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Participatory Cities?
*The Cultural Politics of Community-Based Waste Management in
Dakar, Senegal*

The rise of neoliberalism as a development paradigm has brought to the fore a constellation of ideas promoting community-based development strategies. Spearheaded by a variety of institutional actors—including the World Bank, international organizations, non-government organizations (NGOs), and governments—these approaches dominate contemporary development policy in Africa and are increasingly being employed in the provision of urban public services like water, housing upgrades, and waste management. An unlikely convergence between neoliberal and social movement discourse asserts the transformative potential of such strategies to simultaneously enhance service delivery *and* local democracy through empowering the most marginalized (Evans 2002; World Bank 1989). These optimistic discourses stress the entrepreneurial character of local residents and postulate that the key to development lies in strategically strengthening the grassroots' ability to develop themselves (Gaye 1996). The participation and leadership of women features centrally in normative claims, raising a number of key questions regarding the meanings and implications of 'gender empowerment' raised by these projects. I contend that a more sophisticated examination of the empowerment claims is needed which problematizes the automatic connection made between participation and empowerment, probes the complex relationship between individual, group, and community empowerment, and which questions the simplistic, West-centric reading of women's interests it pre-supposes.

My work interrogates the empowerment claims of participatory development through a careful examination of women-led community-based waste management projects in Dakar, Senegal. Specifically, it looks at similar projects initiated by an NGO which have met with highly divergent outcomes. I insist that women's empowerment in these projects cannot be read off these outcomes but instead must be considered through attending to participants' subjectivity as leaders, the question of agency, and the workings of power in specific settings. I join insights from feminist scholarship highlighting the role that gender plays in the political economy of neoliberal development as well as in organizing (re)productive household activities in Africa with insights from recent scholarship theorizing the spaces of dynamism and renegotiation of power structures in African cities to provide what I believe is a critical yet hopeful perspective. Following AbdouMalik Simone (2003), attention to the micropractices of urban 'city-making' focuses attention to those transgressions and unintended consequences that may be the most important impacts of projects like these. I contest that project outcomes and their empowerment implications cannot be understood without attending to the cultural politics of the spaces created through these projects, situated within larger purview of neoliberal reforms. Because this work is only in its early stages, I join here some preliminary observations from the field with some key theoretical insights I am thinking through in my effort to probe the meaning and implications of empowerment in participatory development. I hope this investigation will lend insight into the possibilities

for tyranny and transformation¹ within the development project and offer a unique window into a broad set of debates considering Africa's urban transition.

Like most African countries, Senegal has undergone a series of political-economic reforms over the last two decades centered on privatization, deregulation, and decentralization. Although there is considerable debate surrounding the effects of reforms in Senegal (USAID 1997), the socio-economic impacts of adjustment and subsequent policies have been clearly devastating (Creevey et al., 1995; Knight 1994; Somerville 1991; Weissman 1990). The withdrawal of funding for the public sector, the inadequate transfer of power and resources to local governments, combined with one of the continent's fastest rates of urbanization² has precipitated a sharp decline in the quality of urban services.³ Community-based projects run by international agencies, NGOs, and local associations are attempting to fill this urban policy gap (Niang 2000). My research examines the community-based projects for autonomous waste solutions that are becoming a prevalent strategy to cope with severely inadequate municipal waste services and insalubrious conditions in Dakar—particularly within the traditional Lebou neighborhoods in its periphery (Abdoul 2002; Gaye 1996). These neighborhoods represent some of the traditional Lebou fishing villages that have occupied the Cape Verde peninsula for 500 years (UNESCO 2000) and are now absorbed into the rapidly growing capital city of Dakar. They are doubly disadvantaged for receiving Dakar-based public services due to their location on the periphery of the city and their traditional village plan, which poses a number of challenges for infrastructural modernization. As a result, are heavily burdened with unhygienic conditions resulting from informal waste treatment systems (Gaye and Diallo 1997). In these neighborhoods, piles of trash build up on the street and on the beach, and inadequate sanitation systems overflow when it rains, endangering human and environmental health (Gaye and Diallo 1997; Abdoul 2001).

In response to these sanitation challenges, an international NGO based in Dakar, *Environment and Development Action in the Third World* (ENDA), has initiated small scale systems for horse-drawn cart trash collection and alternative sanitation systems in a number of Lebou neighborhoods in the city's periphery. Rooted in a rhetoric of empowerment connected to women's leadership roles and alignment with local custom which places women as responsible for waste management, these projects are centered on voluntary neighborhood women's leadership (ENDA 2000). With initial project funds from ENDA, and based on ENDA's project design, women waste managers are charged with promoting the projects in their neighborhoods, soliciting household participation and monetary contributions, overseeing contracts with private horse-drawn cart trash collectors, and, in some cases, transporting to and working at collective sanitation and solid waste stations. Despite their being initiated in what were socio-economically similar neighborhoods, the outcomes of these projects have ranged from total project abandonment to project expansion. My preliminary research suggests that community

¹ The terms tyranny and transformation are chosen deliberately to engage an ongoing academic debate on participation in these terms, epitomized by the conversations between Cooke and Kothari, 2001 and Hickey and Mohan, 2004.

² The urban population grew from 34% in 1975 to 49% in 2002 (UNDP, 2003).

³ Key services include education, healthcare, and infrastructure. It is estimated that 40% of districts in the major district of Pikine lack all proper urban infrastructure such as surfaced roads, sewerage, and water mains (Soumaré, 2002: 263). 45% of neighborhoods in Dakar have been characterized as informal (UNCHS/ HABITAT 2002: 1).

contention—or simply a lack of ‘buy in’—faced by women leaders was a key factor in project outcomes. In order to explore these divergent trajectories and probe the question of empowerment in these projects, I draw from feminist scholarship and recent literature on the political economy of African cities to examine the cultural politics surrounding these projects.

Feminist insights on the construction of gender lend insight into a number of key concerns raised by these projects. Most generally, a body of scholarship has emerged contending that these strategies risk becoming “the new tyranny” when situated within a neoliberal strategy to casualize labor and burden the poor with the ‘work’ of development (Cooke and Kothari 2001; Hickey and Mohan 2004). Critics raise particularly serious concerns regarding women’s participation in urban waste management projects, warning that they instrumentalize gender in the service of dirty, exploitative labor processes (Beall 1997, 2001; Miraftab 2004; Samson 2003). In her work on the employment of women as casual laborers or volunteers in municipal waste management in Cape Town, for instance, Miraftab describes participatory waste approaches as “the conjuncture of privatization and patriarchy” which “serves the interests of capitalism through forms of domination exploiting race and gender” (2004). These critiques draw from an understanding of gender as a basic structuring principle of the political economy (Fraser 1995). They highlight how the practice of waste management is intrinsically tied up with the exercise of power and, thus, that the politics surrounding community-based waste management are central to understanding empowerment claims. The potential for the mobilization of specific ‘traditional discourses’ to risk reinforcing systems of embedded power becomes a key question (Agarwal 1997; Cleaver 1999; Jackson 2002; Shroeder 1993). It is for this reason that participatory waste projects are perhaps the most controversial of community-based development strategies, and why they provide such a rich case through which to interrogate empowerment claims.

In contrast with the failure of most participatory development approaches to consider the specific constellation of meanings surrounding the collective “resource” to be organized around and its political import, my analysis emphasizes that *waste* is a subject loaded with cultural meanings which shape—and are shaped by—the social organization of waste work and the political landscape of waste management. Mary Douglas’ seminal work on pollution and taboo is extremely useful in illustrating how symbolic associations around impurity maintain social structures (1966). Discourses around dirt and danger create social boundaries, and, importantly, classify people into different social categories within a hierarchy of status. In Senegal, women’s connection to the home as well as to impurity through Islamic custom makes dealing with solid and liquid wastes originating from the home an extension of women’s domestic duties (a key reason cited by ENDA for placing women as leaders of the community-based waste projects). Within the sphere of household wastes, furthermore, there exists a hierarchy of ‘feminization’, or a value-laden spectrum of duties, some of which are associated with women more than others. Thus, each item in the catalog of substances to be disposed of—from malodorous fish carcasses to dirty kitchen water—has its own symbolic realm of meaning as well as its materiality, which combine in the social organization of waste work. Sanitation-related activities are generally seen as less feminized while trash sorting and disposal is the most feminized of waste work. Cutting across the gendered division of waste labor in the home is

differentiation according to marital status,⁴ age, and ethnicity, with younger wives and girls generally responsible for transporting solid wastes outside the home, and household maids or *bonnes* usually reserved the dirtiest and most onerous waste duties. Waste management responsibilities, benefits, and priorities are thus different for each household member—a factor that I believe has been extremely important in shaping community support for waste projects. Gaining household participation, particularly financial contributions from male breadwinners as well as support from local authority figures, posed a significant challenge in most neighborhoods because waste was seen as ‘women’s work’ and unworthy of investment of scarce resources.

My analysis thus builds on a body of scholarship demonstrating the central role that gender and household-level social relations play in organizing control over productive resources in the African context (Berry 1989; Carney and Watts 1990; Guyer and Peters 1987; Shroeder 1993). Rather than isolating the household and its role as the site of protracted negotiation between men and women from the larger political economy, this understanding acknowledges the key dialectic relationship between the public and the private spheres: gendered negotiations shape the world outside the household (Burawoy 1985) and outside relations shape the world inside the household (Carney and Watts 1990). As such, the impacts and implications of community-based waste management cannot be understood without examining the conjuncture of the household and political-economic flows and imaginaries.

Furthermore, I extend this attention to the public/private binary to consider more widely the critical role played by the production of space in the exercise of power. I draw from Lefebvre’s foundational theorization of space as constituted through active social practice (1991). Where capitalist modernity has rendered space dead, “in Lefebvre’s hands, space becomes redescribed not as a dead, inert thing or object, but as organic, fluid and alive” (Crang and Thrift 2000: 171). Importantly, gender is profoundly implicated in the production of space, and as mentioned above, has been deeply implicated in the construction of geographies of uneven development and the increasing ‘feminization’ of development that can be seen in participatory projects. As Massey highlights, the fact that “home” and “local” are coded feminine has deep consequences, especially in the connection between limitations of mobility and strategies of subordination (1994). Lefebvre, himself, was deeply concerned with the interplay of gender and space and his exploration of how *representations of space* relate to *representations of the body* are important for this analysis (1991). Spaces are thus metaphorically imbricated with constructions of male/female sexuality.

The spatiality of systems of authority over the body and the imagination thus deeply shape political maneuvering. Of particular importance in Senegal is how women and men’s spheres and mobilities are connected to Islamic constructions of sexuality and purity. As mentioned previously, women’s “place” is connected with their association with ideas of dirt, impurity, and waste. The social organization of waste-work is thus intricately tied to the gendered geography of men’s and women’s spheres within the neighborhood and thus the gendered borders and territories that are involved in

⁴ Single women are of lower status than married women and older wives are considered higher in social rank than younger wives.

neighborhood waste management. This raises important questions regarding women's engagement in neighborhood-wide waste management activities which operate in "public" realms women may not otherwise enter. Furthermore, it calls attention to how the "open" and "closed" spaces intrinsic to participation and leadership are articulated in different discourses—by NGOs, development agencies, neighborhood authorities, male and female participants—and how they interconnect, compete, and work together to shape the political landscape.

Local Islamic custom represents one key system of authority implicated in the production of space in these Lebou neighborhoods, but, importantly, is itself comprised of multiple competing discourses. The vast majority of Senegalese Muslims (94% of the population) are members of Sufi orders, or maraboutic brotherhoods. While the Lebou are known to be members of all the national brotherhoods, the majority of the Lebou in the district of Yoff are members of the Layenne order, a small brotherhood founded at the mosque in Yoff. Although it is the smallest of Sufi orders in Senegal, the Layenne brotherhood is reputed to have a particularly "progressive" reputation with regard to women (Fall 2001), which, I believe might have played an important role in shaping community reception of women's leadership of waste projects in Yoff. My research will explore how the spaces of leadership 'opened up' through these projects articulate with *different* Islamic discourses on women's leadership in each neighborhood to influence community reception of waste projects.

The spatial jurisdiction of "customary" authorities in the Lebou neighborhoods, furthermore, overlaps and competes with Islamic authorities in important ways (for this investigation). Uniquely situated as the "original"⁵ inhabitants of the area, the Cape Verde Lebou have a long tradition of both incorporation into municipal politics in Senegal as well as autonomy and self-determination in the face of urban development. Proclaimed by Lebou themselves and others as an extremely proud and traditional people, the Lebou in these villages have retained an extremely insular, powerful, and complex customary authority base. This "traditional" political organization—and I use this word with caution because it has undergone distinct transformations in the face of the advent of modernity—overlaps and competes with the neighborhood Islamic leadership, and, increasingly, municipal authority. Simone's work in the Pikine district in Dakar demonstrates the key role that customary discourses of authority played in the community-based waste management project there. The *frey*, or traditional leadership councils, are especially concerned with the regulation of neighborhood borders and insisted that the solid waste collection points created through the participatory waste project fell within their jurisdiction. The "handling" of waste, however, was considered to be women's responsibility. The administration of the project—considering these spatial elements as well as the implications of the financial management of the project which was considered a major political activity in the community—thus required major negotiations in order to not appear as a "substantial elevation of [women's] political capacity" (Simone 2003: 226).

⁵ Because of their claim to land on the peninsula, the Lebou constituted a large percentage of what the French termed the "*originaires*" of the first four urban areas of Senegal, the *Quatres Communes*. The *originaires* had special rights under French colonial code—termed "citizenship"—which amounted to special legal status and participation in local as well as French elections (Diouf 1998).

A final key space of authority implicated in the participatory waste projects is that of the municipality. In 1996, Senegal's most far-reaching decentralization reforms substantially increased the number of local authorities and formally transferred responsibility for waste management and other services to the districts. Although the transfer of fiscal resources has been highly incommensurate with the expanded scale of responsibilities (Attahi 1997; Olowu and Wunsch 2004), contributing to the ineffectiveness of the municipality's role public service provision, the local State has nonetheless gained increasing visibility and power over the last decade. This is, no doubt, of crucial importance to this analysis and an understanding of the landscapes of power implicated in community-based waste management. I am particularly interested in how municipal discourses of authority over neighborhood spaces, and, especially with regard to gender and women's leadership, articulate with other discourses to rework local power structures. In general, I believe partnership of the municipality in some of the community-based waste projects of my study has acted to provide a number of legitimating resources to these projects working in favor of 'successful' project outcomes. These resources extend beyond simple visibility and authority, but may also include important discourses related to women's leadership. In Simone's study, for instance, the presence of a woman mayor for part of the project's tenure acted in favor of community reception of women's leadership because it lent precedence and legitimacy to the idea of women's leadership. In my study neighborhood of Ngor, furthermore, I am keenly interested in exploring the impact of the election of a Green Party (*Les Verts*) candidate as Mayor in 2002 on community-based waste. The Green Party, which controls four municipalities in Senegal, explicitly cites women's empowerment and waste management as prominent elements of its platform.

Without going into further detail, it is clear that a bundle of discourses of authority are implicated through community-based waste management which play a key role in structuring the terms and spaces of political struggle surrounding these projects. An attention to the production of space, however, also provides a vocabulary for contemplating – what Massey calls “the ever-shifting geometry of social/power relations” (1994: 4) – forms of contestation and negotiability that exist within spatial practice. For, as she puts it, all boundaries are contested (1994). Simone's work in African cities and in Dakar, specifically, is extremely useful in demonstrating the space for collaboration and renegotiation that exist within geographies of power. His joins with that of other scholars theorizing emergent political-economic spaces of African cities. Simone contends that the African city is especially open to spaces and practices of reinscription through which entrenched forms of customary authority can be remade. He emphasizes the micropolitics of “alignment, interdependency, and exuberance” in African cities (2003) – the forms of social collaboration, rooted in fluid, overlapping, place-based identities – to explore the productive and energetic activity that is building the African city. He shows how quite apart from the 'modernist' intentions behind participatory waste management, these projects precipitated unintended/unpredicted outcomes that, nonetheless, provided “unwitting platform for actors from different localities to work together in places away from 'home'” (2003:226). Instead of outright challenging those local norms which held that their traversing of specific boundaries and management of budgets would be threatening to local authorities, Simone documents how women waste managers in Pikine simultaneously “gave voice” to the *frey*, in order to quell fears of their being a threat, fomented attention to youth organizing in order to distract attention away from women's

groups towards youth groups, and formed a silent contract with the youth to transport trash and invest project revenues *outside* of the neighborhoods. Thus, far from a blanket collaborative impulse or women's intrinsic responsibility for waste and neighborhood cleanliness, the "success" of the neighborhood trash collection project stemmed from its articulation with women's other economic endeavors and neighborhood political agendas.

Without limiting women waste managers to their gender identities or presuming the form and direction of women's interests and agency to be necessarily counter-hegemonic (Mohanty 1991; Mahmood 2005), I find Simone and others' injection of a hopeful fluidity and attention to unintended consequences to be very important to this analysis. Rather than presuming that participatory trash management is necessarily wholly disempowering as is suggested in much of the feminist literature on participatory waste management, I seek a deeper probing into the (often invisible) spatial micro-practices which allow for gendered hegemonies to be renegotiated. This attention is crucial to understanding the 'impacts' of already-existing development projects as well as recognizing what *is* possible within contemporary African urbanisms.

To reiterate, joining insights from feminist theory with recent literature considering the politics of space in African cities helps me to begin to understand the divergent outcomes of participatory waste projects in Dakar, and furthermore, to interrogate the meaning of and implications for gender 'empowerment' in these projects. Far from entering 'dead' or 'blank space', these projects clearly enter a dense fabric of discourses and spatial practices which work in concert and conflict to shape the political landscape. Through attending to the "paradoxical spaces" (Rose 1993) occupied by women waste managers, I foreground insights on the role of gender in the political economy of development while emphasizing the non-trivial possibilities provided by spatial contestation and transgression in these projects. Considering the socio-spatial practices of waste work as simultaneously struggles over meaning and power, I explore how gender articulates with other factors to shape the cultural politics of waste management. This assessment necessitates a move away from an assumption that participation equals empowerment to an analysis of how power is deployed and contested in these projects through attending to local politics and the key multi-scalar links between state and civil society. This offers a window through which to better understand how localized idioms and histories at play in these neighborhood projects remain consequential—even as they are reworked—in moving towards a deeper understanding of the key dynamics at play in the immense transformations taking place African urban landscapes.

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