

BOOK REVIEWS

Agbiboa, D. 2022. *They Eat Our Sweat: Transport Labor, Corruption, and Everyday Survival in Urban Nigeria*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

This book focuses on corruption in informal transit in Lagos, Nigeria, and how it implicates all participants: vehicle owners, workers, and passengers. Particular attention is paid to the informal system of minibuses (*danfos* in Yoruba, the principal local language) and motorcycle taxis (*okadas*). The book makes several significant arguments about corruption.

First, the author shows that grand corruption — at the highest levels — and petty corruption — that is found in daily life and among street level bureaucrats — are not separate, but are in fact closely linked to one another. Bribes are demanded at checkpoints and bus stations from touts, who work for a system that not only provides them a living but also offers income to the highest levels of the *National Union of Road Transport Workers* (NURTW). This ‘trickle-up’ disproportionately benefits those at higher levels of the hierarchy. At the same time, income gained through high-level corruption creates precarity in everyday lives of the entire population, which people sometimes address by their own corrupt actions.

Second, passengers and drivers fully participate, because refusing to pay can cause significant delays and even physical danger — especially if the touts become violent. Thus, passengers collude in encouraging bribes; they also urge drivers to pursue non-legal strategies to speed up, such as driving the wrong way down one-way streets.

Third, despite the involvement of virtually all in a corrupt system, Nigerians generally are against corruption; however, the only reasonable way to act is to comply with demands for payoffs. Not doing so can lead to economic, psychological, and physical harm. In other words, ‘corruption is not embedded in Nigerian “culture” but is in fact shaped by popular efforts to manage precarious lives in transit by bending the rules’ (p. 213). In this situation, the author argues, it is more useful to think of corruption as a ‘collective action-social trap’ problem, rather than one simply animated by well-placed agents desirous of increasing their wealth and status. Although collective action could lead to a better system, conflicting interests discourage people from acting together; individual action does bring short-term benefits but negative long-term consequences create a social trap. Finally, although the transit system may be informal, it is highly structured, fundamentally hierarchical, and well-integrated into the social and economic life of the city.

To develop and support these arguments, Agbiboa examines corruption in the different presidential regimes, both military and civilian, from the 1980s through about 2015, providing an excellent context for understanding grand corruption in Nigeria. Subsequent chapters present data on three crucial parts of the transit system: 1) *danfo* drivers, their passengers, and the conductors they engage to take fares and keep buses running; 2) *okada* drivers and their attempts to cope not only with touts, but also to protest attempts to restrict the areas in which they can work; and 3) the

NURTW, especially as understood through their street level touts, the *agberos*.

Nevertheless, more complementary information on the overall structure and function of the Lagos public transit system would have helped situate the reader who does not know Nigerian or African cities well. What are all the different elements of the system and how do they fit together? What are the major routes, and how are they determined? Do minibuses always have recognized stops, or do these stops exist only in built-up areas? How do drivers of privately owned vehicles make decisions about which routes to cover? What hours of the day do buses run? How are fares and baggage charges calculated? Do fares change with the distance or time of day? How long might it take to get a particular distance?

Although we are told much about the role of *agberos* in the NURTW, the reader learns little about the formal interactions between the NURTW leadership and the drivers — in principle, the members served by the union. Even if it was not feasible to do direct fieldwork, data in public sources such as news outlets or social media could have offered some insights. The grassroots organisations of *okada* drivers get more attention, in light of their court actions to reduce restrictions on when and where these vehicles could be used. The author mentions that he collected data from court cases, for which access was ‘complex, lengthy, and costly’ (p. 170), however, it would have been useful to know more about the cases. For example, what kinds of arguments were made in court? What language was used to make them? On what basis did the judges rule? What uses did

drivers and their associations make of the court decisions?

The author sometimes undermines his own arguments. He begins Chapter Three on informal transport with a statement that there has been little research on the transport sector (p. 99), a statement that he returns to in the Conclusion (p210). However, Chapter Three itself discusses, with voluminous references, significant work on African informal transport. These data support the ubiquity of informal transit throughout the continent, the low income of its workers, the stress illnesses they suffer, and the negative stereotypes attributed to them. Moreover, it considers the role of transport unions as agents of both order and violence, and the ubiquity of corruption. The author laments the essentializing of African culture at various places, but Chapter Two on the ubiquity of eating as a metaphor for corruption throughout Africa risks taking the reader in the same direction. Agbibo also emphasises the general poverty of drivers, but then mentions an *okada* driver with more than one wife and several children in university (p. 200); in much of Africa, this suggests a middle-class household.

In spite of these minor drawbacks, this book provides an in-depth understanding of key parts of the informal transit system in Lagos, as well as new insight into the everyday corruption that exists in many parts of the world.

Dolores Koenig
American University, Washington, DC
dkoenig@american.edu

Murray, M. 2022. *Many Urbanisms: Divergent Trajectories of Global City Building*. New York: Columbia University Press.

In *Many Urbanisms: Divergent Trajectories of Global City Building* (2022) Martin J. Murray offers a clearly written, erudite synthesis of contemporary urbanism, through a realignment of the well-established ‘global city’ paradigm within urban studies.

Opening with a robust critique of ‘template cities’ which ‘act as the template against which all other cities are judged’ (p. 23), whereby producing a dichotomy between ‘good cities’ and those who ‘lag behind to eventually “catch up” by emulating those globalising cities’ (ibid.), Murray argues what is required is a means of interpreting ‘how distinctive cities with historically specific characteristics can share common features with otherwise very different cities’ (p. 38). Another critique concerns the assumption within urban studies research that cities are ‘powerless’ against the forces of globalisation and neoliberalism, thereby creating a ‘convergence’ and, as a result, homogenous cities (p. 46). The problem with this assumption, according to Murray, is the glossing over of divergence developed through ‘local cultural, geographic and institutional dynamics’ (p. 53) and the privileging of structural forces over the ‘capacities of local actors’ (p. 54).

The Global North origin of these perspectives has led to the development of a ‘Southern theory’, which inverts the position of researchers to see the city ‘from the vantage point of the South [enabling] us

to destabilise existing mainstream urban theories by questioning the rigid underlying premises guiding scholarly research and writing’ (p. 59). However, as is argued within (p. 61), relocating the perspective of the researcher from the ‘Northern’ to the ‘Southern’ does not address the underlying issue with the former.

To counter this tendency, Murray proposes four pathways that characterise cities today — the bulk of this text. The first are ‘globalising cities with world-class aspirations’, which adopt neoliberal practices to city building and privilege entertainment focused ‘regeneration’ schemes (p. 71). These post-industrial cities have been successful in developing ‘growth machine politics around the promotion of cultural industries and attractions [with] their competitive advantage [being] derived not from manufacturing and industrial production, but from service industries, cultural amenities and place identities’ (p. 75).

However, not every city has been able to shift into a postmodern economic model. These cities comprise the ‘struggling post-industrial city in decline’ pathway, populated by, amongst others, the cities of America’s ‘Rust Belt’ and post-socialist Eastern Europe. These cities are characterised by a range of factors (p. 93), often falling under the term ‘urban shrinkage’ (p. 100), yet Murray questions the use of ‘shrinkage’ (amongst other semantic categorisations), describing such terminology as ‘conceptually hollow, analytically vacuous and lacking in explanatory utility’ (p. 123), instead calling for a shift from ‘an outcome-oriented approach toward a process-oriented research

agenda' (p. 123). The author continues to state that 'urban decline refers to episodic, cyclical and locally specific circumstances that arise from cyclical patterns of urban development [whereas] shrinking cities syndrome consists of a permanent and seemingly irreversible downturn in socioeconomic fortunes' (ibid.).

The third type concerns 'sprawling megacities of hypergrowth'. These cities, located in the Global South, are primarily defined by what they lack (p130), with Murray stating that 'looking at these cities in their own right [...] offers an opportunity to revise our understanding of urban development not as a staged trajectory moving inexorably toward a common endpoint, but as a complex process with multiple pathways toward indeterminate outcomes' (p. 135). The megacity is often equated with the 'slum' (p. 138) and the 'informal economy' (p. 153), categorisations that reinforce previously critiqued binary perceptions of the urban, with Murray arguing that 'it is more fruitful to treat informal practices as a constituent of the dynamics of city building on a global scale' (p. 155), arguing that informality is, in fact, produced by the processes of state action or inaction (p. 161).

The final pathway is that of the 'instant city' (Dubai, Doha, or Songdo in South Korea), which constitute examples of 'utopian urbanism', 'a kind of futuristic escapism only possible through the information age of hypermodernity and neoliberal globalisation' (p. 177). These cities are 'corporate-led urban enclaves', emerging 'as aspirational epicentres for privileged stakeholders striving for

commercial success in the highly competitive circumstances of global capitalism' (p173). The term 'instant' does not only refer to the rapidity of their construction, but also the detachment of these cities from a sense of historical development — the absence of the 'layered accretions of the historical past and collective memory which shape and characterise conventional urban settlement patterns' (p. 185) — leaving an 'artificial tableaux' in its place.

This absence of temporal development hints at a major argument within this text, namely, these four pathways each have their own 'time-frame'. According to Murray, the *globalising cities with world-class aspirations* exist in 'linear time, marching expectantly forward toward the as yet unrealised goal of achieving world-class status' (p. 207), yet *the struggling post-industrial city in decline* can 'never escape from what they once were' (p. 208) — occupying the past. The *sprawling megacities of hypergrowth* are in 'a time warp, locked into an eternal present [in which] the future beckons but never arrives' (ibid.), whilst the *instant city* '[occupies] the surreal instantaneous realm of pure spontaneity' (ibid.).

These four 'chronotopes' serve as a fascinating, process-oriented, means of interrogating the similarities and differences *between* cities, yet, whilst this text impressively covers such phenomena at a global/regional level, there is scant consideration of the different pathways *within* a city. Cities do not follow a trajectory as a homogenous whole, rather, certain neighbourhoods, communities or

jurisdictions exist within different chronotopes. Although such a step down to the intra-urban scale may have been beyond the scope of this text, it is of importance to understand the emergence of the cities under consideration. Perhaps this endeavour would be best tackled by the urban ethnographers of this world.

Ultimately, Martin J. Murray has produced a fantastic and thoroughly enjoyable book. The call for a focus on

process, rather than outcome, with the implicit consideration of temporality within the urban realm, is as well made as it is urgent. This, alongside the breadth of sources and insight, renders this text as invaluable to any scholar fascinated with the nature of contemporary global urbanisation.

Will Brown
Loughborough University, U.K.
w.brown@lboro.ac.uk