

Cities and inequality



Introduction

In my language we have a saying, *iminwe ayilingani*. In English, it translates, literally to, the fingers are never of the same length. Like all the proverbs in my language, this speaks to the broader social life. It means that people are not equal, there is no equality among people. In a direct way, it means that inequality is a fact of life. The danger with proverbs like these is that they naturalise inequality. In proverbs, language is used to hide the fact that inequality has a beginning and a history. It is, therefore, not natural. The modern city has emerged alongside the growth of industrialization and capitalism. In Africa, the modern city appeared as a result of colonialism and the exporting of capitalism and industrialization to those places outside Europe. I say the modern city because there are debates that there were cities built by indigenous people according to their cultures and traditions in those regions. An example is the modern Bulawayo built on the ruins of the old Bulawayo, the seat of power of the Ndebele nation, that was defeated in December 1893 by the colonizing British South Africa Company (BSAC). Another example is the Great Zimbabwe, now called the Zimbabwe Ruins and the Mapungwe in South Africa. Modern cities have come with benefits especially around connecting people and organizing the economy for possible growth. It is industrialization which mostly led to the emergence of the modern city and with it emerged the capitalist economy. However, cities also emerged with inequality and differences between people.

A short history of urban inequality in South Africa

In South Africa, the history of urban space appears to be already authoritarian and to be characterized by huge inequalities. This is because most modern cities emerged at the crux of colonialism, land dispossessions, and racism, as zones where Black Indigenous subjects were excluded. The South African economy was transformed by the discovery of minerals — diamonds and then gold — in the late 1800s, marking the beginning of capitalist urbanization as linked to deepening European conquest, dispossession, discrimination, migration and capitalist economic progress (Feinstein, 2005: 3). Two forms of migration are central to urbanization in South Africa. First, was the increased European migration after the discovery of diamonds and gold in the 1800s, when about 5,000 artisans and labourers were brought to the Cape of Good Hope from the United Kingdom to boost the population in the colony (Feinstein 2005, 28). Second, was the regional

migration of Black subjects in order to boost labour in the mines that was encouraged by the mining industry. This migration between South Africa and most of sub-Saharan Africa in the 1870s which persisted in the postapartheid moment was jointly initiated by the colonial South African government and capital (Xulu 2013; Fine 2014). Its genealogy can be traced back to the farm labourers at the time of conquests and land dispossessions in the 1700s and mapped ahead to the present African migrants engaged in precarious jobs in Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban, and many of the postapartheid cities.

Once the urban space emerged in the combination of the crystallization of colonial capital around mining compounds and a thriving labour migrant system, racist legal developments increased its authoritarianism. The 1913 Natives Land Act sums up the articulations of land dispossessions, urbanization, inequalities and the primitive accumulation under colonial conditions. The implications of the Act were that the confiscation or expropriation of land from the Black Indigenous peoples left them landless, compelling them to be labourers in farms, in mines, and in the manufacturing industries in emerging urban centres. This landlessness made Black people living in cities perpetual ‘squatters’, ‘a native ... with no land of his own, who is in a perpetual state of unfreedom (Mabin, 1992: 15). While the intention was to grow the reserves, later Bantustans, where black people lived exiled from citizenship, the 1913 Native Land Act had unintended implications in that “from the 1930s, informal settlements on the fringes of the cities and many towns began to become common” (Mabin, 1992: 16). After this Act, the colonial and Apartheid authorities instituted further legal instruments to alienate the Black subject from the urban space. The Natives Urban Act of 1923, linked to the 1913 Native Land Act, was supposed to provide for improved conditions of residence for natives in or near urban areas and the better administration of native affairs (Worden 1991; Dyzenhaus 1991; Davenport 1991). The Natives Urban Areas Consolidated Act of 1945, also called the Bantu Urban Areas Consolidation Act, came as a follow-up to the Native Urban Act of 1923 and was meant to tighten “influx controls” of Black African people into urban spaces (Dyzenhaus 1991: 37; Dugard 1978: 422). The Act effectively deemed urban areas in South Africa as ‘white’ and required all Black African men in cities and towns to carry around permits called ‘passes’ at all times (Worden 1991; Dyzenhaus 1991; Davenport 1991).

Any authoritarianism gives rise to its own resistance. Townships, as specific places where Black people lived in urban South Africa, have emerged as both a mark of this subject's subjugation and resistance. Townships in modern South Africa are places characterized by poor service delivery: schools are not working, there is no water and electricity, among other shortages. This effectively limits the opportunities in life for people living there. The South Western Townships (Soweto) are an example of how colonial urban policies around health issues and sanitation combined with the desire by Black people to be in the city. In 1904, Black people and Indians were removed from the inner city to Klipspruit Farm about 12 miles out of the city of Johannesburg, after a pneumonic epidemic broke out among Indian communities. The Indians and Africans were compelled to remain at the outskirts of the city even after the epidemic had waned. In 1963, now greatly expanded, it was named Soweto (Phillips 2013: 311). However, the Soweto residents over the ensuing years developed and offered resistance to white rule. James Mpanza's squatter movement in the 1940s and the Asinamali Party's rent boycotts between 1954 and 1958 are some of the examples of early resistance in the townships (Phillips 2013: 311; Sisulu 1998). Alexandra, a township that lies across from Sandton, the richest square mile in Africa, was established in 1912, a year before the 1913 Land Act (Musiker and Musiker 2000). However, as a result of informal urbanization over the years, the township is now populated by shacks called *imikhukhu* or *imijondolo* in isiZulu. In the early 1960s, to control the population of Black people in Alexandra, the apartheid government decided to implement a programme of demolishing houses in the township, replacing them with hostels. The idea of hostels was to accommodate Black people—especially men — temporarily in the city as labourers. They were not expected to be permanent, and therefore, to have a lease.

Conclusion

The aim of the short historical outline on the development of cities and townships in South Africa was meant to illustrate how inequalities are never natural or an accident. Inequalities, especially in cities in South Africa today have emerged as a result of certain decisions that humans have taken to affect the trajectory of history. Inbuilt to the economic systems that most former colonies in the Global South is the unintended effect of creating differences between people based on gender and race, among other markers. Mapped on these differences are the economic inequalities that make countries like South Africa some of the most unequal countries in the world.

Reading further

Davenport, T. R. H. (1991), *South Africa: A Modern History*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Dyzenhaus, D. (1991), *Hard Cases in Wicked Legal Systems: South African Law in the Perspective of Legal Philosophy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Feinstein, C. H. (2005), *An Economic History of South Africa: Conquest, Discrimination and Development*, Cambridge, New York, and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.

Fine, J. (2014), “Migrants and Migrant Workers in the Post-Apartheid era”, *Global Labour Journal*, vol. 5, no. 3, pp. 330–46.

Mabin, A. (2000), “Varied legacies of modernism in urban planning”, *A Companion to the City*, edited by G. Bridge, and S. Watson, Malden, MA, Oxford, and Victoria: Blackwell Publishers, pp. 555–66.

Musiker, N., and R. Musiker (2000), *A Concise Historical Dictionary of Greater Johannesburg, Cape Town: Francolin Publishers.*

Phillips, H. (2014), “Locating the location of a South African location: The paradoxical pre-history of Soweto”, *Urban History*, vol. 41, no. 2, pp. 311–32.

Sisulu, W. (1998), “Foreword”, *Soweto: A History*, edited by P. Bronner and L. Segal, Cape Town: David Phillips, pp. 3–8.

Worden, N. (1991), *The Making of Modern South Africa: Conquest, Apartheid, Democracy*, Basingstoke and London: Macmillan Press Limited.

Xulu, N. (2013), “COSATU and Internal Migrant Workers: Old Fault Lines, New Dilemmas”, *COSATU’s Contested Legacy: South African Trade Unions in the Second Decade of Democracy*, edited by Sakhela Buhlungu and Malehoko Tshoedi, Leiden and Boston: Brill, pp. 212–27.

Documentaries that students can watch ahead of the workshop:

1. Urbanization and the growth of global cities - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EpBbnL3pMRA&t=132s>
2. Why South Africa is the most unequal country on Earth and how to fix it | DW News - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=71-jlOvrUFc>
3. South Africa: Country of Contrasts | Extreme Inequality, Townships and White Slums | Documentary - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O5h-MG7GjTM>

Activities

Students can break into manageable groups and discuss the following questions. They will present on them. The aim is to make students think about inequality in the world, especially in the city, around them.

1. What do you think are the inequalities that are related to Konstanz and other cities that you know or have lived in?
2. Is there a historical explanation to these inequalities?
3. After this reading and watching some of the suggested documentaries, what do you think needs to be done to address inequalities in cities across the world, specifically in South Africa and Germany?

Ends.