innovative and blended approaches. They highlight how and why late urbanizing cities, or latecomers, have become particularly exciting for international investors seeking to invest beyond Europe and North America and to target populations increasingly considered 'low on infrastructure'.

However, despite these cities constituting emerging economic hubs which are contributing to global growth, such developments have not been well

documented, either comprehensively or comparatively. East Africa remains on the fringes of debates about urban development and the nature of the urban, despite the 'Southern turn' in urban studies. Many questions abound regarding how best to think about or take into account such issues as the type of urban and infrastructural futures that need to be realized; the richness, depth, complexity and kaleidoscopic nature of contemporary urban developments; the diversity and multi-dimensionality of urban formations; and the distinct trajectories that such futures, developments and formations can follow.

Politics and the Urban Frontier provides one of the first—if not *the* first—detailed, comparative and critical accounts of the different trajectories and political dynamics of urban development in East Africa. The book draws on the examples of Addis Ababa in Ethiopia, Kampala in Uganda and Kigali in Rwanda, but it also situates the entire region of East Africa as a new frontier: 'not a place abundant with many urban frontiers but, in itself, the global urban frontier' (p. 12). In so doing, Tom Goodfellow goes beyond contemporary urban debates that hinge primarily on questions of universalism versus particularism to show how the comparative method can be mobilized to adequately account for the vast differences in urbanization within and beyond the global South. In this book, he argues that the dispute over the universality of the urban versus Southern particularism fails to adequately account for the vast differences in the urbanization experience across the global South, and he

offers a way of seeing that interrogates difference and explores resemblances and uncanny occurrences.

The book is organized around a set of different vocabularies—urban tectonics, urban foundations and urban currents—which constitute its three major sections. Urban Tectonics addresses the politics that drives urban change and explains contemporary trajectories of urban development in East Africa (pp. 3–53). Urban Foundations tackles the making of urban territory and economies from the pre-colonial and colonial eras to post-independence and contemporary times (pp. 57–131). Urban Currents examines the changing urban visions and the reworking of urban territories through manifestations of flagship large-scale infrastructure mega-projects and real estate booms, the scarcity of capital and emergent informal economies which fill the gaps, and popular protests, anticipations and contestations in late urbanizing contexts (pp. 135–265). Throughout, the book weaves together different threads of similarity and patterns of difference and causal forces across the three selected capitals.

Likewise, the author draws our attention to the imperative of history and geography for examining urban processes and landscapes across time and space. The historicized view of East Africa's varying evolution—from first kingdoms and regional trading economies to new mega-infrastructural developments and the subsequent popular economies and responses to this transformation—offers a great insight into the problematique of politics and the urban frontier in global geographies. This nuanced, differentiated and situated account of urban and political terrains highlights the ambivalent nature of dreams becoming, projects emerging, contestations evolving, and plots, schemes, bargains and negotiations both ensuing from and being inextricably linked to the making of the urban frontier. (As a side note in this regard, the 'Impressions' sub-section at the start of the book casually but carefully offers an excellent sneak peek and entry point into the blunt reality of such articulations and manifestations in the different East African cities).

Goodfellow cautions urban practitioners and experts that if we continue to view cities as 'economic and technological projects to be managed rather than terrains of political bargaining and contestation [then] the quest for better urban futures is doomed to fail' (p. 5). He argues that it is going to take more than the normative focus of multiple 'master plans', 'development plans', 'model plans' and various standard infrastructural and technological visions and dreams to realize more sustainable futures. He thus contends that we are going to have to do things in a markedly different way, including developing new independent and alternative approaches and taking into account different urban dimensions, formations and trajectories, such as the politics and dynamics of the urban frontier (pp. 269–80).

Politics and the Urban Frontier is an important work for everyone interested in policy mobilities, urbanization and planning, international development studies, political geography and governance. It tells us what we need to see and how to see it. It also tells us what we do not often get to see and why that matters too. The book persuasively provokes us to think of East Africa as the place to which we should look if we want to understand the potentiality and peril of our urban futures as a species (pp. 3, 283). This provocation is timely, in that it spotlights African (and Southern) cities as a frame of reference not just for urban studies, but for urban analysis too.

However, despite the book's valuable contribution and relevance to the trajectories and dynamics of late urbanizing frontiers, it does not fully address contexts beyond large, central cities. Aside from being national capitals, Kampala, Kigali and Addis Ababa also function as technological hubs, centres of governance and political and economic focal points. They are significant hubs for commerce, diplomacy and culture.

This limitation highlights the need for more extensive research to accurately depict the heterogeneous and multifaceted landscapes of infrastructure in smaller, emerging urban locales and hinterlands in the global South. Future research endeavours could expand the geographical scope to encompass 'newer' and 'later' developing frontiers beyond capital cities and major urban centres across the global South. This prompts questions about the stimulating interactions and comparative analyses that could arise when examining smaller cities, towns and urban peripheries. The present book offers a foundational framework and initial stepping stone for embarking on such insightful explorations.

Prince K. Guma, Urban Institute, University of Sheffield