



Postwar Political Restructuring in Freetown and Kabul: Theoretical Limits and the Test Case for Multiscalar Governance

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The key questions posed in this article are: how to explain city-level politics in two countries located at the very fringes of global capitalism, and how a resulting reconfigured theoretical framework can be integrated into an international comparative urban research agenda. Contemporary Sierra Leone and Afghanistan present major structural differences compared to highly industrialized settings, as their main cities have not been sites of capitalist production. At the same time, both countries have recently experienced major international interventions in the context of intrastate wars. I show how these two characteristics render the explanatory power of established theories of urban politics deficient. An exploration of this gap in the urban politics literature is followed by a discussion of recent political restructuring in Freetown and Kabul. I pay specific attention to the incentive structures that have resulted from recent international interventions and how they shape urban politics. I illustrate how these incentives steer resource flows and forge new poles of accumulation and control—both within the respective settings and outside of them—to the detriment of local “policy space,” which is defined as the autonomy of city-based actors and organizations to determine their own priorities and deliberate about effective policies. I thus show that while the starting point for theory reformulation remains the urban context, a crucial conceptual challenge is to capture the alliances between national and international institutions and organizations, and to examine how they influence city-level politics. This analytical recasting offers an opportunity to test how recent theories of multiscalar governance apply to urban settings such as Freetown and Kabul. I argue that multiscalar governance as a theoretical approach is applicable only if it integrates an analysis of international politics as a major determinant of local urban politics.

Existing approaches to urban politics and political restructuring argue that three types of processes shape economic development outcomes in cities: alliances and frictions between actors based in the city itself (Stoker 1995); cooperation and competition between city-based agents and entities of the national government (Goodwin et al. 1993); and regional as well as global structures and their increasingly direct impact on city politics (Sassen 2000). In practice however, these approaches often ignore how multiple political agents filter, complicate, and transform how economic development processes play out on the ground. Moreover, these approaches assume that capitalist production in the city forms the basis for urban politics. Yet while capitalist production is increasingly global, there are still many cities in impoverished countries where little is produced beyond the population’s subsistence needs, and competitive industries are almost absent. What then are the objects and drivers of urban politics in these settings?

Cities that have not yet undergone the urban transformation common in “industrialized” countries provide important settings for research into the reconfiguration of local, national, and international politics in the urban realm.¹ In the contemporary reconstruction of postwar cities in the global South, local resource scarcity suddenly encounters a massive influx of resources originating from outside the local and national realms. International donors such as USAID and the British Department for International Development (DFID), as well as non-state aid agencies such as Oxfam and CARE International, inject resources into postwar urban economies, strongly influencing local politics as well. Postwar cities offer researchers a new perspective on urban politics—one that looks beyond the presumed local contexts that have informed urban theory to date. In this paper, I present a comparative study of recent urban politics in Freetown and Kabul, the capital cities of Sierra Leone and Afghanistan. These two cases illustrate the complexities of local politics, particularly because they are postwar cities in which international aid agencies wield considerable local power. Understanding both the dynamics of constantly changing “places of [urban] politics” and the politics *of* these places (Burns et al. 1994) requires a closer look at the varieties of political agency that shape such cities, the economic systems in which they are embedded, and their degrees of autonomy *vis-à-vis* institutional and structural factors. The resultant enquiry therefore necessitates a contextualization of urban politics in Sierra Leone and Afghanistan within the realities of widespread poverty and inequality, economic vulnerability, and the political instability of the regions in which both countries are located.

While implicit in any theories of political change, urban theorists have rightly pointed out that the

“three-tiered agenda of linking agency, space, and structure . . . is rarely explicitly taken up” (Tajbakhsh 2001, 22). This is despite one of the lessons learned from the debate on urban autonomy, being that power relations that *play out* in the city do not necessarily *originate* in the city (Beauregard 1984; Mollenkopf 1989). At the same time, the formative dynamics of cities in developing countries often differ from those of cities in Europe and North America. Unlike in geographical regions dominated by industrialized countries, urbanization in the global South has not always coincided with the creation of a competitive structure of capitalist production (Smith 1996). Although urbanization is indeed a global trend, many countries are only partially “urban,” in that they are not fully included in systems of national, let alone global, production. For instance, while Durban in South Africa is an economically important city in its own right as well as in its regional setting, it is commonly bypassed in the recent literature on cities’ roles and functions in globalization processes (Robinson 2006), and it continues to exist in parallel with agricultural livelihoods and rural poverty in the national context.

A central question that emerges from this reality of uneven development—both globally and locally—therefore, is whether existing theories of urban politics hold explanatory power in settings that have not undergone urbanization as a result of industrial transformation. In such settings, urban politics seems to be rooted in a persistent dualism of economic institutions, wherein agricultural production and rural resource extraction *coexist* with the city-based redistribution of benefits and rents (Marcus and Asmorowati 2006; Simone 2005).

Informed by a wealth of empirical data from North

American and European cities, the existing urban theory toolbox, which draws from early debates on “elite theory” and “pluralism,” as well as more recent forays into regulation and regimes, is not particularly well-equipped to interpret the politics of planning and restructuring in other urban arenas. Indeed, empirical realities in cities in the global South frequently challenge Fordist as well as post-Fordist theories such as: “elite theory” (Eyerman and Jamison 1991; Schneider and Teske 1992), “pluralism” (Dahl 1961), “rational choice” (Peterson 1981), “regulation theory” (Goodwin et al. 1993; Painter 1995), and “urban regime analysis” (Elkin 1985; Stone 1987; Lauria 1997). This paper also demonstrates that approaches arguing for the increased competitiveness of cities in a global urban system (Potter 1990; Smith and Timberlake 1995) equally fail to close this gap. Most recently, this void has been addressed through scholarly texts emanating from cities in the global South itself. These texts emphasize resilience yet at the same time argue that the urban political realities in less industrialized countries are not fundamentally different from those in industrialized societies (Pieterse 2005; Simone 2005; Robinson 2006). While these contributions add substantially to the existing urban politics literature, I argue that the cases of Freetown and Kabul point to a remaining gap in the literature. This gap not only necessitates an internal critique of the literature, but also offers an opportunity to extend theoretical frameworks for urban politics to other contexts in the global South.

The resulting agenda is twofold. First, we need to investigate the emergence and sustenance of incentive structures in Freetown and Kabul that redirect resource flows and forge new poles of economic accumulation and control outside their urban realms.

The political alliances that result from these structural changes transcend international boundaries but have significant local impacts. This “dislocation” of urban politics from the geographic context of Freetown and Kabul explains why such alliances often work to the detriment of local political participation. Second, recasting the analytical framework of urban politics in the two cities studied here offers an opportunity to test the applicability of emerging academic research on multiscalar governance in comparable urban settings of the global South.

In the following section, I critique five strands of theories on urban politics. These strands are then juxtaposed with more recent world systems and postmodernist approaches. I then discuss findings of primary research conducted in postwar Freetown in November and December of 2004 and again in October 2008, as well as in Kabul during four month-long visits in 2004 and 2005. Relevant data were gathered in over seventy semi-structured interviews and eight focus groups as well as non-participant observation of city council sessions, workshops, and donor coordination meetings. I show how findings from this research serve to problematize existing theoretical explanations. I then sketch an alternative analytical framework, which in the closing section is discussed in relation to the recent literature on multiscalar governance, in order to assess the literature’s applicability to the cases studied and to similar urban settings.

Structures, Resilience, and the Localist Trap

Arguably the earliest approach to explain urban

politics, “elite theory” explains how power relations work in urban settings based on the *de facto* existence of elites in any given societal structure (Eyerman and Jamison 1991, 31; Schneider and Teske 1992, 738). “Elite theory” attributes the formation of power constellations at the local level to elite ownership of the means of production, which in turn leads to elite domination of local political, media, and educational institutions (Logan and Molotch 1987, 52). “Elite theory” equally emphasizes the detrimental effects of an elite ownership structure on less affluent residents (Harding 1995). However, focused firmly on local constellations of power and productive capital, it fails to include dispersed economic actors who are not part of a formal industrial structure (e.g., warlords, drug barons) and others operating in the informal sector. In developing countries however, these actors constitute the majority of urban dwellers, and their relationships to zones of production and administration *beyond* cities (such as rural agriculture and sites of natural resource extraction) are often stronger than their relationships to city-centered nodes of capital accumulation (cf. Harding 1995, 39-45).

The same “localist trap” (Stoker 1995, 55) characterizes “pluralist theories” of urban politics. Applied to impoverished cities, Dahl’s (1961) work, suggesting that a multitude of actors exerts significant influence on the policymaking process, is ill-suited because of the realities of social and economic exclusion that plague urban governance in less industrialized countries (Beall 2002). Although the short-lived, issue-based coalitions that Dahl describes (Mollenkopf 1989, 120) can be important political actors even where economic production is organized mostly informally and beyond the reach of the state, the disconnect between informal production and formal political deliberation

weakens accountability mechanisms, a dilemma that also finds expression in the exclusion of poorer constituents from policymaking and implementation.

The third major theoretical approach to urban politics, “urban regime analysis,” argues for the relevance of stabilizing institutions, yet brings coalitions of actors (“agency”) into the spotlight. Structural stability in itself is thus not a regime’s objective, but rather the result of multiple actors carefully negotiating their economic interests. Power is regarded as an enabling, not a dominating force, since “no single group monopolizes the resources that city officials need in order to put together and maintain a workable set of governing arrangements” (Stoker 1995, 283). A coalition is only considered a “regime” if it involves private sector actors or succeeds in inducing capital investment from these actors to attain economic development, thus producing local economic growth (Kantor et al. 1997, 349-350; cf. Stone 1993; Elkin 1987). Urban regime analysis thus retains the focus on the city and treats supra-urban influences mainly as exogenous factors to the formation of regimes. However, especially in postcolonial contexts, the reality is often markedly different. Continuing the colonial function of major cities as administrative and distributive hubs, the role of national governments in city politics is significant, particularly in capital cities. National interests thus determine both the intensity of grassroots participation and the relative autonomy of actors interested in urban development.² In order to enable cross-national comparison, Leo therefore suggests that “our unit of analysis must become not just the local regime but all of the forces that help to shape political decision-making in and for the city, whether they originate at the local, regional, or national level” (Leo 1997, 97).

Theoretical approaches that avoid treating cities as self-contained spaces therefore appear more promising to explain political realities in urban settings in less industrialized countries. The post-Marxist structuralist literature and especially “regulation theory” seem to offer such an alternative perspective. In essence, regulation theory posits that municipalities are “the very medium through which regulatory practices [of the state] are interpreted and ultimately delivered” (Goodwin et al. 1993, 67). Rather than analyzing individual or group action—as in the case of elite theory, pluralist theory, or urban regime theory—regulation theory focuses on how changes in the economic environment result in local institutions adapting to accommodate such shifts (Judge et al. 1995, 10; Feldman 1997, 47-49). Regulation theorists thus explicitly acknowledge the embeddedness of localities within larger contexts (Painter 1995, 278). However, with its central aim being to explain continuity, regulation theory focuses on decade-long political negotiations preserving capitalist structures—an emphasis that sits uncomfortably with rapid changes in political coalitions in least developed countries (cf. Steinmetz 1994). Indeed, when Goodwin and Painter (1997, 20) argue that “[v]ery rarely, if ever, does regulation cease altogether (civil war accompanied by the complete collapse of state institutions is perhaps an example),” their qualification points to the reality of endogenous and exogenous shocks as features of fragile statehood (cf. Jonas 1997, 207).

Fifth and last among the review of urban politics theories discussed here, “rational choice theory” deserves to be scrutinized because of its claim to adhere to universally applicable principles of prioritization. In his groundbreaking work, *City limits*, Peterson (1981, 41) argues that the scope of urban policies

is limited to development. Social costs do incur, but as a result of developmental policies, people gain new employment opportunities as well as increased demand for locally provided services, higher land values, and higher local government revenues. On the contrary, Peterson states that national redistributive policies aiming to help “the needy and unfortunate” are “pernicious” (Peterson 1981, 43), since they drain scarce resources from local governments whose main concern is to strengthen the local economy. The poorer the city as a whole, the more important it is for the local government to emphasize developmental policies. This logic also incorporates the main cause of conflicts between city and state: “The national interest in equity will conflict with the local interest in efficiency developing its local economy” (Peterson 1981, 82; cf. Saunders 1986). Peterson’s rational framework is theoretically elegant, but the cases in which *both* national and local politicians are facing severe resource scarcity seem to challenge it. Here, the degree of “choice” or freedom is much lower. Another concern applies to the demand side of public service provisions. In cities in poorer countries, public service provision is usually directly linked to the price of land and property, with the effect that the few better served locational options are unattainable to most dwellers because of their financial constraints. In addition, rational choice theory’s assumption that public services exist in abundance (i.e., that there is an oversupply of provision which allows potential “customers” to choose; cf. Wolman and Goldsmith 1992, 17) is erroneous in the case of cities in which even the most basic needs are not addressed by the state.

Originating in the mid 1980s, “world city theory” characterizes cities as nodes within a global system (Hill 1984; Timberlake 1985). A theoretical response

to the global economic contraction in 1973 and 1974, related approaches emphasize networks and flows (Sassen 2000; cf. Soja 2000, 96-97). Much like rational choice theory, world city approaches suggest a predominance of economic logic, yet embed this logic conceptually in an explicitly global setting. In a reassessment of the first decade of this scholarship, Smith and Timberlake (1995, 81) explain its main contribution as follows: "Although their interrelations are often mediated by nation-states, [cities] are in direct and frequent contact with one another through the various city-to-city flows." Cities thus represent potential ways for countries to enter into the international political economy (Potter 1990, 3). As a result, cities in developing regions increasingly compete with those in highly industrialized countries and have to engage in "a punitive game of catch-up" (Robinson 2006, 6; cf. Hall and Winlow 2003). This proposition has raised particular concern among those familiar with fast-growing urban settlements in the poorest regions of the world. Since these cities start the process of catching up from much lower levels than, say, secondary cities in industrialized countries, and can often expect little national support where national development strategies remain absent or unimplemented, they face limited prospects of joining the network of global production and consumption (Galtung 1985). Increasing city-to-city flows therefore does not only represent an opportunity for economic inclusion; it also constitutes a medium of further marginalization (Knauder 2000, 28). Kabul, for instance, commonly ranks at the bottom of cities for international investors scouting out opportunities in Central Asia (Woznicki 2005); Freetown experiences similar investor avoidance not only because of Sierra Leone's low ranking in economic and physical infrastructure but also due to the city's poor

transportation connections—internationally (only two international airlines service the city and connections are erratic) as well as locally (Lungi Airport is located on a peninsula, which necessitates several hours of transit time to and from the city center).

Firmly focused on inter-city relations, world city theory is awkwardly silent on the complicated workings of internal politics within cities. Rather than exploring individual avenues of local development, its normative stance cautions against "social entrepreneurialism" (Robinson 2006) in light of an allegedly overpowering global economic superstructure. The choice, world city theory suggests, lies between submission to global economic forces and resistance against these forces.

Postmodernist theories concerning urban politics in the global South have taken issue with this kind of macro-structural determinism. Arguing that the "political confrontation with social and political exclusion" creates "the foundational moment of citizenship" (Simone 2005, 14), postmodernist approaches posit that city politics in developing countries is concerned chiefly with the creation, re-creation, and destruction of structures of local inclusion and exclusion. Yet, whereas rational choice theory's prescriptive features are logically deduced from a series of universally applicable mechanisms, postmodernism embraces an explicitly free-floating normative agenda. This stance has both strengths and weaknesses. While postmodernists succeed in capturing sociopolitical realities under stress, their calls for cities to serve as "spaces of tolerance and sociability" (Ash and Thrift 2002, 137) sit somewhat uncomfortably with the realities of urban exclusion and intra-city inequality in many less industrialized countries (Beall 2002; Smith 1996). An early critique of postmodernist writing,

Robins' (1993) work therefore remains instructive. He decries the "consensual belief in public space, the idea that the city should create some sort of communal vessel for shared activity," as an artificial tenet of postmodernism (Robins 1993, 320). My research in Freetown and Kabul suggests that public space is indeed highly contested. It follows then that urban development cannot aim primarily to create social cohesion but rather to produce new spaces for political participation that counter social, political, and economic divisions—in other words, "'tougher' notions of public space," (Robins 1993, 326) that enable politics rather than silence it. In the following section, we shall explore how the multiscalar politics and practices of political restructuring in two cities in the global South impact the structure and scope of local political participation, as well as the quality and extent of local policy space—defined here as the autonomy of city-based actors and organizations to determine their own priorities and to deliberate about effective policies (Cavill and Sohail 2004, 170).

Freetown and Kabul: Global Resources, Local Distribution, National Politics

Historically, capital cities in postwar developing countries such as Sierra Leone and Afghanistan were the sites of deliberate attempts to bring about change in both the local and national political systems.³ These attempts range from modernist agendas pursued by city-based elites to contemporary reconstruction efforts driven by international donors—all of which are strategies to build a kind of statehood that has the capacity to "deliver" to its constituents. Indeed, as much as Freetown and Kabul differ in terms of their

geographic and cultural settings, several important parallels can be drawn between them. To begin, capital accumulation in both countries takes place in cities, yet the natural resource endowments in Sierra Leone and the opium economy in Afghanistan situate the bulk of economic production in both countries outside of the reach of the national government (let alone of the local government), either because of mining concessions owned by foreign corporations or due to the illegality of the production process, as in the case of drug production and trade. A predominantly private sector-reliant, postwar urban recovery approach adopted by international development agencies (Montgomery and Rondinelli 2004) further reinforces local economic inequities. At the same time, multilateral organizations such as the United Nations and the Bretton Woods Institutions attempt to depoliticize the content of urban policies in order to implement technical fixes. Where purely technical solutions reach their limits, urban development is portrayed as a coordination challenge requiring "strategic partnerships" between well-meaning public offices and a harmonious civil society. This masking of urban development as an apolitical and non-conflictual endeavor hampers the function of urban places as sites of contestation over resource allocation. Moreover, it also separates supposedly desirable actions of non-state actors—often used synonymously with the ubiquitous yet elusive "civil society" concept—from political activism considered undesirable.

In both Sierra Leone and Afghanistan, international development agencies have a history in conditioning national governments and their local entities. This influence ranges from the design of their very constitutions, to the assignment of duties, the delineation of administrative boundaries, and the language

used to identify and describe policy challenges. Both countries were recipients of substantial foreign aid prior to their respective armed conflicts during the final decades of the past century.⁴ Nevertheless, the amount of capital flowing into both countries has reached new heights with the arrival of international missions dispatched in the name of peace and security.⁵ As a result, local attempts to restore economic functionality at the city level in both Freetown and Kabul have been overshadowed by internationally-driven nation-building agendas, including fast-track democratization epitomized by donors pushing for quick elections and rapid decentralization in both countries. Urban development was certainly not a priority in either country during the initial three years of postwar assistance from 2002 until 2004. Instead, financial as well as human resources were channeled towards the creation of sustainable rural livelihoods, which, in light of the diamond and opium economies, served not only to aid economic development, but also to advance an international security agenda. Moreover, the postcolonial segregation patterns between foreigners, middle-class Creoles, and rural-to-urban migrant workers have been a crucial factor in the spatial development of Freetown. They bear a striking resemblance to the spatial patterns in Kabul, neatly distinguishable by building type and residential density. Central districts are marked by traditional mud houses, but they border with upscale areas characterized by walled, single-family homes and others donning Soviet-style, high-rise apartment buildings. These neighborhood-level disparities have widened further as a result of skyrocketing rents fueled by demand for office space and housing by international aid workers. This pattern exemplifies how the influx of external financial resources impacts the built environment in both cities. It also shows

an important parallel to global real estate capital increasingly changing the physical appearance of urban centers across the globe; in Sierra Leone and Afghanistan, this impact is indirect yet perhaps even more immediate and visible than in the case of foreign direct investment in industrializing countries.

The regional scale of the conflicts in Sierra Leone and Afghanistan exemplifies similar “geographies of power” (Pugh and Cooper 2004). Both countries’ national governments face severe constraints with regards to economic production. In Sierra Leone, diamonds are mined illicitly and exported illegally, avoiding local taxation via foreign companies with local outlets that swiftly feed them into international supply chains. In Afghanistan, opium not only crowds out potential cash crops for the rural population; its illegality also prevents it from being taxed (Rubin et al. 2004, 7). Furthermore, in both Freetown and Kabul, informal patronage networks are maintained through international aid that uses these cities as distributive hubs. For instance, village-level leaders told me how they would travel to the capital city to “claim their slice” of the financial cake as a means to secure continuous support from their rural constituents.⁶ Thus, diametrically opposed to the initial pattern of rural production and urban consumption, rural constituencies are now fed with external resources channeled through city-based networks. Migdal’s contention that state leaders in developing countries are not only constrained by state structures, but also by actors within the political economy who do not necessarily operate within the formal realm of the state—such as chiefs, landlords, bosses, rich peasants, clan leaders, and others—therefore resonates strongly with these dynamics in donor-driven Freetown and Kabul (Migdal 1988, 33).

Yet another parallel between Freetown and Kabul can be found in the deliberate attempts by national authorities to control local politics, and the dubious role of international agencies in this process. Motivated by economic goals as well as the desire to control political opponents, the hindrance and—in some cases—dissolution of local government under accusations of mismanagement and ineffectiveness, is a political strategy pursued by many national governments in sub-Saharan Africa and other less industrialized countries (Stren 1989, 32-35). In post-war Sierra Leone, national actors and international aid agencies formed an informal alliance aimed at facilitating de-urbanization and returning to prewar figures of urban growth in order to take pressure off heavily burdened urban infrastructure. At the same time, this agenda of de-urbanization also served the national government's interests in dispersing poorer residents and in thus diluting political opposition. Indeed, in my interviews, representatives of Sierra Leone's national government openly declared seizing power from Freetown's opposition-led municipal government to be one of their major political goals. However, the most recent local elections in 2004 (which were partisan only because of a provision in the national constitution) rendered a landslide victory to the then-ruling national government party (SLPP) everywhere but in the capital city and in one rural district—an outcome that naturally sparked a revival of political participation in Freetown. Yet these politics did not revolve around local needs and the negotiation of priorities; instead, they pitted the local government in Freetown against national ministries. The latter enjoyed the unwavering support of international donors such as USAID and DFID, the main concern of which was to ensure political stability as a presumed precondition for short-term

recovery. Local interests only featured prominently in report and brochures. In reality, international support granted to macro-level development agendas led to the subjugation of local democracy even where decentralization formed a cornerstone of the recovery agenda.

Similarly, in Afghanistan, internationally administered national and provincial elections were non-partisan. Donor agencies claimed that the very concept of political parties carried a universally negative connotation resulting from the prewar experience under the Soviet Union. Not surprisingly, the country's existing political leadership happily endorsed these elections and was eager to portray party politics as a cause of instability and even war. The result of the subsequent vote was a highly dispersed political opposition without any realistic chance to challenge those who, despite their questionable performance, were and continue receiving international agencies' political blessings and funding ever since the Taliban were ousted.⁷

In sum, the stances taken by the lead donors in both Sierra Leone and Afghanistan (especially the United States, the United Kingdom, and the World Bank) effectively stalled the development of political activism on the ground and hindered the emergence of an effective and legitimate opposition (Paris 2004, 224). Complex political agendas and actions extending across multiple scales of governance thus limited the scope and effectiveness of the local governments of Freetown and Kabul while at the same time spurring on private sector-driven "anti-politics" (Ferguson 1994) approaches to urban development. In essence, then, political restructuring processes in Freetown and Kabul have happened mostly remotely through a mix of cooperation, collusion, and coercion between international and national stakeholders.

A Second Spatial Turn: Towards a Revised Analytical Framework

The discussion of Freetown and Kabul reveals how the presence of international aid agencies, dysfunctional urban governance structures, the influence of more powerful countries, provincial in-fighting, and the burgeoning private sector all combine to create the need for a multiscalar theoretical approach for analyzing recent postwar cities. Both prewar limitations and the additional war-induced decline of local productive capacities in these cities render city-based actors reliant on national government structures and, increasingly, international accounts. Postwar processes of political restructuring in these cities also offer telling examples of how international involvement in “local” development in least developed countries can backfire. International nation-building agendas and vocal commitments to “local empowerment” and “ownership” in fact bolster the power of national governments and other coalitions over city governments, at the expense of policy space for these cities. City politics in Freetown and Kabul are thus not determined by local production but by the leverage that international actors gain as a result of their financial support for struggling national states. As a result, Freetown and Kabul are governed neither exclusively by local government nor jointly by local and national entities, but through short-lived coalitions operating through multiscalar cooperation, collusion, and coercion.

This proposition of externally-driven political restructuring should not be interpreted as a conspiracy theory. International organizations do not aim at “taking over” postwar cities, and the ongoing debate about how to leave the lightest footprint possible (Chesterman 2002) is not the façade of a hidden

agenda on urban governance in less industrialized countries. Still, the absence of any *intention* to “subdue the local” in the two cities does not negate the impacts of supra-city alliances. The key to understanding these aforementioned outcomes lies in analyzing the conceptual flaws of international actors’ agendas and not in rejecting their stated objectives. These flaws entail an undue faith in “apolitical” reconstruction, distrust in local capacity, and the persistent hesitation to commit to long-term planning for postwar countries, due to the evermore political nature of international reconstruction efforts within donor countries themselves, especially in times of financial crisis.

The findings of our two-case comparison also suggest that none of the theories considered above offer a sufficiently compelling rationale to explain the politics of restructuring in these two cities. Elite theory and pluralist theory do not pay adequate attention to structural constraints or to the embeddedness of cities in layers of socioeconomic power. Similarly, urban regime theory is tied to the structure of local production and also limited by its focus on purely economic interests. Conversely, regulation theory emphasizes the relevance of national regulation structures to urban development but assumes relative political stability within these structures. Empirical realities similarly challenge rational choice theory, which fails to account for the volatility of incentive structures in postwar settings. World city systems theory gives center-stage to inter-spatial relations among cities, but its macro-structural determinism all but eclipses local politics. On the contrary, postmodernist approaches largely neglect the structural dimension in their attempts to explain resilience as a common feature of “different kinds of cities *within the same field of urban theory* without suggesting that all cities are alike” (Robinson

2006, 63; italics added; cf. Scott and Storper 2003).

What emerges from this discussion is an argument that existing analytical frameworks need to be explicitly multiscalar in order to capture the main factors determining politics in the cities investigated here. The cases of Freetown and Kabul demonstrate why spatial scales ought to assume central roles in the analysis of urban politics in countries of the global South: because they broach domestic socioeconomic phenomena such as internal migration and political constituencies, connecting them with international flows of capital. Second, a multiscalar analysis could account for planning timeframes that are significantly shorter—because of political instability and fragile governance structures—than those prevalent in democratically governed cities in industrialized countries, as well as for the resulting political dynamics. Third, a multiscalar approach might offer a framework for conceptualizing institutional multiplicity across spatial and temporal levels, including political-economic remnants from colonial times and incomplete processes of capitalist transformation, as well as tensions between the limits of local resources and the “soft budget constraint” of external aid.

While affirming the relevance of structures beyond the local realm as determinants of urban politics, this agenda goes beyond orthodox Marxist thinking on cities. Noting that Marx in fact regarded geography an “unnecessary complication” (Soja 1989, 32) of the capitalist system, Soja’s critique of the “despatialization,” along with his contribution to what he calls the “spatial turn” (Soja 1989, 32)—the recovery of a “location for spatiality” (Lefebvre 1991, 119; cf. Brenner 2001) in the analysis of global and local political economies as a function of a revived

interest in the relations between space, knowledge, and power (Soja 2000; cf. Harvey 2000)—deserve explicit credit for emphasizing the multiscalar nature of city politics. Following this theoretical tradition, and in line with Brenner’s recent work on scale (2000, 2001), a revised framework could then focus on the following three central components:

1. Illuminating the variety of scales at which political agendas for cities in least developed countries originate;
2. Demonstrating how interrelated scalar processes are linked to the extraction, production, and allocation of both endogenous and exogenous resources;
3. Showing how spatial and temporal scales affect policy formulation and implementation.

Multiscale Governance: Accounting for Top-down Effects

With the intensification of networks and connections across national borders and within regions, the analytical approach that best describes the rise in cross-scalar interactions is “multiscale governance” (Bache and Flinders 2005; Welch and Kennedy-Pipe 2005). Brenner points out that inter-spatiality in urban governance first became evident during the late 1980s when scales “were no longer equated with unitary social functions but were viewed increasingly as material crystallizations of multiple overlapping political-economic processes” (Brenner 2000, 395). Keil explains the emergence of multiscale governance in Europe by highlighting the “spatial concentration

of multi-dimensional problems in parts of urban areas, [a] known but unanswered question in international urban research” (Keil 2006, 335). Pierre clarifies further that governance is in fact a three-dimensional concept in that it can denote a prescriptive approach to social relations, constitute the finding of an empirical enquiry, or be used as a theoretical framework (Pierre 2005). Prompting “the observer to look beyond the institutions of the local state to search for processes and mechanisms through which significant and resourceful actors coordinate their actions and resources” (Pierre 2005, 452), it is this final dimension that appears most promising to guide inquiries into the politics of restructuring in postwar countries of the global South. Analyses thus informed by multiscalar governance theory also align with recent suggestions of urban regimes as only one possible “mode of governance” (Mossberger and Stoker 2001, 818), which resonates with the experience of short-lived, cross-scalar alliances observed in both Freetown and Kabul.

At the same time, Olowu rightly stresses that in applications of multiscalar governance theory to developing countries’ state structures, explanatory power usually stalls at the national scale given the symptomatically lesser degree of regional integration in these settings (Olowu 2003, 515). Therefore, unlike in the case of formal and highly regulated institutional settings characterizing cross-scalar policy deliberation and implementation in North America and Europe, an analytical application of multiscalar governance to cities such as Freetown and Kabul—which are marked by local resource scarcity yet serve as sites of sudden and dramatic aid flows—needs to focus primarily on top-down effects. Rather than approaching urban governance normatively by prescribing unrealistic bottom-up visions of urban

inclusion, multiscalar governance as an analytical lens on these settings needs to take into account the fact that *extra-local* rather than local resources often drive political alliances, which greatly limits the autonomy of city-based actors. In Freetown and Kabul, the prospects for locally-driven political restructuring that increases economic viability while also catalyzing inclusion into local structures of production, distribution, and decision-making remain a game of trial and error, in theory as much as in practice.

Acknowledgements

The author gratefully acknowledges many constructive suggestions by the anonymous reviewers and the members of the *Critical Planning* editorial board. Crucial feedback on an earlier draft was received by Jo Beall, Jonathan Goodhand, and Jennifer Robinson. Discussions during a graduate class on urbanization and development held in early 2009 at MIT also proved highly valuable, and thanks are due to all participants.

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Lead Photograph

Downtown Freetown, 2004. Photograph by the author.

Notes

¹ Countries are considered “industrialized” if they have undergone a structural transition from mainly agricultural to mainly non-agricultural production, including private and public services. Historically this transition has coincided with the concentration of a country’s population in its urban centers. For the purpose of this paper, geographical clusters of industrialized countries (often referred to as countries in the “global North” as opposed to the “global South”) are purely descriptive and do not preclude cases such as South Korea and other Asian Tiger states, or Australia and New Zealand.

² Kantor et al. conclude that their “framework suggests caution in attempting to transfer policies to cities with very different structural soils” (1997, 371).

³ During the postcolonial era, from the mid 1960s until the outbreak of armed fighting in the early 1990s, Freetown morphed from an administrative center to a “place of predation” where formal party politics competed with—and often co-opted—semi-formal power structures resting on rural chieftaincy in the struggle for political leverage in processes of city-based redistribution of economic resources. Since the war-induced international intervention, Freetown has served as a hub of donor agencies and NGOs alike, the latter feeding off the external resources of the former and increasingly benefiting from a discourse that confounds NGOs with “civil society.” An analogous process can be observed in Kabul, where, in recent years, donors tried to force an inclusionary concept of national and urban governance onto the Soviet-dominated public administration system. Historically, Kabul was the capital city where radical administrative reforms for provincial

governments attempted to consolidate the power of the central state against ethno-tribal structures operating outside of Afghanistan’s major urban centers.

⁴ Prewar Official Development Assistance (ODA) to Afghanistan increased from \$17.2 million in 1960 to \$105.5 million in 1979, according to the OECD (SourceOECD database at www.oecd.org, accessed on March 25, 2009). ODA to Sierra Leone increased during the same period from \$6.7 million to \$52.9 million, respectively. This trend continued until the outbreak of open hostilities in 1992, when the country received \$133 million in ODA (SourceOECD).

⁵ In its country data sheet from April 2006, the World Bank states that ODA to Afghanistan rose sharply between 2000 and 2004 from \$141 million to \$2.2 billion, respectively (World Bank 2006), which is consistent with OECD figures (SourceOECD). The most dramatic jump occurred from 2001 to 2002 when disbursements jumped from \$404.6 million to \$1.3 billion. The most recent ODA figure reported for Afghanistan is \$3.951 billion in 2007 (SourceOECD). Figures for Sierra Leone remained relatively constant between 2001 and 2006 at \$350 million, roughly three times the prewar amount, but in 2007 increased to \$535 million (SourceOECD).

⁶ Interviews with village elders (*shuras*) and provincial administrators were conducted in four districts of Ghazni and Kabul Provinces in October 2004.

⁷ After eight years in power, the US-backed government of President Hamid Karzai is widely seen in a critical light. Violence and human insecurity are arguably worse now than in the immediate aftermath of the US-led military campaign that toppled the Taliban; the central administration and its internationally conceived policies and programs are still ineffectual in large areas of the country; and economic progress remains insignificant. On the positive side, access to health and education has improved, and at least in urban centers, women are safer and enjoy a degree of freedom, which, while common during the 1970s, had been impossible under the Taliban regime. Still, international efforts to destroy the poppy economy have proven ineffective, and the creation

of an effective police force has made little progress. Several notorious human rights offenders are members of the young *de jure* democracy's houses of parliament. Moreover, former warlords have undergone a successful transition to being "peacelords" who continue wielding considerable influence over the country's informal economic activities. The recent comeback of the Taliban as a serious political contender in the country therefore not only urges a thorough appraisal of analytical failures among donor agencies; it also necessitates a review of the entire "transformation-from-outside" agenda pursued by external stakeholders. Ultimately, donor agencies are likely to arrive at the bitter conclusion that their focus on the national dimension of postwar reconstruction may have been the single most devastating conceptual mistake in the short history of Afghanistan's recovery to date, in that it conditioned the dual eclipse of both regional capital flows (especially alongside the porous border with Pakistan, cf. Pugh and Cooper 2004) and local politics from the development equation.

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