Why Africa’s Cities Matter

Garth Myers

The first weeks of 2011 witnessed extraordinary movements for social change in the streets of North Africa’s cities. From Tunis to Alexandria and Cairo to Tripoli and Benghazi, citizens have poured into public spaces and changed the world. The people have shaken the tree of repression at its roots. As I write, it is still uncertain what the political outcomes will be in Tunisia, Egypt or Libya. The new governments in Tunis and Cairo appear to occupy highly precarious spaces, and outright civil war may be underway in Libya by the time this issue goes to press. Perhaps popular uprisings in still more cities suffering under Africa’s oppressive regimes will catapult the continent toward the political transformation that has been brewing for two decades or more. After all, largely urban social movements and civil society organizations have forced political change upon reluctant regimes on the continent for quite some time now, considering events of the last few decades in other African cities. Could this people power be the kind of force for change it has become in Tunis, if or when it emerges in Douala or Yaounde, Harare or Bulawayo, Abidjan or Bouake? And then I dream still further: might the popular and scholarly imagination in the west, too, begin to change, to recognize the dynamism and sustaining power present in the innovative energies people devote to their everyday lives in Africa’s cities? At the very least, I think, after the amazing spectacle—however problematic it may have been in other terms—of the FIFA 2010 World Cup for showcasing South Africa’s extraordinary cities—might we be moving to a time when our discipline of geography, and especially the sub-discipline of urban geography, as practiced in North America, recognizes why Africa’s cities matter?

Explaining our answers to our colleagues for this question can present us with a conundrum. This is because, as African societies urbanize, they often do so in ways that seem to challenge prevailing theories and models in the discipline—which has often led to normative “African Exceptionalism” explanations instead of to conclusions that the theories might be inapplicable to some African situations. Perhaps as a result of this apparent gap, African Urban Studies is emerging, or rather, re-emerging not least because of the continent’s increased assertiveness in its own affairs and its reemergence as a theater of the global contest between the West and China. The last ten years have brought a resurgence of interest in urban Africa in the social sciences and humanities, with a long list of major books most readers of this journal would already know. Africanist urban geographers have been important players in this resurgence. My experiences researching the literature of African urban geography, particularly while writing my book, *African Cities: Alternative Visions of Urban Theory and Practice*, sug-